



04 September – 10 September 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

Jesus' promise of abundant life can trip us up if we view it through the lens of our world's values. If we think of abundant life as an individual experience of security, wealth, and instant gratification, we miss Jesus' point entirely, and we will be sorely disappointed by our faith. But, if we can break free of this self-centred, short-term, "quick-fix" view, we will discover something far richer - a life that connects us more deeply with God, others, and our world, and that brings well-being to all through the values of simplicity, service, and sacrifice. It is easy to see that this offer of abundant life is costly and goes against the culture of our society - and this is why the Scriptures warn us against taking our faith lightly or responding to Jesus too easily. If we are to live as true followers of Christ, we need to count the cost and embrace the daily call to take up our crosses.

In a world where the instant and the immediate are valued over the lasting and the long-term, embracing a lifetime of learning to live the Jesus way can be hard to conceive of, let alone to do. But, as we choose afresh each day to value God's Reign above our own small empires, and the short-term rewards of our world, we move deeper into union with God, and our whole frame of reference slowly changes. Then, over time, our lives begin to reflect the life-bringing grace, compassion, and justice of Jesus - and that is good news for us and for those whom our lives touch.

This week we will be seeking to count the cost of following Jesus, while opening ourselves to this alternative life of God.

SUNDAY 04 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Luke 14:25-33

Reflect: Today's reading contains one of the most difficult sayings of Jesus. The idea of hating family members in comparison to our

love for God's Reign sounds wrong, no matter how much we try to rationalise it. Yet, Jesus' words don't leave much "wobble room". But what if failing to "hate" our loved ones in comparison to our love for Jesus' way would actually hurt them? What if the only way to really love them was to love serving them and sacrificing for them even more? What if loving God's Reign above all else is the only way to really love those around us?

In our world love is often expressed in ways that are not actually very loving at all. In some communities, for example, women are told, "if he doesn't hit you, he doesn't love you"! Is this really love? Some parents, while micro-managing their children's lives, and refusing to give their children any freedom or self-determination, explain their actions by saying, "I'm doing this because I love you". Is this really love? When our "love" is any way selfish, controlling, or rooted in our own need, it is not actually love at all. But, when our love is rooted in the sacrificial, other-centred values of God's Reign, then we learn to love as Jesus did - truly and wholeheartedly.

To love like this means that we must do two things: Firstly, we must love the way of Jesus more than anything else in order to root out any selfishness or attempts to control our loved ones. And secondly, we must count the cost carefully, because to love as Jesus did is costly, painful, and sacrificial.

How can you open yourself to loving as Jesus did today?

Do: If we're honest with ourselves we'll have to admit that our loves are far from pure. Even as we seek to love those around us, our hearts are filled with selfishness, self-centredness, and self-protection, all of which war against true love. The only way to move toward a love that is pure is to admit these sinful heart attitudes, confess them to God, and ask for God's strength to enable us to repent. Today, whenever you identify impurities in your love, do the work of confession.

Pray: When my love is impure and selfish, O God, forgive me and change me.

MONDAY 05 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Psalm 2

Reflect: While this Psalm speaks of human power systems which oppose the just, serving power of God's Messiah, it also applies to any impulse within us that seeks to build a small, personal empire in opposition to God's Reign in our lives. Like human rulers, we may feel like God's call to service and love is a heavy burden that enslaves us. We would prefer to do things our way, for our own personal benefit. But, when we give in to this rebellion, we begin to work against God's Reign - and God's abundant life - both for ourselves and for others.

This is why God scoffs and proclaims again that it is God's Son who is the only true ruler of God's people. Only God's appointed king can lead God's people into justice and life, and so, as Jesus is given priority in our lives, all other authorities must be broken. Our selfish desires, our longing for power, wealth and pleasure, our personal agendas must all be brought under submission to Christ if we are not to be destroyed by our worst selves. But, if we take refuge in Jesus, giving ourselves over to his values and purposes, we find joy and the abundant life that he promised - not just for ourselves, but for others as well.

How can you submit yourself more intentionally to Jesus today?

Do: Submission to Jesus, as costly as it is to our pride and selfishness, is a simple thing to do. All it takes is a regular practice of dedication, and a constant opening to the transforming, empowering work of the Holy Spirit. Today, whenever you feel yourself resisting God's call to submit to God's Reign, invoke the power of God's Spirit to help you to dedicate yourself to Christ again.

Pray: Whenever I am tempted to resist the call of God's Reign, Holy Spirit, fill me and empower me to submit to your ways again.

TUESDAY 06 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: 1 Timothy 4:6-16

Reflect: Following Jesus is always costly, but we need to be careful not to over dramatise the challenge of the Gospel. While some of us

may be called to great, public moments of suffering, for most of us the cost is much more routine and ordinary. As Paul explained to the young leader, Timothy, the pain of following Jesus is often like an athlete's training. Godliness is developed in the daily disciplines of self-control, faith, purity, and love. As we build our lives around the lasting and life-giving values of God's Reign, those around us, who watch us and learn from us, will see what a difference this makes, and they will be drawn to live the same way.

But, to do the work of growing spiritually - embracing the daily disciplines of prayer and Scripture reading, meeting regularly with other believers, and opening ourselves to the transforming work of God's Spirit - takes commitment. It also takes courage to reject meaningless arguments while standing up for our convictions. But, as we embrace the daily cost of nurturing our souls, we grow closer to Jesus, and we grow spiritually healthy. Then, our lives, in our ordinary, daily routines, reveal God's grace and God's ways to the world - which is a significant witness.

How can you embrace the cost of being spiritually disciplined a little more today?

Do: It is one thing to do the work of spiritual practice, but unless we have some way to "measure" our progress, it is easy to become disillusioned and despondent. This is why journaling can be such a helpful spiritual discipline. As we take the time to write our thoughts, concerns, prayers, and experiences down, we are able to see how our lives are being shaped by God's Spirit. Take some time to journal today - and if you don't do this regularly, perhaps today can be a start.

Pray: I recognise that spiritual health takes work, O God, and I embrace the cost.

WEDNESDAY 07 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Luke 18:18-30

Reflect: Readings like this one from Luke's Gospel get very uncomfortable for us. It always amazes me how people who claim to take the Bible literally ignore Jesus' command to sell everything and give it to the poor. In spite of Jesus' warning about how wealth

makes it tough to enter God's Reign, many of us still frame faith as a way to material prosperity – which is easier when we define God's Reign as somewhere we go only after death. But when we engage in these biblical gymnastics, we deny ourselves the opportunity to discover the real life that Jesus offers.

Make no mistake, Jesus' words here are hard to hear and put into practice. Even the disciples were disturbed and asked who could possibly be saved. But Jesus' point is that the values of God's Reign - simplicity, service and sacrifice - are so completely different from the values of the world that those who are most invested in this world's systems - the wealthy, the powerful, the well-connected - find it hard to follow Jesus. They have too much to lose to easily give it up and embrace the alternative ways of God's Reign. Those who have nothing to lose find it much easier, of course. The promise though, is that, if we embrace the cost, we receive far more - life, community, love - than we have lost. This is true both now and into eternity!

How can you reduce your investment into the systems of this world a little today?

Do: The practice of giving is a powerful way to identify and change the attitudes of our hearts. When our hearts are captured by wealth and power, we will find giving and service very difficult. But when our hearts are captured by God's Reign we will naturally share what we have with others. But, even if we find giving difficult, making it a regular practice will help to change our hearts. Make today a day of reckless generosity.

Pray: As I give of my possessions and of myself, O God, may your Reign capture my heart more and more.

THURSDAY 08 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Psalm 14

Reflect: Today's Psalm affirms two basic truths about human existence. The first is that everyone worships something. It is foolish to pretend that we do not build our lives around some person, some thing, or some ideology that gives us meaning and purpose. But not all gods are equal. Many of the little gods we create or adopt for

ourselves fail to lead us to the best life, but instead pull us into brokenness and corruption. When we deny that our lives are shaped by core values - by worship of something - or when we give our lives to things that nurture our worst selves, the pain we bring into the world is destructive.

The second truth in today's Psalm is that God always restores God's people. The last verse is filled with a certainty that when (not if) God restores God's people, there is great joy. So, even though we may be surrounded by people who live broken and destructive lives, God is always with us, and God's presence always leads us to life even in the midst of the pain.

For followers of Jesus both of these truths operate simultaneously. We all wrestle with other gods that seek our allegiance - relationships, achievements, possessions, or ideas that we cling to - and we all have to do the work of repentance to release our addiction to these things. This is the cost of discipleship. But it is also the way to experiencing God's restoration and presence.

Of what addictions to little gods do you need to repent today?

Do: When we're faced with little gods that call for our allegiance, we need to choose whether to focus our gaze on these enticements or to shift our gaze to Christ. The discipline of praise is the best way to shift our eyes back to Jesus and to remember that God alone is worthy of our worship. Today, allow praise to free you from addiction to any little gods that may tempt you.

Pray: I praise you, Jesus, for you alone deserve my devotion.

FRIDAY 09 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Jeremiah 4:1-10

Reflect: There is a principle in Old Testament prophecy that must always be kept in mind. When God speaks words of hope and blessing, the people can miss this promise if they turn away from God's ways. And, when God speaks words of judgment and warning, the people can be rescued if they return to God's ways. We see both sides of this principle at work in Jeremiah's prophecy today. In the final verse (10) Jeremiah bravely challenges God because, although God had promised peace to Jerusalem, Jeremiah

is now called to speak a warning. This is because the people had acted in ways that undermined their national unity and opened them up to invasion by foreign nations. They had ignored justice and had forgotten the values that would unite them with God and with each other. So, they had made peace impossible for themselves.

Yet, at the start of today's reading, God invites the people to return to God and find healing. If the people should choose to reject their idols and become humble, just, honest, and righteous, they could be healed and restored. But God knows that they are not interested in this work of repentance, and so the prophet is inspired to speak the words of judgement that follow. The people were unable to recognise that repentance was the pathway to healing, life and peace.

There is no one who does not need to do the work of repentance at some point in their lives. We all fail, and we all hurt others and ourselves. But, if we embrace the journey of repentance, healing and reconciliation can come. Where do you need to do this work in your life today?

Do: From Sunday, repentance will be the focus of our meditations. In preparation for next week, take some time today to reflect on the gracious gift that repentance is. Then, give thanks to God for this, and other, life-giving gifts of grace.

Pray: Thank you, O God, for ensuring that I always have a way back to you, even when I fail.

SATURDAY 10 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: John 10:11-21

Reflect: The religious leaders of Jesus' day were supposed to be helping the people to find their way into deeper communion with God, but instead, they used their position to line their own pockets and control the people. When Jesus claimed to be the Good Shepherd, they knew that he was referring to Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezekiel 34) against the bad shepherds of Israel and positioning himself in contrast to them. But Jesus went even further. He spoke about knowing his sheep - being intimately connected with his followers - and he gladly committed to laying down his life so that his followers

could find life and union with God. This is something that no other religious leader was willing to do.

But Jesus seems to have sensed that his death would not be the end. He proclaimed that he would take his life up again - also for the sake of his followers (sheep). Resurrection is not just something that happened to Jesus but is available to all who turn to God and receive God's life. The listeners were divided in their responses to this teaching. Some thought Jesus was mad, or demon possessed. But, others, remembering a blind man that Jesus had healed (in John 9), were drawn to Jesus. This is not unusual - those who prefer not to do the work of repentance will always find excuses to avoid facing the truth about themselves, and about God's gift of life.

Are there any places in your life where you're resisting doing the work of repentance that could lead you to resurrection?

Do: When we make mistakes, or do things that hurt others and ourselves, it is not always because we are deliberately sinning. Sometimes we can't see the negative impact of our actions. That's why we need to take time to listen and allow God's Spirit to convict us and show us where repentance is necessary. Today, make time to listen for the Spirit's voice of conviction.

Pray: When I go astray, Holy Spirit, please show me, and lead me back to your way.