

Thankful for New Hope, Vision, and Mercies

Message Magazine's Online Devotional for Thursday, January 1, 2015

Based Upon Luke 17

Congratulations! If you are reading this, you have made it to the year 2015, by the grace of God. Who would have thought this earth would continue as it is so long? Who would have thought you would be here, or I? God has been so good to each of us, hasn't He? With new years, come new hope, new vision, new mercies, and new resolve. What are your plans for 2015? Do you want to read the Bible through? Do you want to be a better spouse, friend, or child? Do you plan to travel or get that degree you've desired for years? Have you committed your plans to God for guidance in accomplishing them or abandoning them altogether as His providence may indicate? God's plans for you in 2015 are the same as they have ever been—plans of peace and not of evil, until Jesus returns.

In our focus chapter we see a quick lesson of faith and gratitude, which should inform our manner of appreciation for the year. There were 10 lepers ostracized from society due to their contagion. Somehow, they were blessed to encounter Christ, and in a desperate cry, they all asked Him to have mercy upon them. Being the good God He is, He cleansed them all of their disease, according to their faith. However, only one of them, as he recognized that he was healed, immediately went back to Jesus to give thanks for His goodness and mercy toward him. He was a Samaritan. Jesus asked where the other men were who also were healed. And, according to His manifold grace, Jesus took his healing to another level. Jesus made the man whole!

It is safe to infer from the text, since Luke made a point to mention that this man was a Samaritan, that the others were Jews. Why did not those who were supposedly the people of God, immediately give thanks? Had they become so familiar with the God of their fathers that they failed to be impressed by His goodness? Had they become so blasé concerning His mercies, that once they received them, they immediately took Him for granted? Was the man who would have been twice outcast, once, because of his leprosy and twice, because he was a stranger to the faith, a stronger believer than those who purported faith? This is a sobering question with obvious implications. But, I would like us to glean this simple lesson to carry us through the new year God has given: We must never, ever become insensitive to the blessings of God. We must be ever thankful and show gratitude that He has accepted all who have faith in Him through the sacrifice of Jesus.

Live thanks in 2015, friends and be a blessing. Jesus is coming soon. Are you ready to meet Him in peace?

Doing The Most

Tired of trying so hard, yet falling so short?

Commit your time and talents to God in 2015.

Message Magazine's Online Devotional for Wednesday, December 31, 2014

Based Upon Luke 16

This morning's Bible reading is particularly poignant to me today. I was

doing a self-inventory as I prepared myself for the day (this is very important to do, by the way). As I listened to an inspirational thought, I had to honestly ask myself, "Are you serving another god in place of the Most High God?" The reason this came to mind was simple—my mind is consumed with good things.

As you obviously know, since you are reading this, I am a freelance writer. I am also an author. I recently also discovered a love for audiobook narration. I get up at 2am for narrating and auditioning to narrate for audiobook production. Ironically, I hate to read, but this newfound love overrules in this case. It occurred to me, since I have been writing for years, that I can actually get paid to read and write. These are the two things I hated most in school. Most of my books are Christ-centered, with the exception of one, so the lion share of my focus in writing is to promote the message of Christ. I have done a good bit of narration of conscious and health related materials, but would also like to do more with Christ-centered books.

Why did I tell you this? Is it some sly way to give you a snapshot of my résumé? No. I wanted to highlight the insidious nature of hyper-focus on seemingly benign, or even good things. It is quite possible for people engaged in "good" things to lose focus of the Best. Someone asked me if my mind is going 24/7, because of the amount of content I pump out each day. And sadly, I had to say that it is. When I go to bed, I sleep very well, but when I get up, my mind is flooded with how to improve my reading and writing craft.

What is brass-tacks for you who are reading this? Well, we all are faced with a daily decision when it comes to the talents and gifts with which our Lord has entrusted us. Will we sit on our gifts? Will we use them to the point of exhaustion? Will we surrender them to God, to be used entirely for His glory? Stewardship is a matter of surrendering our entire beings to God, and then utilizing all that we have, and all that we are, in a way that brings Him the most joy.

So, I am going to start praying about this more directly. Maybe you can adapt my prayer to your situation. Here it goes:

"Lord, there are a great many things with which you have entrusted me. I have been desiring to do the most at giving you glory with them. Yet, I realize that I cannot be trusted to do this on my own. Will you please show me how to avoid the pitfalls of doing good for the sake of doing good? Will you please birth within me a dissatisfaction with anything short of resting squarely inside your will? I want to return your gifts with interest, not squander them through a skewed focus."

Now, go in peace for the New Year, friends and surrender your all to the One who loved you first.

At What Price?

Message Magazine's Online Devotional for Monday, December 29, 2014

Based Upon Luke 14

Life is about counting the cost. Every single day the Lord awakens us, we must decide what actions, inactions, deeds, misdeeds, etc. are worth to us. For example, I must decide at night as I am preparing for bed, whether I will have enough rest to conquer the day ahead. Will I be refreshed to awaken

early, so I can worship before I take on the trials of life at work, and at play? If I will not be, how much will that cost me? When I am considering marriage, what impact will that mate have on my temporal and eternal well-being? Will that mate help or hinder me? What will be the cost of our relationship? If I am in pursuit of worldly recognition and reward while my spiritual life suffers due to lack of commitment, what will be the price? If I forsake all that I am, and all that I have in surrender to God's plans for my life, what will it cost?

Are you willing to sell all to follow Christ? Are you willing to relinquish darling sins, distracting vices, diabolical plans, and desperate helplessness to follow Him? What price did He pay to deliver us from sin and death? What price did He pay when He gave His life in love for those who would not love Him in return?

God's Appointed Time—Not Before, Not After

Message Magazine's Online Devotional for Sunday, December 28, 2014

Based Upon Luke 13

Satan assailed the entire journey of Christ's ministry on earth. From the time of Christ's birth, the enemy tried to cut His life short, because he knew that he would be defeated, as when he was cast out of heaven. Hatred for Jesus caused Satan to inspire men to attempt to murder Jesus. Herod signed a decree to murder every child two years of age and younger, in the hope of eliminating a potential king whom he thought would threaten his dominion. Many times evil men sought to lay hands on Jesus to either stone Him or throw Him from a mountain to His death (Luke 4:30). All of these attempts failed, because there was an appointed time for the willing sacrifice of Jesus' life. Often, He said that His time had not yet come. When His time came, He would yield His life for the salvation of humankind. "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father." (John 10:17, 18).

As He did regularly, Jesus was ministering, when some Pharisees approached Him. "The same day there came certain of the Pharisees, saying unto him, Get thee out, and depart hence: for Herod will kill thee. And he said unto them, Go ye, and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures to day and to morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected. Nevertheless I must walk to day, and to morrow, and the day following: for it cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem." (Luke 13:31-33). As usual, the devil wanted to take Jesus' life prematurely, but he couldn't. Jesus prophesied that He would be perfected on the third day. What was Jesus' perfection? What event did Jesus often reference when threatened by death? He knew that only when the time was right, He would be perfected through His sacrificial death on the cross. Jesus' reference of today, tomorrow, and the third day was directly related to His ministry on earth. He spoke using the symbols of the Old Testament to state that His public ministry would be no less than or no more than approximately three years. He employed the day for a year principle

found in scripture relating to symbolic Bible prophecy (Numbers 14:34; Ezekiel 4:6). Each day in symbolic Bible prophecy equals one literal year. It is a blessing to know that the Lord has our lives under His control. When the enemy attempts to take our lives, God must first permit him to. It is only as God's people have fulfilled their individual mission that they will lay down their heads in death. If we trust the Lord as did Jesus, our eternal lives are secure in Him.

God's Love Disperses Fear of Rejection

Message Magazine's Online Devotional for Sabbath, December 27, 2014

Based Upon Luke 12

For those who trust in God, there is absolutely no need to fear. There is no need to fear harm by people who can destroy our bodies. There is no need to fear that God will neglect to provide our daily needs. There is no need to fear that Jesus will mysteriously develop divine amnesia and forget to return to earth at the appointed time to take His people to that heavenly bliss that He has been preparing for them. For those who trust in God, there is absolutely no need to fear. We need simply to place our entire trust in Him and help others to do the same. Yes, there are responsibilities that come with this sort of trust, but with complete trust also comes the power of the Holy Spirit to fulfill our responsibilities.

One fear that insidiously cripples the minds of people more than economic collapse, war, and natural disasters is the fear of rejection. This is part of the reason many inner-city youth resort to violence against innocent people to earn their positions among gang members when their families are splintered. This is why some of our children are staging online suicides when they have had their fill of bullying. This is why many of our women sell sexuality through film, exotic dancing, and prostitution. Much of the fears stems from unresolved guilt feelings for wrongs people have committed or perceived wrongs. They lack a sense of real connection with God and thus some go to the extreme of looking for acceptance in all the wrong places.

Jesus made it very clear that, while it is not advisable or a display of respect, those who speak against Jesus can be forgiven for their sins. However, those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, they will never be forgiven. A misunderstanding of this has caused much fear of being rejected by God. People wonder whether they have finally committed the "unpardonable sin." They fear the ultimate rejection—the rejection by God. Let me just pause right here to be very clear: There is no such thing as any certain individual sin event that is unpardonable. While sin is never to be trifled with, Jesus gave His life to save sinners. The only sin that is unpardonable, whether it is lying, pride, immorality, stealing, selfishness, etc., is that for which we do not sincerely seek forgiveness. You see, the office of the Holy Spirit is to bring the awareness of our sin to us with the power to confess and forsake it (no matter what sin it is). He brings godly sorrow for sin and the ability to turn our backs on it, to walk in the ways of righteousness. Therefore, as long as we continue to hear the calls of the Spirit to repent, we have not grieved Him away (blasphemed against Him). This is reason to rejoice! We have no need to fear rejection by God! This is also reason to be diligent seekers of our God and not place ourselves in position

to cease hearing the Spirit's voice, thus becoming callously unable to repent.

Unholy fear is for those who are perishing spiritually. There is no fear in love relationship with God. Love that completes us banishes unwarranted fear. Faith in God is the conduit through which all of His power moves into our lives. Have faith in God, resist feelings of unwarranted fear, and experience the fullness of joy in the Holy Spirit. Amen

Prayer That Takes Us to Heavenly Places

Message Magazine's Online Devotional for Friday, December 26, 2014

Based Upon Luke 11

Who better than Jesus could there possibly be to teach us how to pray? As He taught one day about the compassion of His Father who welcomes us into communion with Him, to open up our minds to Him in prayer, He also taught about the utter futility of being like heathens who think they can repetitively chant their way into His good graces. He continued by saying that even those who claim to be commandments keepers sometimes perform prayers in a manner to be seen by people, instead of heard by the Almighty. He who sees in the secret places of prayer, rewards the petitioner openly. Far more than some formula for answered prayer, or a prayer speech to be mindlessly recited as a preamble to truehearted prayer, is that which we affectionately call the Lord's Prayer. It reads, "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen" (Matthew 6:9-13). There is so much sweet truth revealed in this prayer, but we will only focus on one phrase—"Our Father which art in heaven..."

The Most High absolutely loves to be called our Father. And, what proud father does not like to hear his child call his name? I can remember deciding what our son would call me before he was born. I grew up in New York City where many New Yoricians (Puerto Ricans who migrated to New York City) lived. As in all cultures and subcultures, they had special names for their fathers. The name that engendered the most affectionate feelings in me was, "Papi" (Poppy). So, this is the name we taught our son. I love to hear when He calls me by that name. It makes me feel even more tenderhearted toward him.

God loves to hear the love, dependence, trust, and tenderness encapsulated by us calling Him, "Father." While I cannot relate to this sentiment as a son, I do appreciate seeing how our son just loves being with his papi. Since he's young, he does have his toddler reasons like wanting me to buy him some juice, let him play with my electronics, take him places, answer his endless questions, or let him climb me. But, that's OK. He wants to be around me. When he is afraid, uncomfortable, or lonely, he does not hesitate to come to me. I'm his papi and it is my pleasure to give him absolutely anything that is in his best interest. This is the case with our heavenly Father. Heaven is His throne room. It is the holiest of all places wherein dwelleth

righteousness (2 Peter 3:13). Into our Father's presence we are welcomed to come boldly (Exodus 26:34; Hebrews 4:16).

So, when we address our loving Father, with the awareness of His holiness, beneficence, and His throne room, we are ushered into a reality often overlooked. I am going to give it to you in a quick bite, so don't miss it: Sin, trials, and temptation are subject to the proverbial gravitational pull of earth. The enemy only holds sway down here (Job 1:7; Revelation 12:10). Victories over these are found in God's presence. Therefore, when we pray, directing our attention and submission to heavenly places where our Father's throne is, we are beyond the grasp of the enemy! It is a blessing that Jesus condescended to dwell among us. However, the goal of His condescension was to elevate us to heavenly places forever.

Whether you have an earthly father or not, I would encourage you to enter the throne room to talk to your heavenly Father as much as possible, knowing that He loves to hear your voice. Tell Him all of your hopes, dreams, burdens, gripes, and complaints. He will never send you away. Allow His Spirit to wash over you as you just linger there. Don't rush, just linger. Recount the many Bible promises that apply to your situation and ask Him to keep them. Look for any excuse at all to lift your heart in prayer. This will certainly usher you into heavenly places.

Humble Love

Message Magazine's Online Devotional for Monday, December 22, 2014

Based Upon Luke 7

How much more humbling an experience can someone have than to bow and wash another person's feet?

We read of the story of Jesus preparing for His crucifixion and teaching the last object lesson of humility to His disciples. Although He knew that they would all forsake Him and flee when the rubber met the road, and one disciple in particular would outright betray Him into enemy hands, He humbled Himself and washed their feet. How much more humbling an experience can someone have than to bow and wash another person's feet?

Then we have another story of such washing. Except this time the one doing the washing was not the high and holy One. It was a lowly woman who had been dejected, bound, abused, and sought vital connection with her Lord. It is true that she was what would have been considered an unsavory character, but is that not what we all are despite the fact that we convince ourselves otherwise? She knew Jesus would be at Simon the Pharisee's house and would stop at nothing to show her gratitude. Of course, as was often the case, this leader murmured in his mind that if Jesus were a holy prophet, He would certainly have known what kind of woman touched Him, and would most certainly not have allowed her to do so. She worshipped Her loving Lord with her tears of experience, the richest ointments of her love, and the hair which was her beauty. She held Jesus in supreme regard as she kissed His feet, yet the Pharisee chose to criticize her homage and her God, rather than humble himself in gratitude.

Jesus saw Simon's ingratitude, criticism, and disdain. Knowing all things, Jesus checked him for it. Simon, despite the fact that he hosted Christ, did not give him water to bathe His feet. Simon, despite the fact that he hosted

Christ, did not greet Him with a kiss. Simon, despite the fact that he hosted Christ, did not anoint His head with oil. Incidentally, if you study Scripture closely, you will discover that the same Simon the Pharisee, was also Simon the Leper. You read correctly. The same person, who was considered one of the spiritual elite, was once considered among the most outcast of society due to what many considered to be a scourge from God—leprosy. This man, chose to forget how great God had been to him and snubbed another person's worship.

This story offers us many great lessons. Among them is that Jesus welcomes humble, loving offerings of worship. The fact that this woman was a career sinner actually recommended her to Christ, because she was willing to surrender her will to Christ. As Jesus said, those who embrace their forgiveness most, also love most. It is unfortunate that Simon forgot that God had graciously healed him. He had the greatest Person who ever lived in his house and missed the ultimate healing.

So, in light of this story, we too have a choice to make. These two characters have modeled for us the two paths we can choose: We can either be forgiven and humbly love much, or reject the richest blessing of healing the world would ever know. Upon this, we should meditate throughout the day. Which will you choose?

So, This is What Democracy Looks Like”

In a sea of many, one man of faith emerges from a circle of comfort to fight alongside the hurting.

The “Justice for All” march, organized by Al Sharpton’s National Action Network, pushed for federal action to stop police brutality and racial profiling throughout the country. It was all prompted by the recent deaths of Eric Garner, who died as police in Staten Island, New York tried to arrest him for selling loose cigarettes, and Michael Brown, who was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri along with grand juries in both cases declining to indict the white officers responsible for their deaths.

The Washington D.C. march, of which I was a part was just one of many marches, demonstrations, die-ins throughout the country in major cities such as New York, Boston, Los Angeles and Oakland, under the slogan “National Day of Resistance” on Saturday December 13, 2014. In the days leading up to the march, I was unsure about the turnout. Nearly everyone I discussed it with expressed ignorance about the event. Those that were aware harbored serious doubts about the utility of marches. As a result, I had serious doubts as to whether there would be a significant turnout, but I was pleasantly surprised when I boarded the Metro(rail) and realized that it was only my church circle of friends that seemed to be unfamiliar about the march.

At Freedom Plaza, the gathering place for the march, the beginnings of a crowd of at least 10,000 held placards reading #blacklivesmatter and #alllivesmatter. Their cry was an organized and on message, “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” and “I Can’t Breathe!”



Before the march, I had discussions with people who questioned the relevance of protest. It is an outdated model, they argued, or it ultimately produces nothing tangible. Most suggested the need for utilizing the economic power that African-Americans wield to let their voice speak. My position is more nuanced, however. The civil rights movements and all other successful movements utilized a potent trinity of marches, protests, and boycotts. This in turn leads to changes in legislation, as incumbent politicians are then beholden to a sensitized, informed, more unified, and galvanized voting base. As I frequently heard marchers yelling in unison at the March for Justice, "This is what democracy looks like."

Sensitizing and galvanizing was the exact effect of hearing from the families of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice. Tamir was the twelve year-old boy who was fatally shot in November by a rookie Cleveland police officer within two seconds of arriving to investigate a complaint about the boy carrying gun. The gun turned out to be a toy. Joining those families was Levar Jones, the man shot by a South Carolina state trooper in September when he reached for his license at the officer's request. Kadiadou Diallo, mother of Amadou Diallo (an unarmed 23 year old man, who was gunned down in 1999 by four officers, all of whom were subsequently acquitted), offered a sobering reminder that this narrative has been repeatedly played out far too often in this country.

"Why do our sons look suspicious?" asked Diallo. "Time and time again, we are going through the same history, and reliving the tragedy every time..."

The masses of people give a bit of hope that this tragedy does not have to a repetitive narrative. It was refreshing and encouraging to see the diversity of humanity—Black, White, Asian, young and old—marching because this is a human rights issue. "Look at the masses," said Eric Gardner's mother, Gwen Carr. "Black, White, all races, all religions ... we need to stand like this at all times."

The case of her son, gasping for breath in a chokehold, recorded for all to watch, took away the temptation to rationalize away the actions of the police, as some may have been tempted to do in the Brown case. Video of the Eric Gardner and Tamir Rice killings, alongside with the video of the shooting of Levar Jones, and against the backdrop of Trayvon Martin, has forced most to acknowledge, whether they want to or not, the gravity of the problem and the truth in the decades long complaints of the Black community. The grief, confusion, frustration, and anger toward law enforcement and its apparent lack of accountability that these families have felt, rumbles in people nationwide. Among those for whom this problem resonates, are people who purport to exercise faith whose narrative is focused on the ultimate

triumph of truth and justice. Like the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 60's, Christians should be at the forefront of issues where injustice rears its head until "justice flows like water, and righteousness, like an unfailing stream." After all, the Bible is replete with instructions on seeking justice and correcting oppression.

- Psalm 82:3 "Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy."

- Proverbs 31:9 "Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy."

- Jeremiah 22:3 " Thus saith the Lord; Execute ye judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place."

- Romans 12:15 "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep."

- 1 John 3:17-18 " But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?

- Isaiah 1:17 "Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow."

Until the day that all things are made new, Christians have a moral duty to do something.

Jesus Calling

Message Magazine's Online Devotional for Wednesday, December 10, 2014

Based Upon Mark 11

In His hand is your debt paid, free and clear.

It's amazing what price people are paying in churches all around the world, just to fit in.

You may have heard of churches that are quick to hold healing services, send water, or some bit of cloth...well...for a fee. They don't call it a fee, because that would be uncouth. "If you sow a \$1,000 [or some other amount] seed, you will reap abundant blessings and physical healing," they say. Perhaps you've not experienced anything that stark, but you been to churches where status, credentials, pedigree, or material demonstration are payment for acceptance into their exclusive cliques. God's people have struggled with this kind of thing from the beginning.

The book of Revelation depicts our Savior as walking among the golden candle sticks, which represents His presence in the midst of His people in sanctuary language. He is ever present to bless and to redeem us. Yet, there are times when the light of His presence reveals the dim reality of our merchandising. Sometimes His house of Prayer intended to welcome all people into fellowship with Him, has been reduced to our puny little houses of discrimination where we must display certain social currency in order to be accepted. If there is one thing that angers our Lord, it is whenever His professed people bar anyone from experiencing Him in His fulness. He jealously sends a scourge to those who do such things.

I am happy to know that our God is protective of me. Like you, I have experienced all manner of rejection over my lifetime. The place I expect to

be most welcomed is among God's people, and this is His will for us. The One who created of one blood every nation, is now making His final call to redeem every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. From the confusion of false religion and denigrated society, Jesus is calling His people to come out. He's preparing a place wherein dwells righteousness for those who place their trust in Him. He has paid the ultimate price, so you can receive this blessing for free.

God's Replacement Warranty

Message Magazine's Online Devotional for Tuesday, December 9, 2014

Based Upon Mark 10

What did you give up to follow Christ? He will give it back.

When I consider purchasing any item in a store or on the internet, there are a few things that I must be clear on before I go through with the transaction. I must understand the return policy, warranty, and overall replacement policy. With the exception of the price, these three have my greatest focus. I don't like being stuck with a product with which I am unhappy. Whenever I find that either the product is faulty or not up to my standards, I like to return or exchange it for something more suitable. I also like the security of knowing that if it goes bad in the next several months, there is a replacement warranty in place to protect my investment. Looking for some affirmation, Peter spoke to Jesus. After having been struck, along with the other disciples, with the reality of salvation being about God and not about human attainments, Peter said that they had left everything in order to follow Christ. Then Jesus began to explain the lifetime replacement warranty to the disciples. "And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life." (Mark 10:29, 30). Jesus understood that life without Him is faulty. It is not worth retaining. We would be well served to take it in to have it replaced. The friends that we have lost by choosing Christ will be replaced with new ones who will help us win others for Him. Those who edify us and support our new life with Jesus will supplement the family members who do not know the Lord. We will never be without somewhere to live when we are in Christ because every believer in the world is at our disposal in our times of need. If we ever need food, clothing, or anything essential for life, God has promised that He will supply it.

We will not always have a bed of ease when we leave all to follow Jesus. We look forward to persecutions just as He experienced because we are not more important than Him. The servants will not escape trials if the Master did not. The promise is that all we have forsaken will be more than supplied, and we will receive the gift of eternal life.

The replacement warranty on our lives says that if anyone realizes, by the power of the Holy Ghost, that their lives are faulty, He will replace it for an upgraded model; a model that will not fall apart or malfunction. We all need to have our lives replaced for a complete life in Christ. Pray that the

Lord will teach us all how to forsake all in order to follow Him.