

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of June 16, 2019

Weekly Prayer: O holy one, ever mysterious to me, I thank you for placing within me a quest for truth. I thank you for your hidden prodding me toward new discoveries. Thank you that however much I gain of the truth I still remain unfinished because life is always an up and down journey and I cannot contain it all. Be with me on my journey and lead me as the disciples were led to embrace new and exciting truths as I am able to receive them. May your spirit lead me onward, be patient with me, and lead me into all truth. Amen

Monday, June 17

Scripture: Matthew 7:7-12, Luke 11:9-13

“Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door is opened. Who among you will give your children a stone when they ask for bread? Or give them a snake when they ask for fish? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets.

And I tell you: Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. Everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. To everyone who knocks, the door is opened. "Which father among you would give a snake to your child if the child asked for a fish? If a child asked for an egg, what father would give the child a scorpion? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

Observation: Fathers play a crucial role, for better or worse, in most lives. Because of that, we tend to imagine that God as father means God is like earthly fathers we've known. Jesus reversed that. He pointed out that we need to form our image of what it means to be a father from the ways God relates to us. Jesus stressed that God is far more generous to us than even the best earthly fathers are.

Application: Luke gave a more specific version of Jesus' promise. God, he said, will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. In what ways is the Holy Spirit's presence the ultimate "good gift" in helping fathers and father figures be all they can be in children's lives (as well as in many other ways)? How do you open your life to the Spirit's presence with you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you promised that you would be with me every moment, every day, and you are -- through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Teach me how to remain open to your presence. Amen.

Tuesday, June 18

Scripture: Colossians 3:21, Ephesians 6:1-4

Parents, don't provoke your children in a way that ends up discouraging them.

As for children, obey your parents in the Lord, because it is right. The commandment Honor your father and mother is the first one with a promise attached: so that things will go well for you, and you will live for a long time in the land. As for parents, don't provoke your children to anger, but raise them with discipline and instruction about the Lord.

Observation: Today's readings are a part of longer passages in Colossians and Ephesians called the "Household Codes." They followed a form familiar in Greek and Roman writing about family (or household) structures. Yet they differ in important ways. In contrast to ancient thinkers, Paul addresses the weaker member of each pair first, indicating that the church includes and serves all its members. Each member has dignity and a role to play. No one is to be controlled or manipulated.

Application: The Greek in these verses reflected the male-dominated societies early Christians lived in and literally read "fathers." (That didn't exclude mothers—it just assumed, as people then did, that fathers always set the tone in their families.) Fathers were responsible for their children's education, but this could include beatings (both from the father and teachers). A minority of teachers, however, warned against beatings and excessive discipline, and Paul here would likely agree. The language also called fathers to avoid "deliberate provocation." Many ancient fathers (and some modern ones, too) thought they must rigidly control their children's behavior, by any means necessary. How did Paul's changes to the traditional household code point in a different direction for a father's behavior?

Prayer: Loving God, too often I'm tempted to take the liberty you give me and use it to try to control and manipulate others close to me. Keep teaching me how to treat my children (and all other people) with dignity and respect. Amen.

Wednesday, June 19

Scripture: Malachi 4:5-6, Luke 1:13-17

Look, I am sending Elijah the prophet to you, before the great and terrifying day of the LORD arrives. Turn the hearts of the parents to the children and the hearts of the children to their parents. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Observation: Malachi's last verses look forward to a new age characterized by healing, reconciliation and peace. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke identify the coming of John the Baptist with God's promise to send Elijah (e.g. Matthew 11:12-15, 17:10-13; Luke 1:13-17). The Bible's stories, and more recent history, hold many tales of broken father/son relationships. It made sense that the prophet's vision of a better future included the healing of those connections.

Application: What were some of the main "connecting thread" experiences (if any) between you and your father? Between you and your children, if any? What were some of the preferences or choices that created tension or stress (if any) in those relationships? If those relationships were/are mainly positive, how has that shaped the way you relate to God? If there was/is tension or pain in the relationship(s), how can your faith nudge you in the direction of seeking reconciliation?

Prayer: O God, you are in the healing business, not only for our bodies but for our minds and relationships. Make me an agent of your healing work in all my key relationships. Amen.

Thursday, June 20

Scripture: Psalm 71:15-19

My mouth will repeat your righteous acts and your saving deeds all day long. I don't even know how many of those there are! I will dwell on your mighty acts, my Lord. LORD, I will help others remember nothing but your righteous deeds. You've taught me since my youth, God, and I'm still proclaiming your wondrous deeds! So, even in my old age with gray hair, don't abandon me, God! Not until I tell generations about your mighty arm, tell all who are yet to come about your strength, and about your ultimate righteousness, God, because you've done awesome things! Who can compare to you, God?

Observation: In our culture, we are keenly aware of the advantages in energy, ambition and drive that younger people tend to have. But Psalm 71 saw at least one spiritual advantage that older servants of God have. Three times, then, the psalm talks in terms of "always" (no psalm makes more use of this word). In the past, "my praise has always been of you." In the present, I need you to be "a shelter to which I can always come." In the future, "I will hope always." One benefit of a long life with God is a greater collection of reasons for praise and faith.

Application: When did you retire, or when do you envision yourself doing so? Many parts of our culture tend to picture retirement as nothing but a perpetual self-indulgent vacation. The psalmist saw instead an ongoing responsibility, at all ages, to share God's "wondrous deeds" with others, including especially younger people. How do you keep, or plan to keep, living out that purpose throughout your life span?

Prayer: Loving God, whether I've been part of your family since I was born, or just opened my heart to you last week, give me an inner drive to "tell all who are yet to come...about your ultimate righteousness." Amen.

Friday, June 21

Scripture: Proverbs 1:8-9, 15:4-6, 23:22-25

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction; don't neglect your mother's teaching; for they are a graceful wreath on your head, and beads for your neck.

Wholesome speech is a tree of life, but dishonest talk breaks the spirit. A fool doesn't like a father's instruction, but those who heed correction are mature. Great treasure is in the house of the righteous, but the gain of the wicked brings trouble.

Listen to your father, who gave you life; don't despise your elderly mother. Buy truth and don't sell it; buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding. The father of the righteous will be very happy; the one who gives life to the wise will rejoice. Your father and your mother will rejoice; she who gave you birth will be happy.

Observation: A proverb is "a short saying that expresses a general truth for practical, godly living." The biblical Book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings, which began in the time of Israel's King Solomon, meant to impart wisdom on the reader. Both Jews and Christians trust

that readers of Proverbs will learn more about how to live a life pleasing to God. The proverbs today offer wisdom particularly about fatherhood and righteous living.

Application: What are the main family roles you play at this stage of your life (e.g. parent, child, both, grandparent, older sibling)? In what ways can the big ideas behind these Israelite proverbs offer wisdom you can apply to your specific situation? Spend a few minutes reflecting on Proverbs 23:23 in today's reading. How can you use this proverb to build a stronger pattern of life?

Prayer: O God, you are the ultimate giver of all wisdom. Open my heart to receive all that you long for me to receive, that I may live a life that honors and pleases you. Amen.

Saturday, June 22

Scripture: Psalm 68:4-6

Sing to God! Sing praises to his name! Exalt the one who rides the clouds! The LORD is his name. Celebrate before him! Father of orphans and defender of widows is God in his holy habitation. God settles the lonely in their homes; he sets prisoners free with happiness, but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

Observation: In Old Testament times, nearly all legal and financial status depended on a connection to a close living male relative. "Orphans and widows" had no such links, and the phrase became a shorthand expression for all powerless or oppressed people. The psalmist extended the thought in verse 6, listing "the lonely" and "prisoners" as others about whom God cared. God, the psalmist believed, is the uniquely reliable presence with all people, and especially the hurting and oppressed. In the tradition of Israel, the victorious divine warrior fights not simply to gain land or power, but to protect the most vulnerable in society.

Application: As we note every time we baptize a child at Messiah, God's wish is that earthly parents model God's love and goodness for their child. In the ancient world, and still today, that doesn't always happen. When, in either a brief, lonely time of crisis or over a longer time (even a lifetime), have you turned to God for nurture and comfort? In what ways did God provide you the "family" you needed? God calls us to be God's voice, God's hands and feet, in a hurting world. In what ways can you join in God's work of blessing orphans, widows, the lonely and prisoners? Do you know anyone who may not be an "orphan" or "widow" in the concrete sense of the term, but whose life you could enrich by extending God's love and care?

Prayer: Lord God, I trust you to be my companion and my strength, even when all else fails. Grow me into a person who can extend your help and strength to others who may desperately need them. Amen.