



JESUS
AT THE
CENTER
OF THE
KINGDOM

DAILY DEVOTIONAL

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Over the next seven weeks, we will walk through some of the most challenging and life-shaping words Jesus ever spoke. From the Sermon on the Mount to the call to build our lives on the solid rock of Christ, these pages invite us to move beyond surface-level Christianity into a deeper, transforming relationship with Jesus.

We live in a world full of noise, opinions and distractions. It's easy to drift into performance, pride, fear or spiritual complacency while still looking religious on the outside. But Jesus never called us to simply admire Him from a distance. He called us to follow Him closely. To ask, seek and knock. To walk the narrow road. To discern truth from deception. To become disciples whose lives bear genuine fruit.

I believe one of the greatest dangers facing both our lives and our church is allowing something other than Jesus to become central. Programs, preferences, politics, success, comfort and even ministry itself can slowly take His place if we are not careful. But when Jesus remains at the center, everything changes. Hearts soften. Lives are transformed. Truth and grace work together. Hope grows stronger. Foundations hold firm even in life's storms.

My prayer is that these devotionals will challenge and encourage you to keep your eyes fixed on Christ. Not simply to know about Him, but to truly know Him, love Him and follow Him daily. Because a life built on Jesus is a life that cannot be shaken.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'B' followed by a horizontal line and a cursive 'J'.

Bryan Jones, Senior Pastor

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DAILY PRAYER AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

"... Our Father in heaven..."

Matthew 6:9b (NLT)

- **What do You want to say to me today as my Father?**

"... may your name be kept holy."

Matthew 6:9c (NLT)

- **What do You want to reveal to me about Your power today?**

"May your Kingdom come soon."

Matthew 6:10a (NLT)

- **Help me make Your priorities my priorities today.**

"Give us today the food we need,"

Matthew 6:11 (NLT)

- **Is there anything specific You want me to do with my time or the people I'm around today?**

"and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us"

Matthew 6:12 (NLT)

- **Reveal to me anyone I need to forgive or ask for forgiveness.**

"And don't let us yield to temptation..."

Matthew 6:13a (NLT)

- **Is there anywhere I'm vulnerable to temptation?**

DAUGHTER OF THE KING

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

1 John 3:1 (NIV)

Have you heard that when we embrace Christ as our Savior, we become sons and daughters of the King? What does this even mean? I didn't have a fairy godmother transform me into an instant princess, nor did a handsome prince whisk me off to his grand castle.

When I think about what it means to be a daughter of the King, I think of the fact that I am His cherished possession. He delights in being with me, in calling me His own. He took my filthy, shame-filled sin, deserving punishment, and erased it. He made me clean and beautiful.

I was recently asked to introduce a song during worship at a women's conference, and part of the song says this:

*The Father who made me, gave His Son to save me. Now His Spirit
has changed me, I lift my voice to sing, I'm no longer broken,
on You I will stand. You make me beautiful; with You I can. From
broken to beautiful, a daughter of the King, I have been redeemed.*

While I may not live in a shiny new castle, I will one day in Heaven in the presence of our Father, our King, our Redeemer. He has called us children—sons and daughters—of the King. And according to today's Scripture, that is what we are.

APPLICATION: Today, take a moment to reflect on your identity in Christ instead of the labels the world or your past may try to place on you. When feelings of shame, insecurity or unworthiness arise, remind yourself that you're deeply loved, redeemed and a child of God. Consider listening to a worship song that reminds you of His love and thank Him for making you new and beautiful through His grace.

PRAYER: Dear Father, thank You for lavishing Your love on me and calling me Your child. Help me walk confidently in my identity as Your child, leaving behind shame and embracing the beauty and redemption You have given me through Christ. Amen.

FOREVER LOVED

The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness." **Jeremiah 31:3 (NIV)**

The relationship between a father and child can bring many different memories, emotions and images to mind. My experience is a mix of both abandonment and love. My biological father left when I was 3 years old, and for a long time, that created a picture of abandonment in my heart. But when I was 8, my stepfather came into our lives and began painting a very different picture—one of love, security and acceptance. He stepped into that empty space so naturally that I quickly became a daddy's girl. I needed his presence, guidance and love. He became my dad.

In many ways, my relationship with my Heavenly Father is the same. I need Him every single day. There's never been a moment when I have not desperately needed Him. God fills the emptiness and silences the lies the enemy tries so hard to make me believe. Unlike people, God never changes. He's the same yesterday, today and forever. He'll never abandon me. His love is eternal and unwavering, not based on human actions or changing circumstances.

As Walter Brueggemann writes, *God's everlasting love reflects covenantal resolve—prior to Israel's response—where divine faithfulness persists through failure, drawing the people back through steadfast, initiating grace rather than earned devotion.*

APPLICATION: Take a moment today to reflect on the areas in your life where you may still feel abandoned, rejected or unworthy of love. Ask God to replace those wounds with the truth of His everlasting love and unfailing kindness. When doubt creeps in, remind yourself that God's love is constant even when people are not.

PRAYER: Dear Father, thank You for loving me with an everlasting and unwavering love. Help me trust You fully and rest in the security of knowing You will never leave or abandon me. Heal the broken places in my heart and remind me daily of Your unfailing kindness. Amen.

MY PROTECTOR

"... He surrounded them and watched over them; he guarded them as he would guard his own eyes. Like an eagle that rouses her chicks and hovers over her young, so he spreads his wings to take them up and carried them safely on his pinions."

Deuteronomy 32:10b-11 (NLT)

I loved being around my dad. I was always his little helper, following him everywhere around the farm. To me, he was the strongest man in the world. He would effortlessly do one-handed push-ups with me sitting on his back. But the moment that truly amazed me was when he needed to lift the front end of a car he was working on to place something underneath it. He picked it up as though it weighed nothing at all.

During one of the darkest seasons of my life, I found myself needing that same kind of strength from God. In the middle of intense spiritual warfare, I cried out to my Heavenly Father, *I need Your strength because I cannot do this on my own.* Looking back, I was reminded that God's love never leaves me. He does not simply come when I call on Him—He's been there all along.

Today's Scripture describes God as an eagle that hovers over her young. He shelters us from rain, wind and the harsh sun. He provides warmth and acts as a barrier from surrounding danger. That's immensely kind and comforting.

APPLICATION: Think about an area in your life where you've been trying to carry burdens in your own strength. Today, surrender that struggle to God and trust Him to uphold you with His power and protection. Take a few quiet moments to thank Him for being present even in the seasons when you felt weak or overwhelmed.

PRAYER: Dear Father, thank You for being my strength when I feel weak and overwhelmed. Remind me that I never have to face life's battles alone because You are always with me, surrounding me with Your love and protection. Help me trust You more fully each day and rest safely in Your care. Amen.

MY DEFENDER

He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. He says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. **Psalm 46:9-11 (NIV)**

When I was 17, I worked at a grocery store in Florida. One of my co-workers continually harassed me, and despite my complaints, the store manager didn't do anything. When I finally told my dad what was happening, he immediately went straight to the store and made it very clear to the manager that his daughter would not be mistreated. The size of my dad was intimidating, but knowing someone was harassing his daughter only added to it. Needless to say, the other employee lost his job that day.

In much the same way, my Heavenly Father fights battles on my behalf all the time. Too often, I try to handle things in my own strength instead of calling on Him, and all it does is prolong the struggle. During a difficult season with my sons, God gently reminded me to *be still* and trust that He was in control. Choosing to surrender the situation to Him was not easy, but years later, I could clearly see how His guidance and faithfulness made a lasting difference in my boys' lives.

Today, let's remember the strength of our Creator. He is our great defender, the One leading the charge in the battles we fight. He is a stronghold against evil and an unmovable refuge for His people. As written in the great hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, He is our fortress and defender.

APPLICATION: Is there an area of your life where you've been striving in your own strength instead of trusting God? Surrender that situation to Him in prayer and choose to rest in the truth that He is already fighting on your behalf. Spend a few moments being still before God and allowing His peace to calm your heart.

PRAYER: Dear Father, thank You for being my protector, defender and refuge in every season of life. Help me stop relying on my own strength and trust You fully with the battles I face. Teach me to be still and rest confidently in Your faithfulness and love. Amen.

HE DELIGHTS IN ME

“The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing”
Zephaniah 3:17 (NIV)

I have six children and five grandchildren. A favorite spot in our home is the family room wall, covered with pictures from years of doing life together. I couldn't tell you how many photos hang there, but my grandbabies love pointing to familiar faces and naming the people they know. Each picture holds a memory—years of life, laughter, milestones and growth. As I look at those photos and see my family taking their next steps after high school, attending college or starting families of their own, my heart is filled with love and delight for each of them.

God delights in me the very same way. He doesn't focus on my failures, mistakes or flaws. Instead, He looks at me with love, joy and compassion. He calls me His daughter, His beloved, and He rejoices over me with singing. Even through every season of my life, His delight in me has never changed. When I feel forgotten, discouraged or unworthy, I can rest in the truth that God sees me through the eyes of perfect love. Just as I treasure the memories and milestones of my children and grandchildren, God treasures every part of my story. He's been present in every joyful moment, every heartbreak, every victory and every struggle, loving me faithfully through it all.

Often we sing to Him, but today's Scripture teaches us that He is also singing over us. May we allow His delight to overwhelm us all over again.

APPLICATION: Today, take a few moments to reflect on the ways God has been faithful throughout your life. Instead of focusing on your flaws or failures, choose to see yourself through the eyes of God's love and delight. Write down three moments where you've seen His goodness and thank Him for His constant delight.

PRAYER: Dear Father, thank You for loving me so deeply and delighting in me as Your child. Remind me daily that I am cherished, seen and rejoiced over by You. Amen.

ABBA, FATHER

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

Romans 8:14-16 (NIV)

To be led by the Spirit is not just about direction—it is about relationship. As a daughter of God, I don't have to wander through life trying to prove my worth. I can walk with assurance that I'm already loved, already adopted, already home in the heart of my Father. Something is healing about being fully known and still fully chosen. My identity in God doesn't have to be earned, and it isn't compared. As His daughter, I *belong*.

Abba isn't a distant title for me—it's the cry of intimacy. In the original Aramaic, *Abba* was used to express a *belonging within a family relationship*. I can run to Him for safety, be honest enough to give Him my tears, and rest in Him because of His perfect Fatherly love. As His daughter, I don't see my Heavenly Father as distant or demanding, but as near, attentive and faithful. And even when the enemy tries to whisper otherwise, the Spirit gently reminds me: *I am His*. Not because I have strived enough, but because I have been adopted. Not because I am perfect, but because of His love that chose me first.

May the name *Abba* move you to a deep reverence, as well as a warm closeness to God as *Father*.

APPLICATION: Today, choose to rest in the truth of your identity as God's child and release the need to strive for His approval. When doubt or insecurity rises, pause and be reminded that you are fully known and fully loved in Him.

PRAYER: Dear Father, thank You for adopting me into Your family and calling me Your own. Help me to live from the confidence of being Your child, not from the pressure of trying to earn what You've already freely given. Teach me to rest in Your love and walk daily in the security of being fully Yours. Amen.

CORRECTIVE LENSES

"But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?"

Jonah 4:11 (NLT)

"For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Matthew 7:2 (NIV)

I don't enjoy going to the eye doctor because I know my eyesight is declining. The longer I procrastinate, the worse it gets, and the stronger my prescription becomes. I ask myself every time: *What's the holdup? Just make an appointment and go!* The truth is, I want to believe I see things clearly. The reality is, my view is through a flawed set of eyes that need help to see differently.

This brings the story of Jonah to my mind. I've walked that path in the same shoes, viewing others through a harsh lens and believing their sin is somehow greater than mine. Jonah was called to deliver a message of repentance to a city of over 120,000 people, yet he struggled to see them the way God did. Because of this, he was unwilling to do what God asked. Though Jonah eventually delivered God's message and Nineveh repented, his heart for the people didn't seem to change. Was his perspective shaped by past events? That's a question for another day.

What's true when we judge others is that it often shines the spotlight back onto us and where we need correction. God shared a question with Jonah that we should ask ourselves: *"Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness..." Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?* So, how do we stand up to the standard we've set for others? Jonah's disobedience was no different than Nineveh's. God's patience and love spared both. Let's remember we're measured by what Jesus did for us, not by our standards for others.

APPLICATION: Today, ask God to reveal areas in your life that need attention. Then ask yourself this: *How am I judging others or being critical of them in these areas?* Surrender that to Him and allow yourself to be empathetic and merciful rather than cold and combative towards others.

PRAYER: Jesus, give me Your eyesight today. Help me to see others through Your truth, grace and compassion, not just what I see on the surface. Amen.

FAMILIAR REFLECTIONS

Brothers and sisters do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who can save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

James 4:11-12 (NIV)

We encounter images and reflections all around us. Most original images are filtered, distorting what was once true through our past experiences, others' opinions or even the world's desire to sell us something more. Even our phones have filters that change our appearance to fit our desires and provide entertainment, sometimes at another's expense. But it comes at a cost—a loss of truth and honesty.

Have you ever met a person and assumed something, only to realize the opposite? What if you met yourself—would you judge yourself against the same standards? When we look in the mirror, who do we see? When we see others, is it through God's truth or our own lens? We're called to use discernment and good judgment, and to apply the truth Jesus has given us through the Holy Spirit.

When we view others as we wish, we essentially nudge Jesus off the throne of our lives and place ourselves where only He belongs. We decide what's best for us and others, leaning on our understanding and not His truth. Be extra cautious! Let the first reflection we examine be our own. Ask God for correction in your own heart and then choose to speak the truth in love to others who've lost their way. Not walking on eggshells, but with gentleness, humility and love. When we look in the mirror, do we see attributes of Jesus? Or do we see the familiar reflection of ourselves—the one we're comfortable with, the image that we've created to our own liking?

APPLICATION: Think of a time when you judged someone. Allow God to adjust your view of that person. If they're aware that you were critical of them, ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to seek amends with this person.

PRAYER: Father, guide me today in Your grace and mercy. Give me vision to see others in the light of Your love. Present me with wisdom and discretion in how I approach others and in the conversations I have. Amen.

GUESS WHO, NOT ME!

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Don't judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." **1 Samuel 16:7 (NLT)**

Growing up, I loved playing board games and singing riddles. A couple of them come to mind when I reflect on today's scripture and its life application. The board game *Guess Who* was always fun to play with friends. Each player chose a character, and the others asked questions until they could identify their opponent's character. But the questions were based only on outward appearances, while the person's true character remained unknown. Then there was the riddle, *Who stole the cookie from the cookie jar?* (Yes, I'm a child of the 80s. Thanks for singing along with me.)

As we look at others' outward appearance, it's easy to start making assumptions about their occupation, whether they exercise, or their financial status based on what they drive, or how they dress. We can quickly begin to judge with worldly eyesight. But 1 Samuel reminds us that God looks at the heart, not at things that are temporary and can be taken away in an instant. Relationships grow best when we take time to understand what's happening inside a person—what drives them beneath the surface, not how they appear externally.

We can assume that someone is a believer because we see them at church. However, there was a time when I attempted to talk to Jesus all day long, but I didn't have a relationship with Him. Outward association does not always reveal inward truth. As we take time to get to know someone's heart, we begin to learn who that person really is. Like owning a car doesn't make me a driver. But learning to drive, understanding how a car works, and getting a license do. In the same way, asking thoughtful questions in conversations is one of the best ways to get to know someone beyond outward appearance, allowing what we see on the outside to remain an image, not an identity.

APPLICATION: Today, look around in your circles, has someone's appearance fooled you? Ask some tough questions, but do so in love and gentleness. Maybe ask yourself: *Am I hiding behind outward appearances and status to avoid being known?*

PRAYER: Lord, shine Your light on my life today, opening me to others and making me more approachable. May I allow You to change my heart, letting it radiate outwardly, so that my outer appearance will reflect You. Amen.

WHEN THE DUST SETTLES

They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger. They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, "All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust.

John 8:6-8 (NLT)

Probably one of the most curious and controversial stories in the Bible is this one concerning the woman caught in adultery. The teachers of the religious law and the Pharisees brought this woman before the crowd and inquired of Jesus about her fate. Jesus responded not with, *Okay, stone her to death*, instead He stooped down and wrote something in the dust. We're not sure exactly what He wrote, then He stood up, presenting a heart check for those in the crowd by saying, "... *let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone.*" Then a second time, He stooped down and wrote in the dust again. One by one, her accusers disappeared, and as the dust settled, Jesus was left alone standing with the woman. His response was, *"Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?"* I'm sure the woman's response was in shock, and she stated, *No, Lord*, then Jesus retorted, *"Neither do I. Go and sin no more."*

This story shares a clear awareness of what happens when we judge others based on what we desire to happen in our version of justice. Whether it's people currently in our lives or those from our past, are we seeking justice for their sinful actions against us or even against God? If we put ourselves in the place of the woman in this story, ask yourself, *what would Jesus write in the dust for us to read?* Jesus desires us to be part of people's restoration, not condemnation. Jesus approached this situation with empathy and compassion. He didn't approve of the sin or let her off the hook. He chose to stand in her place with her, allowing her to turn to Him and away from sin.

APPLICATION: How many stones do you have ready for action against someone today? Seek Jesus and His understanding and forgiveness. Lay the stones down and instead, ask Jesus to use them to build a bridge towards forgiveness with others.

PRAYER: Dear Father, I can hold onto baggage and harbor bitterness, or I can choose to lay these things down and trust you with them. Today, soften my heart toward You and toward others. Thank You. Amen.

SEATS OF MERCY

So, whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you.

James 2:12-13 (NLT)

The phrase *save me a seat* is one you've probably said or been asked to do at some point in life. We can physically save a seat for someone on a bus, a train, a sporting event or even in church. We can also have one saved for us. What we're doing, in essence, is allowing ourselves to be at the mercy of the one saving the seat, trusting that we'll have a spot.

Now, think about a time you attended an event and saw an open seat, only to have someone say, *Sorry, this seat is taken*. That always frustrates me, but really, the frustration should be at myself, not the people saving a seat. Other times, someone would say, *Hey, I got a seat over here*, even though I was late for the event; someone showed me mercy and offered me a seat. I certainly did not deserve that.

Without the mercy of God, where would I sit? We're called to show mercy because we have been shown mercy first by God through Jesus' sacrifice. We're called to have tough conversations with others about their lives and decisions and to share *the way* that points toward God's mercy, where Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father. Through Him, we are made right. Are we saving seats today just for those we choose, for all who need mercy in Jesus, or are we playing a constant game of *Mercy* with others, trying to force them into submission?

APPLICATION: Think of the people you encounter every day. How much mercy are we extending to them, and how much mercy are we expecting to receive? Does it balance out? Work towards balancing that scale in your life today.

PRAYER: Father, only in Your presence, because in my own ways, I have no chance. But, because of Your grace and mercy, I have a seat that You have saved for me. Amen.

ORCHARDS OF TRUTH

"A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. So, every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions."

Matthew 7:18-20 (NLT)

Continuing our theme of not judging others, let's reflect on the importance of using spiritual truths to see and protect ourselves from deception as we follow Jesus, living in the world, not of it. In Matthew, Jesus gives both a warning and an example of how to be mindful of the company we keep and whom we choose to follow. He tells us, *"A good tree produces good fruit, while a bad one produces bad fruit."* Essentially, what is produced reveals what is rooted within.

Someone claiming to be an apple tree (a believer) may produce what looks like apples, but sadly, they're full of worms, making the fruit rotten and inedible. Or, in a similar way, someone may outwardly appear like a sheep but inwardly live like a wolf and lead others down the wrong paths. This is why spiritual discernment matters. Some may not know what good fruit looks like, nor do they recognize the true nature of a sheep. But Jesus reminds us in the book of John that *if we know the truth, then the truth will set us free.*

The Bible reminds us throughout that we should not judge others. Matthew 7:20 says we can identify people by their actions. But we should be careful not to confuse judgment with discernment.

Let's allow the Spirit to guide us into the truth, so we don't fall prey to deception. When we choose to follow the truth, there will likely be backlash. The enemy will try to blur the line between judgment and discernment. But remember, light and darkness cannot exist in the same space. Light reveals what is hidden, while darkness conceals the truth.

APPLICATION: Test your beliefs against the Word of God, what is true in your life, and what would be considered bad fruit. Ask God to prune and, if necessary, remove that tree from your life. This is so you can be fruitful for the Kingdom.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for the parables so we can understand life better. Help me apply them to my life so that the enemy does not deceive me. Amen.

ASK

"Ask and it will be given to you..."

Matthew 7:7a (NIV)

In Matthew 7, as Jesus gives His final Sermon on the Mount teachings, He circles back to a topic near to His heart: prayer. As recorded in Matthew 6:5-15, Jesus previously instructed the crowd on how to pray and described prayer as a connection with their Heavenly Father.

When Jesus resumes His discussion of prayer in Matthew 7:7-11, He continues to invite His followers into a relationship with the Father through three specific calls to action: ask, seek and knock. We'll lean into seeking and knocking later in the week. Today, let's linger a bit in the invitation to ask.

Asking can be intimidating, especially when the person you're appealing to has significant power and authority. We know this is true from human relationships. Imagine approaching the CEO of an organization, a high-ranking government official, or the President of the United States to ask for something you need. It can feel daunting, and you may even hold back out of fear they won't be attentive to your request.

If you transfer that intimidation onto God, who has ultimate power and authority, your heart may be tempted to hold back your needs and desires from Him. Your mind may doubt whether God has time for your request or cares about the little details of your life. After all, He's got the entire universe to run.

But that's the exact opposite of Jesus' instruction. The first word in Jesus' summary on prayer is *ask*! Don't hold back. God is both big enough to hold the universe together and intimate enough to care about every detail of your life. Jesus' invitation permits you to confidently approach Almighty God, and He assures that your request will receive a response. Just as a good father wants his children to come to him with their questions, needs and desires, your Heavenly Father delights when His sons and daughters request His intervention in their lives.

APPLICATION: What's one thing you've been afraid to ask for from God? Take a few moments right now to accept His invitation to ask for what's on your heart.

PRAYER: Father God, thank You that I can come before You and fearlessly ask for what I need. Today, I ask You for _____. Amen.

BE HONEST

Jesus stopped and called them. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. "Lord," they answered, "we want our sight." **Matthew 20:32-33 (NIV)**

Jesus wants to know what you want. You may be thinking, doesn't He already know what I want if He knows everything? Yes, He does, which tells us there's something more here driving His instruction to ask. His invitation to share what you want is not fueled by a need for knowledge. Rather, it's a desire for intimacy.

We see this on display in Matthew 20:29-34. This passage records the account of two blind men sitting alongside a road near Jericho. When they heard the clamor of a crowd, they realized that Jesus was passing by, so they shouted *Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!* The crowd warned them to be quiet, but the men again cried out with greater passion, *Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!*

Jesus stopped, directed His attention towards the men, and asked, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* The men responded as you might expect. They wanted to see! They wanted healing. They wanted to be made well. How do you think Jesus responded? Do you think He looked at them and said *well, that sure is a selfish request. I can't believe you're asking me for healing when so many other people need my help.*

No, no. That's not at all how Jesus responded. Scripture tells us that *Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him* (Matthew 20:34). The men's honest plea to Jesus ignited His compassion, and they experienced the intimacy of His healing touch and began walking with Him as His newest followers.

Jesus isn't looking for overly spiritualized prayers. Tell Him what you want. You don't have to pretty it up or tell Him what you think He wants to hear. He knows your heart. It's in the honesty and the vulnerability that you experience His compassion and develop intimacy with the Living God as He meets or refines your desires.

APPLICATION: How would you respond if Jesus looked at you and said, *what do you want me to do for you?*

PRAYER: God, I'm so grateful that You encourage me to honestly share my desires with You. Meet me with Your compassion as I share my wants with You and heal the places in me that need Your loving touch. Amen.

SEEK

"... seek and you will find..."

Matthew 7:7b (NIV)

If you've ever lost your car keys, you know it takes far less effort to ask, *Have you seen my keys?* than to search every room in the house. Asking invites a response, but seeking gives you an active role in the process.

By following His invitation to ask with the instruction to seek, Jesus is conveying that there is progressive energy to prayer. While the Father loves it when we come to Him with our requests, He also wants us to put in the work to seek Him, His Word and His Kingdom as we pray.

In fact, the word *seek* that Jesus uses in Matthew 7:7 is the same word Jesus used earlier in Matthew 6:33 when he told the crowd to *"seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

Seeking pulls us out of trying to build our kingdom to aligning with God to build His Kingdom. It keeps us more inclined to store up treasures in heaven rather than here on earth (Matthew 6:19-24). It helps us discern God's will and direction as we make decisions. And seeking communicates our desire to grow in relationship with the Lord.

While it is always exciting to see God answer prayers, getting an answer is only one reward of prayer. Often, the greater reward is finding more of God in the process and experiencing Him shape and grow us in the process of asking and seeking.

It's wondrous that God invites us into the mysterious work of prayer. He wants us to come to Him, both expectant that He will answer and open to discovering what He wants to do in and through us as He works out His purposes in our lives.

APPLICATION: Is there something you're asking God for without putting in the effort to seek Him?

PRAYER: God, I confess I can get in the habit of asking You for things without truly taking time to seek You. Deepen my prayer life by giving me a heart to seek You, Your Word and Your Kingdom together with the answers I long to receive from You. Amen.

KNOCK

“...Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you.” **Matthew 7:7c (NLT)**

We live in a culture that markets immediate gratification. If you're hungry, pull out your phone and have a meal delivered in minutes. If you're bored, scroll through a list of entertainment options on your TV or device. If you don't have time to swing by the store, place an order online, and your items can be dropped off at your doorstep, sometimes in a matter of hours.

We've become so accustomed to having our wants and needs met quickly that we can feel frustrated and impatient when we encounter something that requires persistence and endurance.

Prayer absolutely requires persistence and endurance, and that can create tension within us. We want immediate results, but the fact is that Jesus' teaching on prayer doesn't include a *delivery within an hour* clause. Quite the opposite. He suggests it will take patience and ongoing effort.

The implication here is that prayer may sometimes feel like knocking against a closed door, and after a certain period of knocking without an answer, it may be tempting to give up. Maybe that's exactly where you find yourself today. You've been praying about someone or something for weeks, months, years or even decades, and yet the door remains shut. You begin to doubt whether the door will ever open, and you wonder if maybe you should just quit knocking.

Jesus implores you to keep knocking. God hears you, and He's not ignoring you. Sometimes, for reasons only He knows, He keeps doors closed far longer than we'd like. Our responsibility is not to try to figure out God's ways. Our responsibility is to keep showing up in faith and persevere with passion. Make no mistake, prayer takes time, grit and energy. But take heart, you're not knocking against a wall that has no means or hope of opening. You're knocking on the door of a wise and loving Father who, in His perfect discretion, opens doors at exactly the right time.

APPLICATION: Is there something you've been praying for and you're now tempted to stop? Ask the Lord to bring you clarity on whether you need to continue praying for that request. Recommit to praying as He leads and physically knock on something daily as a tangible expression of your persistent knocking before the Lord.

PRAYER: God, help me persevere in prayer. Amen.

TRUST HIS RESPONSE

"For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." **Matthew 7:8 (NIV)**

I have a friend in her forties who deeply longs to get married and have a family. She's brought her request honestly before the Lord. She has sought Him. She has knocked persistently until her hand has turned numb. What she desires is not a bad thing. In fact, it's a good thing, instituted by God Himself. Yet, despite all the asking, seeking and knocking, she's still single.

It can be very difficult to reconcile experiences like this with Jesus' words in Matthew 7:8. Perhaps you've found yourself in a similar tension. So, what do we do with this Scripture when we haven't received the thing we've boldly asked for?

Well, first, it's important to acknowledge that this is hard to process, and God is not afraid of your questions.

It's also important to look to other verses in Scripture to bring clarity to parts that seem difficult to understand. Pulling this verse out of context will presume things that Jesus never promised. This is not a genie-in-a-bottle scenario where God is obligated to grant you exactly what you ask for within the timeframe you desire it. Looking at the following verses in Matthew 7:9-11, you'll find that every response to our prayers is run through the wisdom and love of our perfect Heavenly Father.

God is not a cold-hearted dad that mocks our requests, recklessly holds out on us, or intentionally seeks to hurt us. He is a generous Father who loves to bless His kids, and He does so in accordance with the good purposes and plans He has for our lives. Sometimes that means we receive the things we ask for. Other times, we receive a *no* or *not yet*. I love what Tim Keller once said: *God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked if we knew everything He knows.*

We will never be able to reconcile the thoughts and ways of God to our own because they are so much higher than ours. However, when things don't make sense, we can reaffirm what is true about our Father and trust His response as we continue asking, seeking and knocking.

APPLICATION: Is there something you've asked God for that you've yet to receive? Ask God to tell you what He wants you to know about that request.

PRAYER: Father, give me boldness to pray with expectancy that You will respond and give me faith to trust Your Fatherly heart behind every response. Amen.

FOR EXAMPLE

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Matthew 26:39 (NIV)

Sometimes the best way to understand something is to look at an example of the concept in practice. Jesus has not only instructed us to ask, seek and knock, but He modeled it for us during His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus asked. After Jesus shared the Last Supper with His disciples and foretold of His betrayal, He took Peter, James and John with Him to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. The weight of the suffering, rejection and death He was about to endure felt like it alone could crush Him to death. With deep sorrow and a troubled soul, He fell to the ground and asked God to spare Him from taking the punishment our sins deserved on the cross. Jesus didn't hide His feelings or desires from God. He boldly asked His Father to do what only the Father could do.

Jesus sought. After Jesus laid His request before His Father, Jesus sought the Father's will over His own. Jesus didn't deny the fact that His humanity wanted God to provide another way to accomplish salvation. He wanted what He wanted. However, He ultimately desired the plan of the Father and the achievement of the redemptive mission for which He'd been sent.

Jesus knocked. Matthew 26:44 tells us that Jesus prayed this prayer three times. That's right, three times Jesus knocked on the door of the Father with His passionate plea.

The Father heard the heartfelt asking, seeking and knocking of His Son, yet His response remained to stay the course and endure the cross. Although Jesus didn't receive the removal He ached for, He did receive the will of the Father, and through His surrender, the rest of humanity received the greatest gift in the history of mankind: redemption from sin, victory over hell and death, and a restored relationship with the Living God.

It's this very sacrifice that grants us the privilege and confidence to come boldly into the presence of God to do our own asking, seeking and knocking.

APPLICATION: What about Jesus' asking, seeking, and knocking encourages you in your prayer life?

PRAYER: Jesus, thank You for not only teaching us how to pray but for showing us too. You are the best. Help me become more like You. Amen.

HINDS' FEET

"The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to tread on the heights." **Habakkuk 3:19 (NIV)**

In college, I studied abroad in Belize, where I went on an unforgettable hike to a waterfall. The first half of the hike was easy, but as the trail narrowed and steepened, the adventure truly began. We tackled hundreds of rickety steps, navigated boulders and climbed over rock walls. At one point, we had to move in a single file line along the cliff's edge. It was a thrilling mix of excitement and fear. When I finally reached the top, the tree line opened into a breathtaking oasis: a crystal-clear swimming hole, adorned with its own mesmerizing waterfall.

Today, I see my walk with the Lord as a journey up a mountain. In the beginning, life felt like a wide, flat road—comfortable and straightforward. As I pursued Christ, the path transformed, becoming steeper and more challenging. I faced a choice: to continue onward, embracing the difficulties with the promise of something great awaiting me, or to turn back to what was familiar and safe. I chose to keep moving forward on the straight and narrow.

Despite facing unexpected losses and hardships, I hold tightly to the belief that this journey is worthwhile. I remind myself that God is strengthening my feet, just like those of a deer. The imagery of *hinds' feet* speaks to the sure-footed agility of female deer or mountain goats, both fearless in navigating rocky cliffs. In my relationship with the Lord, I strive to embody the same courage as I travel the narrow path, which may seem daunting.

I trust that He will make my feet stable through His Word, guiding me as I climb. As I envision reaching the summit at the end of my life, I am reassured that every challenge faced will be worth the reward. Each step, each struggle, is an opportunity to draw closer to Him and grow in faith. So, let us embrace the journey, for the view from the top awaits us, and it is filled with His glory.

APPLICATION: Set aside time this week to pray and reflect on your faith journey. Remember, you're not alone in facing challenges, and each step helps you grow in faith. Journaling can help you track your progress and stay motivated on your path to Christ.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, please make my feet swift and sure like a deer. Help me focus on You when the path gets tough. May my hope be anchored in You, knowing a life full of promise awaits. Amen.

ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD

*"There is a way **that seems** right to a man, but its end **is** the way of death."*

Proverbs 14:12 (NKJV)

In my youth, I did competitive Irish Dancing. I wore the big curly wig, the sparkly dress, and the bedazzled tiara. However, beneath the makeup, hair and dress were sweat, blood, blisters and one too many bobby pins jammed into my scalp. I loved pushing myself to win another medal or trophy. But with every win came more pressure to perform at a higher standard. Eventually, I reached a crossroads: did I want to pursue this professionally?

I've seen many of my dance friends chase their dreams, only to reach a point where they had to stop. They grew tired. The training, travel and performances began to wear them down. How often do we see this in our day-to-day lives? People are constantly pursuing money, the next big promotion, the best diet pill, or the trendiest clothing. We're overwhelmed with choices, bombarded with messages telling us that what we have isn't enough—that we need bigger, better and more.

Some of these pursuits aren't inherently bad. Working hard at your job, eating healthy and taking care of your family are important. But they aren't the most important things. I love the story of when Jesus called Matthew to be His disciple. He approached Matthew while he was working as a tax collector and said, *"Follow me."* Without hesitation, Matthew got up and followed Him (Matthew 9:9). There are no questions asked. He simply follows Jesus. At that time, tax collectors were greatly despised. Although Matthew likely made a good living, he was probably isolated and seen as a traitor by his community. He had it all, yet he chose to walk away from everything to follow Jesus. I believe deep down, Matthew understood that only Jesus could fulfill the deep longing in his soul for something more.

APPLICATION: Take a moment to reflect on your current pursuits. Is it money, control or success? Write them down honestly before God. If Jesus asked you to *Follow Me* today, would you be willing to leave everything behind? Invite God to search your heart and align your desires with His will.

PRAYER: Lord, we thank You for pursuing us. Help us to see clearly that the glitter and gold of the world hold no value and give no eternal life, but only You, Jesus. Grow in my heart a faith to follow You without hesitation or fear. I love You. Amen.

HEART OF FLESH

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

Ezekiel 36:26-27 (NIV)

During my high school years, in a Sunday morning Bible class, my teachers were discussing the concept of salvation and what it means to have a relationship with Jesus. At that time, I had not yet accepted Jesus, and I spoke up to express that while I believed He was real, I had no interest in being saved or developing a relationship with Him. By God's grace, I don't remember that moment. One of my teachers, who later became a mentor and dear friend, shared the story with me. She was in tears when I left the class that day and prayed that I would one day accept Jesus into my heart. Thankfully, I vividly remember the day I chose to accept Christ. My mentor was right there with me to guide me through prayer.

I understand why many fall away from Christianity or claim it superficially; it's easier, more comfortable and more convenient. I struggled to devote myself fully to Christ. For many years, I tried to hold onto the things of the world, but it only kept me tethered to my selfishness and distant from Jesus. When I fully devoted myself to Christ, I found freedom in areas of my life I never thought possible.

While it can be tempting to follow the ways of the world, God has a higher calling for His followers. This path requires action, dedication and selflessness. It takes more than changing habits; it takes a change of heart. Well, how do I do that? You don't. Jesus does. It's not about doing what is right; it's about depending on the One who makes all things right.

APPLICATION: Reflect on the state of your heart and where you are in your relationship with Jesus. Many choose the easier path that satisfies their desires, keeping Him at arm's length. Remember, Jesus has greater plans for you and will guide your steps toward His glory.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, I thank You for rescuing me and for giving me a new heart. I pray that my eyes remain focused on You and the path You have set before me. Please instill a new heart in those who are yearning for something more in this world, and guide their steps toward You. I love You. Amen.

GATEWAY

"Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures." **John 10:9 (NLT)**

I always feel nervous when I walk through TSA at the airport, even though usually everything goes smoothly. I know I don't have any liquids over 3.4 ounces, and I'm not carrying any weapons, but as I get closer to the security scanners, my heart starts to race. While I'm waiting in line, I can't help but think about everything I packed. When it's my turn at the body scanner, I panic, worried that I might have a hidden coin in my pocket that will set off the machine. Is it just me who feels this way?

Can you imagine everyone walking through one giant security scanner at the airport? Yikes. As soon as I walk through security, I feel relieved and ready to move forward in my journey. God extends His hand to all, inviting us into His Kingdom. Through His grace, He sent His son to be our *gateway* to eternity. Scripture clearly states that there's only one way to receive salvation: through Jesus Christ (John 14:6). This journey requires us to humble ourselves and lay our burdens at His feet so we can walk with Him and come to the Father.

From the beginning, God established one way to Him. Jesus is the narrow gateway to the Father and the Kingdom of Heaven. So lay your baggage down, friend. He welcomes you with open arms, eager to share a new life with you.

APPLICATION: Are there hidden *coins* in your heart—things you've been holding onto or trying to keep from God? You don't have to carry them alone. Lay your burdens at His feet, receive His grace, and walk forward in confidence, knowing He is with you every step of the way.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank You for being our gateway to the Father and new life. Help me unload my burdens at Your feet today and to trust that Your way leads to new life. I love You. Amen.

ENTOLE

And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit, he gave us.

1 John 3:23-24 (NIV)

As a parent of a one-year-old, I instruct my daughter daily on what's right and wrong. She'd walk straight into the street or tumble down the deck stairs if given the chance. I stay close by, guiding her with, *Step here* or *Grab this* and daily I say, *Follow me*.

When Jesus called Matthew, He said, "*Follow me*." In Matthew 7:13, Jesus says, "*Enter through the narrow gate*." In both instances, Jesus speaks with authority, not suggestion. Scripture is clear: following Jesus leads to life, while following the world leads to destruction. Many people struggle with the word *command* because authority can feel uncomfortable. The Greek word for *command* is *entole*, which also means instruction or order—much like the guidance a child needs while learning to navigate the world.

We see this with the Israelites in the wilderness. Though the desert may have seemed like wandering, God was preparing and instructing them for the Promised Land. The Ten Commandments were given to bring peace, order and hearts aligned with Him. Psalm 119:35 says, *Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight*. Even in hardship, the psalmist found joy in obeying God because His commands lead to life.

Like toddlers and the Israelites, we are prone to wander, follow the crowd, and chase the idols of this world. But it's never too late to turn back, follow Jesus, obey His commands, and reflect the faithful image of God.

APPLICATION: We should delight in God's commands because, like a loving parent, Jesus guides our steps toward peace, purpose and eternal life. Reflect on one of His commands—whether from the Ten Commandments or His simple invitation: *Follow me*.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, what a joy it is that You lovingly guide us through Your commands and scripture. Thank You for leading us to what's good. May Your Word be a lamp to our feet and guide our pathway to living more like You. I love You. Amen.

POINTING OTHERS TO TRUE SHALOM

Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world.

1 Peter 2:12 (NLT)

Shalom! If you're unfamiliar, *shalom* is a Hebrew word meaning peace, harmony and prosperity. In Jewish culture, it's commonly used as both a greeting and a farewell—making it a word Jesus likely spoke daily to those around Him. *Shalom* is far more than wishing someone a good day. It carries the deeper meaning of complete wholeness and restoration.

Jesus says in John 14:6, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life."* He does not offer Himself as one option among many paths, yet as the only path that leads us into a right relationship with God. The world promises completeness through success, comfort, control, or approval, but those never fully satisfy. We can spend years chasing temporary fulfillment only to discover our hearts are still restless. But when we follow Jesus, we begin to experience the deep shalom our souls were created for.

Following Jesus transforms the way we live before others. Every day, someone is watching us—our children, friends, coworkers, neighbors, even strangers. The way we respond to hardship, forgive others, show humility, or walk in obedience can quietly point others toward Christ. Our lives should echo that same invitation through the example we set.

This does not mean living perfectly. It means living faithfully and trusting God. When people see peace in us during difficult seasons, they may begin to wonder where that peace comes from. Our obedience can become a pathway that encourages others to seek Jesus for themselves. When we walk with Him, He not only restores our hearts but also uses our lives to guide others toward His peace, truth and eternal life.

What's so remarkable is that Jesus Himself embodies shalom. He is our peace, our harmony, our restoration and our complete wholeness. Jesus is the path to true shalom—we find the fullness our hearts long for and the true peace that the world cannot give.

Shalom, friend.

APPLICATION: Like travelers on a narrow trail, our footsteps leave impressions behind. Where are your footsteps leading others? Are you following the patterns of the world, or are you walking closely with the Prince of Peace?

PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank You for leading me on a path to true shalom. Help me to walk closely with You so that others may be encouraged to follow in the footsteps along Your path to righteousness. I love You, Lord. Amen.

THE TEST OF CHARACTER

"By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?"
Matthew 7:16 (NIV)

There's a reason grocery stores put the freshest fruit near the front entrance. Bright colors and clean displays make everything look appealing. But most of us have experienced bringing home beautiful-looking fruit only to discover it was bruised, rotten or sour inside. What looked healthy on the outside didn't match what was happening within.

Jesus used a similar picture when warning people about false prophets. He said we would recognize them *by their fruit*. In other words, the true condition of a person's heart eventually shows up in the way they live. Words can be polished. Images can be curated. Public appearances can be managed. But character always leaves evidence.

That warning matters because false prophets don't usually look dangerous. Jesus said they come in *sheep's clothing* (Matthew 7:15). They often sound convincing, spiritual, confident and even caring. But over time, the fruit begins to reveal itself. Pride, manipulation, greed, dishonesty, division or a lack of love eventually become visible.

This passage isn't meant to make us suspicious of everyone. It's meant to help us become discerning. God never asks us to follow personalities, trends or spiritual voices without wisdom. Instead, He invites us to pay attention to what grows out of a person's life. Does their influence lead people toward humility, truth, love, repentance and Jesus? Or does it produce fear, confusion, control and self-centeredness?

Jesus' words also invite us to look inward. It's easy to evaluate someone else's fruit while ignoring our own. But the condition of our hearts will eventually show up in our relationships, attitudes, reactions and choices, too. Healthy roots produce healthy fruit.

The good news is that God doesn't just point out unhealthy areas in us. He helps transform them. As we stay close to Jesus through Scripture, prayer and obedience, His Spirit grows new fruit in our lives. Over time, our character begins to reflect Him more clearly.

APPLICATION: Take a few moments to reflect on the voices influencing your life most right now. Are these influencers producing Christlike character in you? Can you see enough of their lives to discern whether their characters reflect Christ?

PRAYER: Father, help me discern truth from lies. Give me the desire not to have my ears tickled by what I want to hear, but help me desire the truth from You more than anything else in the world. Amen.

THE TEST OF FRUIT

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

1 John 4:1 (NIV)

Most people don't realize how much trust they place in a voice. A navigation app tells us where to drive. Reviews tell us what to buy. Influencers tell us what matters. Day after day, voices shape our decisions, emotions, priorities and beliefs. Some voices help us move toward wisdom and life. Others quietly lead us somewhere unhealthy.

That's why John gives such a direct warning: *do not believe every spirit*. In other words, not every spiritual message, teacher or influence comes from God simply because it sounds inspiring or religious. Some voices mix just enough truth with deception to confuse people and slowly pull them away from Jesus.

Jesus warned about this in Matthew 7 when He spoke about false prophets. He explained that people are ultimately recognized by their fruit. Healthy trees produce healthy fruit. Unhealthy trees don't. Someone may appear impressive at first glance. They may speak confidently, quote Scripture, or attract attention. But eventually, the deeper fruit of their life becomes visible. Do they show humility? Compassion? Integrity? Do they point people toward dependence on Jesus?

The same question applies to us personally. What kind of fruit is growing in our own lives? If anger, pride, bitterness, or dishonesty continually spills out of us, God may be inviting us to let Him work more deeply in our hearts.

The encouraging news is that spiritual growth isn't about pretending to be perfect. God specializes in growing healthy fruit in imperfect people. As we stay connected to Jesus, His Spirit gradually transforms our reactions, attitudes and desires. Love becomes more natural. Truth matters more deeply. Humility grows stronger. Our lives slowly begin reflecting the character of Christ.

God doesn't want us to live in fear or suspicion. He wants us to become deeply rooted in His truth so that we can recognize what is healthy, trustworthy and life-giving.

APPLICATION: Think about one voice or influence that regularly shapes your thinking—whether online, in entertainment or through relationships. Ask yourself honestly: *What kind of fruit is this producing in me?* Spend time in Scripture this week asking God to sharpen your discernment.

PRAYER: Lord, help me recognize truth from deception. Teach me to watch for the fruit being produced in my life and those who influence me. Grow me in wisdom, humility and discernment so I can grow closer to You. Amen.

WEEK FIVE • TUESDAY

THE TEST OF TRUTH

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. **Psalms 119:105 (NIV)**

Have you ever walked through a dark room and bumped into something you didn't see? Suddenly, something as simple as a flashlight becomes incredibly valuable. Light helps us recognize what's actually there instead of guessing our way forward. Spiritually, God's Word works the same way.

Jesus warned His followers about false prophets because He knew not every voice claiming to speak for God would actually reflect God's heart. Some messages sound appealing because they promise comfort without surrender, truth without obedience, or spirituality without Jesus. They often tell people exactly what they want to hear instead of what they genuinely need.

That's why Scripture matters so deeply. God never intended for us to navigate life based only on feelings or opinions. His Word becomes the light that helps us recognize truth from deception.

A counterfeit bill is usually detected by studying the real thing, not by obsessing over every possible fake. In the same way, discernment grows stronger when we become deeply familiar with the character and truth of Jesus. The more we spend time in Scripture, the more quickly we recognize messages that distort God's nature or contradict His truth.

This doesn't mean we approach life with fear or cynicism. Jesus isn't calling us to become suspicious of everyone around us. He's inviting us into deeper wisdom and spiritual maturity. God wants us anchored enough in truth that every trending opinion, persuasive personality, or emotional message won't easily sway us.

God has left us with guidance. Through His Spirit and His Word, He continues leading us faithfully. Scripture illuminates our blind spots, steadies our emotions, and reminds us what is eternally true even when culture constantly shifts. The closer we stay to Jesus, the clearer His voice becomes.

APPLICATION: Choose a short portion of Scripture to read slowly each day this week instead of immediately reaching for social media or entertainment. Ask God to help His truth shape your thinking more than the loudest voices around you.

PRAYER: Thank You, God, for giving me Your Word! Help me to have a strong hunger and thirst for more of its influence in my life. Teach me to listen to Your insights more than anything else available to me. Amen.

MORE THAN A FEELING

Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. **Psalms 42:5 (NIV)**

Sometimes we can mistake strong emotions toward Jesus for the truest measure of spiritual maturity. One of the major pitfalls for followers of Jesus is putting too much stock in our feelings. Feelings can serve you, but they can also mislead you. Why is it that one morning you wake up and feel great, and the next morning, for no reason, you feel overwhelmed or discouraged? The culprit? Often, it can be your feelings. One of the keys to spiritual growth is not to let your feelings have the final word, but to remind yourself about God's truth. Start preaching to yourself.

The Psalmist above has feelings that begin to speak to him. He doesn't suppress them. He acknowledges them. Suppression causes us to deal with things sideways. This is where we end up trying to numb or escape our pain, and it doesn't work. We must face our feelings head-on; however, the Psalmist shows us that once our feelings speak, we speak back. Notice the Psalmist tells his feelings something like, *I know I'm feeling this, soul, but I'm going to put my hope in God. I'm going to praise Him even if it doesn't make sense.*

I've learned that in life, we must preach the best message we have to ourselves. We should be honest about what we feel. We should even share what we're feeling with others, but we need to preach to ourselves the promises of God.

I remember a leader telling me, *In life, the hardest person to lead will be yourself.* I think he was right. There are times when you don't feel like being a friend, going to work, or being a parent, but commitment compels you to do these things. Feelings flee, and someday you'll feel like following Jesus, and other days you won't. Don't read into those feelings; commit to following Him. Jesus faced the cross with deep anguish. In fact, He says, *"Father, if there is any other way..."* But feelings didn't lead His life. His commitment to honor God did. Feelings are good. Faithfulness is better.

APPLICATION: Today, don't listen to yourself; instead, preach to yourself the promises of God.

PRAYER: Spirit of God, awaken my heart to the depth of Your love for me. Let that love overflow in faith, obedience and joy as I commit again to follow You with my life. Amen.

MORE THAN ACTIONS

And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and He was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. **James 2:23-26 (ESV)**

The passage in James has caused many Christians through the years to struggle and wrestle, maybe more than any other passage in the New Testament. Martin Luther said of James 2: *James's epistle is really an epistle of straw compared to these others, for we have been justified by faith.* Luther struggled because He felt James was saying there was a saving faith in works.

But James isn't saying works can save us; he is saying there is a sign of faith in works. The order matters. We don't do things to earn God's love; we do them out of an overflow of love because God has transformed our lives. All other religions point to a god out there waiting to be found when we do the right thing. In Christianity, God isn't distant. He comes to us in grace. Through His work on the cross, He transforms our lives. God does the work first, and ours is simply a response.

This matters because we can't see the heart. Two people can serve God with two different motives. One serves to earn God's love and pay Him back, while the other serves out of gratitude and a transformed heart. Actions don't transform us; the blood of Jesus does.

We need to be reminded that we can't do what the Spirit can do, and the Spirit won't do what we can do. As Dallas Willard says, *Grace is not opposed to effort. It is opposed to earning. Effort is action. Earning is attitude.* You have a part to play in your discipleship.

APPLICATION: Don't just hear the Word—be doers of the Word!

PRAYER: Spirit of God, awaken my heart to God's love. Speak to me about what I need to guard my heart from and how I can cultivate it. Show me what's pulling me away from You and what spiritual practices will help me grow closer to You. I am listening. Amen.

MORE THAN BELIEVING

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!
James 2:19 (ESV)

Something people often say is, *I believe in God. I'm a Christian.* The problem is, even demons believe in God. Belief in God is the starting point, but it's not the finish line. Think about it: in Mark chapter 5, there is a man filled with thousands of demons, and when Jesus approaches, the demons recognize Him and ask what He wants. Yet the Pharisees were filled with thousands of verses, and yet they didn't recognize Jesus enough to follow Him.

We can believe something without building our lives around it. For instance, I believe I should be eating healthier. I believe I should be eating less fried food, less sugar and fewer carbohydrates. In my mind, I am even committed to doing it, but my beliefs haven't changed my behavior. We can't just believe something; we must surrender to it. As Christians, we can't just believe in Jesus; we must follow Him. Think about it: when Jesus calls the disciples, He doesn't say, *I want you to believe in Me, read My Word, and serve.* Rather, He says, *Follow Me.*

The scary part is that one of the 12 disciples believed in Jesus and was even around Him. Judas saw Jesus take a little boy's sack lunch and feed 5,000 people. He saw Jesus walk on water and heal many people. Judas even saw Jesus raise a man from the grave. He believed certain things about Jesus, but his heart was never surrendered to Him. Again, belief is a starting point, but it's not the finish line.

God calls us not only to believe in Him, but to build our lives around Him. The only way you'll build your life around Him is if you see Him as Lord. Judas, the Pharisees and the demons weren't willing to build their lives around Him because they didn't see Him as Lord. They wanted to be the lords of their own lives. That's why Jesus' invitation is simple, but costly. It's the same invitation He gave the disciples: leave behind whatever competes for first place and follow Me. Build your life around Me.

APPLICATION: We can't just believe in Jesus; we must follow Him. Today, in every decision, build your life around Him.

PRAYER: God, stir my belief into surrender. Keep me from becoming familiar with Jesus yet forgetting to see Him truly. Spirit, awaken my heart to His Kingdom, open my eyes to His presence, and lead me to follow Him today. Amen.

CAREER CHRISTIAN

"Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws.'"

Matthew 7:21-23 (NLT)

Sobering, huh? One day, many will stand before Jesus and say, *Look at everything we've **done** for You!* Yet His response in this passage is, *"But I never knew you..."* One of the greatest deceptions believers can fall into is unintentionally trading a relationship with Jesus for a career in Christianity. We were never designed to pursue our relationship with Jesus like a vocation or a degree. There's a difference between performing for someone and knowing them.

The foundation of our faith is not what we do, but whether we truly know Jesus. We could do all the right things: have consistent quiet times, build a great tithing history, attend beautiful church services, never say a bad word, etc., and still miss out on really knowing Him. When we rely on our behavior alone for assurance of our salvation, we settle for performance instead of a relationship. When goodness becomes the goal instead of Jesus Himself, we can begin serving our need to feel worthy rather than pursuing Him. Instead of intimacy, we begin chasing reassurance. What a tragedy.

What seems like a scary statement from Jesus is a glimpse into the heart of the Father. Even in this warning, there's an invitation. When our actions flow from the pursuit of Him first, our activities become avenues to know the Father even more. He has always desired love, not for us to have a career in good behavior. He wants to be known and to know us.

This is why discipleship to Jesus is so important. Obedience matters, but it was always meant to flow from knowing Him. He wants to be with us. Relationship, not religious performance, has always been His heart.

APPLICATION: The life of discipleship to Jesus grows slowly, like a garden. It takes time, intentionality and connection. Spend some time today asking Jesus where He wants to connect with you in the things you are already doing. When He shows you a space, ask Him to speak and spend time with you there.

PRAYER: Jesus, thank You for wanting to be with me. I ask that You make me a true disciple, one who knows You and follows Your ways in all I do. I want to spend my life pursuing You. Amen.

FOLLOW ME

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.

Matthew 9:9 (NLT)

Have you ever considered that Jesus didn't invite people into a religious moment? He invited people to *follow* Him. Again and again in the New Testament, Jesus invited people to follow Him. And people responded. They left boats, nets, jobs, unfinished tasks and even their current religious understanding to sit at His feet. They walked with Him. Shared meals with Him. Saw Him heal people and respond to suffering. Watched Him pray and listen to the Father. Over time, through their daily choice to remain with Him, they were transformed.

Following Jesus requires us to surrender our expectations, identities and preconceived notions and become learners. Disciple in Greek means *learner*. The idea of being a learner of Jesus, rather than simply trying to follow religious expectations, changes everything.

A learner expects growth. They understand the need for practice, correction, questions and time. Jesus never seemed discouraged by the disciples' need to learn, nor the time it took them. Being a disciple implies a process, not a program. A journey, not a quick fix. The transformation Jesus desires for us happens as we intentionally arrange our lives around His practices and rhythms. As we walk closely with Him, we open our hearts to God's power to change us.

While we can't physically walk the paths of Israel with Jesus, we can pattern our lives after Him. Scripture is one of God's greatest gifts to help us learn the ways of Jesus. Scripture teaches us the heart of Jesus. Not just what He did, but the heart behind His actions. As we begin to practice His ways, the Holy Spirit teaches, guides, corrects and encourages us as we continue becoming more like Jesus.

The invitation Jesus gave Matthew is still the invitation He gives us today: *Follow Me*.

APPLICATION: It is encouraging to know that we're on a journey with Jesus rather than having to figure everything out on our own. He not only wants to transform our lives, but also to walk with us through the process. What's one area of your life where Jesus is inviting you to follow Him more closely today?

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for inviting us to follow You. Help us to trust, learn and grow to become more like You each day. Amen.

TO SEE HIM IS TO LOVE HIM

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!"

John 20:18a (NIV)

When we see Jesus, everything changes. He teaches us an entirely different way of life with new values, priorities and desires. Many of us know, however, what it's like to follow God out of fear, striving to do the right things while never truly knowing His heart. But discipleship to Jesus goes far beyond rule-keeping. He is someone to know and to keep getting to know.

To follow the ways of Jesus without loving Him is legalism. It's the attempt to earn God's favor through action alone. This is the trap many of the religious leaders in Jesus' day fell into: a constant pursuit of outward righteousness while missing the heart of God. But when we're transformed by love instead of legalism, the fruit in our lives begins to change.

Mary Magdalene is a powerful example of what loving Jesus can do. When she encountered Him, she was an outcast, a woman tormented by demons. If anyone had to learn a completely new way of life, it was her. How does a woman once possessed by seven demons become one of Jesus' most devoted disciples, one of the few present at His crucifixion and the first to find the tomb empty?

She truly *loved* Him.

The mark of a disciple is love-filled obedience. This is not a religious duty, not an allegiance born from fear or condemnation, but love. Love causes us to be brave enough to sit, wait, wrestle, obey, grieve, celebrate and trust. Love reshapes our daily rhythms and choices so that another's good becomes part of our focus, not solely our own. Love inspires us to grow. It inspires obedience.

When Jesus said His yoke is easy and His burden is light, He revealed something true about life with Him. Does this mean a worry-free, stress-free existence? No, because He also tells us in John 16:33 (NIV), "*In this world you will have trouble.*" But it means that with love at the core, whatever He asks of us, however He directs us, whatever He asks us to let go of or pick up, His love will take the lead. Love makes obedience costly sometimes, but never meaningless.

APPLICATION: To see Him is to love Him. Take a few moments today to reflect on a characteristic of Jesus. As you read Scripture and pray throughout your day, ask Him to reveal His heart to you more deeply and draw you closer to Him.

PRAYER: Jesus, I love You. I ask You to teach me how to love You even more and let Your love be the thing that changes and guides my life. You're worth it. Amen.

THE ART OF RETURNING

That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. **John 21:7 (ESV)**

What pulls our hearts away from Jesus? Drifting from Jesus is usually subtle. Over time, pain, disappointment, confusion and small daily choices can quietly move us from a place of surrender to a place of self-reliance. Pride is one of the greatest threats to wholeheartedly following Jesus because it subtly convinces us that our will can coexist with God's.

Judas is a prime example. Somewhere along the way, Judas' desire to follow Jesus was tangled with his own expectations, desires and disappointments. On the outside he appeared to be a devoted follower of Jesus, but on the inside, his heart had quietly wandered from surrender. But before we judge Judas too quickly, remember that even the faithful ones in Scripture had Judas moments: David, Abraham, Peter, Paul and many others. If we're honest, haven't we all? We're all faced with the same choice: our way or God's way.

So, what's the difference between Judas and Peter? Both followed, and both betrayed. Why did Judas give in to despair while Peter was restored? One ran, but the other knew how to return.

As disciples of Jesus, we must learn the art of returning. We're being transformed from death to life. As we journey with Him, we'll sometimes be frail, confused, disappointed or simply maturing in His ways. When we miss the mark, Jesus will show us the way back to Him. This is good news. It means that conviction isn't a death threat, but an invitation—an invitation to Jesus, to be transformed by Him.

This is what Peter experienced. Instead of running further away, repentance redirected his thoughts and heart back to Jesus. Peter jumped out of the boat and found himself home again. If only Judas had done the same.

Repentance confronts our prideful nature and returns our broken ways to the feet of Jesus, surrendering control back to Him. Repenting doesn't mean losing hope or living in self-hatred. It means allowing God to bring us back home to Himself and reshape the way we think from our own understanding to His.

APPLICATION: Following Jesus means learning the art of returning again and again. Today, invite the Lord to reshape your thinking and draw your heart back to Him.

PRAYER: Jesus, thank You for teaching us how to return. I ask that You search me and know me and lead me back to You in every area of my life. Amen.

THOSE WHO HOPE

Even when there was no reason for hope, Abraham kept hoping...

Romans 4:18a (NLT)

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

Hebrews 10:23 (NIV)

Disciples of Jesus are people of hope. In a world that relies on human effort and feels uncertain about the future, hope is our secret weapon. Oftentimes, we use the word *hope* to mean preference or possibility. Biblical hope is different. It's not uncertain. It's anchored in the unchanging nature of God. Faith is the confidence that God will be faithful in the present. Hope is the confidence that He will continue being faithful in the future. Biblical hope isn't optimism or denial. It's confidence in the character of God, even before we see the outcome.

- Hope kept Hannah from resentment after years of being barren.
- Hope helped David anticipate the Lord's answer.
- Hope moved the bleeding woman to reach for Jesus.
- Hope gave Esther the courage to stand for her people.
- Hope kept Abraham believing God's promise.

Scripture is filled with people who kept trusting God before they ever saw the promise fulfilled. Hope waits for the Lord's voice. It expects God's goodness even in uncertainty. Hope stirs faith. It becomes the foundation of joy. Hope heals what longing takes from us. It keeps us fighting, believing and moving forward. It allows grief to run its course while still believing joy comes in the morning.

Hope lifts our eyes to the character of God instead of trapping us in our circumstances. Why? Because our hope is not found in the resolution of our circumstances but in the person of Jesus. As disciples of Jesus, our future is bright. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. He's not only coming back for us one day, but is also present with us right now. That means even when circumstances are dark, redemption feels impossible, addiction seems too strong, or reconciliation feels far away, we get to hope.

We live in a world desperate for hope. We feel that longing inside our own hearts and see it in those around us. We don't have to fabricate optimism. We get to hope in something greater than ourselves. Hope remains because He remains. And that's good news.

APPLICATION: Where in your life do you need renewed hope? Bring it before the Lord and ask Him to remind you of His faithfulness.

PRAYER: Jesus, thank You for the hope that's found in You. Teach me to live with my hope set on You. Amen.

WWJD

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

Philippians 2:3-5 (NLT)

Do you remember the evangelistic movement in the 1990s that popularized bracelets stamped with *WWJD—What Would Jesus Do?* This phrase became the mantra of a generation, with teenagers proudly wearing those simple reminders to live like Jesus.

Of course, none of us is actually Jesus. So, what does it mean to live like Jesus? What does it mean to have the same attitude Paul urged the Philippians to embrace?

We may not share Jesus' exact circumstances, but we're absolutely called to imitate His character. Dallas Willard said it beautifully: *A disciple is a person who has decided that the most important thing in their life is to learn how to do what Jesus said to do.* So, we look to Jesus for direction and inspiration for what our lives should look like. He put others first, refused selfish ambition, chose humility and served instead of being served. His life overflowed with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control.

Jesus didn't live asking, *What benefits me?* He noticed the overlooked, the hurting and the inconvenient. He stopped for people others ignored and showed compassion to those society pushed aside. His life was marked by humility wrapped in love.

As we pursue Jesus and allow Him to shape our character, spiritual fruit begins to grow in our lives. Following Jesus is more than copying a few of His actions or trying to behave better. At its core, discipleship is surrendering ourselves to His way of life. A disciple decides that if Jesus says something is true, good and right, then that becomes the goal of their life as well. Over time, that changes us. We begin to care about what He cares about. We become slower to seek recognition and quicker to serve others. Humility, compassion, forgiveness and selflessness begin to grow in us because we are learning to take on the attitude of Christ Himself.

The question was never simply, *What would Jesus do?* The deeper question is whether we're becoming people who think, love and live like Him.

APPLICATION: We are on a daily journey of becoming more like Jesus. What would it look like for you to think, love and live more like Jesus today?

PRAYER: Jesus, help me know You and become more like You. Teach me Your ways and shape my heart. Thank You for always being with me. Amen.

WEEK SIX • SATURDAY

IT'S NOT WARM WHEN JESUS IS AWAY

"Anyone who wants to serve me must follow me, because my servants must be where I am. And the Father will honor anyone who serves me."

John 12:26 (NLT)

Follow me. These were the two words Jesus said to His disciples. His disciples didn't know where they were going. They just decided to follow Jesus. Our walk with Christ is like that today. Jesus says to go somewhere or to do something, only for us to question where He's taking us. When Jesus says to follow Him, He means for us to walk with Him day by day and minute by minute to experience a satisfying and transformative life. He wants us to be renewed in our thinking by replacing worldly thoughts with His Word. Following Jesus is essential, and without Him life can feel empty, confusing, cold and lonely.

Growing up, our parents guided us the best they could, and we followed them because we trusted them. If they told us, *come here*, then we went to them. If we were walking around a store, we followed them every step of the way. Have you ever experienced a time as a child when you lost track of your parents? You may have felt worried, confused and felt a sense of coldness. You looked around, and there was no parent in sight. The coldness begins to grow as the feeling of abandonment kicks in. Then suddenly, you find them, they welcome you with open arms, and the coldness turns to warmth. All is well. The same goes for our relationship with Jesus. When we first start the Christian journey, we may not know what it feels like to be loved unconditionally and never forsaken. In His warmth, our emptiness becomes full of His love. The brokenness is healed layer by layer, and our souls begin to feel satisfied.

You are following something or somebody. If you're not wholeheartedly following Jesus, can I ask you to surrender and let Him come close to your heart? His love and comfort are like the feeling of a crackling fireplace on a cold winter night. Comforting. Soothing. Warm.

APPLICATION: What's one habit or belief that you need to let go of today to follow Jesus more closely? Ask Jesus to point this out to you and let go of the old ways today.

PRAYER: Lord, You are our shepherd who can be trusted with the details of our lives. Help us to let go of doubts and worry when You ask us to do something. Guide us in Your will for our lives. Amen.

STORM WARNING

"For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland."
Isaiah 43:19 (NLT)

A diamond is one of the most precious jewels in the world. For a diamond to become a diamond, it must go through extreme heat and pressure. A jeweler knows a diamond is completed not only by the 4C's (cut, clarity, carat and color) but when he can see his reflection in the diamond. That's what God wants to see in you. His reflection. It's uncomfortable in the storm, but you'll look back and see what God was doing. Your character will be more developed. When the storm comes, put on all of God's armor.

No matter how bad the storm is, we can look to Jesus to help us rebuild whatever the storm destroys.

A few years ago, I went through the worst time of my life. I was battling anxiety, depression, financial struggles, two family deaths back-to-back, and life felt like it was more than I could handle. I kept praying even when I felt like my prayers were hitting the ceiling. Eventually, the storm passed, and I realized that I saw God's faithfulness, and I came out of that storm better than before. God knew I needed more strength, deeper faith and more dependence on Him. In that storm, I felt that my plans for my life were being destroyed, only for God to build something new and something better.

One of the most important things I learned in that storm and other storms I've faced is to keep my eyes focused on Jesus. Remember when Peter was walking on water and took his eyes off Jesus, and then he began to sink? Jesus reached His hand out and grabbed him, and they climbed back into the boat. Focusing on the waves around us will lead us to sink and fall into a more difficult state. Focus on Jesus and His power. Sunshine eventually comes after the storm.

Storms help to make the sailors sturdy, and trials help to make Christians strong in faith. - Charles Spurgeon

APPLICATION: Take a moment to write down 3-5 things you're grateful for. Gratitude shifts our minds from our current circumstances to God's goodness and faithfulness.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, as we go through the storms of life, give us all the hope, strength and faith needed. I pray that as we go through storms, You'll continue to shape our character and help us grow in ways that show Your glory. Amen.

FOUNDATION THAT CAN'T BE SHAKEN

But the LORD is my fortress; my God is the mighty rock where I hide.

Psalms 94:22 (NLT)

"Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock."

Matthew 7:24 (NLT)

Any architect or builder knows that the foundation of a structure is critical. The foundation supports the building's weight, prevents sinking and provides stability against weather like wind, earthquakes and hurricanes. The foundation is the backbone of a structure.

The multimillion-dollar Millennium Tower in San Francisco was tilting and sinking significantly before recent fixtures. This is a luxurious residential skyscraper, and it's one of the most beautiful architectural designs in the city. A documentary exploring this skyscraper showed a resident taking a marble and rolling it across the floor, only for it to reverse course. A stable building would not allow a marble to roll forward and reverse course. Residents noticed cracks in the walls and creaking noises. Officials discovered this tower was literally built on sand instead of bedrock. As of 2025, officials stated that the building is more stabilized, although it remains in a permanently tilted position. Things that look beautiful from the outside will eventually sink without a solid rock as a foundation.

Jesus is our rock. He is the only one we should build our foundation on. His foundation is solid and can stand against any storm or circumstance we face. He's the one who is always trustworthy. His teachings guide our everyday lives and are a lamp to our path. With Jesus as our rock, we don't need to worry about tomorrow because we know He will take care of us. Money, looks, careers, status and other people are poor choices to build your life on. When the storms of life come, these things hold no truth compared to the word of God, and they eventually fade away.

Any other foundation will fail, but Christ is a sure and steady rock to build your life on. - Billy Graham.

APPLICATION: Ask yourself today, what are you building your foundation on?

PRAYER: Jesus, thank You that we can trust You and Your Word to build our lives on. I pray that as we go throughout our days and weeks ahead, Your teachings become rooted in our hearts and souls. I pray that anyone building a life on sand will surrender their ways to You and allow You to build a foundation on rock. Amen.

WISE CHILD

If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking.

James 1:5 (NLT)

God is able and willing to give us wisdom. The question is, are we ready to follow what He says? The Lord doesn't want any of His children to be confused or doubtful. He does want us to trust Him when we ask, and He provides. Worldly wisdom doesn't compare to the Lord's wisdom, and oftentimes we want worldly wisdom over His wisdom because it feels good and makes the most sense to us. Worldly wisdom allows us to be in control. But is worldly wisdom truly wise?

Because I prefer to have every answer and everything figured out, the process of getting there causes unnecessary anxiety and stress. If I'm not careful, I'll find myself depending on my own limited knowledge, understanding and wisdom and not God's. I can't see into the future, and oftentimes I struggle with wanting to do things my way. We live in a world where we're told to follow our hearts, although God tells us the heart is deceitful. Culture can be a huge influence in our decision-making and how we live, which is why it's crucial to always ask for God's wisdom. Godly wisdom allows us to see things from God's perspective and follow His guidance. It allows us to have peace and comfort knowing He hears us and has our best interests at heart. We recognize that God is in complete control when we ask for His wisdom.

The main way we can gain Godly wisdom is by saturating our minds with God's Word and understanding His teachings. We also develop Godly wisdom by walking with wise people. As the saying goes, *you become who you spend time with*. Walking with wise people will help you grow to be more like Christ each day.

APPLICATION: What area of your life do you need wisdom in today? As Scripture says, *If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you*. But when you ask, trust that He will provide. When we doubt and waver, our hearts can be unsettled instead of anchored in Him.

PRAYER: Lord, You are a generous God, easy to give us whatever we need. I pray that You guide us in our decision-making and soften our hearts to follow You instead of our own wisdom. I pray for peace and clarity in any decisions we're facing. Amen.

THE GREAT CONTRACTOR

Unless the LORD builds a house, the work of the builders is wasted. Unless the LORD protects a city, guarding it with sentries will do no good.

Psalms 127:1 (NLT)

I love architecture. I'm often drawn to beautiful designs, colors and landscaping. Most people who buy a newly built home do so because they don't know how to build one themselves. So why do we try to build our lives without a blueprint? Jesus is the only one we can trust to build our lives well, from the foundation to the finishing touches.

I remember one time thinking I could build my life while the Lord sat back and approved. I thought I had the blueprint; I just needed Him to agree that my way was best. I found out quickly that life was not only stressful, but it also never turned out how I wanted. Time after time, my house kept collapsing, and, in His faithfulness, the Lord forgave me and kept nudging me to let go of control so He could build His house. Hard work, long hours, independence, limited knowledge and planning don't lead to long-term stability. That comes from God alone. When we take matters into our hands, we take the place of the Lord in our lives. When you leave the building process to God, He may not build things as you imagined, but you can trust that the building will be better than you ever imagined. Let's surrender the tools and blueprints to Him.

APPLICATION: Have you been trying to build your own house and life plans, only to see that they're not going as expected? Ask God today to give you hope and encouragement with His plans for your life.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for being trustworthy with the details of our lives. Thank You for having wonderful plans for our lives that are good for us. Amen.

WRONG WAY

A wise person chooses the right road; a fool takes the wrong one.

Ecclesiastes 10:2 (NLT)

“But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn’t obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand.”

Matthew 7:26 (NLT)

All of us have disobeyed God. It’s part of human nature and goes back to Adam and Eve. Eve took a bite of the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, gave some to Adam to eat, and they became filled with shame. We’re not exempt. The enemy can cast doubt and deception in our minds, too, just as he did with Adam and Eve, leading us to sin or take matters into our own hands. Disobeying God can lead to consequences such as shame, delayed blessings and broken relationships with others and God.

When I was younger, and we disobeyed our parents, consequences followed. The same goes for our relationship with God. When we disobey Him, we’re essentially saying to God, *I know better than You do*. God is an all-powerful God who knows what’s best for us, even when we seem to have confidence that we’re on the right path.

In the book of Jonah, the Lord told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah had his own plans and decided to run from the Lord due to his fear and pride, and he boarded a ship. The Lord caused a powerful wind and storm to blow through, threatening to break the ship apart. Due to Jonah’s disobedience, the sailors aboard the ship threw Jonah into the sea, where he was swallowed by a great fish for three days and three nights. At this point, Jonah was in a worse position than before. Does that sound familiar? We do things our own way and end up in worse situations.

Jesus doesn’t expect us to be perfect, but He does expect us to obey Him when He tells us to do something. He won’t twist our arm, but ask yourself how many times your own way has worked? Let the Lord take the wheel. He will never fail.

APPLICATION: Today, pray and ask God where in your life you’re not following His teachings. Ask Him to remind you of His truths and to develop a heart to follow His path.

PRAYER: Jesus, oftentimes we are disobedient and try to follow our own desires instead of following You. Help us to be obedient when it’s uncomfortable or even unpopular. I pray You give us strength to resist the lies of the enemy. Amen.



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