

We've never seen anything like this before. What is true for this Coronavirus (COVID-19) was also said about Jesus (Matthew 7:28; Mark 2:12; Luke 5:26; John 20:25).

As the burden of "distancing" ourselves begins to grip our days and choke the joy out of our life, we need Jesus more than ever. We need to tap into His work in our lives. We need to remember that the Risen Savior is still at work in the world today!

These devotions are to help us during the week of Easter. They can be done as an individual, small group, or as a family devotional. I would like for us, together (even though we are apart), to take a few minutes out of each day and focus on the Lord Jesus. I believe the Lord wants to speak to us, both collectively and individually.

These lessons come from Jesus on that Thursday night in the Upper Room. These are His last lessons for His Disciples on that side of the Cross. These lessons were spoken, and should be read, with great intensity and urgency.

Over the years, I have sat with these passages. I have tried to picture myself in the corner of the room. Candles lit. Shadows cast. The aroma of cooked lamb fills the room. The careful and calculated chit-chat among the Disciples confirm that there is extreme tension between these men. Jesus has already washed the Disciples' feet. And since Judas Iscariot has left the room, a greater sense of family mixed with a more vulnerable spirit of fear has permeated every man. Jesus speaks. There is a hush, and the men lean in to soak up every word.

Shhh. Let's lean in. For the Lord is speaking.

Day 1 - Palm Sunday

Pray:

Lord, please help me understand Your work and Your care of me and in the people I love. In Jesus's name I pray...

Read: John 15:1-2

Jesus has ordained you and I to produce "fruit that will last" (John 15:16). God fully anticipates and expects the life and the salvation He has given us to matter in this world. Jesus saved us to make a difference. In this passage, there are two types of branches: (1) Those branches that do not produce fruit, and (2) Those branches that produce fruit.

The branches that produce fruit get special attention. However, that special attention is not always easy. Look carefully at verse 2. "Every branch that bears fruit." No fruit-bearing branch is left out. Jesus sees not only what we are doing, but He also sees our potential. And because He loves us, because He believes in us (maybe even more than we believe in ourselves), He prunes (cuts away) at the fruit-bearing branch.

The non-producing branch is cut too. The non-producing branch is cut away to be thrown away.

The fruit-bearing branch is cut. This cutting away is not easy. The branch did not prune itself. The work of God intervened and cut away. Sometimes it seems that the Gardener (Husbandman - KJV) doesn't know what He's doing.

The branch may protest and say, "Hey! What's going on? I mean, life is happening here. I'm growing. I'm producing fruit. I have finally matured enough to give back. Only to discover that You are cutting me back? Why? What have I done? Are You trying to discourage me? Because it looks like as soon as I start doing good, I get knocked down."

Ask a husbandman and they will tell you that the pruning is done to stimulate root growth in order for more fruit production next year. You see, the branches that produce fruit need further root growth to sustain the fruit they will produce in the future. Simply put, the fruit production is only as good as its roots.

So, when we go through the pruning season, we need to understand that the Lord is grateful. The Lord is also excited about what's ahead. And the Lord is calling us back to Himself. Fruit will come, but only as we are grounded and rooted in Him.

What kind of fruit has been produced in your life?

In what ways have you experienced a pruning in your life?

What practical ways can you focus on Jesus during this time?

Day 2 - Monday

Pray:

Lord, teach me the importance of remaining in You. In Jesus's name I pray ...

Read: John 15:4-5

Jesus has put us into some pretty important positions. We are children. We are parents. We are brothers or sisters. We are friends. We are fellow-believers. We have some responsibilities of trust, devotion, and connection. People are counting on us.

And we are trying. We are trying to do our best and be there for the people that need us. We are trying to do our best at the responsibilities we've been given. But it is so hard to give your 100% best everyday, all the time.

We get tired. We get "wo'-out!" Sometimes our bodies, our brains, our spirits, and our faith just need a break, a rest. Sometimes life can be just so exhausting.

And even though we feel like we don't have any more to give, life just keeps coming asking more from us. That's why Jesus calls us to remain in Him.

The Daily Grind is such a grind that the Lord knows that He alone is the only One who can fill us.

This passage talks about our need to abide in Him. We don't need to look for Him in just the difficult times. We need to abide in Him everyday, knowing that we need our ample supply of Him, especially for when the days get tough.

And what about those things in our life that seem to be running smoothly? What about the areas of our lives that we consider strengths? Are we really so convinced that those are

"untouchable?" Do we really think that we don't need Jesus to keep all of those things together?

In the hymn "I Need Thee Every Hour" we get a feel for when we need to abide in Him.

"I need Thee Every Hour, Most gracious Lord; No tender voice like Thine can peace afford,

I need Thee Every Hour, Stay Thou near by; Temptations loose their power when Thou art nigh,

I need Thee Every Hour, in joy or pain; come quickly and abide, or life is vain

I need Thee Every Hour, Teach me Thy will; Thy promises so rich, in me fulfill.

I need Thee Every Hour, Most Holy One; O make me Thine indeed, Thou blessed Son.

I need Thee, O I need Thee; Every hour I need Thee! O bless me now, my Savior, I come to Thee."

What are some of the positions of responsibility you are in?

What are some practical ways that we can remain in Jesus?

How does abiding in Jesus help us fulfill those areas of responsibility?

Day 3 - Tuesday

Pray:

Lord, teach me the consequences of not abiding in You.

In Jesus's name I pray ...

Read: John 15:6

It is a "branch," by the way. We're not talking about a stem or a bud. This is a branch. These men are casting aside a significant piece of this vine.

Over the years, this branch has had some significant growth. I mean, it is a branch. So, I assume at one time it bore fruit. This branch may have even weathered its share of pruning seasons. As a branch, it obviously has seen its share of rain, wind, and drought. As a branch, it probably has a good bark on it to protect it from insects and disease. It knows pruning. It knows harvest. It knows the new warmth of Spring and Spring rains. It knows the sun of summer and the time of harvest. It also knows the cold of Winter. This branch has seen it all. Been there. Done that. And got the t-shirt.

But now, there is no fruit. Now, there is only the memory of fruit-bearing days. Perhaps the branch can boast accurately of how it used to be done. Maybe the branch considered itself retired. Maybe the branch would say, "I've done my time." Maybe the branch felt like it had seen too much, had grown skeptical of how the fruit was used, or had its feelings hurt and decided not to be with the vine anymore. Whatever the reason, the result was the same: separation.

The consequence of such a branch is harsh. Men gather them. They are grouped up and taken. They are taken perhaps to places they do not want to go. I do not believe that non-abiding branches are going to hell. I do believe, that those branches

who desire separation have separated themselves and have no one else to blame but themselves. I believe that such branches give up their influence and are cast aside without much respect. I believe that such branches give up the vibrance of life.

But even here in this verse, Jesus gives them the choice. The verse starts off with "if." Such non-abiding branches are not the victim of circumstance. Such non-abiding branches make up their own mind about whether or not they will abide.

Lord, please give me the strength to abide in You, In Jesus's name I pray. Amen.

Day 4 - Wednesday

Pray:

Lord, please help me to know Your joy. In Jesus's name I pray ...

Read: John 15:9-11

Joy. But not just any joy. This is full joy. It's not just full joy. It is His joy. Think about it. The Joy of Jesus bubbling up inside you. Jesus's wish for you is for you to have His joy bubbling up in you.

This joy comes from abiding in His love. It almost sounds like this love is conditional. How can "unconditional" love be based on meeting certain conditions?

The truth is that the love of Jesus never stops flowing toward us. His love is constant and ever flowing.

One aspect of "abiding in Christ" pertains to my obedience to Christ. It is totally inappropriate for me to think that I am abiding in Christ when I am living in rebellion to His will for my life. God has spelled out for me in the Scriptures how He wants me to live. If I am being disobedient to that, then I am not abiding in Christ.

Now, when it comes to God's unconditional love, my obedience keeps me in the flow of His unconditional love. When I disobey I, by my own choosing, step out of His love.

The Mississippi River is still flowing. I played in Ole Man River growing up as a kid. I've seen it flood in the Spring, and I've seen it mighty low in August. But, the Muddy Mississippi River never stopped flowing. It is flowing right now. As a kid, my family often played in the bays made by its sandbars. Then we left the river and its joys. But just because we left the river and its joys, the river didn't stop. The river still runs whether or not I'm there to enjoy it.

My disobedience does not stop the flow of God's love. My disobedience is my choice to leave the flow of God's love and its joys. Obedience, however, keeps me in the flow of God's love. And in that constant flow of God's love is full joy.

What does the Joy of Jesus look like in your life?

What kinds of things tempt us to get out of the flow of God's love?

What must we do to get back into the flow of God's love?

Day 5 - Thursday

Pray:

Lord, teach me to love as You love me. In Jesus's name I pray ...

Read: John 15:12-14

Here it comes again. Jesus had already given the disciples this command earlier in the evening in John 13:34-35. Again, for the second time in one meal, Jesus repeats this as a command.

Here, though, Jesus gives us a picture of love. Here Jesus says that love lays down one's life for his friends. Think about that picture. These guys were commanded to give their lives for each other. That's a mighty tall order considering that there was some intergroup rivalry and jockeying for Kingdom positions (Mark 10:37).

Yet, history bears out that these, the 11 faithful, carried out Jesus's command until their death. You don't see in the early church any bickering amongst these disciples. We see bickering among their followers but not among these guys. Jesus gave them a tall order, and they followed it.

Did they always agree? I imagine they probably had some disagreements among themselves. Peter never wrote a Gospel, but he did dictate it to Mark. Matthew (Levi) wasn't completely satisfied with Mark's Gospel. So, he wrote another one. Now, John writes a Gospel completely different than those other two Gospels. They wrote different Gospels, but never trashed the other Gospels. These guys endured persecutions, a growing understanding of what Jesus taught them, and different cultures coming into the faith. And yet, you never see them hating each other. Church leadership developed. New

leadership arose. Leadership was scattered. Wrongs were done. But instead of casting them down and counting them out, councils gathered, correction was made, and fellowship was restored.

These men weren't perfect. They were just believers. They, however, took Jesus at His command and loved each other as He loved them. People that love are usually the ones that are loved. People that judge are usually the ones who are judged.

We are loved, y'all. Let us act like it.

Lord, please help us to know Your love for us personally. Then, please let us love others out of that love. In Jesus's name I pray. Amen.

Day 6 - Friday

Pray:

Lord, help me to understand the honor of You calling me Your friend. In Jesus's name I pray ...

Read: John 15:15-17

Friends are important. Parents teach their children to choose their friends wisely.

Mentors will tell us, "It's not about what you know. It's about Who you know." Friends play a big part of our lives. What a great and Godly invention friends are! They bring such joy to life.

A really close friend cannot only make us laugh, but is also someone we can be really deep and vulnerable with. They love us no matter what we look like, act like, or what we do. A true friend can be brutally honest. They have earned that privilege because we understand that they have our best interest at heart. Friends make the mundane enjoyable and the miserable fun, as long as we are doing it together. We always enjoy having our friends around. We just enjoy them and enjoy being around them.

In this passage, Jesus calls us "friends." You know, it's not about us calling Him our friend. He - the Great One, the Savior of the World, the Object of our Worship, the adored One, the world's Redeemer - He looks at you. He looks at you and tells the whole world, "This one is my friend." I just have never gotten over that.

How does He demonstrate His friendship to us? First (15:15), Jesus tells you the secrets of His Kingdom (1 Corinthians 2:14). Secondly (15:16a) He chose you (1 Peter 2:9). Third, (15:16b) He has a special designation for you (Ephesians 2:10). Fourth, (15:16c) He has a special assignment for you

(Jeremiah 29:11). Lastly, (15:16d) He introduced you to His Father and gave you a special relationship with His Father (Romans 8:15-17).

These realities are not based upon circumstance of health, feelings, or accomplishments. These realities exist whether you believe them or not. These realities are unchangeable. Not once over the course of your friendship have these realities ever ceased to exist - even when you didn't know them, appreciate them, or even when you thought others could threaten their existence. God is good and His friendship with you lasts forever.

How does it make you feel thinking about Jesus considering you His friend? Explain.

What act of Jesus's friendship mentioned in these verses mean the most to you? Why?

Take some time to thank God for His friendship.

Day 7 - Saturday

Pray:

Lord, teach me about Your Holy Spirit and His work in my life. In Jesus's name I pray ...

Read: John 16:4-16.

When it comes to God, we believe in something called "The Trinity." The Trinity is our belief that our God is One - God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit - the Three are One in some marvelous and mysterious way. You might want to go back and read that sentence out loud again, and if in a group say it together.

In this passage Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit. Here, Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the "Comforter" in the King James Version and "Helper" in the English Standard Version. Jesus tells us what the Holy Spirit is supposed to do for us.

First, the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin (16:8). The Holy Spirit does convict us but does not condemn us. This conviction leads us to Jesus where we have forgiveness. This conviction is an honest look at our lives.

Second, the Holy Spirit assures us of righteousness (16:8). The Holy Spirit assures us about our standing with God and how we live. We need the Holy Spirit's assurance and He readily gives it to us.

Third, the Holy Spirit gives a convincing judgment (16:11). He judges the world. Not only does the Holy Spirit convict us of our sin as an individual, but He also judges the world.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit guides us in all truth. In today's world of information overload, it is necessary to be guided to what is true and what is deception. The Holy Spirit guides us in

what is really important. We need His help to navigate through these difficult days.

Fifth, the Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus (16:14). The Holy Spirit's job is to bring people to Jesus and help us understand who He really is.

The Holy Spirit is such a wonderful constant in our lives. So, when we find ourselves in need, we need to look to Him to be our Helper and our Comforter.

As you think about the Holy Spirit, do you connect more with Him being called "Helper" or "Comforter? Explain.

Which task of the Holy Spirit do you feel you need right now in your life?

Thank the Lord for His gift of the Holy Spirit.

Day 8 - Easter Sunday

Pray:

Lord, we thank You for this Resurrection day. Help us all celebrate the Victory You give to all who believe. In Jesus's powerful name we pray ...

Read: John 16:29-33

If there was ever a message for us, it is found in John 16:33. You have to remember this verse in context. This peace given not on Easter Sunday. This peace came before Easter, before the burial, before the beating, before the cross, before the death. Yet, this peace was their's for the taking that night, in the midst of difficulty.

The peace of Jesus is not contingent on circumstances. The roller coaster ride of life cannot shake loose the peace of Jesus. His peace is a peace that goes beyond all understanding (Philippians 4:6-7).

Yet, the peace of Jesus is not a peace that denies the difficulty of life. Jesus plainly told us here that in this world we will have tribulation. Life is hard. Weird viruses can happen. We can all get knocked out of our routines and have our Easter traditions messed up.

Oh man, today would be great! Everybody would be at church. Everybody would come wearing their Easter clothes. The music would be moving! Even those of us who sing badly would bellow out the resurrection songs of victory. We just couldn't help it. Jesus is Risen! We want to celebrate! Then we'd gather together at some house with family and EAT! Maybe we'd go Easter Egg hunting and post pictures.

But that won't happen today. Yet, if we dig deep, there's some unexplainable peace deep in our gut. At first, we may not

be able to explain it. Then we read the last part of verse 33. We hear Jesus tell us, "Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world."

Earlier this month, some of us put out yard signs that say, "Because He overcame, we shall overcome." So yeah, Satan didn't win. True, the COVID-19 virus is here, but no Coronavirus is going to have the last word. No sir. My resurrected Savior has the last word.

Make no mistake, we serve the Risen Savior who's in the world today. We know that He is living, whatever men may say. We see His hand of mercy. We hear His voice of cheer. And just the time we need Him, He's always near.

In all the world around me we see His loving care. And though our hearts grow weary, We never will despair. We know that He is leading through all the stormy blast. The Day of His appearing will come at last.

So rejoice! Rejoice, O Christians! Lift up your voice and sing eternal hallelujahs to Jesus Christ the King! He's the hope of all who seek Him! He's the help of all who find! None other is so loving, so good, so kind.

He LIVES! HE LIVES! CHRIST JESUS lives today! He walks with us! He talks with us along life's narrow way. He lives! He lives! Salvation to impart! If you ask me how I know He lives, I'll tell you that He lives within my heart.