

December

Week 1

"The love for equals

is a human thing – of friend for friend, brother for brother.

It is to love what is loving and lovely.

The world smiles.

" The love for the less fortunate

is a beautiful thing – the love for those who suffer, for those

who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and

it touches the heart of the world.

" The love for the more fortunate

is a rare thing – to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich...

The world is always bewildered by its saints.

"And then there is the love for the enemy –

love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer.

This is God's love. It conquers the world."

(from Frederick Buechner's *The Magnificent Defeat*)

Monday. God said through his prophet, **"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!... Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare."** (from Isa. 55:1-2).

Jesus said, **“I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”** (from John 6:35)

O God, there are times when I feel lost and empty and solely reliant on my own abilities which just aren't enough. I confess: I *rely only on me*. I leave you out of the equation which would provide the solution. Forgive me, Lord, and help me remember to turn to you for my spiritual food, my spiritual growth. Instead of looking at life's challenges, help me to look *first* to you. That's the main thing but in my waywardness, I forget it. So I come to you today, hungry and thirsty for more of you in my life. Make me feel that hunger and thirst every day so I will never again forget to come to you first daily. Everything else can just wait. You will guide me. Thank you, God. I pray also for...

Tuesday. “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation...” (from Isa. 52:7)

Father, how beautiful is the way you present your love to us, the way of salvation through Jesus – my heart thanks you, for all my words fail me. None of us can ever start to match the overwhelming beauty of your proclamations of the Good News, your peace, your gift of salvation; but your word challenges us to try. Teach us how and lead us where we should go and to whom we should bring this great Good News. Use us in ways far beyond our own limits so that we ourselves will see the evidence of your power at work in what we are enabled to do. Bring glory to your name through us so that the great circle of love can then be complete. I pray this in Christ's name and in that name, I also pray for...

Wednesday. “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering...Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (from Isa. 53:3-5)

Jesus said, **"...everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled... they will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again."** (from Luke 18:31-33)

Lord Jesus, that you should come to this world as a man to suffer so - that is a statement of love too far beyond any love I can generate by myself. How can I say an adequate thanks? I cannot. That the greatest demonstration of love in action in the history of the world should include me is a concept beyond my ability to comprehend. Only as I learn to believe and love in return will I ever be able to offer any kind of real thanks. So I do believe. I do love you, Lord. And I worship you with all that is within me. Within the aura of your love, I pray for...

Thursday. "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isa. 53:6)

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8, 9)

My Lord, I sin when I thoughtlessly fail to act within your will but, worse, I sin with purpose and forethought. For all my sins, you made a way so I may be forgiven seventy times seven and beyond and beyond... With my confession, I beg your loving forgiveness yet again. And with it, I beg your guidance. Lead me - not into temptation - but deliver me from evil, I pray. And I pray for...

Friday. "'Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken, nor my covenant of peace be removed,' says the Lord, who has compassion on you." (Isa. 54:10)

"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe." (Heb. 12:28)

Thank you, O God, for these assurances. Nothing is beyond your loving support, no matter how tough life is. As we learn to accept your love, teach us to relax and rely on your promises during the

good as well as the bad times. Keep us safe within your kingdom, at peace within our difficulties, joyful in our worship. And I pray for...

Saturday. "You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you and all the trees of the field will clap their hands." (Isa. 55:12)

"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever." (1 Chron. 16:34)

"If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen." (1 Pet. 4:11)

Great God of us all, my heart fills to overflowing when I think of your love for me and for us all, and so I praise you. Your love has always been and it endures forever – how well you have proven it within my life and among your other disciples here in our church. And so we all praise you. In our worship tomorrow, reawaken us to these truths in so full and rich a way that we may truly burst forth in song, speak through your very words, and serve with the strength and guidance you give us. Make our worship draw us together as one and draw us all closer to you on this special day. To you be all the glory for ever and ever! Now, I have these other prayers...

Week 2

The Bible has much to say about pride versus humility. But we all live in systems where competition is encouraged and being Number One is what life is about. Taking pride in winning is the right thing to do, we're told, so we tell our children that and build our own lives on it. "Sense of accomplishment" has a nice ring to it, especially after a long day in which – well, who can deny it? – we just flat out did some great things and got some great stuff! And besides, psychologists tell us that when we're down, a good way to climb back up is to try looking past our failures and pick out the accomplishments. "I'm OK" makes for *being* OK.

None of us invented the system. We're thrust into it. So what could be wrong about it? Shouldn't we honor the gift of ourselves by reaching for the best?

Could this be about the "treasures" and "things" Jesus talked about in Matt. 6:19-34? His advice was clear: forget about it and just seek God.

Monday. Jesus' disciples once let their competition get out of hand and asked the Lord which of them was the greatest in his kingdom. **"Jesus called over a child, whom he stood in the middle of the room, and said, 'I'm telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you're not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God's kingdom.'"** (from Matt. 18:1-4, *The Message*)

Lord, thank you for your message here. But we need your help in this. Success for ourselves and success for success' sake – it's all so ingrained in us that it's hard to change our motivation – but you know all that better than we know ourselves! Teach us that winning is about obeying your commands, about following hard after you, about being found pleasing in your sight – not in our own or someone else's. We need this lesson daily, Lord. I pray also for...

Tuesday. Jesus talked about people who like to be the center of attention and said, **“Do you want to stand out? Then step down. Be a servant. If you puff yourself up, you’ll get the wind knocked out of you. But if you’re content to simply be yourself, your life will count for plenty.”** (from Matt. 23:5-12, *The Message*). In the parable about the servants who were given money to use on their own (Matt. 25), Jesus made it clear that individual abilities were involved in the process, and that we’re to use them as best we’re able.

Father, you teach us to be ourselves and as one with you, and you will take it from there. But we overact because we get too eager to make it alone, headstrong in uncontrolled ambition. Forgive us, Lord. Help us to see that each of us is a beautiful gift, just as we are – and that you come to us, just as we are. Use us and lead us to the successes **you** have in store for us, we pray, not the ones we think we have to have. I also pray for...

Wednesday. Hagar and her baby boy, Ishmael, were lost in the desert and facing death. She gave the boy up to die and in despair, she sat down and sobbed. **“Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.”** (from Gen. 21:19). It had been there all the time. **“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear...”** (from Ps. 46:1,2)

O God, there are times when we are so overwhelmed by our problems that we become frantic, angry, resentful... and we make foolish decisions to act in sin or even to give up. Open our eyes to the help that is there all the time. Teach us that your holy presence is available at every moment. Instill in us a faith that draws us to you in the really bad times. And don’t let us forget that this same faith will keep us next to you to enjoy the good times as well. Replace our fear with a faith that keeps us on an even keel in all our days, we pray. And I also pray for...

Thursday. **“...I took a good look at everything I’d done... at all the sweat and hard work... I saw nothing but smoke... and spitting in the wind. There was nothing to any of it. Nothing.”** (from Ecc. 2:4-11, *The Message*)

“We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name.” (from Ps. 33:20, 21)

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.
(Rom 12:12)

Father, I pray for those in despair over the disappointments in life. You who know us well know that we've all suffered discouragement and the depression it brings. But those who trust in you know more about hope than they do about despair: what a gift you give us – thank you! When melancholy threatens, help us to find that store of hope and peace which can come only through you. In place of dejection, show us how to rejoice *in you, because of you!* I now pray for...

Friday. “There is no one righteous, not even one... there is no one who does good, not even one... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

(from Rom. 3:10-24)

Thank you again for your word, Lord; it tells us who we really are: on our own, we are lost and have no hope at all. But with you, we have value: we are *justified, made right, given new life* – thank you for your grace! You take us from our nothingness and raise us to your very own righteousness – thank you for your love! And we don't have to try to merit these glorious gifts – thank you for being our Savior! You require only that we believe, that we confess, and that we keep looking to you: you even author our faith for us – thank you for being our God! I love you, Lord, and I now pray for...

Saturday. “...count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus... do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires... but rather offer yourselves to God... For sin shall not be your master.”

(from Rom. 6:11-14)

Dear Lord, you know the most intimate details of our lives and who we are, so you know about when we're overly self-confident. And you know when we are vulnerable to sin and failure. Thank you for loving us so much that you watch over us this way!

Thank you for seeing when we are tempted in almost countless ways: from small greed to large grasping; from impatience to angry outburst; from little insincerities to calculated deviousness; from misstatements to outright lies; from a cold-shoulder to open disdain; and on and on... What a dismal picture of sin that is, but for your watching over us – thank you, great Lord! Keep leading us away from all those alarming temptations and, instead, lead us into your paths of righteousness, we pray. And I now pray for...

Week 3

Monday. “I always thank God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you... have refreshed the hearts of the saints. (from Philem. 4)

Lord, I come today to thank you for the strong heritage of faith which comes to us from the multitudes of your disciples. The evidence is everywhere in the world: huge to small buildings in which to worship and have fellowship and learn – they seem countless. Countless too are the good works of your people from earliest times to this very moment. But most beautiful of all are the examples of your love in the lives of all who are called by your name. They are the vividly clear testimony of your love for everyone, everywhere, every time. For this work of your hands in the world, I thank you. Help me, my Savior, to act out my life in these same ways – to love, to share, to understand, to give joy, to encourage – but, most of all, to sustain and be sustained by my faith in you. My heart opens with praise to you this day, Lord. And now I pray for...

Tuesday. In a paraphrase of one of David’s Psalms, Paul said, **“Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.”** (Rom. 4:7, 8)

Lord, how blessed we are! We thank you for love and grace which cover multitudinous sins and grievous errors. We would be saddled with them and dragged down into lives of chaos, but for your forgiveness. We would be lost in meaninglessness, left to our own devices of harm to ourselves and to people around us, but for your forgiveness. You tell us that all we have to do is acknowledge you as Lord and tell you about our sins, knowing as we do it that you are the Savior who explicitly planned this all out – you forgive and forget every single sin. What a beautiful statement of your love – how much we thank you for it! Keep us

fully conscious of it so that, in our enjoyment of it, sinning simply becomes something we no longer do. O for the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives to live above sin – make it so, Lord. And I also pray for...

Wednesday. Paul compared the Good News of the Gospel of Christ to how life had previously been under the old Hebrew laws. There were many similarities. For example, Abraham, who fathered the whole nation of Israel, **“did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.”** (from Rom. 4:18-25)

Father, I pray that, like Abraham, I won't waver, that any temptation toward unbelief will disappear because my relationship with you is so full and rich and strong that no temptation will prevail against it. Your promises in your word are countless and cover every aspect of what's important to all of us. Like Abraham, keep me fully persuaded about your power, about your love to fulfill all those wonderful promises. Let confidence reign and joy remain in all that I am, in all that I do, I pray. And now I pray also for...

Thursday. **“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”** (Rom. 5:1-4)

Dear Lord, I give you thanks and praise today for taking me as I am, forgiving me and even *justifying* me! And I do rejoice in the hope you give me. But to rejoice in suffering? On my own human level, that makes no sense at all. Teach me this truth here: help me to accept that when trouble comes, I'll be the better for it because I will have made it through with the perseverance you give me, the knowledge that you're there with me, sustaining me, moving me on to stronger character, fuller

hope. I pray for your presence with me in ways that will come clear at any given moment – especially in those moments when life scares me. I also pray for...

Friday. Paul compared the example of sin, as demonstrated by Adam in the old Hebrew law, to sin and redemption under Christ. **“For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that come by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!”** (from Rom. 5:12-15)

O Lord, how I thank you that this plan of salvation includes everyone of every place and time – and that it includes me! You make it clear in your word that the sin demonstrated in the story of Adam is just like all other sins, but the way to forgiveness is so beautifully demonstrated by the “grace of the one man, Jesus Christ.” How much you have loved us – to die for us, then to live for us and in us! Let all we do bring glory to your name! I thank you most humbly for your blessings and guidance in 2006. I remember the problems you led me through. And I remember the joys born of your love for me...

Saturday. A new year is one of the best possible planning days. It’s a fine time to think about actually making “righteousness” a lifestyle. Righteous living comes from having right habits. And the best of all habits is daily prayer – that everyday talking to God from the privacy of our own hearts. Nonstop communication with God, guided by daily Bible reading, all in the name of our Lord Jesus – that’s the ticket to the best year of our lives.

“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.” (Prov. 14:34)

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 6:23)

The Bible truly is the very voice of God. (Amazing fact! How can we be so nonchalant about that?) It straightforwardly clarifies all the core truths of life. One of them is that sin inevitably brings tragedy to the lives of people and to the societies which allow it. So it seems ironic that these same Scriptures give us the freedom to choose between God and calamitous sin. There is no double-

talk in the Bible: life is about choice; the temptation to sin is with us daily; we **will** make choices daily.

“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him...” (from I Kings 18:21)

Thank you, God, for the clarity of your word. It makes no sense to choose to sin, but we do it anyway. Forgive us. We seem surrounded by so many things that will pull us away from you when we look to them and not to you. Forgive us. Some of those things seem insignificant at first, but they become insidious in where they lead us. We are weak, Lord. Forgive us and make us strong and unyielding to sin, determined and victorious in our faith. We ask all this confidently in the name of our Lord Jesus who promised to hold us, to embrace us, to lead us. I pray also...

Who Designs Our Lives?

James Carpenter tells of the Quaker philosopher Rufus Jones and an incident in his childhood that seems trivial but was probably the turning point in his life.

Jones' parents once told him to stay home and weed the turnip patch while they were gone. He had just begun when some friends came along and persuaded him to go fishing, promising to help with the weeding when they got back. But fishermen just don't know how to keep track of time.

When young Rufus got home after dark, his mother was waiting. Silently, she led him to his room. He knew what he deserved so he offered not a word.

"But then," he said, "a miracle happened. Mother put me in a chair, kneeled down, put her hands on me, and told God all about me. She interpreted her dream of what my life was to be. She portrayed the boy and the man of her hopes. She told God what she always expected me to be, and then how I had disappointed her hope. 'O God!' she prayed. 'Take this boy of mine and make him the boy and man he is *divinely designed* to be.' Then she bent over and kissed me and went out and left me alone in the silence with God."

Are we who God designed us to be?

(The above vignette comes from James A. Carpenter's *The Minister's Manual*. Rufus Jones [1863-1948], winner of a Nobel Peace Prize, was recognized as one of the most significant religious voices in America. His writings impart a vision of the ever-present reality of God in our souls and in the world.)

Week 4

"I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day."
- Abraham Lincoln

Monday. "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Phil. 1:3-6)

Father, teach me to pray with joy. Even though trouble abounds, I don't have to see my world – your world – in a grim light all the time. After all is said and done, what is of ultimate importance anyway? It is my growth and the growth of others as Christians, and that's just the fact. Help me to stay confident about that. And keep carrying on your work in me and in your other disciples, especially here at our church. Therein is joy! I pray in that joy now for...

Tuesday. "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God." (Phil. 1: 9-11)

Dear God, "that your love may abound" needs to be the deepest desire of my life. You cause me to see that's how knowledge comes, and insight, and discernment – all leading to a life of purity and righteousness, just the way my Lord and Savior taught and designed this great system called Christianity. Make your love increase within me with each day of my life. In that love, I now pray for...

Wednesday. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near." (Phil. 4:4,5)

O God, remind me daily of the need – and the benefits – of praising and rejoicing that Jesus lives within and through me. Whatever gentleness I might think I can produce on my own will be transient at best. Gentleness of spirit, the kind that demonstrates love, will come because my Lord and Savior is near. Help me feel and respond to that nearness now, as I pray for...

Thursday. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:6,7)

Father, sometimes – much, much too often – things get to me and anxiety makes my blood pressure rise. Thinking back, and in the light of these words from Paul, not a one of those things was worth all that worry. Often they were small things and I enlarged them. Here you tell me I shouldn't have anxiety about anything at all, big or little. But you know who I am: I'll never manage that on my own. So thank you for this instruction. I am simply to pray. So I do that now. Let your peace stay with me always even in the big problems. Thank you for telling me I don't have to merit your peace or even figure it out. It's just there for me. How much I thank you! Guard me. Keep me surrounded by your peace as I pray...

Friday. “...whatever is true, ...noble, ...right, ...pure, ...lovely, ...admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.” (from Phil 4:8,9)

O God, how aimless my thoughts can become. I confess that I waste a lot of valuable thinking time on worries and resentments and hurts and dreads and fears and... But even when I try to organize my mind in positive ways, too often I stray off into thoughts that take me nowhere but dead-ends and discouragement. I need to focus in these beautiful ways you tell me about, the excellent and the praiseworthy. And that is you, God, for truly you are worthy of praise! So I do worship you, loving Lord. Engage my mind and my heart unto your very self, the true, the noble, the right, the pure, the lovely, the admirable, the excellent, the praiseworthy. I pray...

Saturday. "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength." (Phil. 3:12,13)

Father, am I too demanding, want too much, expect too much as my due? Nowhere does your word say I'm supposed to have it all, to get enough to make me contented with a life of easy pleasure. Here you make it clear that sometimes I will get my needs and maybe even my wants, and sometimes I won't. But you tell me the great secret: you will give me strength. What a great word – "strength." Your strength is the secret to contentment, no matter what's going on. Thank you for helping me see that. Genuine contentment that comes through being fulfilled by your strength – that will take me through everything, whatever is going on. Thank you, God. Help me not to forget this great lesson. I pray now for...

"I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day."
- Abraham Lincoln