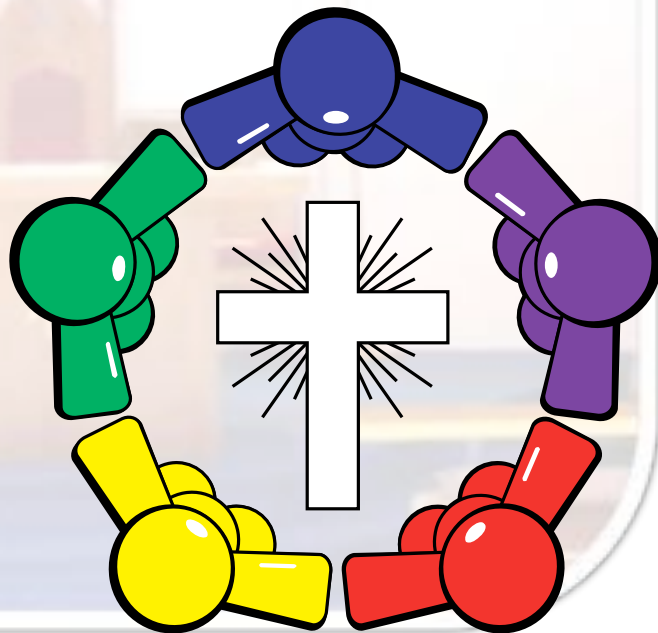


20-DAY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

Strong in God's Grace

Grace Episcopal Church
Capital Stewardship Program
124 Maple Hill Avenue
Newington, CT 06111



DAY 1

EXercise Faith

Colossians 4:12-13

“Epaphras is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, and be mature.” (Colossians 4:12)

Wrestling is an ancient sport. In the first century, wrestlers struggled for their lives, not for TV ratings. In the language of the day, the wrestling ring was called the *agone*, and the wrestlers were called *antagonists*.

Such is this word-image that Paul uses to describe the work of prayer from a spiritual leader of the Colossian church, Epaphras. Paul tells the church that Epaphras wrestles in prayer for them. We would catch Paul's wordplay if we say that Epaphras agonizes in prayer for them. What a powerful image - and a biblical image too - like Jacob wrestling with the angel all night for a blessing (Genesis 32:24-31) - and like Jesus praying so fervently in the Garden of Gethsemane that his sweat became like drops of blood (Luke 22:41-44).

What is so important that Epaphras would pray so fervently? That the Colossian church would grow in their knowledge of God's will and in their maturity of faith.

This capital program is a call to prayer for you and for your congregation. You and your congregation will be encouraged to reflect on a simple question -- What would You do through me Lord to make Your will happen in this church? Genuinely reflecting on that question will mean prayerfully wrestling with God's will in your life and with God's will in your church. This challenge is a time to exercise your faith. The struggle to respond faithfully will not be -- nor should it be -- easy. As Paul would later say of Epaphras, "I vouch for him that he is working hard for you." The process of making a decision will not be -- nor should it be -- short-lived. Like Jacob, you may spend more than one restless night wrestling for an answer and a blessing.

Your church needs an Epaphras or two just now. Your church needs people who will pray earnestly to seek God's will. Would you be willing to pray, to wrestle hard, for the future of this church?

Prayer: Lord, lead me in prayer to wrestle hard with Your will. I will hold fast to You until I find Your blessing.

Action Item: Decide now to make a prayerful decision about your participation in this program. Set aside specific time (at least 15 minutes) every day for the next three weeks to spend in prayer and reflection using this devotional guide. Make an appointment with yourself (and with God) right now. Write down when and where you will spend your prayer time each day for the next three weeks.

DAY 2

EXplore Promise

Luke 11:9-11

“And I say to you, Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you.” (Luke 11:9)

Most of us are good at the first baby step of prayer. It is easy to ask God to do something! Unfortunately, after the asking, we think that we are finished; we think that since we have already asked, we are expected to do nothing more.

The first step in any journey is critical. We do need to ask in order to receive. But asking is just the first step. It takes many more steps to continue a real journey of prayer.

Jesus offers his disciples a model for such a prayer journey. Ask - yes, of course! But then seek. And finally, knock on the doors that you find.

Seeking God's will is much more work than simply asking; seeking takes time, attention, listening, looking, searching. That journey of prayer will lead us far past asking, deep into new paths of seeking God's way for our lives. Along those paths we will discover doorways - places where choices and decisions must be made. Do we have the courage and commitment to knock on those doors? And when those new doorways are opened, will we step into a new way of life?

Simply asking demands little of us. Seeking means searching for God's will in our lives; and such seeking will undoubtedly change us -- redirecting us in God's way. Knocking on the doors that God would open to us may well lead us down paths that we never imagined! We do not know what God has in store for us when we begin such a journey, but one thing is certain – such a journey of prayer will change our lives. After all, changing us has always been the real power of prayer.

Prayer: Lord, I seek Your will and Your way in my life. Lead me down Your paths for Your name's sake. Open new doors that I might find a new way of life!

Action Item: Capture this journey of prayer that you are committing yourself to by journaling your adventure. During your prayer time over the next several weeks, write down what you are asking and what you are given, what you are seeking and what you are finding, what doors you knock upon and what is opened to you.

DAY 3

EXperience Purpose

Matthew 28:16-20

“Go therefore and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19)

When a church has a capital program, everyone seems to have the same kind of question – Are we building? What does the building look like? What color will the carpet be? Or perhaps, what debt are we eliminating? What am I going to get out of this? What is my part to play? Fundamentally, all of those “what” questions are far and away the least important questions to ask. The most important question in a capital program challenge is not what, but **WHY**.

Why are you building? Why are you expanding ministries? Why are you eliminating debt so the church can invest itself better in ministry programs? Why is your church here? Why are you here?

No church builds a structure just to have a nice building. No church expands ministries just to be a bigger church. No person makes a sacrificial financial commitment just to get some kind of service or program benefit. People – and churches – do not give their lives or their resources or their selves to a building or to a program or to being bigger. What people will give their lives to is a God-given purpose, a higher calling. So the most important question to answer in any capital program is not what are you doing, but **WHY** are you are doing it.

Why is your church doing these things? In other words, what does God call this church to be and to do? What is the purpose God calls you and your church to? And how does this capital program provide tools for your congregation to respond to that calling?

The last commandment Jesus spoke for every Christian was, “Go ... make disciples of all nations ... teach them all that I have commanded you.” Every church and every Christian has a God-given purpose. Why are we building? To be and to do what God calls us to be and to do. This program is not simply about buildings or finances. This program is about reaching and teaching and changing the lives of people with the good news of Jesus Christ. The resources raised provide the necessary tools to help us better reach, better teach, more effectively change the lives of those people.

You needed Christ. Your life has been reached, taught, changed by the witness and ministries of this church. Would you like for other people to have a story of faith to tell and a purpose for their lives? Their stories depend now on your faithfulness.

Prayer: Lord, grow my passion for Your purposes in my life and in my church. You have brought me here for a reason. Show me what You would do through me.

Action Item: Make a list of **WHY** these projects are important. How many people will they help your church reach? How many people will they help your church teach? Can you put a value on what changing those people’s lives may be worth? When you focus on the **WHY** question, how important do these projects become for you?

DAY 4

EXperience Calling

1 Samuel 3:1-11

“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10)

In the time of Samuel, the bible says, “the word of the Lord was rare in those days, and visions were not widespread.” It is easy for people to feel the same way today. Who has heard God call their name? Who has heard God speak a word to them? And what great, Godly vision drives your life?

Most people seem to want to think that the word of the Lord is rare, that the word of the Lord only comes to people like the pastors who are somehow “specially” called. Most people seem to want to think that God has no word, no calling, no vision for them.

Maybe, like the boy Samuel, we simply are not listening well. We hear something calling our name and tugging at our heart, and assume that something is just Pastor Eli making a fuss again. Perhaps we need to learn to listen better for a word from God. Perhaps it is not a word from God that is rare, but faithful listening from those who would serve God that is so rare.

Every Christian has a calling. In fact, every Christian has several callings -- as well as the God-given gifts, graces, and blessings to respond to those callings.

Every Christian is called to be a faithful steward of the talents and time and resources God has blessed them with. Being a faithful steward is a personal calling – a word from the Lord. It is a calling that comes with your name attached to it. It is a calling that only you can make a decision about. You can ignore that calling completely. You can brush off that calling by responding only in minimal ways. Or, recognizing God’s claim over your life, you can wake up and listen for God’s own voice. There is a word from the Lord for you in this program. There is a God-given vision for your church in this program. “Speak to me Lord. I am your servant. I am listening to hear from You.”

Prayer: Lord, teach me not only to say Samuel’s prayer, “Speak, for your servant is listening,” but to actually listen for Your word, Lord, and to do Your word.

Action Item: Are you listening for God’s word? List where you hear God’s word (in scripture, in worship, in prayer, in other faithful people, etc). In your daily prayer time and your journaling, make note of the ways that God is speaking to you.

DAY 5

EXpect a Miracle

Matthew 14:13-21 and John 6:1-11

“They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” (Matthew 14:16)

“There is a boy here with five loaves and two fish, but what are they among so many people?” (John 6:9)

Jesus had been with the crowds all day, ministering to people’s needs. It was getting late – past suppertime. And, frankly, the disciples were tired of dealing with all these people. “Send the crowds away,” the disciples told Jesus. Let them go home and take care of themselves for a while. Surely you do not expect us to be responsible for all of their needs.

When a church is challenged with growing needs, it would be easy to say “just send the crowds away” – surely it is not our responsibility to minister to all of these needs. It would be easy saying that to your fellow disciples who are also ready to go home for supper, but don’t try saying that to Jesus. Jesus’ response was, and still is, clear. “**They** do not need to go away. **You** give them something to eat.”

A crowd of more than 5,000. How can we meet that kind of need? It is overwhelming! As Philip says in John’s version, “Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them even to get a little!”

Then, seeing the need and determined to do what he could about it, a boy in the crowd gave five loaves and two fish. It must have taken all the composure the disciples had to receive the boy’s gift with gratefulness and seriousness without laughing in his face. What are these gifts among so many people?

Jesus took the gift, blessed it – and the crowd of more than 5,000 were fed.

Every miracle begins with a person – with a person making a gift of the best they can offer and asking Jesus to bless and to use that gift. Expect a miracle. The need may seem overwhelming. Your gift may appear to be inadequate to cover all of the need. But all Jesus asks is the best that you can offer. When you give the best that you can to Jesus, then expect a miracle. Expect God’s grace to work in and through you - and in and through other people - to accomplish more than you ever imagined.

Prayer: Lord, with your blessing and Your grace, multiply my gifts to make more difference than I ever imagined.

Action Item: Begin now to think about your part, your gift, in this program. No one can do your part for you. No one can make up for your part. You have a part in this miracle that only you can provide. Start the conversation that asks, “Lord, what would You do through me?”

DAY 6

EXtra Effort

Matthew 6:19-21 and Luke 19:1-9

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:21)

Love the Lord your God with all your heart. (Matthew 22:37)

We tend to grow uncomfortable when the church talks about money. Why? Are decisions about how we live and how we use those resources unimportant? Is our faith supposed to be separate from our finances? Are not believing, and praying, and loving more important to our faith?

Look at a revealing count of New Testament words:

- Believe, Believing - 275 times
- Pray, Praying - 371 times
- Love, loves, loving - 714 times
- Giving or give - 2,162 times

Jesus knew that our treasures and our hearts are inseparably linked. For Him, talking about treasure was to reach more completely for the full allegiance of people's hearts. Jesus knew that dealing with our treasures is one of those critical places where the rubber meets the road ... where the practicality of our faith is tested ... where what we believe becomes tangible and real.

Remember the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19? We have no idea what happened between Jesus and Zacchaeus other than they had dinner together. But we do know that Jesus reached and dramatically changed that person's heart. How do we know that? Follow the money! Look at what happened with Zacchaeus' treasure. Half of what he possessed he gave immediately. Every wrong he set himself to make right. Seeing where the treasure went, Jesus exclaims, "Today salvation has come to this house!"

Maybe we are uncomfortable with talk about money because that conversation is getting awfully close to the heart of our faith. Maybe we are uncomfortable with talk about our treasures because we are afraid for something as powerful as salvation to come very near our house today.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to love You with all my heart – and with all my life. Let salvation come to this house!

Action Item: Sketch out a simple budget of where your treasures are (of where your financial resources go). Now write down your current giving to the ministries of the church. How does your giving to God's work through the church compare to your investment in your other treasures? Does that level of giving represent what you believe in? What does that level of giving say about where your heart is? Where would you rather your heart be?

DAY 7

EXtra Effort

Mark 12:41-44

“Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned.”
(Mark 12:43)

“Love the Lord your God ... with all your strength” (Matthew 22:37)

After a long morning of teaching in the temple courtyard, Jesus took a break with his disciples. Sitting right across from the treasury, their gazes drifted over to observing many people who were making their offerings.

Never one to miss a teachable moment, Jesus asked his disciples about what they had seen. "Who put in more?" is the implied question. The answer is obvious to anyone reading or watching -- those who gave the greatest sums put in more!

Jesus turns the tables on the obvious, teaching his disciples an important principle of giving. Giving is not measured by dollar amounts; giving is measured by how much we truly give of ourselves. Some who gave large sums offered out of their surplus gifts that they would never even miss. But what this widow offered meant the world to her, although it was just a penny. Her gift affected her life. Her seemingly small gift is the one Jesus singles out for praise. She put in more of herself than all of the others.

Commitments are not about equal gifts, but about an equal sense of sacrifice. Not everyone has the ability (the resources) to make a multi-million dollar gift; but every person does have the ability and the opportunity to meaningfully invest themselves in what God is doing in their church. In terms of the commitment, rather than the amount, would God be honored if every person in this church made a sacrifice equal to my own?

Prayer: Lord, each and every gift makes a difference to my church. Teach me to give in ways that actually make a difference in my life.

Action Item: Whether you imagine your financial gift to be “large” or “small,” stop ... *right now* ... trying to measure your pledge (in dollar terms) with what other people are able to do. Put that kind of “measuring” away! Every gift from every person is immeasurably significant if that gift represents a meaningful commitment within the context of their blessings. Continue to ask yourself this question: in terms of the level of commitment (not the dollar amount), would God be honored if every person in this church made a sacrifice equal to my own?

DAY 8

EXtra Effort

Romans 12:1-2

“Offer yourselves as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is.” (Romans 12:1)

“Love the Lord your God ... with all of your mind.” (Matthew 22:37)

What motto is on your T-shirt? What values do you conform to? Where do you re-shape yourself in order to “fit in.” What do you give yourself to as a kind of living sacrifice? Anything advertising to make us the greatest, the most successful, the most famous, can capture us and conform us to its own set of values.

A magazine ran a series of articles asking people "How has your mind changed?" Some people answered by telling how a relationship changed their racial prejudices, or by sharing how some tragedy or suffering made them more aware of and compassionate toward others.

What can change your mind? That is an interesting question. Changing one's mind is a difficult and rare thing - especially if the transformation means changing our directions, our opinions, our goals, and our plans. Yet such change is exactly what Paul calls every Christian to. He calls us to be completely transformed by the renewing of our mind. And he calls us to give ourselves as a living and holy sacrifice.

Would anyone notice that your life is molded by the mind of Christ? Could anyone see your transformation? How has your life in faith changed your mind? How have your priorities changed? How has your life changed? Are you still conformed to this world, or are you being transformed? Could anyone notice the difference in you as you offer yourself more fully to God?

Prayer: Lord, lead me to see things differently, to think differently, to live differently. Reset my priorities. Transform my mind ... and my life!

Action Item: Get in touch with the “mind-set” that you have entered this program with. What have you pre-determined? What are you stubborn about? What have you already decided? Be honest here – write those things down. Then make a commitment with yourself to be open-minded. Listen, look, reflect – and see what you learn. You may be surprised to find yourself transformed before this prayer journey is finished.

DAY 9

No EXcuses

Luke 14: 15-24

“Come, for everything is ready now. But they all alike began to make excuses.” (Luke 14:17-18)

How many reasons are there for *not* participating in a capital program? The possibilities are endless! There are more than enough reasons to justify anyone.

A modern parable might begin like this:

The kingdom of God is like a capital program. God gave His people a vision. “Come!” said God, “Take your place prepared for you. Take up your part in My work. Everything is ready now. All of you are invited to make a difference. When you take your place and take up your part, all will be blessed to break bread in My kingdom.” But they all alike began to make excuses...

The most important piece of a jigsaw puzzle is the piece that is missing. Every part is important to making the whole picture work. Synergy is a word best understood when divided. Ergo, is Greek for work, while the prefix *syn* means together. When merged, the words mean “working together.” However, there is more. Synergy is better defined to mean that the result accomplished is greater than the individual parts. Sports teams demonstrate the meaning of synergy. Playing together makes them better than playing as individuals. However, even one team member failing to do his or her part can make everyone lose. Just like one musician not in concert with the orchestra can ruin the music.

A fighter jet was damaged and barely made a safe landing. The same plane was needed for a critical mission the next morning. A maintenance crew worked all night to make repairs. At dawn the pilot asked the mechanic if the plane was good to go. "Sir," he replied, "if this plane does not complete its mission it will not be because of me."

Your participation in the mission of this church is unquestionably significant. No one can play your part but you. No one can give your part but you. Others can only do their part. No one can make up for your part if your gift is excused.

Prayer: Lord, when Your call challenges me, it is easy for me to excuse myself. Reach me! Compel me to respond to Your call in whatever ways I can.

Action Item: If you have already made up your list of excuses, then take that list and offer it up as a burnt sacrifice. Go back to the list you made on day two – reasons why these projects are important. Looking over that list, can you now find reasons *to* give?

DAY 10

EXamine Commitment

2 Corinthians 8:1-5

“They gave themselves *first* to the Lord, and, by the will of God, then to us.”
(2 Corinthians 8:5)

Have you ever watched a tee-ball game where the children are just beginning to learn baseball? Have you ever seen a child, so excited to hit the ball off the tee, that the youngster runs directly to third base and then races back to home plate to score?

Too often we think of giving to the church as a financial decision rather than as a stewardship decision. We shortcut the ground-rules, like the child running directly to third. We rush to start off in the wrong direction. We hurry the process. As a result, we may make a donation to the church, but we do not make a stewardship commitment.

To make a stewardship decision, we have to go all the way around and touch all of the bases. Reaching first means making a faith decision before we even consider the financial aspect of our giving. Reaching first means calling to account our lives of faith before doing any financial accounting.

In 2 Corinthians 8:5, Paul says of the Macedonian church, “they gave of themselves *first* to Lord, and *then* to us in keeping with God's will.” Getting to first means determining your commitment level before deciding your financial position. Making a stewardship decision means responding to a deeper calling of faith, not reacting to a quick accounting. A stewardship decision is first and foremost a faith commitment, not a financial calculation.

First things first. They gave themselves *first* to the Lord. That is the place to begin a conversation about a stewardship decision.

Prayer: Lord, first let me give myself more fully to You. Then let my decisions grow out of what I believe ... and out of what You call me to be and to do.

Action Item: First things first. Instead of rushing to the calculator or the budget, answer these questions first. What does God call me to be? What does God call me to do? What is God doing in my church now? How is God working in my life now? What could God do through me? How can I give myself more fully to God?

DAY 11

EXamine Commitment

Matthew 6:5-19

“This, then, is how you should pray. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:9-10)

Are you still intent on making a stewardship decision? When you have decided to make your decision a matter of faith, then the next step is to seek God's will. “They gave themselves first to the Lord, and, *by the will of God*, then to us.” (2 Corinthians 8:5)

Seeking God's will means getting God involved in your decisions and in your life! Seeking God's will means inviting God's input and guidance. It means genuinely asking, "What would You do through me, Lord, to make Your will happen in my church?"

Where does one ask for God's guidance and seek God's will? How does one invite God to participate in his or her life? Those things happen as we intentionally spend time in prayer.

A stewardship decision is a prayerful commitment. A stewardship decision invites God to the dialogue and involves God in the discussion. A stewardship decision becomes much more than just my sense of goodwill... it means discovering and acting within a sense of God's goodwill.

Taking the turn at second base will take much time for prayer... time for listening and learning and reflecting ... time for asking and searching and seeking. Getting to second base means turning even further from what I am willing to do toward what God wills in my life.

Prayer: Lord, I want to honor Your name. Speak to me! Let Your will be done ... in me and through me. Let Your kingdom come ... here in my life.

Action Item: Listen well over the next week. Make note in your journal what you hear and believe God is speaking to you.

DAY 12

EXamine Commitment

2 Corinthians 8:7-8

“Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in the love we inspired in you – see that you abound in this gracious work of giving also. I am not speaking this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love.” (2 Corinthians 8:7-8)

Praxis is the point where our faith and our actions intersect. Praxis is the point where what we believe and what we do join together. To put it simply, praxis means walking the walk as well as talking the talk!

Now that we have made a faith commitment, and now that we have earnestly sought God's will in prayer, it is time to turn what we have learned into what we can do and will do. We are rounding third - finding ways to practice what we believe.

Now is the time to take inventory. Now is the time to ask another question: "OK Lord, what have You equipped me and blessed me to do?" What resources do I have to give? How can I think creatively about giving - beyond the narrow box of my income and expenses - in order to give of myself fully? Are there assets beyond my monthly income that I can give? Can I create new resources to give with my talents, gifts, and time? Does my faith commitment lead me to change other priorities in my life, reducing spending and thus freeing resources for giving?

There is no one "correct" plan that is right for everyone. There is no formula for the right pledge. Making faith real is a unique journey for every individual. Your praxis is your way of walking the walk. Talking to the church in Corinth, Paul knows there is no formula for giving. In fact, he realizes that he cannot command anyone about giving. Giving has to grow from the heart. But, as Paul well knows, giving is a test of the heart in action, a test of the genuineness of love. Giving is where what we believe gets real.

It is inventory time. Worksheet time. Time to get practical about God's blessings in your life and what you can (and will!) do to financially support God's work in this project. It is time to get real.

Prayer: Lord, I have heard Your word. Help me to be a doer of Your word.

Action item: Make some lists. First, identify (and give thanks for!) all that God has blessed you with. Second, come up with a list of as many ways of giving that are possible to you (for example: changing spending, monthly pledge from income, gift of assets, etc, etc). Begin to think of your pledge as a worksheet, and use this list as you determine your pledge over the next week.

DAY 13

EXamine Commitment

2 Samuel 24: 18-25

“I will not offer a sacrifice to the Lord my God that costs me nothing.”
(2 Samuel 24:24)

Finally we are heading toward home plate and getting close to being ready to fill out a pledge card. But this gift has become something more than a donation! We have first given ourselves to the Lord. We have prayed for God's will to be done in our lives. We have looked hard at our resources in order to find every way to make our faith real with our gifts. This gift has become a stewardship decision that re-shapes your life – you are growing in your discipleship!

Any gift will make some difference to the church, but a stewardship decision is a gift that makes a difference *in you*. Through this gift God is actually growing your faith and your commitment.

Such a gift will certainly cost you something. King David had an opportunity to make an easy “sacrifice” (or offering) to God. Araunah was going to give him the whole deal – the threshing floor (the place for the altar), the oxen, and even the wood for the sacrifice – for nothing. What a deal! But David realized that such a deal was really no sacrifice for himself at all, no worship that honored his Lord and God. “I will not offer a sacrifice to the Lord my God which costs me nothing,” David said.

Offering yourself to God – giving sacrificially – does not come easy. It will cost you something.

Does your giving model the kind of commitment that would honor and worship God?

Does your sacrifice make a real difference to you? Are you giving in ways that shape your living? If you can answer “yes” then you are not simply sharing a gift -- you are sharing your faith.

Prayer: Lord, if I give myself in ways that mean little to me, how would that honor and worship You? Let my giving honor You as my Lord and my God.

Action Item: Reflect on this question – Does what I am thinking about giving make a difference in the way I live my life?

DAY 14

EXcess Baggage

John 15:1-9

“Every branch that bears fruit (God) prunes to make it bear more fruit.”
(John 15:2)

How can I find ways to give? Maybe I need to cut back in some overgrown areas of my life in order to bear better fruit in my life for God’s kingdom.

If you have ever grown grapes in your yard, then you will know that grapevines will naturally overextend themselves with prolific branching and leaf growth every year. If grapevines are not pruned, all of the branching and leaf growth can completely cover an arbor in as little as two growing seasons.

Unchecked, branching growth, while great for simply covering up space, is terrible for bearing fruit. Such overgrown grapevines will bear tiny, unusable fruit – if it is able to bear fruit clusters at all. The extensive branching and leafing drains the resources and energy of the vine from its primary purpose – bearing fruit.

Look at the pictures of a well-kept vineyard whose purpose is to bear good fruit. You will see thick, decades old grapevines pruned back to no more than four short branches so that all the energy of the plant is focused on growing great grapes. Pruning – heavy, regular pruning - is necessary to bearing good fruit.

How overextended is your life? What all have you branched out into? We may think that wildly branching out everywhere as fast as we can grow helps us to cover all the bases in life; but in truth, such unmanaged growth just keeps us from bearing any real fruit. Ask yourself, “Where could I cut back so I could invest the time and energy and resources available to me into bearing the kind of good fruit in my life that matters?” If it has been awhile in your life since you paid any attention to pruning, you may be astonished as to how overgrown and overextended your life has become. No wonder Jesus says that God will prune our lives to help us bear better fruit.

Prayer: Lord, abide more fully in me. Help me to prune and manage my life better. Re-shape my living to bear good fruit that would glorify You.

Action Item: Make a list of areas in your life that are overgrown. What branches can you cut out? What resources does that pruning free up for you to invest in bearing good fruit?

DAY 15

EXpanding Giving

Luke 19:29-35

“The owners said, ‘Why are you untying the donkey?’ (The disciples) said, ‘The Lord has need of it.’” (Luke 19:33-34)

I already give to the church. How can I find ways to give more?

Proverbs 3:9 encourages the faithful to “honor the Lord with your substance *and* with the first fruits of all your produce.” Your weekly or monthly income stream (your “produce”) may not be the only resource in your life to make a gift from. People often have valuable assets (your “substance”) beyond their income stream. By looking at all of your resources, not simply your income stream, you may discover assets or substance in your life which, if untied, can help you to give a far more substantial gift than you thought possible.

- ◆ A retired family on fixed income could give only a limited amount per month. That same family could also give the lakehouse used so less frequently now that their children and grandchildren had grown and moved.
- ◆ An ex-fighter pilot and businessman gave the proceeds from selling his passionate hobby – an airshow airplane
- ◆ A collector donated part of his art collection
- ◆ A mechanic donated his Harley
- ◆ A songwriter gave the rights to a song she had written
- ◆ A family gave some of the property that they had inherited
- ◆ Another family gave stock gains that they had speculated on
- ◆ A family gave part of the retirement they had saved

Why did such people give things that they enjoyed and owned that had real value to them? It is simple. The Lord had need of it. What they were *giving to* meant far more to them than what they were *giving up*. These people freed up resources that were tied up in the substance of their lives. Untied, the “substance” which they had been blessed with could now be an even greater blessing as a gift. Like the owners in Luke’s gospel who provided Jesus with a way into the city of Jerusalem, these people had a donkey -- and the Lord had need of it.

Maybe it is time to untie your donkey, to free some of your substance and bring it. The Lord has need of it.

Prayer: Lord, help me to see how much I have been blessed with in my life – and to see how things may bring a whole new sense of blessing as a gift.

Action item: Do an inventory of your “substance.” Are there assets in your life that you could untie in order to enlarge your giving?

DAY 16

EXpanding Influence

Acts 4:32-37

“There was a man named Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”).” Acts 4:36

The name “Joseph” is such a fine name. In Hebrew, the name means “God’s added blessing.” This was the name for the cherished son of the patriarch Jacob. This was the name for Jesus’ earthly father. So why would the apostles give Joseph of Cypress a nickname like “Barnabas?”

Barnabas, Acts makes note to tell us, means “son of Encouragement”. Apparently, this Joseph was such an encourager that a new name was in order. When the early church needed money to underwrite its ministries, Joseph sold a field he owned and brought the money to the apostles. When Saul of Tarsus (renamed Paul) needed a friend to welcome him into the church he once persecuted, it was this Joseph who was that friend who nurtured Paul into a ministry of his own. When the church needed to send someone to encourage the new believers among the gentiles, they sent this Joseph. When young Mark needed someone to believe in him and to give him a second chance to serve as a missionary, Joseph encouraged him. Any wonder that all of Joseph’s friends called him Barnabas – “son of encouragement”?

Your church needs generosity to underwrite its ministry. Your church needs leaders – people who can speak up, step up, and help encourage others to passionate mission and generous giving. Your gift makes a difference to the church, but so does your faith, your story, your passion. Be a Barnabas! Look for ways to encourage the faith of others by sharing your witness, your passion, your faith. In doing so you multiply God’s grace and influence the faithful response of others.

Prayer: Lord, help me to feel so joyful about what I am doing to make a difference in your kingdom that I can be a witness and encouragement to others.

Action item: Make a list of your spheres of influence – people with whom you connect regularly and whom you have the opportunity to encourage. Find at least one way to share your passion and your faith about these projects with the people in your spheres of influence.

DAY 17

EXpress Joy

John 3:22-30

“The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must increase, and I must decrease.” (John 3:29-30)

John the Baptist was a great man. No less an authority than Jesus said so himself. John was the last of the prophets. When people heard him preach, they trembled. He attracted disciples, crowds, and the attention of the press. He even attracted the attention of kings and queens.

But when Jesus came, John never forgot his place. Despite being goaded by his disciples to be jealous of the early success of Jesus’ ministry, John remained steadfast in his sense of place within God’s plan. He rejoiced in the following that Jesus attracted. He even helped his own disciples to join with Jesus. John 3:22-30 is John’s explanation of his own role to his disciples. Now my joy is complete. He (Jesus) must increase, and I must decrease.

Have you discovered this truth yet? Most of us think that joy increases as we increase – as our wealth and our prestige, our influence and our power increase. But in fact, just the opposite is true. Lasting joy is not found at the top of the corporate mountain or at the pinnacle of power. Joy is not a reward of accomplishment. True joy is found where John the Baptist found it – by finding one’s place in relationship to Jesus Christ.

Are you ready to find joy complete? He (Jesus) must continue to increase in significance and Lordship of our lives while we (our plans and ambitions) must decrease.

Prayer: Lord, lead me to find joy and abundant living as I give my life more fully to you.

Action item: Make a list of the things that really bring joy to your life. You will find that the things that bring joy are not things at all, but rather gifts given to you (like family, health, a sunrise, a friend). Perhaps the way to discover more joy is to give those kinds of gifts more fully to others.

DAY 18

EXtravagant Blessing

Mark 14:3-9

“But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me.’” (Mark 14:6)

Can you picture the scene? This was a tense setting. Word was that the authorities were looking for ways to arrest Jesus. This was a place for serious conversation and for invited guests only.

And then came this woman with the perfume. Who invited her? And who gave her permission to pour the entire contents of a perfume jar on the head of the guest of honor? Can you imagine the smell? You know the way to use perfume. Just a little dab will do. But she poured out the perfume like football players dousing their coach with the Gatorade bucket. And why waste so much expensive perfume? As some said, it could have been sold -- and the money could have been given to the poor.

We do not know this woman’s heart. Perhaps she had experienced the forgiveness of Jesus and felt so grateful for him that she had to find some way to bless Him. Whatever the reasons, Jesus defended her heart, and her lavish gift.

One could debate that the resources your church needs to invest in ministry could be spent on any number of things. Sometimes people may grumble, “A capital program? I want to give money to people, not to bricks and mortar.” In truth, investing in bricks and mortar is an important way to invest directly in impacting the lives of people. Doing such ministries effectively requires such tools. But instead of arguing the point of all that could be done, perhaps we should ask a different question. Is what we are doing honoring God? Is what we are accomplishing furthering the gospel of Jesus Christ? Does what we are doing bless Christ?

Very soon Jesus was stripped of His friends, His dignity, and His clothing as He was nailed to a cross. That dark day the only thing His tormentors could not get off of Him was the smell of that perfume on His head. As Jesus struggled to draw painful breaths upon the cross, did the sweet smell of that loving gift strengthen Him to be broken and poured out for us all?

Prayer: Lord, give me the grace to give to You as lavishly as You have poured Yourself out for me. Let me bless You, even as You have blessed my life.

Action Item: Make a list of the ways that your gift – and these projects – might bless God.

DAY 19

EXude Gratitude

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

“Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:7)

A capital program ... above and beyond giving ... sacrificial giving. Someone will describe such capital program giving in this way: “I know what that means ... it means give until it hurts!”

Give until it hurts? Making a sacrifice actually means giving up something of meaningful value to you in order to give to something that means even more to you. It is giving something you care about to something you love even more. The lasting effect of such giving should not be “hurt,” but rather the joy discovered in giving yourself to those things that are most important to you.

Give until it hurts? Try giving until you discover some joy. The joy of making a difference in a God-given calling. The joy of aligning your life with God’s grace and will. The joy of a meaningfully and purposefully committed life. The joy of doing your part along with a whole community of faithful people. The joy of helping to make miracles – large and small – happen. The joy of seeing people’s lives change because of seeds you planted and nurtured. The joy of glorifying God.

Indeed, as Paul says to the church in Corinth, “you will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God.” (verse 11).

Give until it hurts? No one is being asked to hurt in this program. If that is where you are heading, then you are going about this decision in the wrong spirit. Besides, giving until it hurts is far too easy. If you want a real challenge – and a real blessing in your life – try giving in ways that mean so much to you that you discover joy in your commitment.

Prayer: Lord, teach me greater joy and abundant thanksgiving in a meaningful, purposeful, committed life.

Action Item: Make a list of the reasons why you are GLAD to give – your own litany of rejoicing and thanksgiving.

DAY 20

EXude Gratitude

1 Corinthians 8:9-13

“For you know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (1 Corinthians 8: 9)

There it is – the reason for, the model for, the example for our giving – in the grace and the sacrifice of Christ himself.

The most familiar, and perhaps most important, words in the New Testament are found in John 3:16. “For God so loved ... He gave ... His only Son ... that everyone who believes in Him ... might have eternal life.”

God so loved ... you ... that He gave ... His Son ... that you ... might have eternal life. Now each of us knows what “sacrificial giving” truly means. In God’s heart, you were worth it.

Has this church blessed and shaped and changed your life? Maybe you have never been a part of a capital program in this congregation. If that is true, then this church exists with the tools and the facilities to serve you in Christ’s name only because of the sacrifice and the gifts of others. For them, you were worth it.

Maybe you have been a part of this church for a long time. Maybe you have made sacrifices before so that this church could minister to people in Christ name. If so, then you have seen the lives of many people change because of what you have given. Was it worth what you have given? You know it was worth it – and you know that this new commitment will be translated into stories of faith that you can scarcely imagine. You know it will be worth it.

God gave ... other people of faith have given ... now it is time for your faithful, hopeful, joyful response. “Now finish doing this, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has.” (1 Corinthians 8: 11-12)

Prayer: Thank you Lord for the inexpressible grace You have given to me. Bless my gift, and use my gift to bless others in Your name.

Action item: Follow through! Make the pledge commitment that you feel right about and joyful about in your heart. And over the next several years, as you see God’s grace work wonders in people’s lives, in part through your gift, ask yourself – was it worth it?