



MCG
Study Guide

The Gospel According to Mark
Chapters 8 - 11
January 9th – February 5th

Wednesday January 9th – Compassion

(By NBBC's Blair Clark)

Reading Mark 8:1 - 13

"I have compassion for these people..."

The cause of Jesus' compassion for the people is described for us. This crowd of thousands had been following him for three days, and had had nothing to eat, and so Jesus was afraid that some of them might collapse from hunger on their journey home. The source of Jesus' compassion was his Father's nature and character, living in him. In Ephesians 2:4, the apostle Paul writes that compassion is an inherent part of God's nature. He describes God as being "rich in compassion", whereas Peter states that it is because of God's "great compassion" that we have been given the possibility of new birth and eternal life (1 Peter 1:3-4).

While compassion is generally described as something that we feel, the evidence of feeling compassion is always in the actions that those feelings produce. If there is no corresponding, appropriate action to address the situation that caused us to feel compassion, then we have not really felt compassion. We may have felt pity for them, or felt sadness at their situation, but it has not risen to the level of compassion if it has not motivated us to do something. The mark of Jesus' compassion in this incident is his provision of food for the hungry multitude. Compassion motivates people to go out of their way to help the physical, mental, or emotional pains of another or others.

One of the struggles that we face today is in knowing how to identify genuine need and respond appropriately. I remember reading about an elderly, poorly dressed woman begging every day near Yonge and Bloor. A newspaper reporter who regularly contributed finally became curious and spent a day watching her, and was shocked when, at the end of her 'work' day, once the sidewalk was quiet, she packed up, hurried around the corner and was picked up by what turned out to be her son in his late model Mercedes who drove her to a lovely suburban home.

Just before Christmas, I passed a similarly dressed woman begging on the sidewalk between the LCBO and Fortinos. The immediate questions for me were, “Is this a legitimate need? Am I hard-hearted and lacking in compassion if I don’t give? Am I being scammed if I do?” Then I thought, maybe on my way out from the grocery store I will give her something. However, inside Fortinos was a woman manning a Salvation Army Christmas kettle and I thought, “Better to give \$20 to the Salvation Army than \$5 directly to a questionable need.” So that is what I did. We love institutional channels to respond, but we are still left with the nagging question, “What if that was ‘Jesus’ outside in the cold begging?”

American writer/philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson writing from a secular perspective, noted: “The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honourable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.”

Meditation/Application/Reflection

How often do you check your compassion meter? What questions do you face when confronted with suffering and poverty? How do you respond in those situations?

How might we keep our hearts from growing cynical in regard to compassion?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

- Mark 1:21 - 34
- 1 Cor. 2

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

- Psalm 74
- Joshua 6, 7

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Pray for PACT (Preschool and Adult Coffee Time)
- Pray for the kids on your street

Thursday January 10th – Yeast
 (By NBBC's Veronika Bankuti)

Reading Mark 8:14 - 21

“Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.”

I remember when I used to watch my grandmother make bread at home in Hungary so many years ago! I was amazed to see that a small batch of dough she prepared and put in a bowl has grown to three times the size. She explained to me that it was the yeast that was responsible for this. You put in just a pinch of yeast and in the warm, moist environment the live bacteria multiply quickly and spread to the entire lump. For bread making yeast is a beautiful thing!

On another level, the yeast Jesus warned his disciples about was very different. I recently came across a three-part series on Frontline, titled “The Facebook Dilemma”. Mark Zuckerberg was just a young college boy when he and a friend came up with this new platform. Here is their mission statement from 2004:

“Facebook's mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them.” Membership – which was free - immediately began to grow exponentially! However, as we all know “there is no free lunch” and revenues had to be created somehow in order to provide this platform. Of course, the source of this revenue would be advertisements. Advertisers want to have access to the highest number of people with as little investment as possible. Facebook was the obvious answer! Advertisers want to reach clients with ads that match their interests and behold, Facebook provides this as they collect the information people disclose in their postings, stories, pictures, discussion streams etc. So, Facebook began to sell personal information gathered from their clients (without their knowledge or

consent) enabling advertisers to deliver targeted ads to their personal accounts. Facebook also went public – money was flooding in from hopeful investors, who were “betting on a sure thing”. (At this writing they are down over 20% of their value).

The membership of Facebook today is over 2 billion! Think of it – one quarter of the human population! The platform encourages the open sharing of ideas, which means that along with the good, some “yeast” also invades it.

Various extremist groups set up accounts and quickly garner quite a following. Foreign nations set up “trolls” (fake accounts) and spread fake news to achieve specific goals and soon tens of millions follow. Bullying has increased and caused untold heartbreak, depression and suicide primarily among young people.

Public concern about the sale of personal information reached a level where government intervention in the running of Facebook is being actively considered as it becomes obvious that Facebook is not doing a good enough job policing itself. The “yeast” of greed crept in as profits grew to multiple billions of dollars and blinded them to the price of their stated mission - the monetizing of their users’ privacy!

Jesus fed 4000 with seven loaves and a few fish with seven basketfuls left over. The disciples witnessed it, and yet they were still wondering if they would have enough to eat, as they only brought one loaf with them. Do you think there might be some yeast that crept in?

Meditation/Application/Reflection

As you think about how ideas, attitudes and beliefs spread in our society, how might we guard ourselves from what Jesus calls the yeast, which tries to negatively influence us?

This article highlights how Facebook has been used as a means for negative influence, what are some others means?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Mark 1:35 - 45

1 Cor. 3

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 75

Joshua 8, 9

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Pray against any spiritual strongholds that are in your neighbourhood.

Friday January 11th – Seeing

(By NBBC's Student Intern Ben Froese)

Reading Mark 8:22 - 26

“Do you see anything?”

For much of my life, I was unable to see very well – literally. I had to strain my eyes in order to make out what was on the white board at school or to try to track down my golf ball as it flew through the sky. Then, at 17 years old, I finally decided I was willing to get glasses. Oh, how everything changed! I was able to see in a new kind of way – the world looked clear to me now and it was really exciting for me.

A major part of Jesus' ministry involved giving sight to the blind. No doubt it would have been an incredible joy to be someone on the receiving end of such a miracle.

However, Jesus came to do more than just open physical eyes. He came to open our spiritual eyes as well.

In Mark's gospel, we see that Jesus' identity is hidden for the first eight chapters, and his disciples are unable to see him for who he truly is. Just as Jesus opens the physical eyes of this blind man in today's text, Peter's spiritual eyes will be opened in the verses that follow, as he confesses that Jesus is the Messiah (v. 29). However, like this blind man, whose sight is only partially restored at first, Peter and the other disciples don't fully understand what being “Messiah” means right away. They were still caught up in thinking the Messiah would be a political and military hero. Jesus will need to teach them some new things. The opening of the disciples' spiritual eyes will be somewhat of a process.

And so it is with us, too, I think. We may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, but learning to “see” rightly may take time - and sometimes our spiritual vision may become blurry and we might need an updated prescription for our “glasses.”

Even if we claim to hold to a Christian worldview, our surrounding culture may influence the way we see God, ourselves, and the world around us more than we'd like to admit. For example, we're bombarded by advertisements that send a message that says that to truly find fulfillment in life we need to buy more stuff! Perhaps that message can rub off on us.

Jesus offers a very different vision.

Let's continually open ourselves up to Jesus as we commune with him through prayer and as we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures. We, too, need Jesus to teach us what it means to "see" correctly.

Meditation/Application/Reflection

In what ways might your vision of God, yourself, and the world be influenced by our surrounding culture?

What might it mean for you to allow Jesus to teach you what it means to "see" correctly?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Mark 2:1 – 12

1 Cor. 4

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 76

Joshua 10 – 12

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Pray that God would open your eyes and heart to what He is doing on your street
- Pray for the leaders and staff of NBBC as they meet together this evening and tomorrow

Saturday January 12th – Jesus’ Identity

(By NBBC’s Bob Wilkins)

Reading Mark 8:27 – 30

“Who do you say I am?”

Today it is hard for us to over estimate the importance of identity. Who we are is critical and determinative for virtually our whole life and activities. This is especially true in this digital age when there is so much identity theft resulting in the losses of millions of dollars and even people’s houses.

One can hardly do anything at all without being asked to prove that you are the person you say you are. If you want to travel internationally, you will need a passport. To do your banking in person or online, you will need a client number and a pin number. You may also need to answer security questions. To log on to some websites at times you have to copy an image to prove that you are human. To make a purchase with a credit card you may need a pin number proving that it is you making the purchase. To interact with government agencies, such as Old Age Security you will need a Social Insurance Number. To get medical treatment you will need a Health Card. On and on it goes. Almost every day we are called upon to prove that we are who we claim to be.

Identity for Jesus was also critical. He wanted His disciples to know that the person they were following was who he claimed to be. Many had their opinions of who he was. Some said he was John the Baptist resurrected. Others said he was Elijah, and still others said he was one of the prophets. Peter’s answer to Jesus about his identity was, “You are the Christ,” meaning the Anointed One, or the Messiah. In Matthew’s account of this story Jesus said to Peter that his view had been revealed to him by the Heavenly Father.¹

¹ Matthew 16:13-20

People still debate about the identity of Jesus. For the past 200 years or so, many scholars and popular writers have tried to construct the real Jesus of history, often referred to as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. They generally view the Jesus of the Gospels as a creation of the early church. So, the quest of the historical Jesus is an attempt to sift through the gospels and accept only what they think is genuinely historical.

For six years (1985-1991) some 200 so-called mainline New Testament scholars met to discuss approximately 500 sayings of Jesus with the goal of determining which sayings were genuinely spoken by Jesus and which were created by church tradition or the gospel writers. They concluded that about 80% of the sayings in the gospels could not be attributed to Jesus. To make this determination, each scholar had coloured beads which they used to vote for each saying: red for yes, pink for possibly, gray for unlikely and black for no. Rather an odd way for scholars to seek to determine truth!²

John the Baptist once sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask Him if He was the true Messiah or should they look for someone else. Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."³

Meditation/Application/Reflection

What are some of the identifiers of Jesus that are important to you?

In what ways is your own identity bound up in Christ?

² Robert B. Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus*. P & R Publishing, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, pp. 1-2.

³ Luke 7:22-23

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Mark 2:13 - 17

1 Cor. 5

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 77

Joshua 13 - 14

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember this prayer request:

- Pray for those who are waiting on God to answer their prayer

Sunday January 13th – Mark Chapter Eight

Reading Mark 8

Sermon Notes:

Meditation/Application/Reflection

As you think about today's sermon what is one action point that you are taking away?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Mark 2:18 - 28

1 Cor. 6:1 - 11

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 78:1 - 39

Joshua 15 - 17

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember this prayer request:

- Thank God for the freedom we have in Canada to worship

Monday January 14th – Rejections

(By NBBC's Veronika Bankuti)

Reading Mark 8:31 – 33

"...the Son of Man must... be rejected"

When Jesus told his disciples what awaits him when they go back to Jerusalem, they were stunned. Peter, true to his outspoken nature, did something about it!

I am reasonably sure that none of us gets through life without being rejected by someone, for something, or for no discernable reason at all, at some point in our lives. To be sure, this is not a one-sided affair – we also do a fair bit of rejecting ourselves. Being rejected is never a pleasant experience. It is especially painful when it comes from people we are close to, or who we respect and hold in high esteem. In my experience, when rejection comes it is usually a surprise – we do not expect it, which only adds to its sting. At this point I think it helps to look at the circumstances and try to figure out, or even ask the reason for it. Depending on the reason, we can then choose how to react. If we are rejected because we hold a certain worldview that is objectionable to the person doing the rejecting, but we know that it lines up with the will of God, then we should accept this rejection calmly, even joyfully! In fact, we are told in Scripture that the Gospel message is offensive, so in fact rejection from some is, or should be, the expected outcome.

There is a saying, which is very short and very poignant: Learn to accept rejection and reject acceptance! There are times when acceptance can keep us from our appointed path.

Jesus knew that Peter loved him, and he of course loved Peter wholeheartedly. He knew Peter was propelled by his human love when trying to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem, but Jesus had to steadfastly keep his eye on the mission he alone could fulfill – the salvation of mankind! Therefore, he could not allow anyone, or anything to interfere with that. For this reason, came the sober,

devastating rebuke “Get thee behind me Satan.....” Jesus rejected the loving acceptance of Peter in order to complete God’s purpose.

In our own lives we sometimes find ourselves in situations where we must rely on God alone, pray our situation through and when the Lord speaks to us and reveals his specific will to our hearts – we must follow it in spite of well-intentioned advice from friends or relatives to the contrary, which usually begins with “If I were you...” While the council of trusted people is always a blessing, the fact is, they are not you, and nobody can know for certain what they would do if they were in your particular situation. God gives us spiritual strength and wisdom when we need it – often at the 11th hour – which is when we finally feel sure enough to act.

Jesus acted and went to Jerusalem in perfect obedience to the Father and all of us who believe in Him are now assured “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1 ESV). On Easter morning, Peter and all of the disciples finally understood Jesus’ single-minded determination to complete His mission!

Meditation/Application/Reflection

Recall a time when you were rejected.

Can you recall a time when being rejected turned out for your good?

Is there someone you know who has been rejected that God might have you reach out to?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Mark 3:1 - 19

1 Cor. 6:12 - 20

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 78:40 - 72

Joshua 18, 19

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember this prayer request:

- Pray for those who need God's healing touch in their physical being

Tuesday January 15th – Denial

(By NBBC's Student Intern Ben Wimmers)

Reading Mark 8:34 – 36

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves...”

“It is my cross to bear”

This is a saying that is familiar to many of us. Often, when I would complain about a difficult classmate or a situation at work, my mother would remind me that it is my cross to bear. I began to associate the cross with facing adversity. The cross that I was carrying at any given time was placed upon me by someone else, unasked for. This is incorrect.

Jesus outlines the cost of discipleship to the twelve. He tells them plainly,

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34b).

The cross that his disciples are to carry is not placed upon them by some external force, by a nasty coworker or frustrating customer. The cross that we bear is meant to be picked up of our own free will. The cross is a denial of ourselves. The difficult part about carrying a cross for Jesus is that we must deny a part of ourselves to follow him. That part is linked to our sinful nature. We must deny our wants and desires if they prevent us from walking alongside Jesus. The cost of carrying a cross for Jesus is heavy - to deny ourselves - but Jesus shows us the reward, that we will gain our eternal soul in the end, to live with him forever.

Jesus never asks us to do more than he did while he was on earth. Jesus denied his divine nature to come to earth as a child. He took up a cross of crucifixion and was put to death upon it. He denied his heavenly power and glory to die a lowly death, but he was raised up so that we might be saved. The path to glory is the same for us - to deny ourselves and take up the cross.

“Jesus has many who love his kingdom in heaven, but few who bear his cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share his feast, but few his fasting. All desire to rejoice with him, but few are willing to suffer for his sake. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion. Many admire his miracles, but few follow him in the humiliation of the cross.” - Thomas à Kempis.

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Mark 3:20 - 35

1 Cor. 7:1 - 16

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 79

Joshua 20 - 21

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Preparing for your MCG

As you come for your MCG be prepared to share:

- POTLUCK: Be mindful about a story you might share regarding the importance of MCG regular group meeting together. (ie. What it means to you, or how the group has seen God work through them or in them)
- STUDY: Share from your time of Meditation/Application from each day's study. What from your Bible reading made an impression on you or what confused you?
- PRAYER WALK/ACTIVITY: be creative and intentional as you pray/work together.

Wednesday January 16th – Transfiguration

(By NBBC's Bob Wilkins)

Reading Mark 9:1 – 13

“There he was transfigured before them.”

Most of us can say that we have had life changing experiences. Such experiences can be of different kinds. Some are tragic events such as a death in the family, or a tragic accident that has left one with ongoing impairment. Other life changing experiences may take the form of so-called chance meetings, or spiritual encounters with God, or opportunities that presented themselves and that required a decision on our part.

For me personally, there have been life changing experiences of various kinds. My experience of becoming a Christian changed my life completely even though I was only 9 or 10 years old. My conversion delivered me from a very toxic and foul mouth and also included my initial call to ministry. While I was always aware of that call, I got side tracked during my teenage years, but God recalled me to my life's work just before the birth of our first child through the account of God's call to the prophet Samuel.⁴ Our daughter Faith's losing battle with cancer at the age of 42 had a profound effect on me as God helped me to deal with that. Such experiences also helped me deal with my own health issues, especially a severe battle with depression. These are a few of the life altering experiences that I have had over the years. No doubt many more will come.

When Jesus took Peter, Jame, and John up the mountain where He would be transfigured before them, they probably did not fully grasp how life changing that experience would be. In fact, the disciples often failed to understand or appreciate what was going on. Peter's response

⁴ 1 Samuel

to build shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, suggests that he just wanted to hang on to that experience rather than learning from it.

The voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him,” was a kind of rebuke to Peter that the voice of Jesus, God’s Son, is more important than what he had to say, or what anyone else has to say. For our experiences to be life changing we need to be ready and willing to listen to the voice of Jesus. What is he trying to say to us? God speaks to us in so many ways. We need to listen to Him. He speaks to us in His Word, but He also speaks to us in our circumstances and through other people. We need to hear His voice.

Peter remembered afterwards how important the transfiguration was to him and other followers of Jesus. It confirmed everything that God had ever communicated in the past and that He spoke to them during Christ’s earthly ministry, and still speaks to us today. See how Peter uses the transfiguration experience in 2 Peter 1:16-21. For him it was life changing.

Meditation/Application/Reflection

Reflect on some the life changing experiences that you have had. In what ways did you hear God speaking to you?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Mark 4:1 - 20

1 Cor. 7:17 - 40

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 80

Joshua 22 - 23

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Pray for the young adults that join with us in our gatherings
- Give thanks for the children of NBBC

Thursday January 17th – Unbelief

(By NBBC's Student Intern Ben Froese)

Reading Mark 9:14 - 24

"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Do you ever feel like you don't have as much faith as you think you should? Maybe it's hard to trust God and His plan in the midst of pain and suffering, or maybe doubts rise in your mind at times as to whether God even exists at all.

I think that sometimes in Christian circles we stigmatize doubt. We think that doubt is the opposite of faith. We think that if someone has come to Christ and experienced His love, any doubt is unacceptable.

In today's text, we see that the father of this boy seriously doubts Jesus. He lacks faith that Jesus has the ability to drive the demon out of his son. The father's statement to Jesus, "if you can do anything" (v. 22), demonstrates a lack of confidence in Jesus' power.

But in the midst of his doubt and unbelief, the father comes to Jesus. He asks Jesus to help his son and also asks Him to help his own unbelief. I think the father's asking is itself an act of faith. The father's faith is mixed with doubt and unbelief, but some measure of faith is still there, and it's where this faith is planted that really counts. The father's faith is in Jesus, the One who truly does have the power to heal and save.

Jesus honours the little faith that the father does have. I think he'll honour our imperfect faith, too, if we'll come to him with our doubts, our questions, and our confusions.

Tim Keller writes the following:

Imagine two people boarding an airplane. One person has almost no faith in the plane or the crew and is filled with fears and doubts. The other has great confidence in the plane and the crew. They both enter the plane, fly to a destination, and get off the plane safely. One person

had a hundred times more faith in the plane than the other did, but they were equally safe. It wasn't the amount of their faith but the object of their faith (the plane and the crew) that kept them from suffering harm and arriving safely at their destination. Saving faith isn't a level of psychological certainty; it is an act of the will in which we rest in Jesus.⁵

Meditation/Application/Reflection

How would you define doubt? Do you think it's possible to have faith in Jesus and to have doubts in your mind at the same time?

What do you do with your doubts? How do you think the Christian community can help each other move from doubt or unbelief to faith?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Mark 4:21 - 41

1 Cor. 8

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 81

Joshua 24

Prayer Points:

⁵ Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 36.

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Pray for the neighbour to the left of you
- Pray for the board, elders and council as they meet tonight

Friday January 18th – Private Conversations

(By NBBC's Veronika Bankuti)

Reading Mark 9:25 – 29

“After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately...”

During our lives we come across many hundreds of people. Most remain acquaintances, some become casual friends and if we are very fortunate, a very few become intimate, lifelong friends.

If we see a person often, we become familiar. Familiarity and intimacy are not the same. If we confuse one for the other, we have the basis for major human and marital unrest. Familiarity happens almost imperceptibly. Intimacy is usually hard to come by. Familiarity brings a degree of ease and comfort. Intimacy searches for deep understanding and personal appreciation.⁶

It is to these intimate friends we reveal most of our true selves and as we do, we become the recipients of their revelations about themselves. The one crucial, indispensable ingredient of intimacy like this is trust. Without trust in the character and affection of the person we are sharing with, intimacy will never be possible. If we are lacking real close friendships, maybe the one, fundamental question to ask ourselves is: are we trustworthy? Are we good at keeping someone else's secrets as faithfully as we keep our own? The other reason why we may lack true friends is because we are not willing to reveal our own vulnerabilities and therefore limit the closeness we experience. We may be very trustworthy but unwilling to risk exposure. Both are detrimental to intimacy. When we can talk freely, without having to weigh our words and actions for fear of being misunderstood and rejected – we truly experience joy as we are known and accepted for who we are! This is the blessedness and beauty of Jesus' love! He knows everything about us - the good, the bad and the ugly – and He loves us just the same! The reason we have such difficulty accepting this unconditional love is because it is so exceedingly rare in our daily experience.

⁶ Sermon Illustrations, Gordon Lester Homemade, Vol. 4 Num. 11

During this private conversation the disciples were asking Jesus why they could not cast out this demon. Jesus' answer was fascinating: "This kind can only come out with prayer" and some translations also add "and fasting."

When Jesus talked about "this kind" did he mean the kind of demon who possessed the child, or was he talking about the reason why the attempt of the disciples to cast the demon out was unsuccessful? We need not guess for Jesus gave us the answer to this question in Matthew's gospel: "Because you have so little faith", He answered. "For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain "move from here to there" and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:20)

Jesus did not reveal this to the crowds that followed him (the curious, or casual acquaintances) nor to the Pharisees (adversaries) but to his intimates only, and the almost too good to be true news for us who believe in him and by faith belong to this privileged group of "intimates" – he also revealed it to us!

Meditation/Application/Reflection

Take some time in prayer to tell God about the type of intimacy you desire to have with Him.

What might God be telling you about how you could be more intimate with Him?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Mark 5:1 - 20

1 Cor 9:1 - 12

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 82

Judges 1 - 3

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember this prayer request:

- Pray for the government of Canada

Saturday January 19th – Welcoming

(By NBBC's Blair Clark)

Reading Mark 9:30 – 37

“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me...”

We hear a lot about being welcoming these days. People from many different countries are crossing the border into Canada and requesting asylum and are being welcomed by our Prime Minister. In contrast many Central American migrants fleeing poverty, violence and oppression are not being welcomed into the US by their President. Both strategies have their supporters and detractors.

Today, churches are variously identified, with reference to the LGBTQ community, as being ‘welcoming and affirming’, ‘welcoming but not affirming’, and just plain ‘not welcoming’. Again, each position has its supporters and opponents, and the debates are as acrimonious and polarizing on this issue as they are on the matter of migrants and immigration.

For us as followers of Christ, Jesus’ teaching could hardly be clearer. He chose to illustrate his teaching with a little child. Why? Because children did not have status. Children have needs, lots of needs. Children have nothing of their own to contribute - except maybe a bit of bread and fish that a thoughtful mother packed for her child!

Remember, the context for this teaching is about power and privilege, about occupying places of honour in God’s Kingdom, and so Jesus chose the weakest, most vulnerable and yet most precious thing available to him in that house in Capernaum, and told them, “Welcome this child, and you welcome me; welcome me and you welcome God himself!”

To welcome is to accept, to embrace, to show hospitality to, to provide for. It is not just some trite response of putting a WELCOME mat outside your front door, but then keeping your door closed and locked.

Welcoming has implications for us, just as we saw that being compassionate has implications, and demands an appropriate response.

Being welcoming, both individually and as a church, will challenge us to cross all sorts of barriers – socio-economic, cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic, age just to name a few. It will challenge us to tear down barriers and walls, not construct new ones. Today, in your work place, in your neighbourhood, in your school, perhaps even in your family, who is God calling you to welcome, and what barriers are you going to have to cross, what walls are you going to have to tear down in order to do that? In most of our lifetimes, we have seen the Berlin Wall torn down, and just this year we saw the DMZ between North and South Korea cracked open. What is your - what is our – Berlin Wall that needs to be broken down, what is our DMZ that needs to be crossed so that we can truly welcome those whom God is calling us to embrace?

Optional Reading Plan

Meditation/Application/Reflection

As you consider being welcoming to others, is there anyone, any type of person you struggle to welcome and befriend? Ask God to soften your heart and help you to be welcoming to all.

Is there someone in particular that you feel God would have you welcome and reach out to? Share the name with your MCG and invite them to pray for opportunity to welcome them.

Read through the New Testament in a year:

- Matthew 26:36-56
- Romans 11:1-24

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

- Psalm 64
- Deuteronomy 6-8

Prayer Points:

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Pray for the youth at NBBC who experience peer pressure daily
- Pray that you will remain firm in your convictions

Sunday January 20th – Mark Chapter Nine

Reading: Mark 9

Sermon Notes:

Meditation/Application/Reflection

As you think about today's sermon what is one action point that you are taking away?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Matthew 26:57-75

Romans 11:25-36

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 65

Deuteronomy 9-12

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Give thanks today for God's provision to you personally

Monday January 21st – One of us

(By NBBC's Student Intern Ben Wimmers)

Reading Mark 9:38 – 41

"...we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

I grew up with three sisters. We got along very well most of the time and enjoyed playing together. From time to time they would tell me that I couldn't hang out with them. That didn't always mean they were doing something 'girly' but they just wanted to be the three of them, an exclusive club of sorts. Even though we were of the same blood, from the same family, they set themselves apart and wouldn't let me join in, because of one difference.

Jesus's disciples were not so different. They liked their exclusive club with Jesus and enjoyed the perks that their closeness gave them. They are upset to see someone outside of the twelve casting out demons in Jesus' name. Jesus is quick to correct them, ***"for whoever is not against us is for us."***

I am sometimes troubled by the exclusiveness Christians can portray, and I, too am guilty of it. Even within the group of Christians there can be exclusivity between denominations or even individual churches. Our differences don't have to divide us though. Here I am as a member of the Christian Reformed Church writing devotionals for a Baptist Church.

Jesus highlights the important commonality between his disciples and the stranger they were complaining about. The common thread is the belief in Jesus as the Messiah. That is all that matters to Jesus.

Membership in the Twelve is irrelevant to Jesus. All that matters is a heart that belongs to Jesus, that proclaims his Lordship above all. To declare that Jesus is your personal Lord and saviour is the biggest requirement for membership into the body of believers. When the final day of judgment comes, Jesus won't ask which denomination or group we belonged to, he will want to know if we belonged to him or not.

Ask your brother to play with you, if he isn't against you, then he is for you.

Meditation/Application/Reflection

Take some time to pray for other churches in your neighbourhood.

Do you know of other Christians on your street or in your neighbourhood? Try to make an effort to encourage them and pray for them this week.

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Matthew 27:1-10

Romans 12:1-8

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 66

Deuteronomy 13-17

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Ask God to help you look at your weekly schedule through His eyes

Tuesday January 22nd – Stumbling

(By NBBC's Blair Clark)

Reading Mark 9:42 – 50

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off.”

Today's passage on stumbling leads us to ask two different questions of ourselves. The first question is, “Am I in any way causing someone else, and particularly someone in a position of weakness or vulnerability, to stumble?” The context points initially to our relationship with children – our own as well as those that we are in position to influence – but it is not limited only to children. In I Corinthians 8, the Apostle Paul writes about not causing one another to stumble through the exercise of our freedom, and he is talking primarily about peer relationships.

As we continue to read about the lasting damage and human carnage resulting from the abuse of First Nations children in residential schools, or about the abuse of children by clergy and leaders in the church, it is terrifying to think of the judgement that awaits the perpetrators, but it is not just abuse – emotional, physical or sexual – that is the object of this passage. Questions that I ask myself, *vis-à-vis* my parenting of my own children, relate to the values that I am displaying to them in my everyday life. A preoccupation with success and with materialism, a lack of generosity and compassion, an unwillingness to forgive and a harbouring of bitterness or resentment, all un-Christlike values and behaviours, can also be a cause of someone else's stumbling and ultimate rejection of Christ in their own life.

The second question is this: “Is there someone or something in my life that is causing me to repeatedly fail in my pursuit of godliness and Christlikeness in my life? Jesus uses three examples – my hand (to be understood as the things that I do) my foot (to be understood as the places that I go) and my eye (to be understood as the things that I am watching, reading, seeing) – to illustrate the potential scope of the problem and the kind of radical steps that I may need to take to gain victory and release.

Our goal is nothing less than total conformity to the life of Christ. Anything that is preventing me from that goal is what Jesus is talking about with these examples. It may be necessary to abandon some habit, to deny some pleasure, to give up some friendship, to cut out something that has become very dear to me, in order to be fully obedient to the will of God for my life.

With both these questions, most of us are probably in need of outside help and perspective if we are to achieve the honest and life-saving answers that we need. While it is good to start by asking them of yourself, if you sense that your spiritual life is not where it needs to be, I encourage you to expand the circle of influence and invite others to assist you in finding honest and helpful answers.

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Matthew 27:11-26

Romans 12:9-21

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 67

Deuteronomy 18-21

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Preparing for your MCG

As you come for you MCG be prepared to share:

- **POTLUCK:** Be mindful about a story you might share regarding the importance of MCG regular group meeting together. (ie. What it means to you, or how the group has seen God work through them or in them)
- **STUDY:** Share from your time of Meditation/Application from each day's study. What from your Bible reading made an impression on you or what confused you?
- **PRAYER WALK/ACTIVITY:** be creative and intentional as you pray/work together.

Wednesday January 23^d – Divorce

(By NBBC's Veronika Bankuti)

Reading Mark 10:1 – 12

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

This topic resonates with me as I have been divorced for longer than I was married. I would like to emphasize that I am writing of my personal experience only, and by no means do I mean to imply that all experiences are the same. After the divorce I was certain that within a very short time I would be whisked away on a white horse by a knight in shining armour and would have nothing but uninterrupted bliss for the rest of my life. The reality is – not so much!

Faith has everything to do with our everyday lives. I can confess with full confidence that had I known the Lord in 1987, I would not be divorced today. Not because the problems in the marriage would have disappeared, not because the differences between our personalities would have evaporated, not because life would have changed into a fairy tale – but because I would have had a different attitude, a different heart, a different appreciation for all those qualities of my ex-husband that used to drive me crazy! Being self-absorbed makes us blind to everything else – that includes the very people we love the most, the ones we spend the most time with. Most devastating of all, they are the ones who receive the manifestations of our selfishness – and the wounds take a long time to heal. The deceitful, destroying work of the enemy is so subtle, so convincing that we are absolutely certain that we are the blameless victim, and our desire to break free of these unbearable chains is totally justified. We are blind to the truth, to reality as it exists and by following the false conviction that our lives can only improve if we leave – we are actually taking the first step down a slippery slope that rarely, if ever, leads to an improved life.

Here are some sobering statistics:

- Children of divorce are more likely to experience poverty, educational failure, early and risky sexual activity, earlier

marriage, cohabitation, marital discord and divorce. In fact, emotional problems associated with divorce actually increase during young adulthood.⁷

- A variety of research shows that both men and women suffer serious physical effects at divorce, including depression, weight gain/loss, difficulty concentrating, increase in tension, lack of sleep, nausea, heart problems, and other serious ailments.⁸
- One in five women fall into poverty as a result of divorce. (The 2014 poverty line for a family of three is less than \$20,000 a year), three out of four divorced mothers with child-support orders don't receive their full payment and often need the help of public assistance programs to supplement their family finances, which often still fail to cover all financial necessities after divorce.⁹

When Jesus says, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." He was aware that the tearing of divorce brings damage to those involved. His appeal to avoid divorce is born out of His concern to keep us from the harm it would cause. As is often true with all quick fixes, they often make us pay long into our future.

Meditation/Application/Reflection

Jesus makes us aware that those who are caught in divorce are often hurting. How ought the church respond to such hurt?

If you are married, have you been investing in your marriage? How might you show appreciation to your spouse this week?

⁷ www.child-encyclopedia.com/divorce-and.../consequences-separationdivorce-children

⁸ <https://www.kh-law.net.blog>

⁹ YourDivorceQuestions.org

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Matthew 27:27-44

Romans 13

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 68

Deuteronomy 22-26

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Take a moment to sing a song of prayer to God
- Pray for the neighbour across from you

Thursday January 24th – Childlike

(By NBBC's Student Intern Ben Froese)

Reading Mark 10:13 – 16

“...anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

As I write this, it is just a few days after Christmas. I think back to my memories of Christmas as a child. One of my favourite things about Christmas growing up was the gifts. My parents and other family members loved giving gifts to my sister and me and I sure loved receiving them!

I knew that I had done nothing to earn the gifts I was given. As a matter of fact, I wasn't always the greatest kid and probably deserved coal in my stocking some years, but regardless of my actions, my parents bought me presents and I would open my gifts with excitement and receive them with joy.

In today's text, we hear Jesus say, “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (v. 15). God offers us the Kingdom and offers us salvation, and he asks us to be like kids on Christmas morning. Simply receive!

Just after today's text, we read of the rich young ruler asking Jesus a question that reveals a bit more of an “adult” mindset: “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” (v. 17). As we get older, we begin to think that we need to earn everything that comes our way. We work hard to earn money. We say things like, “Nothing comes free in life!”

However, when it comes to our salvation, it really does come free. There's nothing we can do to earn it. Our Father offers us a gift. Like children, we are to simply receive.

In our Christian life, we should continue to be childlike. I think that as we get older, we begin to take life a whole lot more seriously. In our

spiritual life, we may become more serious about the beliefs we hold to than we are excited about the life with God we get to enjoy.

No doubt, being responsible, hard-working, and thoughtful are good things but let's not allow our "adult" mindset to suck away the joy of life with God. Let's continue to marvel at the love of our Father and at the beauty of the life He has given us. We are His kids.

Meditation/Application/Reflection

Write out or think of a list of things that characterize children. Do you think you need to try to adopt any of these characteristics in your own life? Pray about this.

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

- Matthew 27:45-56
- Romans 14

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

- Psalm 69:1-18
- Deuteronomy 27-28

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Ask God to reveal to you any areas where you place the tradition above the purpose

Friday January 25th – Treasure

(By NBBC's Bob Wilkins)

Reading Mark 10:17 – 31

"...you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."¹⁰ What we treasure or what we value says a whole lot about us and will dictate the choices we make. I am writing this with only a few days left before Christmas 2018. Everyday the inbox in my computer email program is full of advertising for the greatest deals that you can imagine. It is too bad that Christmas has turned into a buying frenzy, and we all get caught up in it to one degree or another. However, it is only indicative of how materialistic we have become. Where is our treasure? Today, people's treasure seems to be in things, in wealth, in financial status, all of which can be gone in an instant.

Jesus said we should not lay up treasure on earth for earthly treasure can be stolen or destroyed.¹¹ This does not mean to say that we should not work to earn money, or provide for our families, or plan for our retirement or our old age. In fact, it is interesting to note that 15% of all of Jesus' teaching is about money and wise investment of that money. Jesus expects us to be wise stewards of all that we have, but we must understand that what we accumulate in this life is only temporary, so it is important that we invest in eternity.

Randy Alcorn in his book, *The Treasure Principle*, says that the treasure principle is very simple and has two parts: you can't take it with you, but you can send it on ahead.¹² John D. Rockefeller was one of the wealthiest men who ever lived. After he died someone asked his

¹⁰ Matthew 6:21

¹¹ Matthew 6:19-20

¹² ¹² Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle: Discovering the Secret of Joyful Giving*. Multnomah Books, 2001, p. 17

accountant, “How much money did John D. leave?” The reply was classic, “He left. . . all of it.”¹³ You can’t take it with you.

Jesus knew that the rich young man who came to him asking about what he could do to inherit eternal life had a problem with material wealth. It was his god, so Jesus exhorted him to get rid of his god and follow him. His was a classic example of not laying up treasure in heaven. Unlike the parable of the man who found a hidden treasure in a field and went and sold everything he had to acquire that field, and with it, the treasure,¹⁴ It says of the rich young man, “He went away sad, because he had great wealth.”

Jesus is asking us to lay up treasure in heaven by making sure that we have Him, the greatest treasure of all, and live our lives totally for Him, and so accumulate treasure in heaven. Jim Elliot said, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.”¹⁵

Meditation/Application/Reflection

Reflect on what it means in practical ways to store up treasure in heaven. What changes would you have to make in order to do that?

Consider your financial giving to the church and ask God what percentage He would have you give this year.

¹³ Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle: Discovering the Secret of Joyful Giving*. Multnomah Books, 2001, p. 17

¹⁴ Matthew 13:44

¹⁵ Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle: Discovering the Secret of Joyful Giving*. Multnomah Books, 2001, p.6

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Matthew 27:57-66

Romans 15:1-13

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 69:19-36

Deuteronomy 29-31

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Pray for Shari and her team
- Pray for the neighbour to the left of you

Saturday January 26th – Stepping into the Chaos

Reading Mark 10:32 – 34

“...the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid.”

Today we read how Jesus headed toward Jerusalem even though he knew the suffering that awaited him there. Jesus' bold and courageous determination astonished his disciples even while causing them to be afraid. Jesus did what would have felt so counter-intuitive to most of us – he stepped into the chaos.

Perhaps avoiding danger is for the most part, a wise means of self-preservation, but avoidance can be destructive when we fail to step into the chaos of our lives in order to bring resolution, order and healing. When relationships get strained we need to step into the chaos and clarify misunderstandings and seek restoration. When work is piling up and tasks are mounting, rather than retreating to the TV and a bag of potato chips, we need to step into the chaos and begin to tackle the work one step at a time. When we notice issues with our health and we are afraid that something might be wrong we need to identify the issues, take the medicine or receive the treatment and step into the chaos. When we are afraid we will never get married or find a spouse, we need to step into the emotional chaos and prepare our hearts to accept whatever future God allows for us.

More often than not, when we step into that which we have been avoiding, we often find that it is not as bad as what our fears imagined, and we also find that we have underestimated God's grace to sustain us in the midst of it and the good that he would bring when we come out the other side.

Why should we step into chaos? Mark Batterson offers the following illustration:

I recently went to the doctor's office for an extensive battery of allergy tests. My doctor wanted to find out what allergens trigger my asthma. The nurse-practitioner pricked my forearm in 18 places with different

allergens and said, "Don't scratch." It was like Chinese water torture. I had to resist the urge to scratch the itch for 15 of the longest minutes of my life!

Testing for allergies isn't a pointless exercise in cruel and unusual punishment, even though it might seem like it. It is a form of reverse engineering. My doctor wasn't satisfied with treating my allergy symptoms. She wanted to discover the root causes of my reactions, and the solution isn't just avoiding those allergens. The cure is actually exposing myself to them in small doses.

Here is my point. The cure for the fear of failure is not success. It's failure. The cure for the fear of rejection is not acceptance. It's rejection. You've got to be exposed to small quantities of whatever you're afraid of. That's how you build up immunity.¹⁶

When we choose to step into chaos, we find something good is on the other side, even if that "good" is a change in our own character.

Meditation/Application/Reflection

What is the "chaos" that you need to step into? Ask God for grace, make a plan and begin to address that which you want to avoid.

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New

Testament in a year:

Matthew 28:1-10

Romans 15:14-33

Read through the Old

Testament in a year:

Psalm 70

Deuteronomy 32

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

¹⁶ Mark Batterson, *In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day* (Multnomah, 2006), p. 49-50

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Pray for those struggling with mental illness

Sunday January 27th – Mark Chapter Ten

Reading: Mark 10

Sermon Notes:

Meditation/Application/Reflection

As you think about today's sermon what is one action point that you are taking away?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

- Matthew 28:11-20
- Romans 16

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

- Psalm 71
- Deuteronomy 33-34

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Pray for the staff and their families

Monday January 28th – Servanthood

(By NBBC's Blair Clark)

Reading Mark 10:35 - 40

“Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”

These are not popular words in today's liberated, self-focused world, but for the follower of Christ, they are critically important. Jesus follows these words with this amazing statement: “Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus both taught and modelled servanthood for his followers.

I have been blessed to have had a number of very formative experiences that have helped shape my life in this important area. One summer I worked the 11 pm to 7 am shift at a gas station on highway 128 north of Boston. One of my jobs in the wee hours of the morning when customers were few was to clean the washrooms. Cleaning up after people who had been car sick, who were drunk, or who were just inconsiderate slobs was not pleasant work, but I took pride in ensuring that during my shift, the washrooms were clean and pleasant for our customers. To this day, when I am in a public washroom, I often find myself picking up paper towels off the floor or wiping down the sink if previous patrons have left it messy.

For several years, I worked part time for a wealthy Boston family, helping the old Italian gardener at their summer house in Manchester by the Sea, or assisting the elderly servants that worked for them at their five-story brownstone townhouse on Beacon Hill, just down from the State capitol building and looking out onto the Boston Common. I learned from their cook Alice and their housekeeper Margaret, both career servants who were then in their early 70s, what it meant to be a 'professional' servant.

The summer after Janet and I were married, we spent four months in Toronto before returning to Boston to complete my seminary studies. I was hired by the Borough of North York for those four months, but

instead of getting assigned to the Parks department, or a road maintenance crew, I found myself riding the back of a garbage truck, picking up garbage for those four months. Again, my sidekick for much of the summer was a man in his early 60s, a veteran of the Korean War who would soon be retiring as a garbage man. The worst part of the job was when we had to pick up the garbage from town house complexes that had a central fenced area for their bags of trash. On really hot days, the area would be crawling with maggots, and I, being the junior person on our team, would have to climb into that area and start heaving the bags of garbage into the truck. I learned to respect that job, and 40 years later still make sure my trash is properly sorted, neatly placed at the curb, the handle on my green bin facing the street so that it is easier to handle for the person picking it up.

How has God taught you servanthood? Are there still some things that you need to learn? What can you do that will help you to develop the humble attitude of a servant, because it is only by serving that we are able to learn servanthood!

Meditation/Application/Reflection

Why do you think we resist being servants to others?

Ask God to open your eyes to where you might serve someone this week where you normally wouldn't come prepared to share about this experience.

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

- Mark 1:1-8
- 1 Corinthians 1:1-17

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

- Psalm 72
- Joshua 1-2

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

As you pray for your church family, community, MCG and yourself, please remember these prayer requests:

- Pray for the elderly in your neighbourhood
- Pray for those in your extended family

Tuesday January 29th— Asking

Reading Mark 10:46 – 52

“What do you want me to do for you?”

In most relationships the way that people know our needs or wants is by us telling them, and for the most part, people want to please others by doing for them what they need or want. Yet, much conflict occurs in relationships because expectations are not met, simply because the expectation was not made known.

I do not suspect Jesus asked this blind man what he wanted because he did not know, but rather, so that the blind man’s request might be honoured. Allowing the man to ask, empowered him to exercise his faith, and to give shape to his desire. Asking is a means of taking control of situations which are out of control.

When Pierre-Paul Thomas was growing up in Montreal, Canada in the 1940s he couldn't play hockey with his brothers and it broke his heart. Thomas was born blind—long before a cure was available. So for most of his life he could only imagine the world that people often described to him. For years he walked with a white cane to avoid obstacles in front of him, but at the age of sixty-six, Thomas fell down the stairs in an apartment building and fractured the bones of his face. He was rushed to the hospital with severe swelling around his eyes. A team of doctors went to work to repair the bones. Months later he went to be examined by a plastic surgeon for a consultation about repairing his scalp.

The surgeon casually asked Thomas, "Oh, while we're at it, do you want us to fix your eyes too?" Thomas did not understand. Nor did he know how to respond. Not long after that, Thomas had surgery and could truly see for the first time.

Suddenly his world consisted of bright colours he had never fathomed before. He spoke of being awestruck by flowers blossoming and trees blooming. As beautiful as this story of a sixty-year-old man who was

able to see for the first time is, there is a sad reality. He could have had the same surgery at a younger age and been able to see earlier. Thomas had assumed such a possibility was impossible and had resigned himself to a life of blindness when, in reality, he could have experienced the gift of sight decades earlier.¹⁷

What might have happened if Mr. Thomas had simply asked earlier? Sometimes we stop asking God because we have resigned ourselves to our circumstances without asking God and making known what we want – without exercising our faith in God’s ability and willingness to change our circumstances. If Jesus was asking you today, “What do you want me to do for you?” how would you answer?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Mark 1:9-20

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 73

Joshua 3-5

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Preparing for your MCG

As you come for you MCG be prepared to share:

- **POTLUCK:** Be mindful about a story you might share regarding the importance of MCG regular group meeting together. (ie. What it means to you, or how the group has seen God work through them or in them) **STUDY:** Share from your time of Meditation/Application from each day’s study. What from your

¹⁷ Adapted from Kyle Idleman, AHA: The God Moment That Changes Everything (David Cook, 2014), page 76; original source: Aaron Derfel, "Blind No More," Montreal Gazette (7-27-13)

Bible reading made an impression on you or what confused you?

- PRAYER WALK/ACTIVITY: be creative and intentional as you pray/work together.

Wednesday January 30th – Untying

Reading Mark 11:1 – 6

“Untie it and bring it here.”

We don't know who was the owner of the colt that the disciples untied. We do not know how the person responded or if Jesus had made previous arrangements, but what we know is that once that colt was untied, once it was given to be used by God, it was used in an unprecedented way! A way that shaped human history.

What if the owner had refused though? What if he preferred for his colt to remain tied? Likely, Jesus would have arranged for another colt to have been used, to fulfill prophecy and to carry the King of Kings. It would not have been Jesus who was denied but the colt and his owner.

There are times when we have something “tied up” that Jesus wants us to untie in order to be used by Him. It may be that we have “tied up” our time watching TV, reading a book or running our kids around to yet another after school program and we can't free up time to do His bidding.

There are times when our finances are “tied up” in other investments, or luxuries, or hobbies and we can't untie them for other purposes that He might want.

For some, our emotional resources are spent, they are “tied up” in unforgiveness, or bitterness, or anger and we aren't able – or willing – to let them go in order to invest ourselves emotionally in those things which God asks of us.

When we fail to untie what we have bound in order that it may be used of God, it is not God who is deprived but us. God wants us to experience the joy and pleasure of being used by Him. Every time we do not make available what we have, to be used by him, we are impoverished.

Randy Alcorn writes, "Suppose you have an important package to send to someone who needs it. You take it to an overnight delivery service. What would you think if, instead of delivering the package, the driver took it home? Then, when you confront him, he says, "If you didn't want me to keep it, why'd you give it to me in the first place?"

You'd say, "The package doesn't belong to you. Your job is to deliver it to the person who needs it."¹⁸

All that we have: our time, talents, money, health, emotions, wisdom – all of it – belongs to God. He's given it to you for a season, so that He might allow you the joy of being used by Him. What is it that you have of God's that you have tied up and are unwilling to untie?

Meditation/Application/Reflection

What are there some things that are harder for you to let God use than others?

Has God ever used you in a way that surprised you?

Take some time to pray and ask God what you might have tied up that He wants to use.

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Matthew 27:57-66

Romans 15:1-13

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 69:19-36

Deuteronomy 29-31

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

¹⁸ Randy Alcorn, "God's Money Managers: Letting go of what isn't mine," Focus on the Family (December 2006), p. 13

Prayer Points:

Thursday January 31st – Hosanna

(By NBBC's Ben Wimmers)

Reading Mark 11:7: - 11

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

I have been a loyal fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs for my whole life. I have never seen them win the Stanley Cup, or even come close. I listen to my dad tell stories of the Leafs in the early 1990s; about how great the team was and how close they got to the cup. I don't know anyone who remembers when the Leafs last won (1967). For over 50 years, a loyal fan base has been waiting for their team to bring home the greatest trophy they can imagine. When I close my eyes, I can see the parade in the streets of Toronto as the team carries the trophy among an exuberant crowd. The wait will be over. It will be worth it and the celebrations would seem endless.

If possible, the people of Jerusalem threw a bigger parade than Leafs fans ever could. The Jews were waiting for a saviour to liberate them from Rome. They had been languishing under foreign powers for much longer than a 50-year Stanley Cup drought. They thought Jesus was that man. However, the celebrations in Jerusalem were short-lived. In a few days Jesus was crucified and buried. Thankfully, this was not the end. Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, to be seated at the right hand of God. That is what the celebration in Jerusalem should have been focused on. That is what the peoples shouts of “Hosanna” should have been directed to.

I feel like we are in a time of waiting again. It has been nearly 2000 years since Jesus left earth, with the promise to return. Are we holding in that “Hosanna” and staying inside until he comes again? Or should we take to the streets in celebration and throw a big parade because he has already won the battle over death? What would it look like to live every day as though Jesus was entering into Jerusalem for that first time? To live in constant celebration of Jesus' victory over sin and death. For he

has won the greatest prize imaginable – the prize he died for - His people.

Meditation/Application/Reflection

The word “Hosanna” is both a cry for help and a cry of praise. It is as if the person is asking God for help even while praising Him for the help they believe He has already granted. Take some time to pray “hosanna” prayers as you ask God for help in those areas of concern, even while thanking Him for what he is already doing.

How might you celebrate the victory that Jesus has brought over sin this week?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

- Matthew 27:57-66
- Romans 15:1-13

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

- Psalm 69:19-36
- Deuteronomy 29-31

Prayer Points:

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Friday February 1st – Fruitlessness

(By NBBC's Bob Wilkins)

Reading Mark 11:12 – 14

“...he found nothing but leaves...”

First Century Palestine was largely an agrarian society. It is therefore not surprising that Jesus would use agricultural examples in His preaching and teaching ministry. Many of His parables utilized well known farming techniques. People who flocked to hear Him speak would readily identify with the parable of the sower, the parable of the weeds, the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the growing seed, etc.¹⁹ Included in His utilizing of farming illustrations is the importance of fruitfulness and harvesting. In fact, the whole purpose of farming is to have a harvest of grain, of fruit, or of vegetables.

Apart from anything else related to the cursing of the fig tree here in Mark 11 is the seriousness of fruitlessness. Jesus says that trees are identified by their fruit²⁰ According to John the Baptist a fruitless tree will be cut down and thrown into the fire.²¹ John exhorted his hearers to produce fruit in keeping with repentance.²² Jesus also spoke about the importance of fruitfulness when He said to His disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.”²³

Perhaps one of the most challenging passages in the gospels relating to fruitfulness and fruitlessness is earlier in John 15 where Jesus refers to himself as the true vine and the Father as the gardener. Every branch that does not bear fruit he prunes, so that it will bear more fruit. For a branch to bear fruit it must remain in the vine. “Apart from me,” Jesus

¹⁹ Matthew 13, Mark 4

²⁰ Matthew 7:16

²¹ Matthew 3:10

²² Matthew 3:8

²³ John 15:16

said, “you can do nothing.”²⁴ Then he goes on to say, “If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.”²⁵ Now in the context the branches are identified as professing followers of Jesus the vine. Note that fruitfulness is not just a nice option but absolutely critical as evidence of a genuine relationship to Jesus. “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”²⁶ Fruitfulness is not what makes us disciples of Jesus, that is determined by our faith in Christ and what He did for us on the cross, but fruitfulness is the proof that we are his followers. Fruitlessness only goes to show that we do not belong to Him.

What is the fruit that Jesus is looking for in our lives? It is at least two-fold. It includes our service and ministry for him. The disciples were called to be fishers of men, and so are we. In eternity such a faithful and fruitful servant will hear that “well done good and faithful servant.” The second aspect of fruitfulness is holy character, or as Galatians 5 calls it, the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.²⁷ Fruitlessness is to face Christ’s divine judgment as did the fig tree.

Meditation/Application/Reflection

Reflect on what it means for you to be a fruitful person. As a spiritual farmer what do you need to do to be fruitful?

As you look towards the year ahead, is there one area of your life where you would like to see more fruit? Why not make this a special point of prayer for 2019?

²⁴ John 15:5

²⁵ John 15:6

²⁶ John 15:8

²⁷ Galatians 5:22

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Matthew 27:57-66

Romans 15:1-13

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 69:19-36

Deuteronomy 29-31

Prayer Points:

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Wednesday February 2nd – A House of Prayer

(By NBBC's Student Intern Ben Froese)

Reading Mark 11:15 – 19

“My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations...”

In today's text, some of the things Jesus does may not seem all that “Christ-like” to some of us.

Jesus enters the temple courts, flips over tables, and causes a scene! Jesus was ticked off!

Why was Jesus so upset?

At the temple, people came to offer their sacrifices, but the temple was to be more than just a place where animal sacrifices took place.

In verse 17, Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7, where God says, “My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” Interestingly, this verse in Isaiah also mentions burnt offerings and sacrifices, but Jesus only quotes the part about the temple being a house of *prayer*. The temple wasn't just to be the place where sacrifices took place, but primarily a place where something deeper took place: worship of and communion with God Himself.

Jesus was at the house of prayer, and not a whole lot of praying was going on!

I'm sure Jesus was ticked off by the corrupt business practices going on, but it may have been more than just that. I think Jesus was also so upset because all the distractions at the temple got in the way of people actually connecting with God.

This leads us to ask, “What distractions exist today that get in the way of our connection with God?”

I'm sure one of the biggest ones would be our phones. Have you ever been having your devotional time or in the midst of prayer and been disrupted by a text or email? Or maybe you've been disrupted just by the thought that you need to send a text or email?

In Jesus' teaching on prayer in Matthew 6, Jesus says, "When you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen" (6:6). In this text, Jesus was commanding his listeners to practise prayer differently than the Pharisees, who offered public prayers in order to be honoured by other people. However, I wonder if Jesus was also encouraging his hearers to block out the distractions in their lives in order to connect with God. "Go into your room!" "Close the door!" "Pray!"

We, too, will need to block out the distractions in our lives in order to connect with God deeply and authentically in prayer.

Meditation/Application/Reflection

What are your biggest distractions to your devotional and prayer life?

What would it look like for you to block out those distractions to connect deeply with God through prayer?

Why do you think it is so easy to be distracted in prayer?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Matthew 27:57-66

Romans 15:1-13

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 69:19-36

Deuteronomy 29-31

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

Sunday February 3rd – Mark Chapter Eleven**Reading: Mark 11****Sermon Notes:****Meditation/Application/Reflection**

As you think about today's sermon what is one action point that you are taking away?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Matthew 27:57-66

Romans 15:1-13

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 69:19-36

Deuteronomy 29-31

Prayer Points:

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Monday February 4th – Believe

Reading Mark 11:20 – 26

"...whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

In *Pray!* magazine, Jennifer Kennedy Dean tells this story:

Several years ago, Mary (not her real name) came to me for prayer. She was desperate and afraid. Her son had been arrested for selling drugs. She told me the story of his years of drug abuse; the anguished attempts to overcome his addiction; the glimpses of hope that turned out to be false. Through his story she weaved in her own; she had prayed every way she knew how, and God had never answered. I sensed that Mary had come to me because she was looking for someone who could "get results" someone who knew how to pray with such skill that God would behave the way she wanted him to. Mary had a long list of things she wanted me to pray for.

I began by asking her, "What is it that you really desire for your son? As she went back to her list and began to read off her requests, I interrupted her. "No. Those are the things that you have determined will accomplish what you want for your son."

Years ago, God taught me that I can't know the desire of my heart unless I know the heart of my desire, so I helped Mary peel back the layers until she discovered the centre of her desire: that her son would know Jesus Christ and find peace in his life. "Then that's what we'll ask for," I told her.

Things didn't go well, if you define things by circumstances. Mary's son continued to be bitter and suffered excruciating withdrawal. In her panic, Mary would say, "God isn't answering. Why isn't he doing anything?" I reminded her of what we were praying for. "Don't assume he isn't answering," I said. "Look for the path his yes is taking."

Fast forward: Mary's son was given a prison sentence. I wish I had room to tell you all the details that had to fall into place for God's plan to emerge, but the condensed version is this: He was led to Christ by a fellow inmate, who got him involved in a prison Bible study. Gradually, he became a different man. When he was paroled, he had to continue in a daily drug rehabilitation program. He finished the program, continued in his Christian walk, and has been sober and working for just over two years.

During all of it, what appeared to be going backward was really edging forward. What appeared to be down was really up. What appeared to be dark was really light.

Too often we miss what God is doing in a situation because we pray "little prayers" that focus on a narrow, specific outcome.²⁸

Meditation/Application/Reflection

As you think about the requests you bring to God, are you telling God how to answer or are you presenting "the heart of your desire"?

When you don't get what you ask for in prayer does this mean that God is unfaithful? Why or why not?

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Matthew 27:57-66

Romans 15:1-13

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 69:19-36

Deuteronomy 29-31

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

²⁸ Jennifer Kennedy Dean, "Optical Illusions," Pray! (Issue 31, 2002), pp.14-15

Prayer Points:

Tuesday February 5th – Authority

Reading Mark 11:27 – 33

“By what authority are you doing these things?”

Four years ago, I had open heart surgery to repair a valve and to have double bypass. Leading up to the surgery my family doctor referred me to a very capable cardiologist, who did a number of tests and in turn referred me to a heart surgeon at the Peter Monk Cardiac Centre in Toronto. The surgeon was the world-renowned cardiac surgeon, Dr. Tirone David. Dr. David has performed over 15,000 open heart surgeries, published more than 350 scientific papers and demonstrated complex surgical procedures around the world. Needless to say, I truly felt that I was in capable hands, an expert who knew exactly what he was doing.

When it was clear that I needed work done on my heart, I didn't look for a mechanic a skilled carpenter, plumber, or electrician. They would not have had the authority or the skill to do anything for me. I needed expert help. Recently, I needed extensive repairs done to my car. For over ten years now I have used the same mechanic. He does good work and I trust him. If I didn't trust him, I would not feel comfortable driving my repaired car.

All the time we look for experts to do all kinds of work and procedures for us - work and procedures that we would never be able to do ourselves, nor trust to somebody who had no past experience in such work. We look for people who have the necessary authority and skill to do what is needed. This is not only important for surgery and car repairs, but we need a trusted authority for the things that we believe; for guidance in how we live and for equipping us in our life's work and service. No one can completely fulfill that role other than Jesus Christ Himself.

There was an authority about Christ in what he said and what he did. It could not be avoided. Even the religious leaders recognized that there was an authority about him. Certainly, the general public who flocked

to hear him teach and perform miracles, recognized that he taught with authority and not as the teachers of the law.²⁹ Once the Temple guards were sent by the chief priests and Pharisees to arrest Jesus, but they could not do so. When challenged, they replied, “No one spoke the way this man does.”³⁰ Jesus Himself claimed divine authority. He claimed to have authority to forgive sins on earth.³¹ He claimed authority to be the final judge.³² He claimed authority over all people to grant eternal life to those given him.³³ And when he gave His disciples their commission in life, called the Great Commission, He said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations.”³⁴ There can be no better authority to live by than the One who has universal and eternal authority.

Optional Reading Plan

Read through the New Testament in a year:

Matthew 27:57-66

Romans 15:1-13

Read through the Old Testament in a year:

Psalm 69:19-36

Deuteronomy 29-31

Questions about your reading? Jot them here to discuss with our MCG:

Prayer Points:

Preparing for your MCG

As you come for you MCG be prepared to share:

- POTLUCK: Be mindful about a story you might share regarding the importance of MCG regular group meeting together. (ie.

²⁹ Mark 1:22, 27; Luke 4:32

³⁰ John 7:46

³¹ Matthew 9:6

³² John 5:27

³³ John 17:2

³⁴ Matthew 28: 18-20

What it means to you, or how the group has seen God work through them or in them)

- STUDY: Share from your time of Meditation/Application from each day's study. What from your Bible reading made an impression on you or what confused you?
- PRAYER WALK/ACTIVITY: be creative and intentional as you pray/work together.

Missional Community Group (MCG) Covenant

We desire to grow as followers of Jesus who represent Him and His Kingdom well in all of our life. We recognize that God's plan is for us to grow in and through relationships with other like-minded disciples. As those who identify as neighbourhood missionaries we enter into this covenant so that we might be transformed by God's grace and that together we might be transforming agents in our neighbourhood.

To this end, this year, we therefore covenant to:

- Meet regularly for weekly encouragement, accountability, and fellowship in our Missional Community Group and corporately with all of NBBC.
- Seek to grow in likeness to Jesus by engaging in NBBC MCG's shared practices.
- Nurture loving relationships within our Missional Community, accepting others as Christ has accepted us.
- Faithfully steward the resources that God has given us: time, abilities, resources and energy.
- Together discern where God is at work and join Him in His mission to bring the Kingdom of God to our neighbourhood.

In all that we covenant, we recognize that we are dependant upon the grace of God to enable us and so we joyfully enter this covenant in anticipation of what He might do in and through us.

Missional Community Group Shared Practices

1. Daily engage in reading Scripture and praying for God to bless NBBC in its missional calling.
2. Each week, purposely and intentionally bless another person.
3. Monthly practise table fellowship with someone in your Missional Community.
4. Respond to the Spirit's prompting as you sense Him leading and directing.
5. Share with others the stories of what God is doing in your life as opportunities arise.