

INTRODUCTION

Becoming a better Christ follower doesn't just happen. It takes work. I congratulate you in taking a step. Maybe for you it's a first step, maybe for you this is just another one of the hundreds or thousands of steps that you've taken in an effort to become more like Christ. Either way, you're on your way.

The heart of this devotional is to help you better connect with Christ on a daily basis. Whether you choose to start your day or end your night by spending time with God, it's my prayer that these readings and Scriptures will aid you in that process. Thanks.

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Get poor, get more.

We're pretty free with the word, "need" aren't we? We casually say things like: I need a new pair of shoes, I need a break, I need to lose weight, I need a new outfit, I need some chocolate. But what is it that we truly need?

In Matthew 5:3 Jesus says, "*God blesses those who realize their need for Him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is given to them.*" Some versions say, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*" Some of you are thinking, "This is great, I'm totally poor, I'm set for life." But what does it really mean to be poor? Are you really poor and what does it mean to be poor in spirit? To be poor in spirit centers around the idea of humility.

The definition of humility is "the quality of being without pride." If that's not a countercultural idea, I'm not sure what is. We've been trained to be proud of who we are, and where we've come from. So where does Jesus come up with this "No Pride" idea at? At first glance, it's admittedly a little confusing.

What Matthew 5:3 is driving at comes down to giving credit where credit is due. You and I do not have what it takes to make it. No matter what we have achieved in life or how proud we are or how proud anyone else is about what we have done, it doesn't equal enough to make us right with God.

Pride has no part in God's kingdom, and until a person surrenders pride they can't enter into God's kingdom. The door to Christ is low and anyone who stands tall can not enter in. We can not be filled with Christ until we are empty of ourselves. We can not be made worthy in God's

eyes until we realize that we are not worthy on our own. We can not live in Christ until we are dead to ourselves.

So the question becomes, “How do I get poor?” How do we get ourselves into a place where God can accept us? Allow me to make a few suggestions:

1. Admit your sin and allow God to save you.

Before you skip ahead because you’ve heard this before, read on. God tells us in His Word in Romans 3:23 that all have sinned. That’s everybody, you, me, the milkman, your mama, your papa and everybody in between. God knows that you have done things that have been against what He would desire for your lives. He knows that you have done things that are against the specific plan He has for you. (Jeremiah 29:11)

Not only is God aware but so are you. When I screw up and disgrace God, I know it. The biggest issue that I deal with isn’t knowing right from wrong, it’s admitting that I was wrong and accepting God’s challenge to change.

All God wants is us. He doesn’t want the person you’ve become or the person you hope to be or the person that everybody else; thinks you are. He wants you; He wants the you that He created. He wants you to come to Him and say God I need you in my life, I’m a screw up.

2. Focus on God and deny yourself

In Luke 9:23 Jesus says, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross daily, and follow me.” That’s sounds crazy right? With our culture constantly pushing us to get ours and leave everyone else behind, the idea that we should put aside selfish ambition sounds ridiculous. But that is exactly what Jesus tells us to do.

He tells us in Proverbs 3:6 to seek His will in all we do and He will direct our paths. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus says the God will give us all we need from day to day if we live for Him and make the Kingdom of God our primary concern. What is your primary concern? Is your primary concern is yourself or others? Is your primary concern yourself or what God wants for you? If you want to stay poor in God's eyes, your focus has to be Him and Him alone. What's your focus?

Some of you may be saying, "I don't understand how anyone could do that. How could anyone admit they're a screw up and want God to change them? How could anyone put there own wants and desires aside and only focus on what God wants? How do people do that?" Here's the easy part: people do all of that by simply asking.

3. Ask God to be poor

David prayed, "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*" In Matthew 7:7 Jesus says, "*Keep on asking and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking and you will find. Keep on knocking and the door will be opened.*" How do we become poor? How do get filled with the desire to be in His word and be about His business? How do we do what seems impossible for us to do? We ask. We have to ask because it is impossible for us to do on our own.

Questions for Reflection:

How good are you at admitting your sin?

How good are you at denying yourself?

What is it that you truly need?

God's Promises

Remember the movie, “Liar, Liar”? It starred Jim Carey and centered around his comical struggle with a lifestyle of lying. A bulk of the movie told the story of his son’s birthday ‘wish come true’ that prevented his dad from lying for an entire day. Under normal circumstances, telling the truth would be an easy assignment, but for Jim Carey’s character who had built a life of lies, it was a tough sell.

Often as we page through God’s Word we come across promises and perhaps wonder, “Will God follow through?” or “Is this promise really true?” Let’s check out some of God’s promises and put them to the test.

1. The promise of salvation

John 14:23 says, *“Jesus replied, all who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with each of them.”*

In this verse Jesus simply says, “I’ll be with you.” Salvation isn’t a list of do’s and don’ts. God’s not in Heaven waiting to zap the salvation right out of us when we screw up. Walking with Jesus is exactly that, walking with Him. He’s right by your side the whole way. While our salvation can be linked to a particular moment in time, the working out of our salvation is a journey. It should be a daily thing. Too often our relationships with God are based on some past experience that happened 20 years ago. Our relationships with Christ should be current, active and happening right now. He promises us salvation if we believe in Him and live it out on a daily basis.

2. The promise of forgiveness

1 John 1:9 says, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.”

God promises us that he will forgive us for our screw ups...If we only do it once and never again; if we come to church every time the doors are open, if we throw a little money in the plate. That’s false. God promises us forgiveness if we confess. The definition of confess is, “*to own up to, to admit, to acknowledge...*”

That’s exactly what David did when he wrote in Psalm 32:5, “*Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, “I will confess my rebellion to the Lord.” And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone.*”

God wants to keep this promise to you. He doesn’t want us to walk around feeling guilty, or feeling down on ourselves. He wants us to be free from all of that and we can be if we just confess it to Him. He says, “I’ll forgive you, I’ll take all of your guilt away, I’ll take all of your sadness away if you will only confess it to me.”

3. The promise of eternal life

John 11:25 says, “*Jesus told her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying.”*”

You know we can run the risks of throwing around terminology so much that we start to forget what it really means. Can you imagine? Can you really imagine what it will be like? You’re likely familiar with the still popular song, “I Can Only Imagine”. With so many songs, paintings and books on the topic of what Heaven will be like our vision can quickly become blurred. Regardless of what it will be like, let’s agree that it’s real. There will come a day when we don’t have to imagine anymore. No more guessing.

What are you doing to receive God’s promises? God is faithful to not only promise but to fulfill His promises. Our job is to simply receive.

Questions for Reflection:

Are you receiving God's promise of salvation by walking with Him daily?

Are you receiving God's promise of forgiveness by confessing your wrongs to Him?

Are you receiving God's promise of eternal life by believing in Him?

Forget that Old Stuff

Have you ever been in one of those really old cool walk up style attics? The kind that you can stand straight up in. The kind that has one of those super old trunks in. I'm talking about the attic that's at the beginning of that really scary movie. I've always wanted an attic like that, instead I have that little square hole in my hallway ceiling that you can barely fit through and even when you do manage to squeeze through, you have to scurry around on your hands and knees in order to not bust your noggin on the rafters. Regardless of what kind of attic you have they are usually used for the same purposes, to store old stuff. If you take a look through your attic you may find: old pictures, old clothes, old toys, who knows what's really up there.

You may find things that you had completely and entirely forgotten about, things that you had forgotten that you ever owned. You may find something that jogs your memory about something that happened ages ago that you had never really given any thought to, but suddenly you come across this item or this picture that brings back flood of memories. Attics are full of memories.

You may have memories you would like to forget, you wish you could erase a certain memory because all you feel is hurt and pain.

Maybe for you it's the pain of a letdown. You know when you're expecting something to happen or you're anticipating something big and then "Bam" it falls through. Maybe it was a relationship gone south, a passover for a job promotion or a presentation that you bombed. Let downs happen to everyone.

Maybe for you it's the pain of a loss. Losses are even tougher to deal with because it means that something has been taken away from us. A

loved one, the loss of a job, a friendship, a marriage. We've all experienced loss at some level.

Maybe for you it's just the pain of life. Sometimes our pain and hurt is unrelated to letdowns or losses, sometimes life just happens and it hurts. Maybe you were on the receiving end of a parent's divorce, it's not something you caused but you were left picking up the pieces. Maybe you were the victim of abuse. Maybe you've been reaping the consequences of poor choice you made years ago. Maybe you or someone in your family has struggled with chronic illness for years.

Letdowns, losses and life all deal out pain and hurt into our lives at a rapid rate. And weather the pain and hurt that you have in your life happened yesterday, last year or ten years ago, it's likely still just a painful today as it was then. Maybe you've been one of the lucky ones and your pain has lessened because of time but it's still there and every great once in a while it sneaks up on you and slaps you in the face.

So what's the problem with having all of this pain and hurt in our lives? Well besides the fact that it's painful, you run the risk of losing control of your life. Pain and hurt that isn't dealt with will control who you become, it will control the choices you make, it will control where you go in life.

In Matthew 11:28 Jesus says... *"Come to me, all you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."* Here's the great news: You don't have to force your pain and hurt onto Jesus. He's asking for it. He wants it, He wants it because He loves you.

Think for a minute about the old stuff that's stored in the attic of your heart. In Philippians 3:13 Paul encourages us to forget the past and to look forward to what lies ahead. God's desire is that we would not be caught up in the past, His only concern with your past is forgiving you for the mistakes you've made and taking away your hurt. His concern is your present and your future. His concern is that you live for Him today and that you prepare now for what He has for you in the future.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What old stuff is in the attic of your heart?
2. How is that old stuff effecting your present and your future?
3. How can you practice handing that old stuff over to God?

4

Passion

People are passionate about all sorts of things: Animal rights, religion, space travel, feeding the hungry, equal rights, human rights, being right. People that are passionate about everything from cars and computers to post-it notes and memo pads.

Just about everybody is passionate about something. You may not go out and protest or have a rally for what you are passionate about but that doesn't mean you are not passionate about it. What you spend our time on, what you talk about and what you spend your money on is what you're passionate about. Go ahead and fill in the blank: I am passionate about _____.

O.K. fine so we can all agree that we're passionate about something. What of it? Well maybe nothing, but God's Word says in Matthew 22:37-38, "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.*"

What is this loving with all your heart and soul and mind? It's passion! It's saying that our greatest passion in life should be, loving God. Jesus sets an amazing example for us in Scripture. Matthew 26:39 records Jesus praying, "*My Father, if it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will not mine.*" When the disciples asked Jesus how they should pray, He said, "*Our Father in Heaven, may your name be honored. May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done here on earth, just as it is in Heaven...*" Jesus says in John, "*My nourishment comes from doing the will of God...*" He says later in John, "*For I have come down from Heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do what I want.* Two verses later He says, "*For it is my Father's will that all who see His Son and believe in Him should have eternal life.*"

What was Christ's passion? Christ's passion was to do the will of God. His greatest passion during His time on Earth was to do exactly what God had sent Him to do. Jesus was sent to be the mediator, to be the go between, between us, and God and He was completely and entirely consumed with that one thing.

What about your passion? Does your passion in life mirror Christ's passion? Are you completely and entirely consumed with God's will?

Do you have a heart passion for God? The answer to that question is simple when you answer another question, "Have you given God your heart?" If you haven't then you won't have a heart passion for God.

Matthew 6:21 says, "*Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be.*" You see something's not right if you say you have given God your heart and yet your number one passion isn't His will. That just doesn't fit. Having a heart passion for God is a result of Him doing a supernatural work in your heart. When He has a firm grip on your heart, it's then that you will begin to have a heart passion for His will.

Do you have a soul and a mind passion for God? "Soul" is defined as the vital principle, which moves and animates all life. Do you allow the very thing that animates you, your soul, to love God? Or what about your mind, do you love God with your entire mind? Do you love God with the thoughts that run through your head?

God's will, should be our number one priority. God's will, should completely and entirely consume everything about us.

At a meeting of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Bobby Richardson, former New York Yankee second baseman, offered a prayer that has become classic: "*Dear God, Your will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Amen.*"

Questions for Reflection:

1. What are you passionate about?
2. Is what you're passionate about of eternal value?
3. How could allow God to consume your heart, mind and soul?

Are you speechless?

My family has always had a Thanksgiving tradition of circling the room and having each person; man, woman and child give an example of something they are thankful for. You always wanted to be the first person in the circle so you could say, “I’m thankful for family and friends” because usually that was the popular answer and everyone else just repeated what the first guy. Regardless of those in the circle gave thanks for, everyone said something which in this tradition is of course appropriate, but these responses got me thinking. Are we ever left speechless?

Have you ever been speechless? If you’ve found the love of your life, you may remember a time when he or she left you speechless, words simply were not enough to accurately communicate how you felt. Maybe, for you it was seeing that dream car or perfect pair of shoes, whatever it was for you, words could not be found to express how you were feeling.

As I listened to my family share what they were thankful for I began to wonder if any of us, including myself have ever been rendered speechless when considering what God has done for us. The Bible is clear in 2 Corinthians when it says that this gift God has given us in Jesus, is too wonderful for words.

2 Corinthians 9:15 it says, *“Thank God for this gift, too wonderful for words!”*

Have you ever been speechless? Over what you might ask: consider the fact that you can have your sins forgiven. The Bible tells of a time when a man came to Jesus looking to be healed. Jesus looked at him and said, *“My son, your sins are forgiven.”* The religious leaders who were near by said that was wrong. They said that Jesus couldn’t do that. Why?

Because they said that God was the only one who could forgive people's sins. In other words, *"Who do you think you are? This man has sinned against God. God has to forgive him, not you. Who do you think you are, God?"*

Jesus' response was simple; *"The Son of Man has authority on Earth to forgive sins."*

That is the wonderful gift that God has given to us. That's the gift that Paul is referring to in 2 Corinthians when he says, "A gift too wonderful for words". The fact that we can have our sins forgiven and God's judgement taken away should make us speechless.

Does it make you speechless?

What about the fact that we can even have a relationship with the Creator God?

John 1:1-4 & 14 says... *"In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone." ... "So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son."*

Jesus is God reaching out to us. God wants to be known. He wants to be loved. He wants to be a Father and a Friend. Although He is great beyond all imagination, He came near through Jesus so that we could know Him.

You've heard the story of the father and son who were out hiking together when to the father's surprise the son unexpectedly jumped from a rather high ledge straight into the father's arms without warning. The father was forced to become an instant circus act, catching him. As the

both fell to the ground the father became frustrated and said to the son, "Son, can you give me one good reason why you did that???" The son responded with remarkable calmness: "Sure...because you're my Dad."

That is exactly how God wants us to be with Him. He wants us to be so confident in our relationship with Him that we will always know that no matter what happens; He'll catch us. We can know God – just as personally as we know anyone here on Earth. The fact that we can have a relationship with Jesus should make us speechless.

Does it make you speechless?

Questions for Reflection:

1. What really makes you speechless?
2. Has the goodness of God ever left you speechless?
3. Has the forgiveness that God offers ever left you speechless?

6

Choices

If you happen to have little kids in your house then you most definitely get the tension that exist when it comes to choices. I've actually seen this tension of choice come across the face of my own kids. As one of my kids has a bat or something in his hand and I walk into the room just in the knick of time to yell, "STOP". I see this look come across his face where you can literally see him processing the ramifications of the choice he's about to make:

- Am I going to listen to my dad?
- Am I going to whack my brother?
- I'll get in trouble if I whack my brother?
- Boy it would be fun to whack my brother?
- I bet I'll get a spankin' if I whack my brother?
- It sure would be fun to whack my brother?

You can literally see these things going through his head. What's he doing? At that moment, he's exercising, or at least considering the exercising of his freedom of choice. Regardless of whether or not your a parent, as free willed humans you and I understand this, but we understand it on a much higher level. The choices that you can I face as adults aren't as simple as, "Am I going to whack my little brother with a bat" or not? The choices that you and I are faced with have much higher stakes.

As an adult, we're talking about...Careers, Families, Education, Life long relationships, Addictions, We're talking about some serious stuff.

The choices that you and I make are high stake choices, but yet, you and I have the exact same thought process that my kids have. When you and

I are faced with a choice, all of those same thoughts run through our heads.

- I know I shouldn't but it sure would be fun to do this.
- I know this flies in the face of God's Word but it's what I want.

How is it that we as adults are still dealing with the same battle that rages in the minds and hearts of eleven year olds across the planet? As a Christ follower you and I are challenged to make choices that are pleasing to God and reflect our commitment to Him. When we make those right choices the Scripture assures us that our lives will bear good fruit. Regardless of how long you've been following Christ, sometimes you still have to make the conscious decision to put aside your feelings and desires and what would feel good and do what you know will please God.

I think sometimes we assume that we will grow out of temptation and struggle. Like once we've been following Jesus for over "X" amount of years that the right choices will be effortless. Becoming more like Jesus doesn't just happen, it's intentional.

Really what's happening inside of us is the battle between what the Scriptures call, "the old self" and "the new self".

2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT says, *"What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun."*

As Christ followers, do we walk in the light or wander in the darkness? As Christ followers, do we live as new creations or do we fall back in the old way of living? These are decisions that need to be made on a daily basis.

Listen to Paul again but this time from the book of Galatians.

Galatians 5:16-17 says... *“So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won’t be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions.”*

Maybe for you, a lightbulb just went off over your head. Maybe for the first time you are realizing that this is why you’ve been struggling to live out your faith as you know God wants you to. There’s a battle raging in the hearts of 11 year olds, like my son and 19 year olds and 27 year olds and 35 year olds and 60 year olds. This battle is raging in all of us.

There’s one force that is drawing us towards the “New Life”, towards love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc. and at the same time the other force, what the Scripture calls, the sinful nature is drawing us towards envy, anger, selfishness, jealousy, drunkenness, sexual impurity, etc.

It’s funny because it sounds so simple right? We’ve all got friends or family that have ignored God’s leading in their lives and they don’t have anything to show for it. They seem to struggle constantly, they work, work, work and never seem to make any progress. Maybe they catch a break and it looks like things are starting to turn around for them and then it’s right back to square one.

On the other hand, we know that following God’s leading in our lives leads us to life. We see in the Scripture that living according to the Spirit of God will produce in us traits that are good for us. I mean who doesn’t want to have more patience? Who doesn’t want more faithfulness? Who doesn’t want the ability to express more love to those around them?

We step back and we see these two choices, we hold them up and compare them to one another and the differences become pretty obvious. With even a little critical thought, it becomes very clear that one path takes us towards Christ and the other takes us away from Christ.

You know for the vast majority of us, it's not about better understanding Scripture. It's not about not understanding that living the way we selfishly want to live leads to destruction, we get that. It's not about not knowing the benefits of living by what Paul calls, "by the Spirit". We understand all of that, we get it.

What it really boils down to is choice. It all comes down to the daily choice of either living for ourselves or living for Christ.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Why is it difficult to be "NEW"?
2. Why is it so easy to slip into old habits?
3. Is your life directed more by the Holy Spirit or more by your old sinful nature?
4. What new and different choices do you need to start making?

Holy Confrontation

I do not have a green thumb. For the life of me I cannot seem to keep a potted plant (indoor or outdoor) alive for more than a few weeks. My wife on the other hand, has the touch. You may also have the touch to nurture a small plant and to keep it fresh and green and alive. Some of you have the ability to nurse a dying plant back to health, you can water it, prune it and feed it in just the right way as to take it from death's door back to life.

What a powerful spiritual lesson.

Listen to what Jesus says in John 15:1-2, *"I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more."*

Gardeners, if they are good at what they do, know that when dealing with their plants, they have two choices: to cut off or to cut back. Now let's be honest, if you're the plant, neither option sounds fun. The thought of being cut off or cut short or trimmed back suggest something painful or at the very least, something uncomfortable.

I mean we live in a culture where everyone is free to be whoever and whatever they want to be. Everyone is given the freedom to express their opinions and there are no wrong ideas or wrong thoughts or wrong feelings. We have this idea that because we think it, it's automatically right. It's almost like our society has figuratively sprinkled us with Miracle Grow and we are free to grow and spread out in any which way we choose, there's nothing off limits.

From the plant's perspective, cutting is a negative concept. It almost feels backward. We think we should be growing and expanding and widening our horizons and then we hear a verse like John 15:1-2 and Jesus is talking about trimming and pruning and really it feels a little like hindering who we really are.

I believe that what God is calling us to is a different perspective. When we the "plants", begin to see as God sees, we discover that the painful cutting times often yields spiritual growth. In other words, we go forward by going backwards. Positive results come from experiences that at first seem negative. This isn't a tough concept to understand, we see this idea played out in many different areas of life. We understand this concept in our work places, we understand this concept when it comes to our schooling, yet when it comes to our spiritual development, we often shy away from the pruning.

Pruning is an essential part of good spiritual care. Cutting and pruning isn't unkind and mean when it's necessary.

Ephesians 4:15 says, *"Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church."*

A loving confrontation, a firm denial, a direct rebuke - these are all pruning tools that can be used to produce more and better fruit in our lives. That's the heart of Ephesians 4:15. For some reason in the church culture we've developed this mentality that we can't call one another out. But I think the Scripture makes a case that not only is calling each other out okay to do, but it's expected from Christ followers.

So here's the reality, spiritual confrontation is tough. It can be awkward, it can be uncomfortable. But the consequences are even more uncomfortable. Without loving confrontation, the church's mission could be compromised. Without creating a culture of healthy spiritual confrontation our energies would slowly shift away from things that really make a difference and more towards just making each other

happy. Suddenly we look up and we realize that we're no longer really tending the plant but rather we're dealing with all of the weeds that have grown up around the plant. We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, we don't want to step on anyone's toes, we don't want to make anyone feel bad so we just ignore the negative attitudes or the inappropriateness of comments that are being made.

We must learn how to prune one other. The only awkward conversation is the one that doesn't happen often enough.

2 Timothy 4:2 says, *“Preach the word of God. Be prepared, whether the time is favorable or not. Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching.”*

Questions for Reflection:

1. Why is so difficult for Christ followers to confront other Christ followers in a healthy way?
2. How can we create a culture that encourages loving confrontation?
3. What positive results could occur in your setting from creating a culture of healthy confrontation?