

Matt Boulton

THE 40 DAY DARE



**Catching God's
Heart For Your
Neighbourhood**

Day One

INCREDIBLE VALUE



Photo By Nima Hatami On Unsplash

Read Luke 15:1-10

Have you ever noticed that when you lose something which is important to you, it can fill you with an overwhelming feeling of dread and desperation? Whether it's your keys, your wallet, an important piece of paperwork, or one of your children, it's like that negative chemical rush

just floods you and makes it impossible for you to think about anything else until you have found that thing that you are missing.

One wise person said, "the most important things in life are not things." God wants us to know that He is completely obsessed with pursuing lost people. In fact, it's no exaggeration to say that there is nothing more important to Him in the universe. His heart aches to be with them. He wants them so badly that He sent His only son to die a cruel death for them, and He even sent you to live among them, with the burning hope that you would go after them with the same desperation.

I wonder if, for the next 40 days, you would be prepared to accept an invitation to carry just one piece of God's overwhelming burden for the lost people in your community? Would you agree with me in prayer that He would move your heart with compassion to see what He sees in your street and around your neighbourhood? Would you pray deliberately for God's Kingdom to come? For His will to be done in your street as it is in heaven? And like Jesus, would you be moved enough to leave your place of comfort to go out and walk where they live with your heart and your eyes wide open?

I know that if you will, then God will be able to work in you a wonderful transformation, and a repositioning of your relationship with Him. Let's face it, a lot of Christians spend a good deal of their devotional time asking God to help them in a multitude of different ways and, because we're not designed to live that way, it sure gets boring very quickly. This 40 day challenge will actually position you to be in the far more rewarding role of helping Him, as you walk alongside Him, pursuing what is most important to Him. There could be no other purpose under heaven more exciting than that!

Today's Challenge - Get Prepared

God wants to show you the people of your neighbourhood. He wants you to see how they live and to show you what you can do to bring His light to them. Unfortunately, a high calling like this is going to require you to get out of bed. For 40 days you will be working on the fitness of your mind, emotions, spirit and even your body, as you walk around your

neighbourhood praying for that which is of the utmost importance to God right now - your neighbours.

Today, schedule this walk in at a time that works for you over the next 40 days, and make a commitment that you will not allow excuses to creep in. God wants to open your eyes and show you things that He cannot show you unless you go outside and get amongst it. If you need to buy shoes, an umbrella or a coat to make this work, you have today to get organised. Tomorrow, we begin a great adventure together which will thrill the heart of God and bring refreshing and purpose to your own heart.

Pray

Ask God to begin to reveal to you His heart for the lost. Commit yourself to partnership with Him over this next 40 days and submit to Him your priorities and your willingness to be led. Pray that you can help Him to make a lasting difference to the lives of His precious people in your local neighbourhood.

“If you really want to do something, you’ll find a way; if you don’t, you’ll find an excuse”

Jim Rohn

Day Two

PLACED FOR A PURPOSE



Photo By Jed Owen On Unsplash

Read Genesis 2:4-15

During the industrial revolution, many people looked forward to a future Utopia in which machines would have developed to such a point that man would have nothing to do but spend his days relaxing. It's interesting that in God's creation, Eden is not a perfect Utopia where Adam is simply placed with nothing left to do. On the contrary, Adam is given work to do

and a garden which requires him to tend it and to till the soil. This is because, as anyone who has ever been unemployed will tell you, there are few things more dehumanising than an idle existence with no purpose.

You may not realise it, but you are not in your neighbourhood by accident. God planted you there on purpose. Not only on purpose, but with purpose, and the same driving purpose which is His all-consuming obsession - your lost neighbours. Like Adam, God has given you a garden to tend and to take responsibility for. That's right - it's a responsibility. Although so many of us are prone to focusing on how best to make life in our neighbourhood most convenient and comfortable for us, God actually sees us there for a much greater purpose.

Reflect

How comfortable are you with this thought that you have been planted in your neighbourhood to tend and to care for it? How might this challenge you to see your neighbours differently?

Act

Today God wants to show you something wonderful. Just like He did with Adam, He wants to give you a guided tour all around the length and breadth of the garden He has put you into. Through His eyes, you are going to see this garden in a way you've never seen it before. You will see incredible beauty in people made in His image, but you're also going to see their brokenness in a new way which will reach into your heart and call for a response. From the outset, understand that you cannot tend this garden by remote control. You really do need to go out there and walk with Him; but what a privilege! You don't need to be Adam or Enoch to walk with God - you just need to be willing to get up, get dressed and go.

Pray

As you walk through your neighbourhood with God today, pray with your eyes wide open, and let Him show you things. Today, He really wants to show you where people live, how they live and how much better they

could live in the plans He has for them. He also wants to hear from you as you talk to Him about them, and bring their needs to Him.

Day Three

WHY PRAY ANYWAY?



Photo By Ben White On Unsplash

Read Genesis 3:1-13

The story of Genesis 3 is not a story about God becoming overly jealous about His mangos; it's an important story about dominion. Just as God delegated His earthly dominion to Adam and his wife, the serpent manages to trick the couple into giving earthly dominion over to him; ironically, under the guise that God has been holding out on them. In allowing the

enemy to provide a second opinion, the couple effectively decides that God alone should not have the right to decree what's good and evil. Unwittingly, by making Satan a higher authority on this matter, they hand earthly dominion over to him.

When Jesus refers to Satan as "the god of this world," He's talking about a dominion that should have been ours. When Satan says, "all of the kingdoms of the world have been given to me," Jesus doesn't argue, but already has a better plan to deal with the problem. Like a world superpower which sees its ally occupied by an enemy, His plan is not to dominate, but to liberate. Through His sinless life and perfect sacrifice, the man Jesus, the second Adam, has won dominion back for as many as call upon His name. This is why our prayers are so vitally important.

When we pray, we reverse the mistake of Adam and Eve. We take the earthly dominion which is ours again in Christ, and we submit it back to God and His higher thoughts and purposes. Jesus taught us to pray for God's will to be done on earth as in heaven. That's because our words carry dominion, and God's delegated authority to powerfully change things. He longs to be invited into our neighbourhoods, but awaits believers who know their dominion, and who are prepared to start calling the shots and getting specific when it comes to "Your Kingdom come."

Reflect

If you really had dominion in your neighbourhood, how would you call down God's Kingdom? How would you like His will to be done on Earth as it is in Heaven? What are you prepared to ask and keep on asking for?

Act

Continue with your habit of getting out of bed, leaving your house and exploring your community; only this time, do it with a dominion in your step like you own the place.

Pray

Begin to use the power of your words to bring change to the things that God wants to show you as you walk through your streets listening to Him.

Day Four

FOR ME TO LIVE



Photo By Mike Hindle On Unsplash

Read Philippians 1:19-24

Imagine yourself in a prison cell below the cobbled streets of Ancient Rome. You have been lowered through a small opening like a manhole, and now you sit in manacles chained to the wall. There is no toilet, no shower and no room service. You rely only upon brave friends who might risk their lives to tend to your needs. It's no way to live, but every day is a

gift seeing as you are on death row awaiting your execution and with little hope of being pardoned.

In this very situation, the apostle Paul sits and contemplates how he should pray. Will he pray that the Romans would just get on with it so that he can be at peace in Heaven with his Lord? Only recently, a previous generation of Christians clung to a similar "escape theology;" constantly praying for the Lord to come soon and rescue them from the trials of the wicked world. For these folks it was unreasonably uncomfortable to have to live surrounded by a world of sinners, and simply could not be God's best plan for them.

For Paul, the very prospect of an opportunity to minister to his persecutors (and to strengthen the church to do the same) becomes like an anchor fixing him to planet Earth. He offers no suicidal or escapist prayer, but his only inner struggle is over which will be better for the spread of the Gospel: for him to bring glory to God as a martyr, or to stay and grasp every possible opportunity to bring God's love to his community. In this short time while we still have breath, let us also give ourselves to God and to the service of the communities He has placed us into.

Reflect

In Paul we see a man who has attained such a level of spiritual maturity that he is prepared to die or completely live for the sake of those that the King has entrusted to him. Do you even hope to be able to attain this kind of spiritual maturity some day? To what extent is your life prioritised around what's best for reaching the lost, and to what extent is it really just about avoiding discomfort?

Act

As you walk through your community today, compare your situation to that of St Paul in that cold, stinking prison. As you pass houses, properties and people, try to imagine what it would be like to feel for your community what Paul felt for his temporary one.

Pray

Begin to pray that God would lead you to a spiritually mature perspective of what it means to be given to your neighbourhood.

Day Five

A POSITIVE KIND OF DIFFERENT



Photo By Saiesh Ganji On Unsplash

Read Matthew 5:13-16

Around the lake of Galilee there were several cities like Jesus described, which were "on a hill." Even in the time of Jesus, cities like Capernaum and Magdala would have been lit by torch and lamplight, and would have been easily visible across the lake from Tiberius and other seaside towns and cities. In the same way, Jesus wants His followers to know that the

light He is putting into our lives is actually going to stand out. Although we're not called to be weird, neither should we be ashamed about being a positive kind of different.

In your neighbourhood, you can expect that you might stand out at times. People might notice cars arriving for a Bible study, or hear the sounds of worship songs coming from your house. They might notice you all dressed up on your way somewhere on Sunday morning. When we have the light inside of us, we don't have to go out of our way to be strange or different, we just need to be comfortable in our own skin and live confidently just the way He's made us.

Next time you're tempted to tone it down, blend in and be "relevant," ask yourself, "am I being myself as a Christian in this neighbourhood, or am I covering up the light that Jesus may have put there to light up the whole street?" You never know who might be watching.

Reflect

How comfortable are you with being the obvious Christian in the street? In what ways, if any, might your faith be noticed by how you live?

Act

As you walk around your neighbourhood today, try to be aware of any other signs of light in the area. As you pray from house to house, what evidence of light and darkness do you see? If you ask the Holy Spirit to show you, He really will.

Pray

Pray that God will give you the wisdom to let your light shine in a way that others will see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

Day Six

FROM HEAVEN'S PERSPECTIVE



Photo By Swapnil Vithaldas On Unsplash

Read Romans 2:1-16

One day when Jesus was in Jerusalem, the religious people brought to him a poor woman who they had caught in the act of adultery and asked what they should do with her. This little play was an attempt to trap Jesus between a rock and a hard place. The religious law said an adulterer should be stoned to death but, under the Roman occupation, it was not within the

power of the Jewish religious leaders to administer the death sentence. Jesus responds by bending over as though oblivious, and writing in the dirt with His finger. It's only when they really press Him for an answer that He responds without even looking up, "let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

It's amazing what a difference a little perspective can make. Perhaps, like me, you might have once taken the time to browse through satellite pictures of the Earth taken from way out in space. I once placed two of these pictures together; one of The Grand Canyon (which is over a mile deep) and one of Mt Everest (which is over 8 kilometres high). Whilst from man's perspective one towers above the other, the only discernible difference from out in the heavens is that one looks browner and the other looks whiter. Actually, the view from Heaven is not a bad thought to keep in mind when, like those religious people, we consider judging other people, or even comparing our lofty splendour to their moral canyon.

There's an old saying, "we judge others by our actions but ourselves by our good intentions." The mistake the religious people made was in taking it upon themselves to judge this poor woman against God's commandments. What they failed to recognise was that the hand doing the writing in the dirt was not only the same hand which once made that dirt, it was also the same finger which once engraved in stone the law they were referring to. You see, when Jesus looks at other people, He doesn't see them as we do. From heaven's perspective, He sees them as His other precious children who are no less deserving of His love and grace than we are. So as you notice the neighbours living around about you, will you compare yourself against them, or will you choose to take Heaven's perspective?

Reflect

Take a moment to honestly reflect upon this question: are you a better person than most of the people living in your area?

Act

As you walk around your community bringing the needs of your neighbours to God, pray that He will show you what He sees from Heaven's perspective.

Pray

Ask God to help you never to feel like you are a better person than your neighbours. Ask Him to show you His Father's heart, and what it means for Him to have no favourites.

Day Seven

SHOWING YOURSELF FRIENDLY



Photo By Abbas Hussain On Unsplash

Read Proverbs 18:24

This year I had the unusual experience of attending a men's camp where there was not a single person that I knew. After driving for six hours to the remote location, I arrived to find groups of men parking their cars, unloading their trail bikes, talking, laughing and setting up their tents together. Since the sun was about to set, I knew that I too needed to choose

a spot quickly and to get my own tent set up somewhere; but exactly where and next to whom? I soon discovered that it's a really peculiar feeling to walk into a community where everybody knows everybody else, and where you're the only outsider. Sometimes our neighbourhoods can feel like that too.

More often I am in the opposite role, as I watch new people arrive at the church I have attended for over 26 years. Just like I did at the men's camp, I have discovered that church visitors often feel very insecure. Since their nervous body language often appears quite defensive and unfriendly, most people assume they are either a bit grumpy or prefer to be left alone. Week after week, my eyes scan the crowd like a Martian heat-ray, as I make it my mission to notice these people, and to break the ice with them. As I start with some small talk and get them to tell me about themselves, it's always a rewarding feeling to see another person unlocked, comfortable and with a new sense of belonging.

It's exactly like that in your street. Whether people live in suburbia, acreage or high in an apartment, most of them will feel uneasy about breaking the ice with a stranger. As you pass them in the corridor or in the street, you will notice their insecure body language, and it may even look unfriendly or guarded to you. Scripture says that "he who would have friends must show himself friendly," and your eye contact, friendly smile and "hello" are your best tools for doing just that, and for beginning to connect with your community. If you're a bit anxious about it, remember this: your neighbour probably feels like an insecure outsider like I did at the men's camp. Who knows what a great vault your little bit of friendliness might unlock?

Reflect

Take a moment to consider how you might look to others when you are feeling like a stranger or a bit insecure. Do you think you could possibly look a little unfriendly?

Act

As you go for your prayer walk today, make a conscious effort to give people some eye-contact and a friendly smile. If it seems appropriate, say "good morning" or "hello," and watch the transformation as the friendly person emerges in them.

Pray

Pray that God will give you courage to take a chance and to deal with your own discomfort so that you can begin to unlock other people in your community.

Day Eight

A FILM WITH NO EXTRAS



Photo By Avel Chuklanov On Unsplash

Read Luke 19:1-10

Are you the kind of person who walks out of the cinema as soon as the movie is finished? Not me; in fact I'm usually one of the very last to leave and, as I watch the credits, I'm always amazed just how many people are involved in making even a low budget movie. Although we only see the names of the big stars on the billboards, almost every movie will have

many times more extras, whose names you will only see if you're that nerd who stays back until the credits are finished. While the movie is rolling, we're not really supposed to focus on the extras, because the story is not about them; it's about the stars.

These days most of us are exposed to hours and hours of TV shows and movies each week, so it's easy for us to slip into the same viewing mindset as we go about our interactions with real people. When you go to buy your groceries, it's understandable that the plot line is about you and what you need to take home for the week. But how many extras are in the background doing their shopping? While you're walking out and about in your neighbourhood, how many other random people will you walk past? Well here's a news flash: nobody is a random or an extra in God's great story.

Like the small man Zacchaeus, it would be fair and reasonable for us to think of ourselves as merely the extras in God's great story. But God is so wildly creative that He has written a story for everyone. He's even able to follow each of those billions of stories with the same care and attention as if it were the only story. Although it didn't impress the religious people, Jesus demonstrated with Zacchaeus that He has no favourites, and truly longs for every story to reach its intended happy ending.

Reflect

What would it be like if you could see what Jesus sees in each and every face in your local community? If you could see that you are not surrounded by randoms, but by people like you who are living out their own rich stories, how might you live and interact differently?

Act

Today, as you walk the streets praying for your community, try to see the clues which help to tell you the stories of real people in your neighbourhood.

Pray

Thank God that He doesn't treat you like a random or an extra, and ask Him to make you more conscious of the real people and real stories on your doorstep.

Day Nine

THE GOOD NEIGHBOUR



Photo By Gleren Meneghin On Unsplash

Read Luke 10:25-37

The term “Good Samaritan” is an interesting one, since it is known not only by Christians, but has become a well known figure of speech to describe anyone who goes out of their way to help a stranger in distress. The term has even been adopted in law in many countries, where Good Samaritan laws protect people from being sued where they have acted in

good faith to assist someone in an emergency. If anything, this should remind us that it is not always the Christian who will be the one to respond to a situation of need in a community.

We need to understand that this parable is given as a response to a lawyer, or an expert and teacher of the Old Testament and in the set of laws which the Jews had included to further help people live a righteous life. Secondly, we need to understand that Jesus has just reminded him of God's command to love his neighbour. To try to get himself off the hook, the shifty lawyer echoes Cain's am I my brother's keeper attitude by asking, "yeah, but who should I consider to be a neighbour?" The response of Jesus is very interesting, since He doesn't stoop to address the kind of person we should consider a neighbour, but only what kind of neighbour we should seek to be.

The story of the Good Samaritan reminds us that God does desire us to be our brother's keeper. It reminds us that being a Christian in your neighbourhood will demand for you to take responsibility for the welfare of other people. Sometimes it will demand your time, and other times your money. At all times it will demand your heart, and your firm understanding that when God shows you things, it's because He is trusting you to step up and be the solution. But the Good Samaritan also reminds us that if we don't step up, God will eventually throw our responsibilities to unbelievers to take care of.

Reflect

Jesus made no distinction as to which kinds of neighbours we should take care of; only the kinds of neighbours that we should seek to be. What kind of neighbour do you think you are right now?

Act

As you walk your local streets in prayer, God is going to show you situations of need in your neighbourhood that nobody else is taking responsibility for. When He does, you will have a choice to step up and be a neighbour or, like Cain, to numb your heart a little more towards your

responsibilities. Unfortunately there is no third option that will not involve the same simple choice.

Pray

Ask God to give you great courage today, to be able to walk out your door with your eyes and your heart wide open.

Day Ten

LOOK TO THE FIELDS



Photo By Clever Visuals On Unsplash

Read John 4:31-38

Do you ever pray for revival to come to your neighbourhood? Do you pray that people's hearts will be open to the Gospel and that they will passionately seek after God? Do you actually long to see a greater harvest in your local community? It's not a bad thing to hope for; it's just not what Jesus told us to pray for. In today's reading, When Jesus tells His disciples

to lift their eyes to the fields, it's also a good reminder for us that we would do well to lift our vision for our own neighbourhoods.

Like the disciples, the problem for us seems to be that we have adopted a mindset that the harvest is the problem, and that hardly any people are willing to come to Jesus. It's like we have decided that we workers in the harvest are somewhat redundant, having nothing to do. If we will permit a second opinion from the Lord of the harvest, Jesus is trying to tell us that the problem is actually too much harvest and not enough workers (Matthew 9:37-38), and that our urgent prayer should be for more workers!

If we continue to tell ourselves that the harvest is the problem, we will have an attitude much like the disciples, who saw the Samaritan city and its people merely as randoms they could buy their lunch from. Jesus, on the other hand, lifted His eyes to see further. Because of His higher vision, He was not only able to engage with the woman at the well in a life-giving way, but He was able to watch the ensuing miracle of the whole town surrendering up its harvest. Imagine what could happen in your neighbourhood if you were to stop praying for the harvest to change and just get on with bringing it in.

Reflect

Why do you think we might have a tendency towards seeing the harvest as the problem, rather than the willingness of the workers in the harvest?

Act

Go. Walk your streets and pray earnestly for more workers, for the harvest is ripe and ready.

Pray

For many years, parents, children, grandmothers, friends and relatives have been sowing prayer after prayer for people in your neighbourhood. Pray that you might have the joy of being the answer to their prayers; reaping where you have not even sown (John 4:38).

Day Eleven

FOREVER TO PARTY



Photo By Chuttersnap On Unsplash

Read Luke 14:15-24

The parable of the wedding feast is a story which is well-known by most Christians, but I'm going to suggest that it's seldom understood from the perspective of the One who first told it. When Christians hear this parable, we are inclined to compare ourselves with the folks who were invited to the wedding feast, but who made dumb excuses. Perhaps you have read

this parable and thought to yourself, “there's no way I would bail out of an important wedding just because I've bought myself a new cow!” I wonder, though, whether we are wise to lower the bar by comparing ourselves to the excuse-makers.

It seems to me that the ones in the parable who are doing most of the activity are the ones running back and forth making things happen for the master; yes, those servants. But what is their role in the story? Is it not to listen to the heart and wishes of the master, and then to go and make things happen for him? Perhaps that sounds familiar. If you think about the implied happy ending of this parable, it would not be possible for the poor, the lame, the blind and the maimed to come from the highways and the by-ways if the servants had refused to listen or refused to go seek them out.

So why does it matter who we identify with in the story anyway? Well, if we identify only with the guests, then we might be tempted to live and behave like guests. If we identify as guests, then we will be content to enjoy the wedding party, knowing that the Host wants us to feel spoiled and special. There's nothing wrong with that either; our comfort and indulgence right now is just not exactly the meaning of life, that's all. If you dare to identify as a servant, you will understand that you actually have forever to party, but such a short short time to seek out and bring others with you.

Reflect

To what extent do you think you identify as a servant, rather than a party guest in the Kingdom of Heaven?

Act

Consider what the Master would say to you today as He sends His servant out to the local streets, highways and by-ways.

Pray

Ask God to disturb your comfort whenever you start to identify as a spoiled party guest so that you don't miss the deep fulfilment that comes with being His true servant.

Day Twelve

WILLINGNESS TO DROP EVERYTHING



Photo By Scott Webb On Unsplash

Read Luke 15:1-7

In the city I live in, there are quite a number of high schools, primary schools, both private and state-run. Like most cities, the schools vary in their number of students, with some schools having thousands, some hundreds and some less than one hundred. Since I have school-aged

children, I am aware of some of the names of the local schools, their points of difference, and even aspects of their particular school uniforms. To single people, or to those without children, much of this detail and much of the activity surrounding school communities goes on unnoticed; that is, until the moment a child goes missing.

While that child was walking to the bus every day, nobody knew their name or stopped to notice their uniform. When that child in the neighbourhood goes missing, their name, their school, their uniform and their every move rightly becomes the business of the whole community. It's likely that all of these details will even be broadcast far and wide across electronic and print media for days, weeks or years until answers are found. As a community, we understand that a lost child is everybody's responsibility, and that everybody will have at least some small part to play in making that child's safe return a priority.

The parable of the lost sheep is God's way of reminding us that, when one of His children is lost, He is completely unable to view them as just a number or something expendable. Whilst He might be even more thrilled than us to see the local church packed to the rafters each Sunday, His bigger priority is to have every one of us swept up with Him in his obsession for bringing home the lost ones down the street. How proud He must be when He sees in His people that same willingness to drop everything and get fully committed to His all-important search and rescue.

Reflect

How might I live life differently if my priority was always to leave the 99 and to go after the one? What might the investment of my time, energy and money look like?

Act

Begin to record the names of people who you know are lost, and who matter very much to The Good Shepherd, Jesus.

Pray

Begin to pray for these lost sheep by name, asking that they might be delivered from their pointless wandering and make it home.

Day Thirteen

FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL



Photo By Patryk Sobczak On Unsplash

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Have you ever been to one of those petting zoos where they let you get in the pen with the small furry farm animals? It doesn't seem to matter how old I get, I will always be one of the guys there in the line, with or without a small child to use as an excuse for being there. My favourite kind, though, is the one where you can buy a bag of feed and distribute it out to

the cute animals of your choice. The frustrating thing is, if you ever try to do that, you learn very quickly that it's the “not very cute” intimidating animals that get up in your face, bully the other animals out of the way and take at least 90% of what's in your hand.

When I read a passage like 1 Corinthians 12, I have to admit that I can't help but to think about the gifts of the Holy Spirit in much the same way. When verse 7 tells us that these manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit are given for “the good of all,” I really need to stop and have a good hard think about whether or not the Holy Spirit is truly getting His desired result. Yes, many of us might understand these nine gifts of the Spirit, or even go looking for them, but how many of us ever see them operate outside the four walls of the local church? I'm going to bet the farm that the last time you prayed for healing, it was either at church or for one of your Christian friends.

Now thankfully the gifts of the Holy Spirit are very different to my finite little bag of feed pellets, in that God has more than enough to go around. I also know that God is so rich in love, mercy and grace that He would never despise His people when they keep pressing into Him for more. The thought that challenges me to the core is when I stop to consider my part of the deal. That is - when was the last time I operated in one of the nine gifts outside of the church, so that someone who really needed a demonstration of God's love and power received it for the first time?

Reflect

Has God ever worked one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12) through you for the benefit of another person? If so, what was that like?

Act

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are not just meant to be used by a select few Christians (v6) and neither are we supposed to be ignorant about them (v1). Think for a moment of someone you know who operates in these gifts of the Holy Spirit more often than you do. Decide to make time to

talk to them about it, to listen and to learn from them so that God might be even more able to count on you when He needs to.

Pray

Ask God to give you the sensitivity to notice when other people need to receive from Him, and the boldness to be able to step out in faith when He shows you what you need to do.

Day Fourteen

FAITH THAT WORKS



Photo by Nick Fewings on Unsplash

Read James 2:14-26

By now we've probably all seen the bumper sticker that says, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." Perhaps we've even seen it sported by those whose driving justifies the display of this permanent reminder. Whatever we may think of it, it's a reminder to us that being a Christian and being Christian really can be two separate things altogether. The first is all about relationship and where we stand before God in Christ, whereas the second

is all about displaying a character and behaviour befitting one who truly follows after the way of Christ.

In today's reading, James reminds us that having a well-grounded faith in God ought to show itself in the life and actions of the one holding it. He reminds us that when people in our community are in need, it's not enough to express sympathy and a few well-chosen Christian platitudes; the true believer's inner transformation will not be able to help but to respond with sacrificial acts of service.

I believe that at the most basic level, a Christian's true faith will be shown in community by their willingness to get involved. The reason Jesus gave the Pharisees such a hard time was that they continued to show their faith only through religious talk and rituals, but were not prepared to roll up their sleeves and truly represent God; the One who always gets involved where there is human pain. I'd like to think that if we are genuine people of faith, we will not be simply situated in our neighbourhoods - we will be saturated in them.

Reflect

What does it mean to you for your faith to be outworked in your community by actions?

Act

As you walk the streets today, try to notice where there are invitations to roll up your sleeves and get involved in bringing positive change.

Pray

Pray that the character of Jesus, who left the comfort of Heaven to get involved in human pain, might be found in you a little more each day.

Day Fifteen

SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD



Photo by Tanner Yould on Unsplash

Read Mark 6:30-37

Jesus and His disciples are exhausted and in need of a break. If you had the time to read the rest of Mark 6 with a map in the other hand, you would understand that the amount of travel they have been doing on foot up to this point is impressive. You can add to that the emotional drain of Jesus being rejected by the people of His own home-town. The disciples themselves have just been sent out to do the hard yards of face to face

ministry and then, to top it off, they all receive the final kick in the guts: the news that their good friend the cousin of Jesus has been murdered. It's really no wonder Jesus tells them they all need some time out.

When you really need some personal space, pushing off in a boat is supposed to be a great way to do it, but not when the crowd stalks you by land, and is already waiting for you at the supposedly deserted side of the lake. I could really understand the disciples inwardly groaning at the sight of this crowd. However, Jesus doesn't see a crowd; He sees only sheep without a shepherd and, for Him at least, this changes everything.

When sheep have no shepherd, they wander with no direction. When sheep have no shepherd, they stray into danger, and are an easy target for predators. When sheep have no shepherd, they probably don't even realise they need a leader to protect them and to provide for them. Without a vision, they simply cast off any restraints and become the victims of their own lack of sense. When God opens your eyes to precious lost people in the same predicament, it won't matter how busy or exhausted you are. When you truly see sheep without a shepherd, it changes everything.

Reflect

How often do you feel like you're at the end of yourself physically and emotionally and with nothing left to give? Have you ever been simply compelled to dig deeper at these times? What did you learn about yourself?

Act

As you walk the streets today praying for your neighbourhood, hold in mind this image of sheep without a shepherd and try to be mindful of how your heart instinctively responds to human need.

Pray

Sometimes your heart gets overwhelmed by people and their stuff. Confess it to God and ask Him to show you how to dig deeper when you really need to have a soft heart towards your neighbours.

Day Sixteen

IT'S JUST NOT FAIR



Photo by Martin Jernberg on Unsplash

Read Acts 16:6-10

“What about those remote people groups that never get to hear the Gospel? Would a just God really let them go to Hell if they never have a chance to hear about Him?” I'm sure that, like me, you've probably at least heard that question before if you haven't actually wrestled with it yourself. It's a tricky one because, if we decide that a loving God wouldn't do that, then the last great command of Jesus to go into all of the world and preach the

Gospel seems like it could possibly do more harm than good. Still, it doesn't seem fair, does it?

If we stop and examine this old chestnut, we have to bear in mind that God's willingness is not the problem. In fact He's clear that He is not willing that anyone perish, but wants all people to inherit eternal life with Him (2 Peter 3:9). The church of Jesus Christ has had over two thousand years to outwork that Divine willingness, with opportunities enough for the Gospel to have reached right around the world several times. Unfortunately though, while most Christians might have at least 3 or 4 Bibles in the family home, we still find that so many people are yet to know such a thing exists.

Far from trying to be negative about the church, my point is that it's not God whose willingness is in question. In today's reading, God was clearly willing for Paul, Silas and Timothy to go over to Macedonia to share the Gospel with an unreached people group, but they still had to be willing to hear His calling and to go. If it were not for this simple act of obedience, there would be no books of Corinthians, Philippians or Thessalonians in your Bible. These churches might simply have never existed. You see, sometimes the only thing required for suffering is for people like you and I to do nothing.

Reflect

Paul went over to Macedonia because the Holy Spirit gave him a vision of a lost person calling out for his help. Take a moment to imagine what desperate searching and deep wrestlings might be going on in the households up and down your own street.

Act

Continue, like Paul, Silas and Timothy, to simply go. As you walk the streets with an active prayerful concern for your community, incredible miracles become possible.

Pray

Pray about your willingness to be interrupted by the specific calling of God.

Day Seventeen

YOUR KINGDOM COME



Photo by Markus Spiske on Unsplash

Read Matthew 6:7-13 & v 33

If the Lord's Prayer is not the most well known prayer in the world, then it's certainly the most well known in the Christian world. Though you've probably prayed it many times, I wonder if you've ever stopped to consider what we mean when we pray "Your kingdom come." Because, when we pray for God's kingdom to come, we are praying that He would gain power and ultimate authority over an ever increasing territory or realm. We are

praying that more and more hearts would bow to Him as leader and that the hearts He is King over would become more and more subject to Him.

As the Lord's Prayer continues, it almost repeats itself with "Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." This request acknowledges that, in Heaven, God has ultimate authority and dominion, but also recognises that this is not yet the case on Earth. It reminds us that right now we live in a world caught between two Kingdoms, with the choice to either live under the lordship of Christ or by default under the cruel dominion of the enemy. There is a reminder here that, under Jesus at least, we can live in such a way that restores dominion to the world's right and proper King.

Since Jesus knows that much of our prayer-life is going to default to verbalising worries about the things we need, He reminds us that if we seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, then all of those other concerns will simply be taken care of by someone far more qualified to deal with them. Whilst there's certainly nothing wrong with asking Him for the things we need, I wonder how often we first invite Him to be King over that particular aspect of our life. After all, there is no promise in Scripture that He will bless and prosper a kingdom which still has you on the throne.

Reflect

Take some time to think about the things that you would normally pray about when you pray. How many of these are about the Kingdom of God coming to your neighbourhood? How many are just about your anxieties?

Act

On your prayer walk today, try to be aware of people, places and situations where God's Kingdom really needs to come and set itself up.

Pray

Ask God to help you to restore balance to your prayer life so that your words truly bring Heaven down to Earth.

Day Eighteen

PREPARING THE SOIL



Photo by Markus Spiske on Unsplash

Read Matthew 13:1-9

The parable of the sower reminds us that unfortunately, as far as sharing the Kingdom of God is concerned, not every seed which is planted will remain. As Christians, we know this all too well, and can all bring to mind a dear friend or loved one who once was excited to hear the Gospel, but whose heart is now far from the Kingdom of God. If we're smart, we'll take it as a personal reminder to guard our own hearts, remembering Paul's

words, “let he who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). But what about our neighbourhood? What about the garden which God has specifically placed us in that we might tend and care for it?

In your community, do you ever feel like you might be dealing with some very hard ground? That’s okay, but God forbid that we should ever decide that it's all too hard, and that the hardness of our neighbourhood towards God is the whole problem. If you remember the story of Elijah calling Elisha, you might recall that this was in the days of a severe drought. Like the hearts of the people of Israel, the ground had become incredibly hard and resistant. Even the great Elijah had been brought to despair by the hard circumstances of the day not long before he came across a certain faithful sower who was not given to failure or excuses.

When We meet Elisha, the Bible says he is ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen. That’s twelve pairs of strong beasts, and evidence of a man with a “whatever it takes” attitude. Sure, there were a lot of factors like the weather and the climate which were beyond his control, but here was a man seriously committed to that part which was in his control. As you and I seek to prepare good soil in our communities, by far the most influential factor we can control will be the simple kindness we show towards those we are trying to reach. I just wonder how open and receptive neighbours could become if God could count on some Christians to start stirring up kindness with that 12-yoke, whatever it takes, attitude.

Reflect

How hard do you think hearts might be in your little corner of the world?
What small factor are you able to control?

Act

Today, as you walk around your community in prayer, I want you to begin to conspire to commit an act of kindness which will begin to soften the hard ground in your street. It's going to take more than just a good idea or a good intention; this requires you to make a plan and a time-line which you will commit to and actually make it happen.

Pray

Ask God to rid you of the old excuses like, “nobody here is interested in the Gospel.” Ask Him to prod you when you slip into this negative mindset, and to show you empowering ways to soften any hard ground which might exist. Ask Him to create in you a strong, 12-yoke kind of whatever it takes attitude.

Day Nineteen

A LIFE OF MARGIN



Photo by KAL VISUALS on Unsplash

Read Matthew 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

There's an old saying, “Live simply so others can simply live.” Probably most of us would interpret this advice as being all about the need to be charitable with our money, rather than greedy. In today’s reading though, Paul points to the more important need to maintain a simple lifestyle, rather than a busy and self-absorbed life of ambition. He encourages us to

take care of our own affairs, to work hard, but to live simply. This is not an easy balance to get right, nor to keep in check.

Think about it for a moment. If neighbours in your street showed an interest in connecting with you, would you be able to find a free night to invite them over for a meal, or has your life become too cluttered with other expectations? Do you already cram every spare moment of each week with activity, or do you keep some margin; some room to breathe, and potentially to spend on showing other people value?

Sadly, if you ask most folks in the western world how their week is going, they will usually respond with something along the lines of, “good thanks, just busy.” Yes, busy is a something of a badge of honour, and a reminder to ourselves and others that we are worthwhile, and bringing something significant to the table. Unless we are well-grounded in the incredible value that we have just by being God’s children, the addiction to self-made significance can be hard to shake. I wonder whether Paul’s challenge is simply to put aside our pressing need to be someone for long enough to truly allow our neighbour to feel like *they* are someone in our world.

Reflect

Do you habitually describe yourself to others as busy? Spend a moment reflecting on whether that’s what you want to be. Do you live a life of adequate margin?

Act

Some time today, take a look at your diary or calendar, or else write up a weekly calendar showing your regular commitments, routines and even how you are using your downtime. Spend some time being deliberate about what you need to do to live a life of margin.

Pray

Ask God to help you to live a life that counts; not for what looks impressive or important, but for what's truly important to Him.

Day Twenty

WEIRD OR WONDERFUL



Photo by Puk Patrick on Unsplash

Read Acts 17

Today's reading tells us that the people of Athens used to spend their time "in nothing else" than telling or listening to something new. Much like the internet age we live in today, the Greek world was all about information saturation. Since these were a people hungry for knowledge and truth, they actually wanted to hear from Paul, and brought him to the famous

Aeropagus; a place where would-be teachers would have their ideas judged before a council of wise leaders.

Paul's speech is a masterpiece, because it's clear that he took the time to understand his audience and the rules and culture of the day. At the Aeropagus, a speaker could continue to speak without interruption as long as every point followed on logically from the last point. He begins by addressing a topic which mattered to the Athenians, and a question which they were actually interested in having answered - their mystery of "an unknown God" who was credited with having once saved their city.

If we would like our neighbours also to respond, "we would like to hear more from you about this," then we would do well to learn from Paul. We would do well to first become students of our communities, listening to the issues which people really want to talk about. We would do well to hold back from spouting forth about concepts which are just culturally weird to our neighbours, so that we don't find ourselves answering questions that people are not even interested in asking. If we can do this patiently and respectfully we just might find that, like the Athenians, our neighbours really do find our ideas wonderfully interesting.

Reflect

What are the hot topics of interest in your community? What are the questions which your neighbours lie awake thinking about? (Hint: these will not be the same as the questions you wish they would ask you). How could you begin to engage with the real questions?

Act

Try to find a copy of the local newspaper in your area, and begin to be a student of the local culture. Consider joining a Neighbourhood Watch group, Neighbourhood Centre or sporting group where you might be able to position yourself alongside issues that matter to your community.

Pray

Ask God to show you what is important to your neighbours, and to help you to be wise in how you might address these.

Day Twenty-One

WILLING TO SERVE



Photo by Cristina Gottardi on Unsplash

Read Philippians 2:5-11

What does it mean to “have this mind in you which was also in Christ?” Paul says that it is to put aside any privileges we might have in order to humble ourselves as servants. In the 21st century, this is a very tough ask. Not only is it sometimes hard for us to find time to put the needs of others before our own, but we might also find that the people we wish to serve

feel too awkward about letting us serve them. But how exactly might we be able to serve our neighbours in practical ways?

If you are already on speaking terms with your neighbours, a simple way to serve them is to offer to swap phone numbers in case you notice something happens to their home while they are out. You could also offer for them to be able to call you if they think they've left a window open or forgot to put the rubbish bin out for collection. When they're going on vacation, why not offer to collect their mail and feed their pets for them? If you're mowing your lawn, and you notice theirs is a bit neglected, why not take up this small opportunity to show your neighbours that they matter to you?

When we stop to serve someone, we give them the gift of our energy, our effort, and sometimes a little sweat and strain. When we serve, we also give somebody a little piece of that precious commodity which no amount of money can ever replace - our time. For this reason, our service communicates that we value somebody else, and that we are prepared to make them a priority. You might find, as I have done, that serving your neighbours is the single best way to break the ice and to kindle the beginnings of a warm friendship.

Reflect

Where is your relationship with your neighbours up to at the moment? Are there some on good speaking terms? Are there others that need more investment? Take a moment to consider what different kinds of service might be appropriate for various neighbours in your street.

Act

Decide to take a step towards being a servant to your neighbours. Don't just decide though; start today!

Pray

Ask God to exercise in you this mind “which was also is Christ;” the mind of a servant.

Day Twenty-Two

WHAT DO YOU SEE?



Photo by Amber Kipp on Unsplash

Read John 4:4-26

When Jesus stops to have a conversation with this woman at Jacob's well, it's really clear that He was not seeing what everybody else could clearly see about her, and the kind of woman she was. For a start, anyone could see that she was a Samaritan, and therefore part of a people group which had compromised themselves with idols and intermarriage with pagans. She was clearly a woman, and therefore not esteemed very highly by the

Jewish men of the day. Most scholars also believe that, because she was collecting water in the heat of the day, she was most likely an outcast among the women of the town too.

If anyone else could see that this woman was a black sheep, why did Jesus only set Himself up to cop a spray of sarcasm and attitude from her? The text suggests that He not only knew she was an outcast, but He already saw right into the depths of her heart and all of the past events which had damaged it. For Jesus, it was not a question of what He couldn't see, but that He was able to see much much further. Thank God that He sees you and me in the same way; beyond all of our junk, sin and brokenness. Yes, “As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.” Psalms 103:13-14 NKJV.

Perhaps in your street there are a few black sheep you have decided to have nothing to do with. It could be the one who has loud drunken parties well into the night, the ones with the barking dog, or the one who makes the street untidy with his project cars parked all over his two foot high lawn. Wouldn't it be great if we could see these write-offs the way Jesus sees them; beyond all of their junk, through their pain and damage, and right into their priceless soul? He not only wants us to be able to see all of the value and all of the potential in these black sheep, but He's even ready to show us if we will ask Him.

Reflect

Who are the people in your neighbourhood that you have written-off, or decided to do life without?

Act

Not so fast. Reflect a little longer on that previous question, and God will show you exactly what you need to do about it.

Pray

Ask God to show you how to see beyond the repulsive and unlovable traits in our neighbours, and to truly give you His ability to see further and to

love deeper.

Day Twenty-Three

SHEPHERD FOR HIRE



Photo by Biegun Wschodni on Unsplash

Read John 10:10-16

When Jesus refers to Himself as The Good Shepherd, he knows that it's necessary to explain to His disciples exactly what it requires to be a true shepherd of people. On the one hand, Jesus refers to previous religious leaders as being like robbers, who only came to steal and consume the flock. On the other hand, He refers to hired shepherds who would care for the sheep only until it became treacherous or dangerous. Since the Old

Testament law said that hired shepherds were not responsible for the deaths of any sheep which might be attacked by wild animals, these hired shepherds were free to run away and protect their own lives.

Jesus wants His disciples to understand the difference between one who is hired to care for the sheep and one who actually owns the sheep. For a true shepherd who owns his own sheep, an attack on the flock is personal. At these times, a true shepherd will stand up and defend his sheep. The difference between a true shepherd and a hired hand is a matter of personal responsibility. Ultimately, as Jesus says, the Good Shepherd would be prepared even to lay down His life for the sake of His sheep; even those who are not yet of His fold.

In the local communities which God has given to each of us to care for, we need to make a crucial decision: will we or will we not truly act like disciples? Now it's true that if we live in our neighbourhoods like hired shepherds, we can still do a lot of good for people without taking ownership for them, and many of us will choose such a life. If we choose to be a disciple of the Good Shepherd though, this will mean stepping up and taking responsibility for the people in our community. It will mean sometimes leaving the 99 to go after the one. It will mean giving whatever it takes to make sure that, on our watch, none are lost or taken out without a fight (2 Peter 3:9).

Reflect

What would it look like for you to be a shepherd in your local community?

Act

Identify what it would look like for you to leave the 99 to go after that one straggler in your neighbourhood, then make a plan to do just that.

Pray

Ask God to keep reminding you what it costs to be a disciple, and pray that He would give you the heart of a good shepherd.

Day Twenty-Four

CALLING ALL FISHERMEN



Photo by Fredrik Öhlander on Unsplash

Read Luke 5:1-11

When Jesus was teaching the people, He seemed to often enjoy using powerful visual presentations to make important principles unforgettable for His listeners. On this particular occasion, Jesus is trying to drive home a point about winning souls, (or fishing for men as He calls it). He begins with some men who are packing up their nets; discouraged after trying hard all night to make a catch. If you know the story well, it's easy to gloss

over what happens next and to miss a couple of important truths that I believe Jesus would want us to know about winning souls.

For one thing, human effort alone never brings the kind of catch that God is looking for. It's only when we invite Jesus on board and trust Him to give us direction that we are going to encounter any real success. It was only after Jesus began teaching the crowd from aboard the boat that the catch came along. Remember, it is not our own wisdom, but ultimately it is the words of life from Jesus which lost and broken people will be attracted to. If we forget that the business of winning souls is meant to be a partnership, we too will find ourselves exhausted and with empty nets.

Finally, it's so important to realise, as the disciples did, that we can't possibly haul in the whole catch that God wants to give to us. Just as Peter did, we need to call upon the other fishermen nearby, and to pray in some of the fishers of men which God has everywhere. When you're interacting with your neighbours and eventually sharing about Jesus, you're merely throwing out the nets. If you're not the one God chooses to pull in the catch this time around, don't be discouraged. That's the best time to pray and call in some more reinforcements to finish what you've started. Relax - God has a very big fleet of fishers that you know nothing about.

Reflect

Spend some time reflecting on what it means to be in partnership with Jesus in the business of soul-winning. How might this idea influence your approach to your neighbourhood?

Act

Decide to take responsibility for what you can do in your community, and to trust God to engage His team to do the work you can't.

Pray

Ask God to send more workers alongside the neighbours you have been trying to reach with the Gospel.

Day Twenty-Five

A WILLINGNESS TO GET INVOLVED



Photo by Atlas Green on Unsplash

Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

When I was in my twenties, I always kept a New Testament in the glove box of my Holden Gemini and just loved to pick up hitch-hikers so I could share the Gospel with them. Late one particular night, I was heading back from Brisbane to the Gold Coast, which was about an 80km drive. I had asked God for an opportunity to speak into somebody's life and to bring

them to Christ, and I soon spotted a couple hitch-hiking. Ray and Jane were down on their luck, and it wasn't too long before we got talking about their interest in the supernatural, star signs and particular religious cult they had been approached by.

When pressed for an opinion, I told my new friends that I believed that these kinds of things were like a clever counterfeit of some of the gifts which God has given to Christians. “What do you mean?” Jane asked. I took a deep breath and replied, “well, for instance, God is telling me that one of you has been suffering with a pain in the lower leg.” Ray piped up, “that's right. That's me!” I continued, “and God is telling me that because he wants to heal you.” Still driving, I reached around, laid hands on his leg and said, “In the name of Jesus, be healed.” Ray experienced an instant healing.

By the time I dropped Ray and Jane off some 30km past where I had intended to go, they had both said a prayer to invite Jesus to be Lord of their lives. All it really took was for me to make myself available to God, and to believe that He really did mean it when He said, “these works shall you also do, and greater works than these.” The gifts of the Holy Spirit are for all believers, and were never intended to be confined only to a church building on a Sunday morning. You know, there is probably only one thing holding God back from moving in your community like this all of the time, and it's certainly not His own willingness to get involved.

Reflect

Paul says he does not want the church in Corinth to be ignorant about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and God would not want us to be ignorant about it either. Who do you know who could teach you more about operating in these gifts?

Act

Make a plan to read, research and learn about operating in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. For best results, invite a friend to join you.

Pray

Ask God to send you opportunities to share, pray with and lay hands on people who really need an encounter with Him.

Day Twenty-Six

CONFRONTING YOUR KRYPTONITE



Photo by Chandler Cruttenden on Unsplash

Read Acts 10:9-29

Have you ever considered how much it took to convince Peter that it was okay to go with the servants of Cornelius the Roman centurion? God didn't give him a dream, but a vividly clear vision in broad daylight. After that, He followed up the vision with an audible voice directing him to go with the men. If that wasn't enough, He coordinates the arrival of the men at

just the right time when Peter is still trying to understand the vision, and sends the men with an equally amazing story of how God has directed them to come and collect him. It's clear even from Peter's initial response to the vision that God knew Peter was going to find it hard to believe this was a God appointment.

For the Jews, Gentile people (non-Jews) were thought of as being without purpose, and completely outside of God's plans, promises and covenants. More than this, they were considered unclean and to be avoided in the name of keeping oneself pure before God. Like the unclean foods in Peter's vision, Gentiles were like Kryptonite to the Jews. Any God-appointed assignment to go reach them was sure to be received with the same enthusiasm Jonah had given to the task; it was an absolute deal-breaker.

It's easy for us to criticise the New Testament church for harbouring this kind of attitude towards people outside of the true faith, but the truth is that each of us probably has our own Kryptonite where reaching out to non-believers is concerned. For instance, if a neighbour was to invite you for a Melbourne Cup party at his home, would that be a deal-breaker for you? If alcohol was flowing and secular music began to play on the stereo, would you have to excuse yourself? Would the consistent use of bad language keep you from engaging more fully with your neighbours? If their garden was full of Buddhas and their walls covered in astrological symbols, could you even go into their house? Like Jonah, it's important for each of us to think very carefully about where we will and will not allow God to send us.

Reflect

Stop and consider what your own Kryptonite might look like. What factors might put you at risk of saying no to an assignment from the Spirit of God?

Act

Confront your Kryptonite. Name it, and tell a trusted Christian friend why you will not allow it to rob you of future opportunities.

Pray

You might like to examine your heart and repent of any God-opportunities you have rejected which the Friend of Sinners would have liked you to have grabbed with both hands.

Day Twenty-Seven

THE HOSPITALITY DARE



Photo by Matthieu Joannon on Unsplash

Read 1 Peter 4:7-11

At the time when the New Testament was being written, hospitality was a very big deal for folks in the Middle East. Not only was it considered a civic duty to offer visiting strangers food and lodging, it was actually considered a great privilege. In Biblical times, guests were considered to have been a gift sent by God, so it was not uncommon for people to even sit at their door watching and waiting, just to make sure they didn't miss

out on this particular blessing. Although some would go as far as to build or set apart a room just for this purpose, everyone would at least have in mind a space where they could make provision for such an honour.

From behind our 6 foot fences and security grilles in the western world, it's hard for us to relate to this concept of hospitality; something which, for us, has become a term almost exclusively used to describe only hotels and restaurants. To show someone hospitality these days is to do something radical and counter-cultural, but that's exactly what makes it powerful, confronting, and an excellent way to break down the walls between us and our neighbours.

When we moved into our last house, the neighbours on one side were hesitant to have any contact with us at all. When they sold up and moved out, we made a decision that we would start our relationship with the newcomers in the most hospitable way we could. After we met them on the sidewalk and broke the ice, we soon had not only invited them over for a barbecue, but we had also invited the neighbours on the other side to join us. This was the beginning of a long and close relationship, which continued even after we moved to a different neighbourhood. The great lesson for us was that, although it's counter-cultural, people are very open to the right kind of invitation, and the openness can be ongoing and wonderful.

Reflect

Reflect on the reasons why you might not have invited your neighbours over for a cuppa or a barbecue? Is there something you're afraid of? What are you waiting for?

Act

Identify a neighbour or neighbours that you could invite to your home. Determine that the next time you are speaking to them, you will make the invitation.

Pray

Pray that God will give you the right opportunity, the right words and the right timing to make your offer of hospitality a big success. Pray for boldness so that your anxiety doesn't become the weakest link in the chain.

Day Twenty-Eight

FACE VALUE



Photo by JD Mason on Unsplash

Read Proverbs 15:13-15

If there is one universal language which continues to show itself reliable to researchers, it is the language of facial expressions. In fact, when researchers show photographs of faces to people of all nations and cultures, they seem to consistently recognise the same five distinct broad groupings of emotions; namely happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and

disgust. These are not only emotions common to us all, but the way we express them upon our faces is also remarkably similar.

If you take the time to look long and hard into faces, you might also notice something else which is remarkable about them. As the proverb suggests, “a joyful heart makes the face cheerful.” Over time, the face has a way of preserving our predominant moods, as the lines, wrinkles and muscle groups gradually assemble and set in place our emotional back-stories. Perhaps you've heard it said of someone, “if that old grump smiled his face would crack.” Although that might be an exaggeration, we all know that when a perpetually negative face smiles for a moment, there is certainly something strained and insincere about it.

While you're out walking your streets, you might encounter a person walking their dog, or a jogger pounding the pavement. If you take the time to really look at the blank or default expression on their faces, there is much to learn from the stories the lines and wrinkles naturally betray. You will discover that it's not only a cheerful face which reveals a joyful heart but (especially with the help of the Holy Spirit), faces are always ready to reveal the true heart of people to whoever cares enough to notice them.

Reflect

What would it be like to be able to see a little of the story behind every face? How might this help you in your prayers for your neighbourhood?

Act

Take some time to look at your own face in the mirror. Look away from the mirror, completely relax your face and then turn and face the mirror once again. This is how you look to other people most of the time. Reflect and evaluate. Do you look friendly and engaging or a little bit harsher than you thought? Since your face is your primary calling card, you might like to take the time to do this mirror work occasionally to ensure the first impression of others is the one you hope to be creating

Pray

Ask God to give you discernment and the ability to see the story behind the faces you encounter today and every day.

Day Twenty-Nine

BEING A FAITHFUL INVESTOR



Photo by Dan Dennis on Unsplash

Read Matthew 25:14-30

Did you ever loan something to someone in good faith, only to have it returned broken, damaged or abused? Worse someone ever just lose your item altogether, and then just shrug their shoulders like it didn't matter all that much? If you're like most people, it's not the loss or damage that hurts the most, but the realisation that the borrower failed to value the trust that

you are placing in them with something that was truly valuable to you. It's more than disappointing; it can really feel like a slap in the face.

Did you ever consider that when God brings unbelievers across our path, there's a measure of trust involved? We know how it works: someone somewhere is praying to the Lord of the harvest to send workers. Sometimes, without even knowing it, you and I will be those workers and the spotlight of heaven will turn towards us for a moment. What will we do with the most precious possession under heaven?

Sometimes the problem is that we feel inadequate. Do I have what it takes to invest in this precious opportunity? Would I be better off taking a lesson from my dog and burying the opportunity in the ground for a perfect day when I know exactly what to say? And it's easy to think that someone else might be far better at evangelism than I am too. What the parable teaches me though, is that the more I invest in the opportunities God brings my way, the more He will give me increase, and the more He will be pleased with the life-changing results of my faithfulness.

Reflect

What makes you hold back from making the best of the opportunities you have to share with unbelievers? How would you invest if you really believed the boss was watching?

Act

Look across your life, your contacts, your friends, your family, your world of social media, and your neighbourhood, and begin to make an investment plan in the things that really matter to God (hint - they're not things).

Pray

Ask God to give you a new opportunity today, and make a commitment that you will invest when He does.

Day Thirty

CASTING DOWN ARGUMENTS



Photo by svklimkin on Unsplash

Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-6

One of the most common reasons that we Christians hold back from sharing our faith is that most of us would prefer to avoid awkwardness or a potential argument. The devil, on the other hand, has shown himself quite comfortable with arguments from the very beginning. Since Genesis 3 when he argued over “what did God really say?” He's been arguing over Christ's authority, His ability, His motives, His compassion, His existence,

and pretty much every word He's ever said. As Christ's ambassadors to a hurting world, it's probably best for us to accept that we are going to encounter some resistance.

There's a story about an old-school lumberjack whose friends convinced him he would be able to greatly increase his productivity if he would upgrade his axe for a chainsaw. Reluctantly, he went out and bought one, only to discover that the process of clearing trees was much harder than with his axe. When he returned the chainsaw to the store, the salesman seemed puzzled. "Let's have a look," he said, and pulled the starting cord. With that, the lumberjack was startled and rushed to cover his ears. "What's that loud noise?" he exclaimed.

We probably look just as silly when we're trying to win spiritual arguments just by being more clever than the other person. We might be able to chop away at it but, as Paul reminds us, arguments against the Gospel and the redemptive message of Christ are more than just thinking contests between two people. These kinds of arguments are rooted in spiritual rebellion, and originate from spiritual entities. As Paul suggests, a breakthrough will only come through taking spiritual authority, armed with the weapons of prayer. Thankfully though, when demonic arguments are disarmed, our work becomes a whole lot easier.

Reflect

Are you the kind of neighbour who likes to engage in spiritual debating?

Do you ever avoid talking about spiritual issues for fear of awkwardness?

Act

By now you would have people in your neighbourhood who God has placed on your heart. In prayer, begin to take authority over arguments and every high thing which would exalt itself against the will of God for their life.

Pray

Pray that the Holy Spirit might continue to prompt you before you make the mistake of engaging in spiritual debates before spiritual warfare.

Day Thirty-One

THE RESTORER OF STREETS



Photo by Francesco Gallarotti on Unsplash

Read Isaiah 58:6-12

Have you ever met a Christian who was so heavenly minded that they were of no earthly good? Not too long ago, a generation of believers became so fixated on their future in those streets paved with gold, that they almost forgot the reason they were still here on Earth. We should never forget that “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on Earth as in Heaven” is more than a prayer; it’s our mandate. Yes, we are actually meant to be bringing

Heaven down to Earth, both in our prayers and with our corresponding actions.

When Jesus said He would go to prepare a place for us, He meant that He's got that part under control. The streets that need our help are not the ones paved with gold, they are the ones all around us, paved with deception, heartbreak and bondage. Today's reading reminds us of this by setting out exactly how God expects us to take responsibility for suffering in our communities. It's a criteria sheet which closely matches the criteria sheet found in the parable of the sheep and the goats, and it's no coincidence; it's our Father's business.

So what does it mean to be a restorer of streets in which to dwell? I believe it's about living in our communities with a transformational mindset. It means a decision not to walk past a problem or a need when it's in our power to bring hope and change. Concepts like “divide your bread with the needy” and “loose the bonds of wickedness” challenge us to the core, because they are about us taking action. That always comes through a decision to accept responsibility for problems we did not cause. I wonder if we are ever as Christlike as when we do just that.

Reflect

In your neighbourhood, what suffering do you think you merely walk past or unintentionally ignore?

What would it look like for you to be a restorer of streets in which to dwell?

Act

Write down something that you feel you should take responsibility for in your neighbourhood. If possible, commit yourself to a deadline for taking action.

Pray

Ask God to change your mindset towards your community so that you might default to taking responsibility rather than walking on by.

Day Thirty-Two

DEVASTATING YOUR DIARY



Photo by Glenn Carstens-Peters on Unsplash

Read Joshua 1:12-16

When it came time for Joshua to lead the Israelites across the river Jordan, the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh were already settled in their new allotments on the East side of the river. With the rest of the tribes still to fight for their promised land, you could well understand these Eastern tribes saying, “there's nine of you; you guys have got this - we'll stay put thanks.” Instead, they leave their wives, children and property behind, and

spend the next 20 chapters, and probably as many years, fighting for the inheritance of their sisters and brothers. That's some kind of selflessness.

Reuben was the firstborn of Jacob's sons, and perhaps at least that tribe would have well understood the principle of the firstborn. A firstborn son would receive a double-portion of his father's inheritance, and with it a double-responsibility. According to the custom, the firstborn was tasked with looking after his siblings and, if necessary, to bail them out of any financial catastrophes. This called for great wisdom, careful stewardship and a selfless attitude.

When the Bible refers to Christians as God's firstborn, it's much more than just a promise of a double portion of prosperity and comfort. God wants us to understand that He has given us the whole inheritance; and it's not merely to allow us to get settled before the others. Like those ancient tribes, it's likely that at times this idea will amputate our ambitions, pulverise our priorities and devastate our diaries. Sure, a day will come when we cross over to reach our place of rest. Until then, let us order our days with the priorities of Heaven, and fight hard for those who have not yet received a portion at all.

Reflect

Consider your own willingness to tolerate inconvenience if your neighbours suddenly need you. What if you're busy? Are you prepared to devastate your diary for their sake?

Act

It's a great practice to take an inventory of your day and to categorise the way you have spent your time. You could repeat this for several days to see if any patterns emerge, and if you are happy with how you are prioritising your time.

Pray

Pray that, when the need arises for you to devastate your diary for the sake of others, that God will make it clear to you.

Day Thirty-Three

NUMBERED WITH SINNERS



Photo by Oleg Kukharuk on Unsplash

Read Luke 5:27-32

In the days when Jesus walked and talked amongst us, He lived amongst a defeated people and a nation under the occupation of the Roman Empire. As such, it was a requirement for the people of Israel to pay tributes and taxes to Caesar. There's no doubt this once-great people who God led across the Red Sea would have felt the irony and the stinging insult of having to fund the regime of their oppressors. Nevertheless, there were

some Jews who were not only prepared to collect taxes on behalf of the Romans, but to make a career of it.

Like a modern day worker who is prepared to cross a picket line, these tax collectors were the sellouts or the scabs of their day. Already hated by their people, and with nothing to lose, many of them took opportunity to swindle their fellow Jews out of more than their due tax contributions. With the full support of the Romans, everybody knew these tax collectors were becoming rich through stealth, disloyalty and the betrayal of their own people. No wonder everybody hated them - well... almost.

There's no question that attending a tax-collectors' party at the home of a tax-collector would have been viewed as the worst PR disaster for the Jesus brand. To do so, you would have to either be inexcusably ignorant as to who tax collectors were, or else recklessly care-free about associating yourself with the lowest scum of society. Thank goodness Jesus had a strong and secure self-image. Not only did He know who He was, but He shows an almost defiant self-identity which cannot be shaken by the charge, Friend of Sinners. As we venture deep into our communities, may we share with Jesus such a single focus for the lost that we completely lose all fear for our reputation and embrace the high calling of being a friend of sinners.

Reflect

Are you careful with your reputation and the way you are viewed by other people? There's nothing wrong with that, but it's important to decide which group of people you will be most comfortable about disappointing.

Act

As you walk the streets and pray for your neighbourhood today, consider which of your neighbours it would be most scandalous to be associated with. Allow God to speak to you about this thought.

Pray

Ask God to deal with any insecurities you may have about associating with other people in your community. Pray that He will give you such a strong and resilient sense of who you are, and who you are in Him, that nothing else will matter.

Day Thirty-Four

WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS



Photo by Ben White on Unsplash

Read Matthew 6:19-21

Several years ago, our church held a fundraising auction to support some of our projects which were reaching deep into our local community. As several items of sporting memorabilia went under the hammer, Steve the pastor was helping the auction along with a few inflated bids of his own. Glenn, a local businessman with a big heart for the community, also entered into a bidding war over several items, but there was one signed

jersey which was of particular interest to him. Sadly for him, he was outbid by Pastor Steve's own passion for the local mission they were supporting.

Over the next few days, Pastor Steve felt increasingly uneasy, since he realised that this particular item had been one which was special to the businessman Glenn. Unannounced, he arrived at Glenn's business and handed over the signed jersey as a gift from Pastor Steve. For several years this act of kindness lay dormant in Glenn's heart until one Sunday, he decided to attend that local church to say a personal thank you. Although Pastor Steve had moved on long ago, he happened to return that day (for the only time) as the guest preacher. Such a coincidence was too much for Glenn, who began attending the church, received Jesus as his Lord and Saviour, and continues to serve there to this day.

What incredible miracles are possible when our hearts are more interested in winning souls than accumulating more stuff. Jesus reminds us that where our treasure is, our hearts will be also, and it never ceases to amaze me how one always follows the other. The truth is that generosity of the kind that touched Glenn's heart is rare in our local communities. When we open our wallets, it's not uncommon for people to open their hearts. The thoughtful gift that you give just to bless somebody might not even cost as much as your weekly tithe, but for the person who receives it, it could just blow their mind.

Reflect

What if opening your wallet really could open people's hearts? Would you live any differently if it was so?

Act

Think about specifically where a small act of generosity towards someone in your neighbourhood could blow their mind and heart wide open.

Pray

Pray that God would give you such a heart for the lost that your treasure would never fail to follow in the same direction.

Day Thirty-Five

WILLING TO BE SERVED



Photo by Danique Ter on Unsplash

Read John 13:3-10

At some stage, we've probably all read this famous passage where Jesus stoops to wash the feet of His disciples. It's a passage about a scandalous brand of leadership, demonstrated through humble service, but that's not what I wish to focus on today. What I find fascinating is Peter's response, since he puts into words what I think you and I would have been thinking. "You're the Lord, for crying out loud! There's no way you're going to be

washing my feet! If anyone's going to be the servant in this relationship, it's me!"

Did you know that the average Joe in your community feels the same way about being served? I would bet that you're no different to him either. On any Sunday, there are churches right across my city who are ready to spoil newcomers and who build the entire church experience from the ground up to make the unchurched feel welcome and special. There's nothing wrong with that, but here's the funny thing. If a raging storm was to rip the roof off the church, even people who have no interest in attending church would be there lining up to help out.

Missionaries on the field will tell you a similar tale. Despite designing stunning projects to reach their new communities, many find the best relationships they forge are with locals who take pity on them and teach them to speak their language. So what if an important key to reaching your neighbours is to understand that they're more comfortable helping you than they are in being helped? If that thought makes you uncomfortable, then you're in good company. Nevertheless, we have to understand that reaching our community is sometimes a business of great personal humility. Are you up for some of that?

Reflect

Have you ever realised your neighbours could have helped you with something or loaned you something you needed, but you were too uncomfortable to ask?

Act

Identify one opportunity by which you could make more of a nuisance of yourself and, in doing so, possibly take a neighbourly relationship further.

Pray

Ask Jesus to teach you what He had to teach Peter: that humility can sometimes be the key to unlocking God's greater plans.

Day Thirty-Six

THE PRAYER HE DELIGHTS TO ANSWER



Photo by Olivia Snow on Unsplash

Read 1 John 5:14-15

Back in the 80s when I was a university student I stumbled upon a prayer that God always listens to, and always answers swiftly. Maybe I was bored with being a consumer-Christian, always feeding on the things of God, but never living the kind of adventure I would read about in the book of Acts. Whatever it was, I decided to pray a prayer like this: “God, I go into this

day as your instrument and I ask You to use me in any way you want, and with whoever you want me to speak to.”

The moment I stepped off the bus and onto the university campus, a friend greeted me, and I could see that he was in pain. He went on to tell me that he had been playing gridiron on the weekend, had been smashed from pillar to post, and had actually damaged some muscles. At once I felt the love of God for this giant and felt I just had to offer to pray for him. We found a quiet place, I prayed for him, and he quickly received a healing. He was so amazed that he just kept asking me questions until he finally asked Jesus to be his Lord and Saviour. It all happened so easily that even I was amazed.

What I didn't know that day was that God absolutely always answers this type of prayer quickly. Certainly there are some prayers that God has no time for, and which He will not answer (James 4:3), but this is one prayer in which we can have the greatest confidence. Today's reading reminds us that if we ask anything according to God's will, He will hear us and give us just what we ask. So if you want to pray a prayer that is a sure certainty, start asking for opportunities to speak to lost people. There's no doubt He wants it a whole lot more than we do. Question is, why wouldn't we pray a prayer like that every day?

Reflect

How comfortable would you be praying for God to use you however He wants to use you today? Is it a little bit scary knowing that He will actually do it? Might this anxiety be holding you back from asking more often?

Act

Establish some visual prompt which will remind you to pray this prayer every day before you leave your house. You could set a daily reminder on your phone, or use something as simple as a note in your sock drawer.

Pray

You know what this is going to be. Offer yourself to God today and tell Him He is welcome to use you to speak to whoever He pleases. Ask Him

for His supernatural power and wisdom to go with you as you do.

Day Thirty-Seven

JUST DOING GOOD



Photo by Anna Earl on Unsplash

Read Acts 10:34-38

When Peter is preaching in the house of Cornelius, he refers to Jesus being anointed by God, with the Holy Spirit and with power. He says that Jesus “went about doing good” and healing all who were oppressed by the devil. I don't know about you, but I find it striking that Peter’s one-line summary of the life and work of Jesus could begin with this simple thought that “He went about doing good.” But when you look back at what Jesus read from

the scroll of Isaiah (Luke 4:18-19) when He spelled out what He came to do, those two thoughts do pretty much sum it all up nicely.

But what about you and the community God has sent you into? And what if the whole mission He has given to you could be summed up as doing good and healing people oppressed by the enemy? For many of us, it's the doing good part that probably sounds a bit cheesy, or even a little boring. Like keeping to a weekly savings plan, this habit may seem petty - even fruitless. As with money though, there is a compounding interest which applies to good deeds, and it yields rewards which are literally out of this world.

Perhaps St Paul understood our frustration with this non-spectacular calling when he reminded the Galatians not to grow weary in doing good (Galatians 6:9). The boring part is that we will not see quick results from simply doing good to others. As with the ten lepers, the majority will never return to show appreciation, and most of us don't like to put in a big effort for too long when we can't see a clear reward. Nevertheless, I believe if we get on with the slow and steady business of simply seeking to do good, God will never fail to keep His promise of a harvest.

Reflect

What might the term doing good mean for you in your little corner of the world? What opportunities do you have right now in your neighbourhood to simply do good?

Act

Begin to devise a doing good moment that you could orchestrate in the next seven days which would make someone in your neighbourhood happy.

Pray

Ask God to continue to prompt you whenever there's an opportunity for your good deeds to make somebody's day.

Day Thirty-Eight

WILLING TO LOOK THE FOOL



Photo by Agustin Fernandez on Unsplash

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-21

You've probably heard it said that in western societies, it's not politically correct to discuss religion or politics; and especially not with folks you don't even know. Amidst our cultural backdrop of atheism, relativism and evolutionary determinism, it's common to feel a little weak in the knees, and even socially foolish, when we start talking to secular people about our God. As today's reading reminds us, the Gospel has always come

across as foolish to those who most need to hear it. The question is, how prepared would you be to look and sound like a fool if God really needed you to reach someone?

When I first started doing prayer walks around my neighbourhood, I soon became aware that I would see many of the same people day after day. One who particularly caught my attention was a little Filipino woman I would pass every day on her way to work. One morning, as she approached from the other direction, God spoke to me about her, and gave me a message He wanted me to deliver. I was immediately uncomfortable about the prospect of bringing a prophetic word to a total stranger, and so I decided to think about it overnight.

Well I wish I could say that I dutifully spoke this message to the little Filipino lady the very next day. I wish I could say that I did it the following week. The truth is, I carried this message for many weeks, and every day it became more and more clear to me that it was a word from God and that I needed to just get on with it. Eventually, I did take a deep breath and get it done. Whilst nothing earth-shattering happened right there and then, I know this small step of obedience was a giant leap into freedom from that old fear - “what will they think?”

Reflect

Deep down we all know that our choice to live in obedience to our Saviour is risky. It's just plain unlikely that we are not going to be asked to do something embarrassing at some point. How do you think you will respond to this?

Act

Perhaps you, like me, have already been procrastinating about something you know God is asking you to do. Is it time to simply trust and get on with it?

Pray

Thank Jesus that He “disregarded the shame of the cross” (Hebrews 12:2), and was obedient to the point of death (Philippians 2:8) for you. Pray that

God will nurture you in this same willingness so that you can truly live free.

Day Thirty-Nine

TOO GOOD TO KEEP TO YOURSELF



Photo by Kwinten De Pauw on Unsplash

Read 2 Kings 7:1-9

Although very entertaining, this story of the four lepers by the city gate is a true story, and one with some powerful parallels for Christians living in the 21st century. Just as the people of Samaria were desperately hungry and besieged, souls in your community are often starved, and it's amazing what they are prepared to swallow (Cf. 2 Kings 6:25) in their quest for

satisfaction. Whether they know it or not, there is an enemy intent on keeping them from the freedom they could be living in. Like the lepers at the gate, we Christians are nothing more than the rejects who happened to have stumbled upon “life in abundance” (John 10:10).

There's something I particularly admire about the four lepers at the city gate. Remember, they were men shunned, removed from society and avoided. The rest of the city had learned to live without them, and even to shut them out quite literally. I'm sure that, upon discovering the mother-load of riches, they could have felt quite justified in keeping it all to themselves. After all, what if the people of Samaria did come and inhabit the abandoned Syrian camp? Would the lepers not find themselves once again outside of that camp? Quite possibly.

Although they were physically unwell, these were men of high character who understood that they were not entitled to live selfishly (V 9). These were men who understood that, although their community rejected them, they still had a responsibility to that community. It's rare these days to find men and women who understand and embrace responsibility. But even in these times of self-entitlement, there are still great men and women who step up and say, “it is not right to keep quiet about this abundant life we have found!”

Reflect

What does it mean for you to take responsibility for sharing what you have found with the spiritually starving in your community?

Act

You might like to make a list of all of the abundant blessings God has showered on your life since you first gave your life to Him. Allow this gratitude stocktake to shape your perspective of the community around you.

Pray

Ask God to give you a revelation of the kind of responsibility He expects us to embody in our communities.

Day Forty

FEED MY LAMBS



Photo by Tim Marshall on Unsplash

Read John 21:15-19

We've probably all heard of very young children sometimes having a special security blanket which they take everywhere for comfort. For my own daughter, it was a pair of pink swimming togs that she had grown out of; or perhaps I should say she had grown out of wearing. On one occasion, we had been on a long car trip and stopped at a diner to eat. Perhaps because she had slept on the way home, it was not until the next morning

that we realised that my daughter had left the pink togs back at the diner. Not surprisingly, she was devastated.

For the staff back at the diner, the pink togs might have looked like a discarded cleaning rag, but to my daughter, the pink togs meant the world. Although they would have been inexpensive to replace, there was no doubt in my mind about what I had to do. I would soon be eating into my work day to make a two hour round trip to rescue the pink togs. That's because when something matters so much to someone you love, it begins to matter to you too, and it can even become your priority.

And so today we come full circle back to what we acknowledged on day one - God is ridiculously obsessed with finding His lost sheep. When Peter saw Jesus on the shore, he alone jumped into the water fully clothed and swam to get to Jesus first. But it seems like Jesus challenges his demonstrative dive, saying, "if you truly love me more than these others, tend My sheep - feed My lambs." So whilst our good works may be fitting, and our praise is good for us, the true measure of our love for our God is found in how much we will give ourselves to this unlikely act of worship; to make *His* one obsession our highest priority.

Reflect

In what ways do you like to show your love for God?

What if the truest act of worship is to take care of God's highest priority?

Act

Determine to continue what you have started; to go out daily to seek God for your community, and to be a champion for the lost sheep.

Pray

Ask God to do a permanent work in your heart so that His burning obsession for the lost becomes your own.

