

LOOKING UP - February 8

“Wagging a Finger or Lending a Hand?”

Last Thursday I shared a devotional on how Jesus invites those who are weary and burdened to find their rest in him (Matthew 11:28). Over the weekend it got me thinking of another bible passage that gives us some insight into one of the most vital ways Jesus helps us with our burdens...

“Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1,2).

This passage reminds us of several powerful truths...

- God takes sin in the lives of his children very seriously and so should we
- The motive of a truly spiritual person is gentle restoration, not harsh condemnation
- It is a delusion to think we are better than others - we all have our struggles and we all need grace
- When we bear each others' burdens we have the honour of participating in the greatest work of Jesus - the restoring of souls.

Just imagine what the world would look like if everyone who claimed to follow Jesus lived this way...

What about us? When you see someone stuck in sin does your heart desire their judgment or their restoration? Are you drawn towards gossip or grace? It could be that we are truly the ones in need of restoration and need to take hold of God's gracious forgiveness today.

Do you know of someone who is struggling with a burden? Is there someone in your life who has fallen away and needs a helping hand? With humility and gentleness reach out today...

Steven Amarin - First Baptist Church Tillsonburg

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LOOKING UP - February 9

“Held Together” - Colossians 1

Jesus has been described as many different things by many different people. Some say he was a wise teacher, a prophet, the founder of a religion, just a man, a prominent historical figure. Who do you believe Jesus is?

Colossians 1 holds some of the most powerful statements in the bible about who Jesus is. Here he is described in divine terms as the “Image of the invisible God” (v.15), “In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (v.19), essentially God took on flesh and dwelt among us as Jesus Christ. Fully God and fully man. We also read, “He is before all things”(v.17), “all things were created through him and for him” (v.16), here we see Jesus, before he took on human form, presiding over creation with divine power along with the Father and Holy Spirit. We read something fascinating in verse 17, that “In him all things hold together”. Jesus is the sustainer of creation, holding it together, protecting it from disintegrating into chaos, restoring what sin breaks.

It is amazing to consider that the reason Jesus was able to perform miracles among us - like healing disease, walking on water, multiplying food to feed thousands, and ultimately rising from death - was that he was not bound by the physical laws that govern our universe - because he set them in place. Being God, he was unlimited by what limits us - he is above all and has ultimate authority over creation. Even so, he laid his life down and his blood was shed on the cross to atone for our sin. He did this to make peace and reconcile humanity with God (v.20). Only Jesus could do this and he did it willingly out of love.

This is the description of one who is much more than a mere man, just a wise teacher, another prophet...this is the description of who God is and what he was willing to do to show his divine love to those he created.

Lord, who am I to wrap my mind around who You are and how You created this universe? For all our supposed advancements, we humans are still so limited, so broken and in need of repair. Jesus, I have heard you hold all things together - could that include me today? With all my limitations, I rest in your unlimited power and grace. Help me reach to you in faith - and take hold of the measure of strength and understanding I need to be a success in Your eyes today. In the name of Jesus I pray, Amen.

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LOOKING UP - February 10

“Ultimate Treasure”

What things give you a sense of self-worth and security? What are the most important personal assets you have? Maybe your finances, the value of your home and possessions; maybe your education, skills and job; maybe your physical assets like youth, strength or beauty; maybe your family standing or social status. What things are you counting on to measure your worth and bring you a measure of contentment? What things are you hoping others notice and admire about you?

Paul was a man who could easily boast of things like his lineage, education and abilities...but instead he said something quite shocking, *“I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8).*

While it is not wrong to appreciate our many worldly blessings - The challenge we run into in the Christian life is when we become dependent on these things to give us meaning, security and worth. For Paul, anything in this world, when compared to Jesus was worthless rubbish. He knew that full well because he literally lost everything for the sake of following Jesus. His worldly poverty enabled him to see the unmatched treasure he had in knowing Jesus.

I think of the time when the Lord divided the promised land among the sons of Jacob, the tribe of Levi received no share of the land. God simply said, *“I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel” (Numbers 18:20).* Far from being empty-handed, the Levites were given something greater than a patch of land, they were given the special privilege of ministering in the presence of God.

While possessions, strength and admiration are gained and lost - those who look to the Lord alone for meaning, security and contentment will find a treasure that cannot be taken away.

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LOOKING UP - February 11

“Priorities”

One of the reasons people like to reminisce about the past is that we often think of it as a simpler time. Life these days has become so complicated, whether it be in our world, our relationships, our work or our faith.

Processing the abundance of information, choosing between a million options, balancing the responsibilities, managing the expectations and opinions of those around us - there are times where we can become so consumed in trying to figure things out that we experience what is called “analysis paralysis”. Sometimes the experts we consult and the books we read only serve to make things more convoluted and leave us feeling like we don't measure up.

Every so often it helps to come back to the basics and remind ourselves what our greatest priorities are. I think of three passages in the bible that have helped me to get centred when life has become complicated...

“Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:12-14).

“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And [Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:36-40).

These brief passages could be distilled into two foundational priorities for our life...

Priority #1: Love God with humble reverence.

Priority #2: Love others with selfless kindness.

When we get these two priorities straight, all other things will fit into their right place and have God's blessing. If this complicated world has left you feeling weary, reflect on these passages and simply do the next right thing...

LOOKING UP - February 12

“What is Love?”

With Valentine's Day on the way my kids are getting excited to share the stash of treats we just bought with others in their class. Some of us might feel that this is just another Hallmark holiday designed to empty our wallets all under the pretense of feigning our love. Maybe so, but what about love? This year where the love in many relationships has been put to the test, it is good to consider what love really is.

Some describe love as a feeling you get when you are with someone special, an emotion you experience when conditions are just right, something you fall into. But, in God's Word we discover that love is described in a much deeper way than just feelings and emotions. In 1 Corinthians 13 we come across the famous “love passage” and while this scripture is often quoted at weddings, the type of love here isn't just meant for marriage, it is meant for every relationship in the life of a follower of Jesus. It says...

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

At first glance we quickly realize what an impossibly high calling love is. While there might be some good feelings that accompany it, true love is made of something greater. Love involves a commitment to the good of another before one's self. It is less about hormones, and more about things like humility, courage, selflessness, integrity, forgiveness. Love isn't something you fall into, it is something you step up to.

How do we love this way? It is hard to love others when we do not know what it means to be loved. Here's the awesome part; when we consider this quality of love - it describes the kind of love that Jesus has shown to us. Consider the words of Jesus...

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends” (John 15:13).

These are words that Jesus backed up with his actions. Our capacity to love in this way comes from the fact that Jesus has first shown this kind of selfless love towards us in laying down his life for us. We are invited to receive it, to be changed by it, and to give it to others the way it has already been given to us. That is true love!

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