



# **FOLLOW.**

**Gospel of Matthew Daily Devotional**

**Pastor Gregory Rapp**

## **Congratulations! You are a disciple of Jesus Christ!**

Jesus led his first disciples so that they would one day be able to lead disciples of their own who one day would be able to lead disciples of their own. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we follow Jesus' teachings and His example. Jesus is in charge. He is our teacher, mentor, commanding officer, and guide. We surrender our right to decide for ourselves. We surrender our right to be in control. From this moment on, we live our lives for Him. His purpose is our purpose. His mission is our mission. His life is our life. His heart is our heart. His mind is our mind. Jesus is not just a large part of our lives; our lives only have meaning in His. If you are new to Jesus, or if God has been, up until now, something you've done once a week on Sunday, you are in for the adventure of a lifetime! You are about to surrender everything to Jesus and find a life more meaningful than anything you have every known!

Christian writer Bill Hull, in his book *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, gives one of the best explanations of how we become disciples by observing how Jesus taught the original twelve disciples.

1. A disciple submits to a teacher who teaches how to follow Jesus.
2. A disciple learns the words of Jesus.
3. A disciple learns Jesus' way of ministry.
4. A disciple imitates Jesus' life and character.
5. A disciple finds and teaches other disciples to follow Jesus.

In the ninety days that follow, we will walk with Jesus through all four gospels. You will read one chapter per day, paying close attention to what Jesus said and did in order to imitate Him. Every day, your life will change as you decide to "FOLLOW."

## **JANUARY 1: Read Mathew Chapter 1**

What determines the kind of people we become? Is it our family DNA and genetics or is it the way we were raised and taught? Today we get a glimpse of Jesus' family tree, which was a mixed bag of faithful and untrustworthy people. It may be boring to read Jesus' family tree, but it is far more exciting than it seems. The list reads as a "Who's Who?" of the history of Israel through whom God worked out salvation and covenant with each new generation. Some of these people were holy and good. Some of these people were downright evil, yet God continued working through all generations. Jesus is part of this larger unfolding story. More important than the earthly family tree is the true nature of Jesus. Jesus is not just the Son of God. He is God the Son, an equal part of the Trinity with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Conceived in flesh by the Holy Spirit with Mary his mother, Jesus is born. His stepfather Joseph is prepared to help raise this child by none other than an angel of God. He is named "Jesus" which means "one who saves." He has come into this world to save us.

We are all descended from a mixed bag of characters. We also all have mixed experiences with the people who raised us. Jesus understands that and overcomes that. You are not limited by the family that raised you. You are not limited by your past. God is beginning something new in you.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**What does my family tree look like back through the generations?**

**Has my family helped me to accept my part in God's plan or held me back?**

**Do I want to follow Jesus?**

## **JANUARY 2: Read Matthew Chapter 2**

These Wise Men are not from Israel. We know from yesterday that Jesus is part of what God is doing through the descendants of Abraham. Why do these foreign astronomers care about a new king born in some other country? Jesus is a king coming to save more than just Israel. He is saving every nation on earth and the entire creation as well. Their gifts are another hint revealing who Jesus is. Gold is a precious metal fit for a king. Frankincense is a perfume often used in the incense burned by priests making sacrifices for forgiveness of sins. Myrrh is an anointing oil used to anoint kings and prepare bodies for burial. Jesus will reign as lord and king. Jesus will offer a great sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus will die.

Jesus is setting up a new world that is replacing the world as we know it. Many people, like King Herod, have a lot invested in the world as it is and have no interest in letting go of their wealth, position and power. They have no use for Jesus and His big plans and will do anything to stop it. We rarely talk at Christmas of the thousands of young children who were murdered by Herod in his attempt to eliminate Jesus. Never forget: Jesus' work of building a new kingdom is dangerous work because it is a direct threat to very powerful people. As disciples, we are joining Jesus and continuing this work. If done faithfully, being a disciple of Jesus can be dangerous too. Not everyone will welcome the work we do, but God does guide us and God does protect.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**What is the most difficult or dangerous thing I've ever done for God?**

**What have I already given up to accept my part in God's plan?**

### **JANUARY 3: Read Matthew Chapter 3**

Something was stirring in Israel. Why else would so many regular people travel out into the desert to listen to John preach? John was nothing like today's celebrity preachers who build massive auditoriums, attract huge crowds, sell millions of books, fly in private jets and preach about Jesus while wearing a \$2,000 Armani suit. John was dirty, homeless, unshaven, and wore a rough burlap sack for clothing. He ate whatever he could find, like locusts. He had one message for the people: repent. He did not preach comfort and blessing. He told people to quit messing around and get it together. No more excuses. No more saying one thing and doing another. Repent means to turn, to change, to go another way. His preaching must have hit a nerve because people begged him to help them change. They filed down into the river to be baptized. They washed off the filth and stink of the lives they had been living. They washed off their past and their problems. They came back out of the water as new people ready to live new lives. It was good that the people were made clean because the real change they longed for was coming.

If baptism with John was about repenting of sins, why was Jesus there? He had no sin to be cleansed of. Baptism isn't just about breaking with an unfortunate past. It is also about choosing a holy and obedient future. Jesus' obedient future was the Cross. In Baptism, Jesus commits to obediently accepting the Cross. That is why the Father in heaven is "well pleased."

#### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**What in my life needs to change? (Make a list.)**

**Have I truly buried my past and begun a new life with Jesus?**

**Would I be willing to stand in line for hours in the desert for Jesus? Why or why not? (Make a list.)**

## **JANUARY 4: Read Matthew Chapter 4**

It is natural for us to do what feels good. We don't even think about it. If it feels good...If it tastes good...If it's easy...If it's comfortable...we just naturally go there. But Jesus' work of saving and changing the world will not always be easy, for Jesus or for us. There will be tough choices. There will be struggles. Being a Christ Follower doesn't always feel good. Our assignments are not always easy. Remember this wisdom: "What is right is not always easy, and what is easy is not always right." For Jesus, doing what's right included surrendering himself to death on a cross. Sacrifice is about being willing to lose, suffer, or struggle so someone else doesn't have to and that doesn't come naturally to us. We naturally seek out comfort, security and popularity instead. Discipleship doesn't have to be a life or death struggle, like Jesus, but it is always a choice. Whether those choices are big or little, they will either move us closer toward God or farther away. Self-denial is a basic skill of being a disciple. We recognize the natural temptation to do what is easy or comfortable, and choose instead to follow our convictions and our call. If Jesus was not able or willing to choose the cross over what is easy or comfortable or what feels good, then we are all lost. The Father's plan fails. Likewise, if we in smaller daily ways are not able to choose obedience over what is easy or comfortable or what feels good, then the Father's plan fails in our lives and God will have to turn to someone else to work through.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**How angry do I get when I am uncomfortable? Hurt? Rejected?**

**How well do I hold up to Satan's temptations?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 5: Read Matthew Chapter 5**

The Law of God is hard enough to keep. Just ask the ancient Israelites. Now Jesus seems to be making the Law even harder to keep. Not only are we condemned for killing, but now we are condemned for being angry. Not only are we condemned for committing adultery, but now we are guilty of looking lustfully at another. Why would Jesus make things harder on us? Because good behavior means little without pure thoughts. This is the way things work in the Kingdom of God. If you want to be a part of it... if you want to help create it, you must be compatible with the Kingdom way of life. In the Kingdom of God, our thoughts matter. Our feelings matter. Our desires matter every bit as much as our actions. As followers of Jesus, we want to be like Jesus. His only motive seems to be to love God the Father with all His heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love all neighbors as He loves Himself. Period. There is nothing else mixed in. Jesus has no personal agenda. Jesus has no secret angle. He is so committed to the values of the coming Kingdom that He places the wellbeing of others above everything else. Jesus' great desire is to draw all people to God in a personal loving relationship that lasts forever. As a servant of Christ, we see all people as God sees them, as friends to love. That is not always easy, but it brings God glory and changes lives for the better.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**How committed am I to the Kingdom way of life?**

**How well do I control my thoughts as well as my actions?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 6: Read Matthew Chapter 6**

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” That’s true for more than just money. Who are we trying to please, God or the people around us? If I pray in order to impress others with my holiness, I am trying to please people. If I let everyone know how much I have given, I am trying to impress people. We like to be recognized, don’t we? We like applause and praise. As followers of Jesus we perform for an Audience of One. As we pray, serve, give, worship, and obey, God’s opinion and approval are the only ones that matter. God is the yardstick against we measure our life and discipleship. By giving in secret and praying in secret, we eliminate the distraction of an audience that we instinctively try to please. Likewise, when we worry more about our food, clothing, cars, and cash than about simply pleasing God, we are serving another master. Strip away everything but God. Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and everything else will fall into place.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**How much do I care about what other people think of me?**

**How much time to spend worrying about money?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 7: Read Matthew Chapter 7**

When we judge, we evaluate each other as either good or bad, right or wrong, righteous or evil. These are moralistic judgements that determine the worth of the person. The worth of a person determines whether we deserve reward or punishment and it then becomes far too easy to throw a person into the trash. If we are honest with ourselves, our first instinct is to judge other people. It always gets personal. We don't approve of the rhetoric or behavior of an elected official, so we call him an idiot. His actions may be questionable, but we have branded him as hopeless, unwanted and unredeemable. He deserves punishment, which allows us to justify our anger, insults, and even violence. This runs completely counter to the way of Christ, who sees every human being through a single lens of love. To Jesus, every human being is wanted, redeemable, and brimming with hope. Our actions may leave a lot to be desired, but we are worth reaching and saving. Blessed are the peacemakers. Paul K. Chappel wrote that "*when we wage war, our goal is to turn enemies into corpses. When we wage peace, our goal is to turn enemies into friends.*" To judge another harshly is to throw that person away. We never throw away friends, so judging just isn't useful to us or to the Kingdom.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**How easy is it for me to care for a person I don't like?**

**What would I do differently today if my goal was to become friends with everyone I meet?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 8: Read Matthew Chapter 8**

Jesus was very busy today. He spent the day teaching and healing. Everywhere Jesus went, He encountered people who were suffering. People suffered from every malady and affliction from leprosy, blindness, and paralysis to fevers, mental illness, and even demonic possession. Jesus had so much to teach us about the Kingdom of God, but He took the time to heal the people around him and relieve their suffering. This was not just a compassionate act of alleviating pain. Many of these patients were unable to work or support themselves and were thus condemned to a life of hunger, poverty, and homelessness. By restoring sight, Jesus was restoring the ability to work and the sense of self worth that comes with it. Jesus cares about the whole person, not just the eternal soul. Suffering matters. Poverty matters. Our health matters to Jesus who brought healing to people who could afford it, like the Roman Centurion, and those who couldn't. Notice though that Jesus was not taking a break from teaching as He healed the sick. He revealed that in the Kingdom of God, there is no sickness, deformity, mortality, or pain. He restores health and strength as well as dignity. As followers of Jesus we see people as much more than just souls to be saved. We see this world as more than just a sinking ship to be abandoned on our way to heaven. We, and our world, are worth saving and restoring.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**Do I believe that everyone has the God-given right to be healthy and free of pain? Why or Why not?**

**What small thing can I do today to alleviate suffering and restore dignity?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 9: Read Matthew Chapter 9**

Sin is a hard problem to get our arms around. On one hand, sins are the dumb, selfish, disobedient things we do that run counter to the instructions of God. On the other hand, sin is something much larger than us that we are caught up in. It is the broken societies around us that shape us against our will. I may not force children to work in a sweatshop in my garage, but when I buy an \$8 shirt from Wal Mart that was made in China by kids working for \$.50 a day I am contributing to that outrage. I'm a part of it even if I am not directly responsible for it. Sin is problem for us because it ruins our love relationship with God, not because God is mad at us, but because we become incompatible. Like trying to force a square peg into a round hole, sin makes it impossible to enter the Kingdom of God because we just don't fit in. Imagine trying to squeeze through a tiny door while wearing an enormous backpack. We could fit through on our own, but the backpack is too big. Sin is the backpack that wedges against the doorway keeping us from entering the Kingdom of God. What does Jesus do? He forgives. Notice also that today He is forgiving people who are sick, injured, and in need of healing. Without that forgiveness, they will never know the health and strength of life in the eternal Kingdom of God. Jesus is more than happy to take away the baggage that is holding us back.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**What sins do I need to confess and have forgiven?**

**Who do I need to forgive? What is stopping me?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 10: Read Matthew Chapter 10**

Disciples are apprentices. They learn to do what their Teacher does. So far, we have joined the disciples and followed Jesus as He travelled from town to town teaching and healing. We listen and take to heart what He says. We watch and take to heart what Jesus does. Today is the day we realize what Jesus has been preparing us for. Jesus sends His followers out into the countryside to teach, heal people, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons. They are ready to do what Jesus does. He then gives them thorough instructions, preparing them for what lies ahead. They will be taking a risk by serving in His name. If Jesus is mistreated and rejected, we should certainly expect the same. We learn in order to do. Sooner or later, we leave the classroom and get to work revealing the Kingdom of God. How have the past few days been for you since you began this devotional? Surely you have been challenged and surely you are growing in understanding, but how much action have you taken for Jesus so far? We have seen Jesus heal, help, and teach. It is time for you to start healing. It is time for you to start helping. It is time for you to start teaching. You may feel uncomfortable with this, but that is good thing. We grow more when we are uncomfortable.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**What risk will I take today to heal? To help? To teach?**

**What makes me uncomfortable about this? (Make a list.)**

**How will I push through the discomfort to serve Jesus?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 11: Read Matthew Chapter 11**

If you want to rent a car, you must show I.D. If you want to buy a six pack of beer, you must show I.D. If you want to rent a hotel room while on vacation, you must show I.D. This step is necessary to prove that we are who we say we are and that we are qualified. John the Baptist was pretty sure that Jesus was the promised Messiah, but in his final days, he wanted to be sure. He sent his disciples to talk to Jesus who ask him to show some I.D. Jesus did not have a birth certificate or a driver's license. Instead he told John's disciples to report back what they saw Jesus doing: "*the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.*" If we dare call ourselves Christians, we will also need to show some I.D. How do we prove we are who we say we are? We do what Jesus does, so as we practice our faith in the world around us, are the blind receiving their sight? Are the lame walking? Are lepers cleansed and do the deaf hear? Are the dead are raised up? Do the poor have good news preached to them? Of course, we may not have the supernatural gifts needed to actually heal the blind and raise the dead, but is our work bringing relief to those who suffer? Are we bringing good news to the poor? Are we paying any attention to the poor at all?

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**How will I make the care and comfort of hurting people a higher priority?**

**How will I become directly involved in the lives of those struggling with poverty?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 12: Read Matthew Chapter 12**

Jesus puts people first. It sounds like today's stories are philosophical debates about the proper observance of the sabbath day. They aren't. It is all about people. Jesus and His disciples are out walking from town to town, teaching and healing when they get hungry. Serving the Lord is hard work. Walking through a field of grain, the disciples casually pick a few ears of grain and eat them. Later, Jesus meets a man with a withered hand who wants to be healed. In both cases, the Pharisees freak out because Jesus has broken the custom of "not working" on the sabbath. They aren't wrong. The Bible does teach the importance of resting on the sabbath day. It is a gift from God for our rest and refreshment, but what happens when observing that gift means others must go hungry or remain injured or crippled? That seems to miss the whole point of what God is doing in the world. Jesus always chooses to take care of people first. Rules and technicalities are an obstacle if they keep us from being kind, or worse yet, punish us for being kind. There are Christians who take the Bible very seriously, but they would rather be correct than kind. They practice their faith with strictness that turns them into rabid watchdogs instead of loving protectors of hurting people. German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said:

*"Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God's will."*

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**Reflect upon the quote above. What does it mean for me?**

**How will I put people ahead of rules?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 13: Read Matthew Chapter 13**

After hearing these parables, it might seem amazing that anyone follows Jesus without quitting. Look at all the distractions, competing interests, and problems that can destroy our faith. Too much of a good thing can lure us away from Jesus. Too much of a bad thing can crush us. Remember, faith in Jesus is more than what we believe. It is our entire way of life. We choose to put Jesus first in all things and follow His teachings and example. When we are stressed, distracted, and overwhelmed we sometimes forget that. According to Jesus, these things make us “unfruitful.” An apple tree with no fruit on it become firewood because it fails to serve its purpose of producing apples. We follow Jesus in order to fulfill our purpose of helping Jesus draw the world closer to God. If we quit, the work of reaching and healing the world may remain unfinished. If you’ve never been steamrolled by life or tempted by something shinier and more popular than Jesus, you will be. If you’ve never been tempted to quit following Jesus, you will be. How do we prevent it? Jesus uses the image of young tree taking root. Is your life rooted in God? Do you hold on to God the way a sapling holds onto the earth during a strong wind? Are you fed and nourished spiritually by God the way a tree draws water and nutrients out of the soil? We draw this strength from God by constantly deepening our personal love relationship with God through prayer, studying scripture, spiritual disciplines, worship, and service. Hold on tight. Discipleship is going to be a bumpy ride.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**How deeply rooted in God am I? What could tear us apart?**

**How will I deepen my love relationship with God every day?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 14: Read Matthew Chapter 14**

To days ago, the disciples picked grain on the sabbath day and got in trouble for it. Jesus only cared about feeding people who are hungry. Today, there are a lot more people than the Twelve caught out in the middle of nowhere with nothing to eat. The disciples wanted to send the people away, not because they didn't care, but to encourage the people to go and find food for themselves. After all, no one could feed 5,000 people at one time. Jesus instead does the impossible: He feeds them. There will be more days ahead to focus on the miracle itself, but today, let's focus more on the motive.

*Jesus is always moved to feed hungry people.* They scrape up a few loaves of bread and fishes and through the power of God, He multiplies this meager meal into an epic feast. There appears to be a reliable pattern forming here that guides us as we follow Jesus today. We, like Jesus, are moved by the experience of hungry people. We, like the disciples, may be powerless to feed everyone. But, if we are all willing to share what we do have with God and with others, God will take care of the rest. Followers of Jesus are compassionate, because Jesus is compassionate. Followers of Jesus are generous because Jesus is generous. Always.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**How can I feed people who are hungry today?**

**What do I currently have on hand in my house that I can share today?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 15: Read Matthew Chapter 15**

Birds of a feather flock together. We tend to spend time with people who are like us. We are not comfortable with outsiders. We do not naturally gravitate toward people who are different. For centuries, God had instructed Israel to stay away from its “foreign neighbors” because God was still trying to help Israel become the example of obedient living that was found nowhere else. While healing in the street near Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman begs Jesus to heal her daughter. At first, Jesus refuses to heal her. He was sent to teach and heal in the land of Israel, not Canaan. This gift was not for her, yet she pleads, insisting that there must certainly be enough blessing to go around. Jesus is impressed with her faith and gladly heals her daughter. Do not be fooled by this story. Jesus is not being mean or stingy by refusing to heal. Give Jesus credit. He knew what was going on. Of course Jesus would heal her, regardless of where she lived, regardless of what language she spoke, regardless of what nation she called home. These days, we spend too much time deciding who is allowed to enter our country, who is worthy to earn a living, who is deserving of our “charity.” Jesus is interested in the wellbeing of all people and seeks to draw all people to Himself. No one is disqualified because of where they live, what language they speak, or anything else. As followers of Jesus, we love everyone and we serve everyone. No exceptions.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**Who can I help today that no one else is willing to help?**

**Who can I include today that is being excluded?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 16: Read Matthew Chapter 16**

*“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*

Take a moment and read that verse again. It may be Jesus’ clearest explanation of what it will take to follow Him. We have already discussed self-denial on January 4. You may want to read it again. We put our desires on hold to embrace what Jesus desires. That makes sense, but the “take up your cross” part may leave us a little confused. The cross is a tool of execution like a noose or an electric chair. This is about death. Does this mean we have to die for Jesus? Not necessarily, but we do need to “die” to our old way of life, our old dreams, our old plans. The cross is Jesus’ unique part to play in the Father’s Plan to redeem Creation. We each have our own unique part to play in the same Eternal Plan and following Jesus means accepting and doing our part. To say that our part in the plan is unique is not to say that no one else in the world will be doing the same thing. We are called to follow Jesus’ teachings and example in everything we do. That alone can change the world. We are also given special assignments from God. Moses was called to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. John the Baptist was called to prepare the people for Jesus. You may receive a call from God to take on a special assignment that is yours and yours alone. In the meantime, abandon everything that is not from Jesus and serve.

### **TODAY’S REFLECTION:**

**Memorize Matthew 16:24 today.**

**What is my unique part to play in God’s Eternal Plan?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 17: Read Matthew Chapter 17**

Have you ever had a “mountaintop” experience? Peter, James, and John had no idea when they climbed the mountain that Jesus was going to reveal His heavenly glory to them. Peter did not know what to do or say in this moment of absolute bliss, so he babbled something about building some houses on the mountaintop and staying there. It is understandable. When God reveals the reality of heaven to us during prayer or a worship experience it is beyond moving. There is a danger to these rare moments. After we’ve tasted heaven in this way, we crave it on a daily basis. Instead of abandoning our own plans and desires, taking up our cross, and following Jesus into the work of redemption, we seek instead to recapture that spiritual high. Jesus makes it plain: we cannot live on the mountaintop. These moments recharge our soul before God sends us back down into the valley to get back to work helping people with love and grace. If you’ve never experienced anything like this, don’t worry. God gives us the gifts we need when we need them most. Following Jesus is the main thing. Follow His teachings and example wherever it takes you, whether it be the mountaintop or down in the trenches. Jesus is found in both places, but we can’t make a mountaintop experience happen. That is God’s gift to give, but Jesus can be found every day caring for people. Jesus found His joy in serving the Father among the people. We can too.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**What is the most powerful spiritual experience I’ve ever had?**

**Where can I find Jesus by “serving in the trenches” today?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 18: Read Matthew Chapter 18**

Jesus insists that in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven we must humble ourselves and become like children. We could fill a book describing how children can be a role model of holiness. Here's one way. Children have keen sense of what's unfair. If you cut in line in front of someone, that is unfair. If you bring cupcakes to school for your birthday but don't have enough for everyone, that is unfair. If the king forgives your debt of ten million dollars, but you refuse to forgive your friend who owes you ten dollars, that is unfair. It feels right to our innate sense of fairness that we share what we have received with others. God has treated us well. We should treat others well. God has given us a second chance. Naturally, we should give others a second chance. God has forgiven us of every sin. Should we not be willing to extend the same gift to others? Earlier, while discussing the Lord's Prayer, Jesus said that we cannot receive forgiveness from God if we will not forgive others. As a matter of fact, we agree to that every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. "*Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.*" That does not mean that things are happening at the same time. It means that our willingness to forgive others is the measure God uses to determine how much we will be forgiven. That may send a chill down your spine, but any child can tell you that it is fair.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**Who do I need to forgive?**

**What steps will I take TODAY to offer forgiveness?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 19: Read Matthew Chapter 19**

I have a recurring daydream about all the wonderful things I will do once I win the lottery. This kind of thinking is a dangerous trap because it comes from the value system of this dying world and not from the Kingdom of God. Jesus said so when He said that it will be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy man to enter the Kingdom of God. Does that mean that wealthy people are somehow evil and unworthy of God? No, it does not, but when we deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus we will need to leave some things behind. It will be hard to trust Jesus in expectant prayer when I can easily meet the need with my lottery winnings. Because we do not read the Bible in the original Greek, we miss out on the fact that Jesus has a sense of humor and uses puns. When he says the Greek word for camel (KAMELON) it sounds a lot like the Greek word for a thick rope (KAMILON). It is hard to thread a thick woven rope through the eye of a needle because it has way too many threads to fit. It's also hard to fit a camel through the eye of a needle because it is a huge smelly animal. So, whether it is a thick rope or a huge smelly animal, it is going to be tough to do. Wealth can be put to good use, but it can also be a dangerous distraction that keeps us from ever truly trusting in God with our whole heart.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**Do I struggle to have enough money, or do I have too much?**

**What can I give away today in order to trust Jesus more?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 20: Read Matthew Chapter 20**

We've established that we know fair when we see it and this story of Jesus strikes us as unfair. The owner of a vineyard hires a bunch of workers throughout the day to work in the vineyard. Some work all day. Others work half the day. Some only work a few hours, but at quitting time they are all given the same pay. As you can imagine, those who only put in a few hours were thrilled by the owner's generosity. Those that had started their work day at dawn felt cheated. Jesus told the story to explain the idea of grace. Grace is a gift. It is treating other people better than they deserve. By definition, grace is not fair. Justice is when everyone gets what they deserve. The good are rewarded for the righteousness. The evil are punished for their crimes. The hard working and loyal are compensated for their efforts and the slackers receive only what they've earned. It makes sense. Justice is the epitome of fair. Salvation though is a gift of grace. Which one of us is so perfect in God's eyes that God had no choice but to offer eternal life? Which of us has worked so hard and done so many good things for God that God had no choice but to repay us with eternity? Grace is a gift and thank God it is, because we would all be in trouble if we had to earn it. Whether we gave our lives to Jesus as children and spent our entire lives serving Him or if we turned to Jesus on our deathbeds, Jesus is free to give salvation according to His own generosity. Grace is not fair and thank God it isn't. We still need justice in the world, and God will bring it, but that is for another day.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**What do I really deserve from God for the life I've led so far?**

**Who would I like to punish that God wants to save?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 21: Read Matthew Chapter 21**

*“God doesn’t care where you’ve been near as much as where you are going.”*

Jesus is once again criticized the religious leaders and holy men for the company he keeps. Jesus is adored by the crowds in Jerusalem, but evidently these are not the kind of people a respectable teacher should claim as his own. They are tax collectors, prostitutes, criminals, thieves, and “low-lives” of every conceivable kind. That’s when Jesus tells the parable of the two brothers. Both are asked by their father to go work in the fields. One agreed but then never went. The other refused but then went and put in a full day’s work. It doesn’t matter how you begin the day. It is how you finish that really counts. The religious leaders are likened to the brother that agreed to go. He appeared to be obedient and loyal, but our words mean little compared to our actions. The same can be said for the other disagreeable son who changes his mind and gets to work in the vineyard. A lot of people start out life on the wrong side, choosing a selfish and destructive path, but every life can change. This is also why Jesus instructs us to stop judging each other. We cannot decide who the winners and losers are until the game is over. There is still time for those on the wrong path to make things right. There is also plenty of time for those on the right path to get lost. It does not matter how we begin. It matters how we finish. Remember that.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**Do you consider yourself on the right path or the wrong path?**

**What will it take for me to “finish well” with Jesus?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

**JANUARY 22: Read Matthew Chapter 22**

There's a lot to remember, isn't there? The Bible is full of teachings, commandments, expectations, and rules. It's hard to keep it all straight. That's another reason why I love Jesus so much. He has a way of cutting through everything complicated and getting to the heart of the matter. Life may be hard, but faith isn't. It's quite simple, really: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.”* That's not too hard to remember, is it? Imagine a dashboard on your car with the gauges for your speed, oil pressure, fuel level, and engine temperature. Now imagine a similar dashboard on your chest with gauges for the love level of your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Where would the needle be on each of those gauges? Does God have all your heart, half your heart, some or none? When trying to decide what to do in a tough situation, rather than remembering lists of instructions, ask yourself “What is the loving thing to do?” Remember, love is the choice to treat other people with kindness, compassion, and respect. When in doubt, just love God and love other people. It's hard to go wrong with that.

**TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**Take out a sheet of paper and draw four circle that look like the gas gauge of your car. Label them “My Heart, My Mind, My Soul, My Strength.” Where would you place the needle on each?**

**What can I do today to move the needles closer to “ALL?”**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**



**My Heart    My Mind    My Soul    My Strength**

## **JANUARY 23: Read Matthew Chapter 23**

Be careful who you follow. Of course, you are following Jesus, but we all need someone to teach us how to follow Jesus. Jesus really blasted the scribes and the Pharisees and warned the people about becoming like them. These religious leaders were more interested in the prestige of their office than selflessly caring for people. The Pharisees meant well, and I believe that were by and large good people, but they missed the point. They taught in such a way that brought themselves honor and glory and often made things harder for the people. Remember what we discussed yesterday? Remember how hard it is to follow a bunch of rules? The Pharisees liked the rules. They took comfort in having things stated clearly but then placed those clear rules on the peoples' shoulders and weighed them down. As we've already learned, Jesus is always more interested in helping, healing, and setting people free than in punishing and judging. Are you convinced that your spiritual leaders have your best interest at heart? Are they serving God or serving themselves? Are they making life better for you or more complicated? A shepherd is supposed to protect and guide the sheep and will even risk their life to do so. That is who you should follow.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**Do I trust my pastor and spiritual leaders?**

**What can I do today to earn the trust of the people I serve?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 24: Read Matthew Chapter 24**

Jesus is preparing His disciples for His death on the cross. In order to do that, He spends a good deal of time talking about the future and the end of the age when the Kingdom of God will be complete. The disciples are fascinated with the idea of the end of this world and the beginning of the next. A lot of Christians today are fascinated with the end times and construct elaborate theories and timelines of what has been fulfilled and what has yet to happen before Jesus returns. Too often though this fascination with the future leads to fear and paranoia as we think we see the devil behind every news story. This is NOT the Good News. The Good News brings hope and drives away fear. Of all the things Jesus tells them here is the most important: *No one knows the day or the hour when Christ will return.* Anyone who claims they do is either lying or delusional. No one knows the day or the hour when they will meet God. The end will come when it comes. Don't be distracted by these stories. Live your life day by day. Be ready and endure to the end. How do we endure to the end? Simple, by following Jesus. Follow His teachings and His example every day, imitate His life and character, and you will have nothing to worry about. Ignore the conspiracy theories and claims of "secret knowledge." This is a dead end. Serving Jesus is the way that leads to life.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**Am I ready to meet God today?**

**If I'm not ready, what can I do today to be prepared?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 25: Read Matthew Chapter 25**

Yesterday we discussed how predictions of end times can create some weird paranoia among the believers that can distract us from loving God and loving our neighbors. This chapter contains the most positive and encouraging vision of the return of Jesus found anywhere. Jesus returns and says to His followers *“When I was hungry, you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked, and you clothed me, I was sick, and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”* We will ask Jesus when we saw Him in need and helped Him and He will respond: *“When you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.”* He said nothing about the antichrist. He said nothing about destruction and persecution. He said nothing about cryptic signs in the skies or Armageddon. He talks only about caring for the poor and those in need. Think about that. If you want to get up close and personal with Jesus, the best way to do it is by caring for the poor and those in need, because when we do, we are caring for Jesus. It is also the single best way to be ready for His return. We tend to think about worship, study, and service as very different things. They are not. They are all ways of deepening our love relationship with God and making the world a better place.

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**Do I spend more time with Jesus in a church sanctuary or with people who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and in prison?**

**What can I do this week to meet Jesus more often among people in need?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 26: Read Matthew Chapter 26**

It's easy to serve Jesus when everything is safe and comfortable, but what about when things get dangerous? Jesus predicted that He would be betrayed, denied, and rejected by His best friends. His friends were shocked to hear it and protested. They could not imagine turning their backs on Jesus, but once Jesus was arrested by soldiers and dragged before the Jewish Council and Roman governor Pontius Pilate, they ran for their lives. Think for just a moment: *What is the worst thing that could possibly happen to you because you have chosen to follow Jesus?* How bad could things get? What would it take to drive you away from Jesus? Can you imagine something that bad happening? Maybe that is the point though. Peter never imagined denying Jesus. The rest of the disciples never imagined anything bad enough to drive them away from Jesus. They were afraid. They were terrified. They panicked. When we panic, we make bad decisions. We happen to live in one of the safest and freest nations on planet earth. We do not regularly suffer for our faith. We don't expect to ever suffer for our faith and when we are even mildly inconvenienced we cry foul. Are we followers of Jesus only when it is comfortable? The Way of Jesus is the Way of the Cross. There will be suffering. Are you ready? Will you follow Jesus no matter what?

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**What kind of mistreatment and suffering would you willingly endure for Jesus?**

**Is there anything that would cause you to abandon Jesus?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 27: Read Matthew Chapter 27**

Jesus didn't have to die. He chose to accept the cross to save us, which takes love and kindness to a whole new level. He chose to save us the same way a soldier might dive onto a live hand grenade in order to save the lives of his friends. We have learned many things about Jesus so far. Here is one more massive truth: *Jesus is willing to sacrifice Himself for others.* Humility is attending to the needs of others as well as our own. Sacrifice is attending to the needs of others INSTEAD OF our own. It is being willing to lose so that others might gain. It is choosing to struggle so that others might thrive. It is a true gift. We see this most clearly in Jesus' agony upon the cross, but also in every indignity He endured along the way. He accepted the mocking and jeers of the crowd. He accepted the ridicule of the leaders. He accepted the abuse of the soldiers. He accepted the thirty-nine lashes. Long before any of us would accept being violently beaten and broken, we would have to accept insults. How many of us are able to let an insult roll off our back? We want to be right. We want to be respected. We want to be accepted and applauded. Are you willing to let all that go for the sake of Jesus? What will you be willing to endure so that someone else might be saved?

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**How well do I accept insults and disrespect?**

**What will I be willing to endure so that someone else might be saved?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**

## **JANUARY 28: Read Matthew Chapter 28**

It amazes me that the reunion in the garden outside the empty tomb is over so quickly. After all they have been through, after all Jesus had endured, it would be tempting to find a quiet spot in the shade to just rest together and talk. But instead, Jesus is all business. He sends the women at the tomb back into town to gather up the rest of the disciples to urge them on to Galilee where Jesus would meet with them all together. The women probably could've used a break. The appearance of the angel, the earthquake, and the stone rolling away were all downright frightening. He gives them no time to catch their breath afterward, but sends them immediately on their way. Jesus never did waste time. He never was distracted, but always focused like a laser beam on the mission for which He was born, for which He died, and for which He had been raised. It is hard to imagine of death and resurrection as merely a "temporary setback" but that is evidently how Jesus views it. This day was like every other in that He was one day closer to completing God's Eternal Mission. As followers of Jesus, today we are one day closer to the completion of God's Eternal Mission. Regardless how yesterday went, today we choose, like Jesus, to keep moving forward. We do not grieve in anguish over our losses and we do not revel forever in our victories. We simply rise each new day and ask God the Father: "What's next?"

### **TODAY'S REFLECTION:**

**What is holding me back today, grief or celebration?**

**What's next? How shall I serve the Father today?**

**What did Jesus say today that changes the way I live?**

**What did Jesus do today that changes the way I live?**