



24 July – 30 July 2022

### THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

In our world of instant solutions and instant gratification, the idea of persistence can seem extremely quaint and outdated. When we respond to God's call and begin to follow Jesus, we may feel that our lives should change instantly, and that all our endeavours should see immediate results. But when that doesn't happen, we easily grow disillusioned and frustrated. In spite of the vast range of books that offer spiritual transformation in a few easy steps, becoming our truest, most Christ-like selves does not come quickly or easily. It takes a lifetime of perseverance - as does any real change in our communities and our world.

Were we to make perseverance a higher value in our lives, we may be surprised by the difference it might make to our relationships, our work, our families, and our sense of meaning and purpose. When we expect quick results, and easy benefits without sustained work, our relationships break down, and we may find ourselves jumping from partner to partner; our work breaks down, and we may find that we never really reach our goals; and even our ability to know and grow our best selves breaks down, and we go through life reacting to circumstances instead of proactively creating our own lives. The antidote to this disease is perseverance - specifically, perseverance in prayer. When we persevere, we may wait a very long time to get to where we want to be, but each day we will be moving a little closer - and that's all that matters.

This week we will explore what it means to persevere, as we acknowledge how God has persevered in reaching out to us in love.

### SUNDAY 24 JULY 2022

**Read:** Luke 11:1-13

**Reflect:** It was common, in Jesus' time, for disciples to ask their rabbis to teach them to pray. It was also common for the rabbis to give their followers a "skeleton" prayer that they would then use as a framework, filling in details under each "heading". This is probably what was happening when Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer. While it's not wrong to recite the prayer as we do in worship - on the contrary, it can be a very helpful practice - this is not how Jesus would have intended it to be used. Rather, he would have expected his disciples to create their own heartfelt prayers around the basic statements of praise, thanksgiving, requesting and confession.

But, of course, Jesus didn't stop at offering a prayer. He also taught his disciples the principle of perseverance in prayer. When we pray we are to keep on asking, knocking and seeking until we receive. But, as Jesus notes here, the primary gift for which we are to pray is the Holy Spirit's presence and power. Once we have learned to live from the Spirit's guidance and resources, our prayers, and our lives, are dramatically changed, as they start to align with the purposes and values of God's Reign. This is the greatest gift God can give us.

How can you commit to persevere in praying for the Spirit's activity in your life today?

**Do:** One of the most important prayers for us to pray continually is that of invocation - asking God's Spirit to fill and empower us. As you go through today, make invocation a constant refrain in every moment and activity.

**Pray:** As I ask, seek and knock, O God, please give me the gift of your Spirit.

### MONDAY 25 JULY 2022

**Read:** Hosea 2:14-3:5

**Reflect:** After prophesying judgement on Israel for her idolatry (which Hosea, like many of the prophets, calls adultery), God instructs Hosea to speak words of restoration. This is also a typical pattern for the prophets - there is always a message of hope beyond the suffering. The message that God gives Hosea to proclaim is filled with beautiful images of peace, justice, and intimacy with God. Instead of seeing God as a "master" the people will come to know

God as an intimate partner. Instead of violence, there will be security and peace because all weapons will be eradicated. Even the animals will share in this new order - no violence will exist between humans and the other creatures with which we share this planet. This vision of wholeness is God's dream for our world.

Part of Hosea's proclamation involved him purchasing his prostitute wife back and restoring her as his partner. The perseverance of the prophet's love for his wife was intended to be a glimpse into God's persevering love for God's people. Even in this, though, there was to be a process. She would not be restored to the fullness of their relationship immediately. Rather, a time of waiting and preparing was necessary. Hosea would have to persevere patiently in his love through this waiting time. In the same way God, continues to patiently wait for us to open more and more deeply to God's love.

How have you experienced God's persevering love in your life? How can you respond more intentionally today?

**Do:** When we forget the blessings we have experienced in the past, it becomes much harder to persevere in the present or to hope for the future. This is where thanksgiving becomes such a powerful practice. When we give thanks, we are reminded of all that God has done for us, and our faith is strengthened, enabling us to persevere longer and harder. Today, use every opportunity to give thanks.

**Pray:** For your persevering love, that always reaches out to me, O God, I give you thanks.

## TUESDAY 26 JULY 2022

**Read:** Romans 9:30-10:4

**Reflect:** In our quest to persevere in faith we may find ourselves legalistically striving to feel accepted by God. A commitment to do the right thing is not wrong in itself - just as it was not wrong for the Jews to build their lives around God's law (the apostle remarks about their admirable zeal for God). But, when we believe that we can somehow earn favour with God by doing the right thing, we get our faith mixed up, and we lose the freedom and joy that God seeks for us. It is important to remember that we don't persevere in order to become right with God. Rather it is because God has already

restored our relationship with God that we can stay faithful and true to God's call and God's ways. Our perseverance is the fruit of God's work in our lives, not a prerequisite for it.

One of the key words in today's reading is "trust". Christ has already accomplished everything for which the law was given. All people, no matter who they are or where they come from, are already made right with God in Christ. However, in order to experience what it means to be accepted by God, we need to trust in the work of Christ. Then, out of this sense of security we can live our lives in alignment with God's ways, persevering even when it gets tough, because we know that this is the best way to live. This means that our trust is not just about being forgiven and going to heaven. It's about living the Jesus way here and now.

Are there any ways that you are still trying to earn God's acceptance? How can you place your trust in God's grace today and allow that to guide your life?

**Do:** Sometimes we feel like God asks us to confess our sin because God wants to punish us, but that's not what we see in Scripture. Rather, we see that God has already accepted and forgiven us. Confession, then, is not for God. It's for us - to become honest about our lives, and then work to "live up to" our best selves. Today, if you find yourself falling into legalism in any way, take the time to confess it and release it to God.

**Pray:** When I trust more in my own efforts than in your grace, O God, forgive me and free me.

## WEDNESDAY 27 JULY 2022

**Read:** Matthew 5:43-48

**Reflect:** The last sentence in today's section of the Sermon on the Mount has often been misunderstood and has resulted in all sorts of legalism and judgement. The problem is that we think of perfection as a static state where nothing changes because everything is as pure, flawless, and as good as it can be. The problem with this definition is that it too easily leads us to judge ourselves or others when we fall short of perfection. But, in Jesus' teaching the word "perfect" is not a goal to be attained. Rather, it is an attitude that is

constantly lived, and it has more to do with compassion (which is the word Luke uses here) and with maturity, which is about being more concerned for others than for ourselves. This is why Jesus says these words in the context of loving our enemies. It takes great perseverance, compassion and maturity to treat our antagonists with kindness and compassion.

When we learn to love all people as God does, we show ourselves to be true children of God. Note, that Jesus doesn't say that this makes us God's children - nothing we do can achieve that - it simply reveals the truth that we belong in God's family. Notice also that God sends sunlight and rain on all people, good and bad. So, in offering love to all people, we follow God's example of all-inclusive, gracious love. This is not easy, but that's why we need to persevere and keep opening ourselves to God's Spirit to change and teach us.

Who do you find it hard to love? What one step can you take to move a little closer to loving that person today?

**Do:** It is very hard to continue hating someone when you pray for them. The problem is that, when we pray for our enemies, we too often make the prayers about us - asking God to change *them* to make *our* lives better. Today, pray for your enemies, but ignore the way your life might be affected. Rather, take time to consider what they need, and make that the focus of your prayers.

**Pray:** God, may your love and grace reach through me to touch even those whom I struggle to love.

#### THURSDAY 28 JULY 2022

**Read:** Psalm 49:1-12

**Reflect:** This not-very-cheerful Psalm seems to contradict yesterday's reflection. It seems to gloat in the destruction of evil people. In the Old Testament, "an eye for an eye" way of seeing the world, it was acceptable and expected that people would rejoice when their enemies were destroyed. But Jesus revealed that this is not his way. His way is to forgive our enemies. But forgiveness does not mean that we condone or embrace their ways. The specific issue that the Psalmist addresses here is wealth. The enemies the Psalmist speaks of are wealthy people who believe they can use

their wealth to buy security and privilege. But no amount of wealth can protect us from life. Rich and poor all suffer, die, and must all find life in God. Somehow, though, it is harder for wealthy people to accept this - which is the focus of Sunday's theme.

The truth is that those of us who have access to the Internet are among the wealthiest people in the world. It is easy to fall into the trap of trusting in our houses, cars and bank accounts for our security. It is easy to feel that we trust God for our eternal well-being, but we trust our money for our well-being in this life. Even though we may not feel wealthy, our finances can easily become our god if we're not careful, and then it can be very hard to follow the loving, generous way of Jesus.

Are there any signs of trusting in money in your life today? How can you shift your faith back to God?

**Do:** One of the ways we learn to trust God is through giving. If you believe money is your security, it will be very hard to part with any of it. But, when we share what we have with others, we bless them, and we free ourselves from our addiction to wealth. Giving is also an act of faith in which we proclaim that we trust God, not our wealth, for our well-being. Today, try to give as much as you can to those who need it most in your community.

**Pray:** I find my security in you, O God, not in my worldly wealth.

#### FRIDAY 29 JULY 2022

**Read:** Ephesians 4:17-24

**Reflect:** What do you live for? It's easy to answer that question in words, but for many of us, the real answer is seen in our values and actions. This was the case with some of the Ephesian Christians. The apostle draws their attention to the people living around them. He uses the word "Gentile" as shorthand for those who worshipped the idols of the pagan temples for which Ephesus was famous. A key feature of some of this pagan worship was a focus on hedonistic pleasure seeking. The writer makes it very clear that this way of living contradicts the way of Jesus. Yet, it seems that some of the Ephesian believers may have forgotten this. Although their words professed commitment to the way of Jesus, their actions resembled

those of the people in the world around them. And so, the apostle confronts and challenges them to shift their values away from their own pleasures, and onto the disciplined, renewed way of Christ.

You will not have to go far to witness the same struggle in the Church today. We live in a world that is obsessed with pleasure, possessions and power (as Richard Rohr puts it), and this obsession easily infiltrates the Church. While we may profess verbally that we embrace Jesus' way of sacrifice, simplicity and service, our actions reveal a different story. When we build our lives around accumulating "things", or around feeding our physical desires, or around controlling our friends, family and colleagues, our lives resemble the society around us far more than they proclaim Christ. So, like the Ephesians, we need to be reminded that Jesus' way is very different, and that we need to constantly "put on" the new nature we have in Christ.

What values are reflected in the way you live? How can you be more intentional in "putting on Christ" today?

**Do:** One of the most challenging disciplines of the Jesus way is fasting. When we choose to go without food for a time, it reflects a commitment to build our lives around higher values than our pleasure. But, in a world where pleasure is such a strong value, this can be tough. Today, why not try a simple fast - perhaps just from one of your favourite foods or drinks - as a way to bring your desires under the lordship of Jesus?

**Pray:** Teach me, Jesus, to live not for pleasure, but for the renewed, Spirit-inspired values of your Reign.

## **SATURDAY 30 JULY 2022**

**Read:** Mark 10:17-22

**Reflect:** Yesterday we saw how easy it is to get side-tracked in our faith by the pull of pleasure. Today, we read about a wealthy man who was unable to fully respond to Jesus' call because he was controlled by his possessions. It seems that he approached Jesus with the hope that he would be justified in his lifestyle. He observed the law faithfully, but he clearly had a sense that there was still something missing. So, in an attempt to silence the disquiet within

him, he came to Jesus hoping that he would be affirmed and that he could return to his life feeling that he had done all that was necessary. Unfortunately for him, though, Jesus did not respond as he had hoped. Jesus saw into his heart and challenged him to commit his life to his faith, instead of making faith an "add-on". But, in the face of Jesus' challenge, this man was left with nothing but disappointment. For some reason he was unable or unwilling to take his commitment to God's ways further, and so he returned to his comfortable life of wealth, but with the unsettling call to more still unsatisfied within him.

It's important to remember two things about this story. Firstly, what Jesus says to this man, he does not say to everyone. Jesus' interaction with this man is based on what Jesus saw in his heart. The call to sell everything was intended to address the addiction to possessions that had this man imprisoned. Secondly, the struggle of this man is pretty common in our world. Those of us who have enough - or a little more than enough - can easily begin to trust our possessions more than we trust the way of Jesus. So, while Jesus may not tell everyone to sell everything, he does challenge us all to ensure that our allegiance is to God, and not to our wealth.

Are there any signs in your life that your possessions have an unhealthy hold on your heart? How can you release this addiction and shift your allegiance to God's way of simplicity and generosity?

**Do:** The call to be generous is not just about money. Even though we may not be wealthy, we all have abilities and gifts that can be placed at the disposal of God's Reign. Today, take a moment to consider what you can contribute to the saving work of God, and then make yourself available to your church, or to some other group that works to bring life and wholeness to others.

**Pray:** All I have and all that I am is yours, O God - use me for the sake of your Reign.