

Partners in the Gospel

Week One

Daily Devotions

and Small Group Study



Partners Who See Themselves as God Sees Them

September 16-22, 2007



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Study Overview



The apostle Paul gave thanks for the Philippian Christians' partnership in the gospel (Philippians 1:4,5). As we begin a 40-day focus on ministry, let us also give thanks to God for the partnership in the gospel that we enjoy together. We are partners with God in the grandest work of all – proclaiming his glory and drawing everyone around us closer to Jesus Christ our Savior. May the Holy Spirit work in us through our study of God's Word in the next 40 days. May he prepare us for greater works of service that will give witness to Christ and glorify our Father.

To become more faithful partners with Christ, we will look at six weekly topics:

1. **Partners who see themselves as God sees them.** Because you are God's partner, it is important to understand your relationship with him.
2. **Partners who understand the time.** As God's partner, you will want to understand the urgency of God's work.
3. **Partners who see others as God sees them.** To treat others the way your Partner wants, look at them through his eyes.
4. **Partners who understand their personal ministry.** The Old Testament priesthood is a model to help you understand your partnership in the gospel.
5. **Partners who understand their SHAPE.** The SHAPE acronym will help you see that you are a unique partner in God's work.
6. **Partners who understand their call.** Every Christian is God's partner in the gospel. It is a special privilege when Christ calls you through the church to serve in the public ministry.

We will use God's Word in four ways during these next forty days.

- Weekly messages in worship that focus our attention on the topic for the week
- Daily scripture readings and devotions distributed in weekly devotional booklets
- Weekly small group Bible studies
- Weekly memory passages that grasp the key thought for the week.

You will benefit the most if you make use of all these growth opportunities. Please note that if you are unable to attend worship on a weekend, you may watch the message on our website www.stpaulmuskego.org. You may also download the weekly devotions/small group study there as well. If you do not have internet access, you may stop by the church/school office for a weekly devotions/small group study booklet and a copy of the sermon. You may also call and we will mail a booklet to you.

May God bless our study together of our partnership in the gospel.



WEEK 1 – WORSHIP

Partners Who See Themselves as God Sees Them

Daily Devotion & Week 1 Small Group Study

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Week One Memory Passage: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25-27).



Week 1 – Partners Who See Themselves as God Sees Them

Devotion for Day 1 – Sunday, September 16th You are Here to Serve!



The Word: John 13:1-5, 14, 15

It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.



Meditate

Twice John wrote, “Jesus knew.” What Jesus knew about himself was important!

- He knew the time. “The time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.”
- He knew his power. “The Father had put all things under his power.”
- He knew where he had come from and where he was going. “He had come from God and was returning to God.”

The truth that Jesus knew about himself is the same truth we can know about ourselves through our faith in Jesus.

- We know that our time here on earth is short, and that when we leave this world, we are going to the Father.
- We know that all things are under Jesus' power and that he uses that power in our behalf.
- We know that we have come from God, created by him and redeemed by him through Jesus' suffering and death. And we are going to God.

Because Jesus was confident about who he was, he could humbly serve the disciples and us. We too are here to serve. Jesus did not call us to be mere spectators in the work of spreading the gospel. He called us to be active participants, God's partners in the gospel. During the next forty days, pray that the Holy Spirit will instill in each of us a greater understanding of this call to serve. This week we will focus on what we can know about ourselves from God's Word. This will give us the strength to serve.



Pray

That the Holy Spirit help every participant in the *Partners in the Gospel* studies grow closer to Jesus.



Week 1 – Partners Who See Themselves as God Sees Them

Devotion for Day 2 – Monday, September 17th You are a Saint!



The Word: Ephesians 1:1; 5:25-27

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus...

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.



Meditate

You are a saint!

Did you laugh at that statement? Do you think of yourself primarily as a sinner instead of a saint?

Many people define a saint as someone who has lived a perfect life, or at least an exemplary life, someone like Mother Theresa who gave her life to serve the poor in Calcutta.

But the Bible's definition of a saint is different. The Bible uses the term saint to refer to people who are holy. A saint is a holy person not because he or she has lived a perfect life but because they believe in Jesus as the one who gave himself up for them. So every believer in Jesus is a saint.

In fact, you can say that on the day you were baptized, you were added to the roster of the saints. In baptism Jesus washed all your sins away. He looks at you and your fellow believers as "a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish."

What a great way to start the day! Every morning we can announce to ourselves, "I am a saint." You don't have the burden of yesterday's sins to make up for. They are forgiven.



Pray

Think of one person whom you know that struggles to believe that he or she is a saint. Pray for that person, and if it be God's will, may he use you today to remind that person that every believer in Jesus is a saint.



Week 1 – Partners Who See Themselves as God Sees Them

Devotion for Day 3 – Tuesday, September 18th You are Chosen by God!



The Word: Ephesians 1:3-8

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing **in Christ**. For he chose us **in him** before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons **through Jesus Christ**, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us **in the One he loves**. **In him** we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.



Meditate

You are chosen by God!

When my grade school classmates were picking sides for a game, I was often one of the last people chosen. I wasn't and am not very talented in any sports. My only hope of escaping the embarrassment of being "the last choice" was if a good friend of mine was one of the captains. He chose me, not because of my abilities, but because he liked me as a friend.

What a relief it is to hear that God has not chosen us on the basis of our abilities! Instead, we have been chosen because a good friend is the team captain. I've put in bold type the five times in these short verses that the apostle reminds us that this choice comes to us in connection with Christ Jesus. His love is unique. It is a love that is completely undeserved.

Reread this short section and meditate on these phrases

- "every spiritual blessing"
- "before the creation of the world"
- "adopted as his sons"
- "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins"

Dear fellow saint, as you go out to serve Jesus today, you can be confident that you lack nothing to accomplish the tasks that Jesus has given you. You have every spiritual blessing! Go out confident of your standing. Jesus chose you before the world was created. Know that has guided your life to this point so that his choice would be accomplished. He is the one that made sure you heard the gospel and believed it. And as you serve the Savior, know that you are one of God's forgiven saints.



Pray

Confess to your Father in heaven the sins that burden your conscience right now. Admit that you don't understand why he would choose you. Give thanks that he chose you for Jesus' sake. Ask him to help you "praise his glorious grace" in all that you say and do today.



Week 1 – Partners Who See Themselves as God Sees Them

Devotion for Day 4 – Wednesday, September 19th Christ Rules for You!



The Word: Ephesians 1:15-23

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.



Meditate

Christ rules for you! That truth frees us.

Many people spend their lives looking out for themselves, worrying if they will have enough, seeking to serve themselves. They are trapped in worry, wasting precious time in fretting about what has happened and what might happen.

But Christ has been seated at the right hand of God. He rules all things for the church. That means he rules for you! There is no need to worry about the past or the future. The King loves you and is thinking about your good with every decision he makes.

The Apostle Paul prayed that his readers would have the eyes of their hearts open to this truth. Many events in our lives seem to deny Jesus’ rule. Troubles strike Christian households too. But our faith isn’t based on what we can see. It is based on the promises of God.

That’s why we meditate on God’s Word. It is only here that we understand who we truly are. We are brothers and sisters of the King of the Universe. He rules for you!



Pray

What is your greatest fear? Write it down here_____.

Ask the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of your heart to know that Jesus as ruler of all creation will be able to take care of this fear.

Consider your closest friends. Which of them is struggling with fear? Ask that God would open their hearts as well.



Week 1 – Partners Who See Themselves as God Sees Them

Devotion for Day 5 – Thursday, September 20th You Are Alive in Christ!



The Word: Ephesians 2:1-5

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.



Meditate

You are alive in Christ!

You were... dead ... disobedient ... following the desires of the sinful nature ... by nature objects of wrath.

Paul's look back at our past isn't very pleasant. We were dead in sin. There was no spiritual life in us. We were unable to please God. Our natural inclination was disobedience. We were slaves to the desires of the sinful nature. We were objects of God's wrath. The fire of hell was our rightful lot.

But that is all past! The same God who raised Jesus from the dead has worked powerfully in you. You are alive. You live now and will live with Christ forever! You are no longer helplessly under the control of the sinful nature. Sin has been defeated. God promises: "Sin shall not be your master!" (Romans 6:14) Now you follow the promptings of a different Spirit that is at work in you!

Love prompted God to act. The Father sacrificed his Son. The Son willingly giving himself up on the cross for us. The Holy Spirit made us, who were spiritually dead, alive in Christ through God's Word.

God's mercies are new to us every morning (Lamentations 3:22?). Every morning is a new day to rejoice in this spiritual life.

Yes, it is by grace – God's love for us that is completely undeserved – that we are spiritually alive!



Pray

Think of a "hopeless case," someone that is so far from Christ that it seems impossible for that person ever to come to faith. Remember you were once that way too! Pray that God in his grace would work the same miracle of faith in that person that he has in you.



Week 1 – Partners Who See Themselves as God Sees Them

Devotion for Day 6 – Friday, September 21st You are Seated with Christ!!



The Word: Ephesians 2:6-7

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.



Meditate

The apostles James and John once asked Jesus if they could sit at his right and left hand when Jesus entered into his kingdom. They were thinking of a kingdom here on earth. They wanted the power and prestige. Jesus instead turned their attention to the suffering that would belong to anyone who sought to be great in the kingdom of God.

The Holy Spirit, speaking through the Apostle Paul, surprises us in this text by granting James and John's request. Our glorification mirrors that of our Savior's. God the Father raised Jesus to life from the dead on Easter morning. God the Holy Spirit raised us to spiritual life when we were brought to faith. God the Father seated Jesus at his right hand to rule all things for the Church. As amazing as it sounds, the Holy Spirit has also seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms.

Do you see that the King of the Universe has made room on his throne for you? Sometimes we get so caught up in the day-to-day struggles that we forget that the victory is already ours.

But there will come a time when you will see your exalted place. Right now it has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit so that we can be like Jesus in our lesson from Monday. We know that all power has been given us in Christ and that we are going to the Father. We have been given this vision now, not so that we can relax in a position of power, but so that we can serve others from this position of power.



Pray

You are seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. You have the privilege of asking him to use his power to benefit others. In your prayer, draw your Savior's attention to someone in need today.



Week 1 – Partners Who See Themselves as God Sees Them

Devotion for Day 7 – Saturday, September 22nd You Were Created for Good Works!



The Word: Ephesians 2:8-10

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.



Meditate

You were created to do good works!

The Christian faith is the easiest thing in the world. We do nothing to save ourselves. We are saints. We are chosen. We are raised to a new life. We are seated with Christ. All this is by grace with no works at all. There is no boasting in God's kingdom.

Yet the Christian faith is the most difficult of all. We have been created in Christ Jesus to do good works. As we saw in the account of Jesus' washing his disciples' feet, service is not optional if you are going to be a follower of Christ. But we serve, not to make ourselves alive or to prove ourselves worthy of God's choice. We serve because we know who we are and where we are going. We serve other people because that is how we serve Christ.

Have you wondered how God wants you to serve? There is no magic formula that makes it clear what is the best way for you to serve. It is largely by trial and error. Later in this study we will look at several tools that might help you narrow your focus, but finally you will have to experiment to see where your spiritual gifts, your heart or passion, your natural abilities, your personality and your experiences meet – your serving sweet spot as Erik Reese calls it in his book *SHAPE: Finding and Fulfilling your Unique Purpose for Life*. May this lesson assure you that God knows your SHAPE. He has already prepared opportunities for service for you.

Remember who you are and enjoy serving your Savior by serving others!



Pray

Thank God for reminding you who you are this week – a saint chosen by God, empowered to serve him. Ask that the Holy Spirit would lead you to see the opportunities for service that God has prepared for you to do.



Small Group Session One

Partners Who See Themselves as God Sees Them



CONNECT TOGETHER – 15 MINUTES

Share one characteristic that you inherited from your parents that you especially value and/or name one characteristic you inherited from your parents you wish you could give away!



GROW TOGETHER – 40 MINUTES

If we are to be effective as partners in the gospel, we need first of all to understand how God sees us.



Discussion Question #1: On a scale of one to five (one being sinner and five being saint), do you see yourself more readily as a sinner or as a saint?

Read together this week's memory verse: "*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless*" (Ephesians 5:25-27).

As you read the following paper, consider how God sees you. Highlight or underline significant points that you would like to discuss after the reading. If you are reading the paper together in your small group, read only the sections in bold.

AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO SPEAK POSITIVELY TO BELIEVERS

By Pastor Mark Cares (abridged)

Once upon a time there were twin boys whose mother was a drug addict. She died when they were in their early teens. By this time, the boys were street smart. They belonged to a gang and had experienced many bad things. To everybody's astonishment, both were

adopted by loving families. But the fathers took different approaches in raising them. One father not only regularly reminded his adopted son that he was once a gang member, but frequently still referred to him as a gang member. At times he would even call him worthless. He regularly pointed his shortcomings out to him and repeatedly warned him not to fall back into his old ways. But he also was sure to regularly tell him he loved him and forgave him for the bad things he still did.

The other father would also talk with his son about his former gang life. But he was careful never to refer to him as a gang member in the present tense. He made a point of telling his son that is what he was – but he wasn't that now. Instead he would go out of his way to regularly identify him as his beloved son. When needed, he would point out his son's shortcomings and punish him when he deserved it. But he concentrated on encouraging him to develop his positive qualities. Instead of constantly reminding him of his past, he would remind him of the behavior he now expected from him as his son.



Discussion Question #2: Do you think the two different approaches would make any difference in how the two boys developed? Explain why you think the way you do.

Do you think the two different approaches made any difference in how the two boys developed? Obviously there would be a big difference. It isn't difficult imagining the first boy being plagued with low self-esteem and unmotivated to succeed. It doesn't take too many times for people to hear that they are worthless before they believe it and act like it. Many of us have counseled people whose lives were dramatically impacted as a result of such comments.

In contrast, it isn't difficult imagining the second twin gaining more and more confidence; becoming more and more motivated to do the good; and becoming more and more successful in life. I still remember the year my high school football coach began the year addressing us as champs. That remained his theme throughout the season. To the surprise of many, we won the championship. To this day, I credit much of our success to his positive motivation.

How we talk to people is important. It makes a huge difference. Far too often, I fear, many of us, including myself, have taken the approach of the first father when talking to believers. But in the past few years, I have come to appreciate just how much Jesus, Paul, and the biblical writers address believers like the second father. So that I am not misunderstood, let me clearly state up front that I am *not* advocating that we no longer use the law with believers. Far from it! What I am saying, however, is that the biblical writers talk to believers differently than they do to unbelievers – that their tone to believers is remarkably positive. This is what I now invite you to ponder with me.

THE CAREFUL USE OF VOCUBULARY

The biblical writers make the distinction between believers and unbelievers in a variety of ways. Sometimes they do this with a subtle shift in vocabulary... One example of this sharp distinction literally stopped me in my tracks. It's the Bible's use of the word

“sinner.” After all, it is a word I had been accustomed to using quite freely in regard to all people, believers and unbelievers alike. *But in virtually all cases, the Bible uses “sinner” as a synonym for an unbeliever.* Psalm 1:5 is a representative verse: “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.” Another such verse is 1 Peter 4:18: “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

There are a couple of exceptions to this rule, the most familiar of which is 1 Timothy 1:15: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst.” But note again that Paul, as he did in Romans 7:14, applies this to himself. He is not addressing believers as sinners. In fact, *Paul never addresses believers as sinners.*

A similar example is Peter’s declaration in Luke 5:8: “When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.’” But again note that Peter is making this statement about himself. *Peter, like Paul, never addresses believers as sinners.*



Discussion Question #3: Were you surprised to learn that the Bible uses the word “sinner” to refer to unbelievers? Why is it significant that Paul and Peter both call themselves “sinner,” but not other Christians?

In this discussion of the word sinner, let’s not lose sight of the forest for all the trees. *Rarely* does the Bible label believers as sinners. Jesus never addressed his disciples in that way. In none of Paul’s letter, even in his letters to the problem-ridden congregation in Corinth, does he address believers as such. Neither do we see this in any of the seven letters to the seven churches of Revelation – even though the majority of those churches were infected with serious problems.

But what is even more startling is how the biblical writers talk to and about believers. Here’s my unofficial and incomplete listing:

- Righteous – approximately 180 times**
- Brothers – 98 times just in Paul’s letters**
- Saints – 67 times**
- Holy – 36 times**
- Friends – 24 times in the epistles**
- Chosen – 23 times**
- Children of God – 13 times**
- Elect – 10 times**
- Heirs – 8 times**
- Sanctified – 6 times**
- God’s temple – 5 times**
- Worldly or unspiritual – 4 times**
- Wretched – 2 times (Romans 7:24, Rev. 3:17)**
- Sinner – 2 times (1 Timothy 1:15, Psalm 25:8)**
- Sinful – 1 time (Luke 5:8)**

What are we to conclude from all this? Allow me to make a few observations. The first is that by commonly referring to believers as sinners we are speaking in a way that confuses believers' dual nature with their single status. The Bible plainly states that believers have a dual nature - most often described as flesh and spirit. But the Bible also clearly emphasizes the believer's one status before God. We are righteous; we are saints; we are God's children; we are the heirs of heaven, and so forth.

According to my count, the Bible uses exalted terms like "righteous", "saints", "holy", "chosen", "children of God", "elect", "heirs", "sanctified" and "God's temple" 348 times compared to the 9 times it uses words like "worldly or unspiritual", "wretched", "sinner" and "sinful". Throw in the hundreds of times it addresses believers as brothers and friends and similar such terms and close to 99% of the time the Bible describes believers in positive terms. What do you think the ratio is for you?



Discussion Question #4: Discuss the difference between the dual nature of the Christian and their single status before God.

Permit me to repeat: I am *not* saying that we are not to use the law with believers. What I am saying is that we need to use it in such a way that it doesn't obscure the wonderful status believers have. Instead of seeing believers as sinners-saints, the Bible describes them as *saints who still sin*. They have one status but two natures. This is not just a parsing of words either. Keeping this distinction clear makes a huge difference when talking to believers.

This has been amply demonstrated to me over the past few years. The thing that caused me to first study this topic was the outreach we were doing to Mormons. Over the years I have had the privilege of sharing our witnessing technique with thousands of Christians all over the country. The heart and core of our gospel presentation to Mormons is Hebrews 10:14 – "by one offering he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." It's at this point, almost without exception, that Christians become squeamish. Many have great difficulty in publicly saying that God sees them as perfect in Christ – many have difficulty referring to themselves as saints. I have actually had some WELS people angrily walk out of my presentation because I said they were saints!

Try this with members of your own congregation. Ask them if they see themselves more readily as sinners or saints. I feel quite confident in saying that most think of themselves more readily as sinners. It wouldn't surprise me at all if more of your members resisted being called a saint than being called a sinner. It's been my experience that most believers don't need convincing that they are sinners. What they need convincing of, more often than not, is that they are God's holy people, saints, the righteous ones of God.

How many of us don't identify with the following from Philip Yancey's pen?

For me too, accepting God's love involves a relentless hushing of voices that whisper otherwise. *You are unworthy. You failed again. God cannot possibly love you...* I must ask God who 'is greater than our hearts' to halt the

ruthless cycle of condemnation and to remind me of perhaps the hardest truth to grasp, that God desires and loves me. (*Reaching for the Invisible God*, p. 164f)

In a similar vein, C.F.W. Walther [a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod theologian and founding father] quotes Luther: “In your tribulations you will become more aware that the Gospel is a rare guest in men’s consciences, while the Law is their daily and familiar companion. For man has by nature the knowledge of the Law.” Walther then comments: “If you are a Christian, you will admit that you are far more often troubled and worried than comforted.” (*Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, p. 49)

In addition, nothing has helped me stayed Christ-centered in my ministry more than this. The more we focus on what believers are in Christ, the more we have to talk about what Jesus has done for them. Conversely, the more the focus is on them as sinners, the more people tend to focus on themselves. They think that they can’t do anything because they are so worthless and full of sin. Again, please don’t misunderstand me. I am not saying that we shouldn’t point out sin to believers. What I’m talking about is *how* we do that and *how* we then encourage them in their lives of sanctification. [“Sanctification” here means living the Christ-like life.] Think back to my opening illustration and how the two fathers dealt differently with their sons. I am trying to be more like the second father because that is the pattern I see in the Bible.



Discussion Question #5: Do you agree or disagree with Walther’s comment: “If you are a Christian, you will admit that you are far more often troubled and worried than comforted.” Why do you feel that way?

CAREFUL USE OF TENSES

Closely related to its careful use of vocabulary is the Bible’s careful use of tenses when talking to or about believers. The biblical writers carefully distinguish between believers’ past and present status. For example, note the tenses in Ephesians 2.

“you *were* dead in transgressions and sins in which you *used* to live”

“we *were* by nature objects of wrath”

“even when we *were* dead in transgressions”

“we *are* God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works”

“you *were* separate from Christ”

“you *are* no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household”

“you *are being* built up”

Or compare the two following statements Paul makes in Romans:

Romans 7: 5: “when we *were* controlled by the sinful nature”

Romans 8: 9: “You, however, *are controlled not* by the sinful nature, but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”

I have found keeping these distinctions clear especially helpful in witnessing. For years I tried to build a bridge to unbelievers by saying that I was a sinner just like them. In the last few years, however, I have tried a different approach. I now say that I used to be like them, but now I am a child of God, a saint. Again, the response has been surprising. They have been intrigued by it. It's the difference between an overweight person coming up to another overweight person and saying, "I understand how hard it is to diet", or a slim person coming up to that person and saying, "I know how hard it is to diet. I was once there. Let me tell you how I lost weight." I wonder if we sometimes hamper our witness by identifying ourselves too much with unbelievers. Rather, would we be better off showing them our before and after pictures?

EMPHASIS ON ENCOURAGING THE SPIRIT RATHER THAN BEATING DOWN THE FLESH

Another example of how the biblical writers address believers in a positive way is their emphasis on encouraging the new nature, the spirit, to produce good works. This is not to say that they don't point out specific sins to believers and urge them to flee them. My point is that their *emphasis* is more on encouraging believers to pursue righteousness than to flee temptation.

In this regard, I was quite taken aback to discover that Paul, not once, told any of those congregations to repent. Nor do we ever hear Jesus, in the gospels, ever telling his disciples to repent. In the great majority of cases, the command to repent is in the context of conversion. So much so that, "used in this latter sense, repentance is a synonym of conversion." (Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics II*, p. 502)

By making that observation, I am not saying that believers don't regularly repent. On the contrary, as we all can testify to from our own experience, dealing both with ourselves and with our faithful members, repentance is something that healthy believers do almost naturally. That's what Peter did in Luke 5:8. That's what Paul did in 1 Timothy 1:15. My focus is not on what believers are doing or not doing, but rather on what we need to be *communicating* to them. As I look at the biblical pattern, I don't see believers needing a lot of encouragement to repent. I see them rather needing a lot of encouragement to pursue righteousness. When addressing believers, the Bible emphasizes the *fruits* of repentance much more than the *act* of repentance.

The believers whom we need to tell to repent are more commonly the ones not in church on Sunday – those members who are straying from the Lord or persisting in a sin. Those are also the biblical contexts in which believers are told to repent. Without exception, they are told to repent, not in a general way, but to repent of *specific* sins. Classic examples are the letters to the seven churches of Revelation. Jesus commands repentance in four of those letters – repentance over specific sins. Significantly, however, Jesus doesn't "automatically" tell all seven churches to repent.

Could one of the reasons why writers like Max Lucado are so popular be because they talk so positively? Much of our criticism of their writing is valid. But can we also learn from them? Consider the following excerpt from Lucado's book, *When Christ Comes*.

You have captured God's heart.

I first witnessed the power of a marriage proposal in college. I shared a class with a girl who got engaged. I don't remember much about the class, except that the hour was early and the teacher was dull. (Doctors used to send insomniacs to his class for treatment.) I don't remember the name of the girl. She didn't stand out in the crowd and seemed to like it that way. No makeup. No dress-up. She was ordinary.

One day, however, that all began to change. Her hair changed. Her dress changed. Even her voice changed. She spoke. She spoke with confidence. What made the difference?

Simple. She was chosen. A young man loved her squarely in the eye and said, "Come and spend forever with me." And she was changed. Empowered by his proposal. Validated by his love. His love for her convinced her that she was worth loving.

God's love can do the same for us. . .(p. 143)

He then continues for five more pages talking positively about believers beautifully illustrating who they are in Christ.

It's not as if I haven't seen that in some of our writings. I have. But they are fewer and further between. Rarely have I found somebody going on for page after page describing believers in positive terms. But, as I said earlier, according to my unofficial calculations, close to 99% of the time that is how the Bible speaks to and about believers. That is a pattern well worth emulating.



Discussion Question #6: What do you feel you need to hear more of: calls to repentance or calls to produce fruits of repentance? Discuss.

Take a couple of minutes to draw a picture of yourself the way God sees you. Explain your picture to the rest of the small group (or if your small group is larger than six, break up into groups of four and explain your picture).



SERVE TOGETHER

Ministry is something done for someone who is already a believer. If your group consists of both members of your congregation and members of a different congregation or not members of any congregation, you may wish to choose a ministry project that helps a family in need or a member of your community. Perhaps you could select a mayor, alderman, legislator or congressman that you know to be a Christian and let her/him know that you will be praying for her/him as individuals and as a group.

If you are all members of one congregation, your service project could be a project you do together at church – volunteering as a unit to serve a soup supper, volunteering as a unit to be greeters/childcare providers for one Sunday to give the usual people a week off, or volunteering to gather food in connection with a food drive.



SHARE TOGETHER

In the “Share Together” time we want to work together to reach out to those who are not Christian or who are struggling in the Christian faith. We have heard today that we are saints! Consider whom in your circle of influence you would like to assure of their status as saints. Write their names down and remember them in your prayer at the end of the meeting.



Your group is also encouraged to participate together in a Mission Project.

Our Primary Mission Project:

***Our Partnership in the Gospel with Gethsemane Lutheran
Family Saturday, the morning of November 10***

St. Paul’s has been strengthening our partnership with Gethsemane Lutheran Church, 2827 Harrison Avenue on the southside of Milwaukee for several years as it reaches out to the Hispanic population. As part of our ***Partners in the Gospel*** program, we will provide the manpower and financial assistance to make a ***Family Saturday*** possible. Presentations for the community will include child-discipline, internet safety, family health, buying your first home and starting a business. Small groups will have an opportunity to help with publicity, provide childcare, teach a Bible lesson to children, teach art and/or music and provide food and refreshments. Your small group will be encouraged to gather a monetary gift as well. Please discuss today your group’s availability to help on Saturday, November 10th.

Your mission project may also be an act of Christian love to someone or some group in the community. Examples include:

- Go to a nursing home and visit with residents.
- Adopt a needy family for gifts of food at Thanksgiving and/or Christmas gifts.
- Help an elderly person with yard work.
- Provide care packages for our troops overseas.



W ORSHIP TOGETHER

Ask for prayer requests and make note of them below. Name a person you would like to invite to the next small group meeting and ask everyone to pray for him or her.

Group member's name	Prayer Request	Person for whom to pray

Let each group member offer simple, one-sentence prayers for a person they have chosen to pray for that that person would see themselves the way God sees him or her through Christ.

Close by reading together the following prayer:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:14-22)