

LIVE THE JESUS WAY!



**FOLLOWING AND LIVING THE
TEACHING OF OUR MASTER**

LIVE THE JESUS WAY

INTRODUCTION

The best single collection of Jesus' teaching is in "The Sermon On The Mount" as is called Matthew Chapters Five through Seven. The first dozen verses are called "The Beatitudes." Matthew says Jesus went up on a mountain to teach. Luke's Gospel Chapter Six has a parallel passage known as "The Sermon On The Plain."

If you visit the Mount of Beatitudes in northern Israel, you see a large plain up on what some would call a mountain or very high hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Thus, there is no significant conflict between Luke calling it a plain and Matthew calling it a mountain. It is actually both.

This booklet contains 30 devotionals based on verses from these two sources where Jesus identifies the key elements of His unique teaching.

Each one highlights a scripture passage with short comment and often concludes with a story. Then there is a response and prayer to end the writing.

My prayer is that these teachings of Jesus will permeate your mind, heart and lifestyle.

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1-THE BEATITUDES

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.
Matthew 5:1-2

For the next number of days, we'll look at Jesus' greatest training program—the Beatitudes. It is important to remember that each of the eight Beatitudes has a two-fold nature: a “knowing” and a “doing” response. We must not only *know* them we must also *respond* to what we learn from them.

Eight times in the Beatitudes it says, “***Blessed are....***” To understand the Beatitudes, we need to know the meaning of those words. ***Blessed are*** refers to Jesus' evaluation of the kind of person He names in each Beatitude. Jesus was referring to *His esteem for that kind of person*. His meaning is, “I esteem highly any person who....” He was urging us to have that kind of attitude. His deeper meaning is, “All you who hear Me, choose to become like these kinds of people.”

One noted author calls the Beatitudes, “God's radical reconstruction of the heart!” We must never consider that Jesus was promising happy conditions, as though He meant, “The one who is poor in spirit will feel good and always be joyful.”

The first four Beatitudes focus internally—that is, they speak to the heart of the one who wants to obey God. They can be viewed as four stepping stones to becoming an obedient servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are: humility, mourning, meekness and hunger for righteousness.

The second four Beatitudes focus on the external behavior of the servant who follows Jesus. They are: mercy, purity, peacemaking and persecution.

This teaching has particular relevance for Christians who live under Islam. Restricted, deprived, regarded as second class citizens, laughed at, despised, often living in fear, many times persecuted, the words of encouragement are precious and give fresh hope of another place and time when things will be put right.

While in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, there are greater freedoms and life is not so difficult, there are restrictions nonetheless. In others like Pakistan, Christians have suffered unjustly and are denied many basic rights. In Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Sudan, Nigeria and Morocco, the story is similar though the extent of suffering may vary. To all, Jesus gives this important message. We will look at each of the eight Beatitudes individually.

RESPONSE:

I will study Jesus' Beatitudes so that I live the way Jesus lived.

PRAYER:

Pray for Christians in Islamic countries that they will receive great encouragement as they seek to know and live the Beatitudes in their regions of restriction.

2-THE POOR IN SPIRIT

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 5:3

Acknowledging our poverty in spirit is humility. It occurs when a man or woman realizes his or her own utter lack of resources to meet life and finds his or her strength in God. Such an attitude leads one away from attachment to things to attachment to God and heaven. The word for *poor* here means absolute, abject poverty. We can thus paraphrase the first Beatitude this way:

Blessed are those who have realised their own utter helplessness and inadequacy and who have put their whole trust in God. Such a person will humbly accept the will of God and thus become a citizen of the kingdom.

Christians especially in countries like Pakistan find this a great comfort, for the majority of them are road sweepers and do menial jobs that others will not do. They are denied better jobs often because they are illiterate. Their children have no access to higher education and so the cycle of poverty continues with little hope of a break. Surely this message is also for them. As they put their complete trust and hope in the Lord, they are assured of a place in the Kingdom of God.

A Chinese Christian woman, a leader in her church, was arrested and put in prison. Led of the Lord, she volunteered to do hard labour, cleaning the filthy prison cells on her knees. This humble work gave her opportunity to sing and share Jesus with the prisoners in each cell. Through her words and actions many prisoners came to know the Lord in a personal relationship.

RESPONSE:

Today I acknowledge my helplessness and inadequacy and place my complete trust in God.

PRAYER:

Lord, help me express true humility in practical ways today and show that my trust is in You alone.

3-MOURNING

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Matthew 5:4

Mourning is the kind of grief that cannot be hidden. It can be a deep sorrow for our own unworthiness that leads us to trust the Lord as our total Provider, seeking His presence and counsel (authority). Such action is rewarded by the Father's gracious comfort.

It can also be for grief over the sorrow and suffering of this world. Blessed is the man who cares intensely for the sufferings, sorrows and needs of others. And so again we can paraphrase this Beatitude:

Blessed are those whose hearts are broken for the world's suffering and are deeply sorry for their sin and unworthiness, for they will find the joy and comfort of God.

As we meditate on this, what comes to mind is the need to mourn for the state of the church and Christians generally. In many countries, churches are weak and nominal, or are split by internal conflicts. There is need to mourn. There is need to mourn also for believers who have quit the struggle and crossed to the other side.

Mourn for the poor quality of preaching, the lack of prayer and the deficiency of spiritual power. Mourn for those who come to the church only to find they are unwelcome. Mourn for Christians unwilling to introduce the light of Christ to them. Mourn for a church hiding its light, too scared to let it shine. Yes, there is much to mourn for. Yet, the promise is, if we mourn, comfort will come.

A self-sufficient Bible trainer from the West, spent time in China with young leaders needing biblical training. He felt inadequate at first but later wrote, "As I left them, I wept. I wept because I had to go back to a world where God was not taken half as seriously. I wept to return to a church where if I do not insert enough clever illustrations, eyes glaze over and no one listens to my talks. I wept to go back to a world of unread Bibles and dry eyes. I wept to return to a lifestyle that would regard me as mad if I kept trying to rise at 4.30 a.m. for prayer. I wept because I really wanted to stay with those fifty teachers and learn to love God as they did."

RESPONSE:

Today I will repent of my self-sufficiency.

PRAYER:

Lord, I truly mourn over my own sin and unworthiness. And I mourn too for the deep and painful suffering that I see around our globe. May I receive Your joy and comfort.

4-THE MEEK

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Matthew 5:4

Meekness is not to be confused with weakness. In Scripture, meekness means “power under control.” In this context, the contrite, praying person is blessed with the indwelling control of the Holy Spirit and the inheritance promised to the believer even in conflict.

History shows that it is the people who have learned this, people with their passions, instincts and impulses under disciplined control, who have been great. (see Numbers 12:3 and Proverbs 16:32) Thus:

Blessed are those whose every instinct, every impulse, and every passion is under the control of God’s Spirit! They will be right with God, self and others and enter the life which God alone can give.

Pray for this meekness when entering into dialogue with those of opposing positions. There will be times when patience and self-control will be sorely tested. There may also be times when the Spirit will suggest a change of direction in the dialogue or a strategic retreat that looks suspiciously like defeat. To be meek is to be able to willingly accept temporary defeat in order that there may later be victory in the Spirit.

A co-worker in China was struggling with the attitudes of a house church group who forbade handclapping during the singing of hymns. One leader complained bitterly. Every evening in the brothers’ sleeping quarters, he would complain further. The group would then debate endlessly on whether or not clapping hands during singing was permissible. It was like the black smoke pouring out from the weeds.

This continued until the afternoon of the last day, when God used His Word, and the Holy Spirit did an amazing work. This brother stood up and admitted his wrongdoing. He asked God to forgive his ignorance, stubbornness and defensiveness. With his confession, Christ’s love tore down an invisible wall. It was as if the Lord “broke down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron.” The response of the workers as they prayed together was, “The glorious King has come.” Thank and praise the Lord. He was completely victorious.

RESPONSE:

Today I will quit calling the shots and surrender complete control to God.

PRAYER:

Lord, today I completely surrender to the control of Your Spirit in my life. Help me to be meek.

5-HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Matthew 5:6

This attitude portrays a maturity of belief that shows a servant is ready for service. When completeness or wholeness is achieved, the servant receives the satisfaction of being used of God for that which they have been called, trained and equipped.

In ancient times, wages were very low and men often could not earn enough for the family to eat well. Water was also a precious commodity. The emphasis in this Beatitude is the passionate desire for the whole, for complete righteousness as a matter of life and death. Blessed indeed is the one whose most passionate desire is to love God and to love others as they ought. Thus:

Blessed are those who long for total righteousness as a starving person longs for food and as a person perishing of thirst longs for water, for they will be truly satisfied.

People of other faiths are impressed with those who take their faith seriously. They do not respect people whose religion is merely outward form, who are just “weekend Christians.” Much of what they see is materialistic, that is, “carnal” or “worldly” (see 1 Corinthians 3). Christianity turns them off—the low regard for moral purity, the hedonism, the wishy-washiness, the unwillingness to suffer or make sacrifices, the fear of making a stand.

As Brother Andrew says, “How can Muslims respect a church that is in hiding?” Christians need to acknowledge their beliefs and be willing to suffer for their faith and convictions. A more complete righteousness will definitely have great impact. It will earn respect for our preaching the gospel.

During a visit to Indonesia, a coworker had the wonderful opportunity of participating in an Open Doors SSTS seminar held in an area of intense conflict. The constant presence of armed soldiers outside the building confirmed that this seminar was far more than theology – this was reality! More than 700 churches were already burnt to the ground and the church in the region was facing a severe onslaught.

On the second day of teaching, he remembers one pastor suddenly jumping up and with all his heart cried out, “My brother, please don’t teach us to survive, teach us to be faithful.”

RESPONSE:

Today I am so grateful for God’s presence in my life that I yearn for more of Him.

PRAYER:

Lord I long for total righteousness so that the world will see more of Your faithfulness in me.

6-THE MERCIFUL

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Matthew 5:7

As we in humility recognize our “poverty of spirit,” God in His mercy forgives and equips us. Having received mercy, we are expected to show it to others.

The biblical term merciful is related to the word for empathy, which means the ability to get right inside another person’s skin until we see things with his eyes, think things with his mind and feel things with his feelings. This is what Jesus did for us in His incarnation. Thus:

Blessed are those who empathize with others until they are able to see with the eyes of others, think with their thoughts and feel with their feelings. The one who does this will find others do the same for him or her and will know that God did this for them in Christ Jesus.

How do we see our non-Christian friends? Can we see Muslims, for example, as real people groping in the semi-darkness, under the mere glimmer of light that a crescent moon provides, thinking that is all the light there is?

As we see them, mercy would be an appropriate word to describe our feeling and attitude as well as actions toward them. Just as we would go to the aid of a blind man heading in the wrong direction, so mercy should similarly drive us to go after them and show those who are willing to listen, the way to more complete light.

If we are secure in the knowledge that Christ is the Sun of Righteousness, then we do not need to prove anything but patiently and gently show others the way.

A relatively young man decided to work for the Lord in China. His father was not a Christian and very strongly opposed him. The son decided to attend a series of Christian meetings in one of the areas where he was serving. His father opposed so strongly that they quarreled before he left for the meetings. Then the son suddenly died while he was at the meetings.

The Christians there prayed and showed much concern. They knew that the news of the death would be hard for the father, so they asked a doctor to be there just in case the father needed him. When the father arrived and saw the love of the Christians, he gave his life to the Lord.

RESPONSE:

Today I will see others as Jesus sees them and I will empathize with them as though in their skin.

PRAYER:

Lord, help grow closer to You so that I will act like You, forgiving others and being sympathetic.

7-THE PURE IN HEART

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Matthew 5:8

As our mourning to God begins the transforming process of our new life in Christ, so our lifestyle of purity amid the impure can become the beginning of reconciliation.

This Beatitude necessitates the strictest and most honest self-examination. We are to do everything with pure, unmixed motives. This demands the death of self and the springing to life of Christ within the heart.

So, blessed are those whose motives are unmixed and who operate in purity. They shall be given a vision of God Himself. As we draw closer to Him through purity, we shall see Him more clearly, love Him more dearly and follow Him more nearly. Thus:

Blessed are those whose motives are absolutely pure and whose life is characterized by purity, for they will be able to see God.

The area of moral purity is one major concern of Muslims. Great stress is laid on modesty in dressing and purity of relationships between the sexes. But Christians seem so nonchalant about such issues. Is it because we do not care about purity? No. The difference is in our starting points. In the Muslim view, purity is from the “outside in.” For the follower of Jesus it must be from the “inside out.” Thus, Muslims seek to cleanse themselves knowing they are in need of cleansing, whereas we know Christ has already cleansed us.

But we tend to disregard the danger that dirt can pose to us and we become careless. What is important to realize is that a careless disregard for even the “appearance of evil” will lead people to wrong conclusions and cause them to stumble. It is not enough to say we are pure. We must be seen to be pure.

A co-worker in China was teaching a class of believers in which two antagonistic-looking groups of students sat across from each other, looking as if they were facing enemies. As he was sharing, some students started crying and others were repenting. He told them that if they needed to apologize to others, they should sincerely ask the Holy Spirit to work, and to move them, and to give them the courage to admit their wrongs to others. He said that God delights in pure hearted children, and He wants to use submissive, humble people. Everyone was hugging and crying. Everyone was confessing his or her sins to each other. The cleansing brought purity to their relationships.

RESPONSE:

Today I will seek to live my life in true purity before God with good motives.

PRAYER:

Lord, I can only live this way if I listen and respond positively to the reproofing of Your Holy Spirit. Help me to be sensitive to purity issues.

8-THE PEACEMAKERS

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Matthew 5:9

With the possession of a meek spirit, we are equipped to step into the midst of conflict and be ambassadors “*waging peace*” that passes all understanding. The richness of the New Testament word “peace” describes a condition of perfect and complete positive well-being. It also describes right relationships—intimate fellowship and goodwill between human beings. Peace comes not from avoiding issues but from facing them, making peace even when the way is through trouble.

Blessed are those peacemakers who produce right relationships in every sphere of life, for they are doing a God-like work.

Such actions may involve laying down one’s life, like Jesus did, in order to reconcile men with God and break down barriers among men (Galatians 3:26-29). Are we willing to pay the price so that others might find peace with God? Are we willing to insist that all should hear the gospel and believe? In some conflict areas of the world, Christians call this “*waging peace*.”

Our brothers and sisters in Israel and the West Bank—where “peace” is sought but very evasive—remind us that Jesus’ high moral teaching is that we should not resist evil with evil (Matthew 5:39). Jesus is calling His followers not to respond in kind to the acts of injustice and dehumanization directed against them, but rather to respond with transforming initiatives. This unique perspective that He teaches contrasts with the “fight or flight” responses so deeply conditioned in human beings.

Dr. Salim Munayer is a wonderful example of such a peacemaker. The organization he founded takes groups of Christian Palestinians and Israelis on trips to the desert where they must work together in a situation that breaks down barriers and promotes trust relationships. Brother Andrew comments that this ministry doesn’t “just talk about the problem between Palestinians and Jews. It brings the two sides together and provides the means for them to reconcile.”

“*Waging peace*” involves: promoting love not hate; fostering unity among brethren; being a witness of a higher kingdom; and following the non-violence example of Jesus.

RESPONSE:

Today I will be proactive and “wage peace” in my sphere of influence.

PRAYER:

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. May I counter hatred with love and injury with forgiveness today.

9-THE PERSECUTED

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:10-12

With our hunger and thirst for righteousness comes the promise of persecution for those who take a stand for God. We have not been called to safety and comfort but to serve in the midst of conflict. Persecution is not to be strenuously avoided, for it is the result of righteous living. To avoid it, one would have to cease living righteously.

The early church went through much persecution for their faith in Christ. It affected their livelihood. They had to ask themselves, Should a Christian craftsman create idols for the temples? Or should a tailor sew robes for heathen priests?

Persecution affected social and family life. Most feasts were held in the temple of some god. A common invitation would be dining at the table of such a god. Even an ordinary meal in a home began with a cup of wine poured out in honor of the gods, like grace before a meal. Could a Christian share in such a meal like that?

Severe persecution meant being flung to the lions, burned at the stake, or being wrapped in pitch and set alight to provide light for Nero's palace gardens. Or it meant being sewn in animal skins and set upon by Nero's hunting dogs. Christians were tortured on the rack; scraped with pincers; had molten lead poured on them; had red-hot brass plates fixed to the most tender parts of their bodies; had eyes torn out; had limbs cut off and roasted before their eyes; had hands and feet burned while cold water was poured over other parts to prolong agony.

Most of us have never in our lives made a real sacrifice for Jesus. To have to suffer persecution is to walk along the same road as the prophets, the saints, and the martyrs. To suffer persecution is to make things easier for those who are to follow. To suffer persecution is to experience the fellowship of Christ, as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did in the furnace (Daniel 3:19-25). It is not always so dramatic, but it is nevertheless real. Most of us enjoy the blessing of liberty today because men and women in the past were willing to buy it for us at the cost of their own blood, sweat and tears.

RESPONSE:

I will accept persecution, whether mild or hot, which comes as a result of righteous living.

PRAYER:

Lord, encourage those today who are experiencing severe persecution for Your name.

10-THE PROCESS OF PERSECUTION-1: OPPOSITION

Consider [Jesus] who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:3

Whenever we ask audiences in free societies to word-associate “persecution,” most responses are what we refer to as the “big three”: torture, imprisonment and martyrdom. Many would agree that persecution is much more than the “big three” which are often only experienced in the final stage of the process of persecution.

Jesus repeatedly warned his followers that if the world hated Him, it would hate them also (John 15:18). In Luke 6:22, Jesus reminds his disciples that this opposition is a blessing. Not a blessing I ever hear many Christians praying for.

So the very basic and first step in this process is awareness that as a follower of Jesus, you can expect opposition, just as Jesus Himself experienced (Hebrews 12:3). He indicated that it will come from the world and possibly even from your own family and friends.

So do we walk around with a persecution complex, chip on our shoulder attitude, because of this? Absolutely not. The good news is that Jesus says we can live a life of joy in the midst of these troubles because He has overcome the world and so can we (John 16:33).

And this opposition is in every country and culture, not just those where severe persecution is being experienced. A few years ago Jim Cunningham and I wrote a little booklet about experiencing mild persecution right here in North America entitled *Red Skies @ Dawn*, available at Open Doors offices. It is a dialogue between two young couples. Here’s a relevant excerpt:

Sam responded. “Ultimately Satan, our real enemy, wants to destroy the church of Jesus Christ, wherever it’s located. And Jesus Himself is the stumbling block to those who don’t believe. When we say He is the only way, we are labeled as exclusivists and on this basis we are then considered intolerant.”

Yvonne added, “I heard a program host on the radio the other day and he was obviously upset by this. When someone told him that Jesus is the only way to God, he shouted that we evangelicals are the scum of the earth!”

“Whoa,” Sanjit reacted. “That’s a little heavy, isn’t it?”

Yvonne continued, “Well, he went on to say that it wasn’t the belief to which he objected so much but he objected to the arrogance of any person claiming ‘my way or the highway’ and writing off the rest of the human race to eternal damnation.”

“All of this discussion clearly points out,” Sam concluded, “we are facing—and will face even more—attacks because of Jesus in us. Persecution may not be just for those brothers and sisters across the seas in places like East Africa and China, but perhaps even for us.”

RESPONSE:

Today I will rejoice that in the face of general opposition to Jesus in me, I can be an overcomer like Jesus.

PRAYER:

Help me, Lord, to be aware of any opposition without it negatively affecting my witness.

11-THE PROCESS OF PERSECUTION–2: DISINFORMATION

Blessed are you when people...falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Matthew 5:11

This stage of persecution is characterized by unchecked ridicule and disinformation against a targeted group (Christian or others) most often spread through media. In this stage Christians are robbed of their good reputation and the right to answer the accusations made against them. Media, politics, entertainment, publications and schools are most often the avenues used to spread such insinuations or lies.

If disinformation about any group is disseminated long enough, no one will help in later stages because of this negative brain-washing about them. It essentially dehumanizes the person and is a pattern of thinking that may make it easier for milder wrongs to ignite a chain reaction of events. It creates an “us-versus-them” mentality.

A classic historic example is the gross disinformation the German Nazis spread about the Jews which then developed into a literal negative symbol when Jewish homes and businesses were marked with Stars of David and then targeted.

This also can result in verbal stereotyping. In the Rwanda genocide, the term “cockroach” became a negative classification of all Tutsi as conspirators against the government.

There are many significant global examples of disinformation used against our Christian brothers and sisters. The influence and impact of negative television programs against Protestant Christians in an autonomous region in Central Asia is very strong. A local pastor was shown on TV and, without reference to any evidence, labelled “an enemy of the state.” His family members’ pictures were also shown at the same time causing them to be despised by their community.

Recently a Christian woman who was shown on TV was not able to continue her work in a kiosk in the market. Other vendors forced her to leave the bazaar.

One local pastor says, “Since the program is shown regularly on TV, persecution has become worse. Some people have left the church out of fear. When you start to preach (to the public), people close up and say, we have heard about you, we don’t want to listen.”

In North Korea, the entire society is controlled by propaganda and disinformation. Persecution is so severe that in many Christian families, children are not even told about the family’s faith in Jesus until they are young adults because they are encouraged and expected to inform on their parents while in their school years. Christians are considered enemies of the state and the disinformation about this is wide spread.

Similarly, in countries like Laos, the government disinformation is that Christianity is an American religion being used to infiltrate their country rather than the former military methods. All Christians are thus portrayed as being traitors and working for America.

RESPONSE:

Today I will work for truth and quash all attempts at disinformation against followers of Jesus everywhere.

PRAYER:

Lord, grant Your blessing today on Your followers suffering from lies and untruths.

12-THE PROCESS OF PERSECUTION-3: INJUSTICE

In his humiliation he [Jesus] was deprived of justice. Acts 8:33a

Christians experiencing persecution are following in the footsteps of their master, Jesus. In Acts chapter eight, Philip revealed to the Ethiopian eunuch that the passage from Isaiah 53 he was reading referred to Jesus who indeed was deprived of justice. Today in the Western world, we would describe His trial before crucifixion as occurring in a “kangaroo court!”

If disinformation about any group, including Christians, is disseminated long enough, no one will help when that group or person is discriminated against. Discrimination relegates Christians to second-class citizenship with inferior legal, social, political and economic status. Once discrimination takes place, no one will intervene when the mistreatment comes.

Examples of such injustice against Christians abound around the world: ID cards in a country where Christianity is an unacceptable entry in the religion column; daughters abducted because they are Christians; expulsion from the community just because they are evangelicals.

Christians in Pakistan are a small minority among a large Muslim majority and often face such discrimination. The problem is compounded by the fact that many Christians are illiterate and poor. One Christian teacher at a center training Christian women recently said, “We do face discrimination because we live in the midst of people who don’t want us to move forward; people who keep trying to push us down so that we will always be in slavery.”

But there is one repeated scene of injustice against Christians that occurs in Pakistan which brings me to tears which involves young Christian girls. As a father of two daughters and having six granddaughters, I shudder every time I read news reports that describe Christian family injustice in this land. The stories usually work out this way:

Muslim women must marry Muslim men but Muslim men are allowed to marry any woman they wish with the proviso that any children must be raised as Muslim. Consequently, in Pakistan there are Muslim men who often desire some of the very beautiful young Christian girls in the community but realize there is no way their Christian families will agree to marriage. So these men resort to abduction.

The Christian father’s only option is to go to court where the judge—usually a Muslim—hears the case and pronounces to the Christian father, “Your daughter voluntarily converted to Islam and voluntarily married this Muslim man so you are to have no more contact with her. One of the most recent cases involved two young Christian sisters aged thirteen and ten. In this case, the judge allowed the ten-year-old to return home to her family but not the thirteen-year-old.

Safwan, a secret believer in Algeria, found a Christian pamphlet between the paperwork given him at work and started reading it. Upon discovering him reading the pamphlet, his boss reported him to the police. Later that night the police visited him and searched his entire home. They found Christian CD’s, several Christian movies and a New Testament. “It was clear to them that I had become a Christian. My boss fired me.”

RESPONSE:

Today I will work toward justice for everyone in my own country and around the world.

PRAYER:

Lord, be with those experiencing discrimination today because they love and serve You.

13-THE PROCESS OF PERSECUTION-4: MISTREATMENT

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him... Philipians 1:29

“When the process gets to persecution [mistreatment following disinformation and discrimination], no one will do anything because, ‘You know they are bad people anyway,’” says Rev. Dr. Johan Candelin referring to his three-step process of persecution model.

Once the first steps in the process occur, mistreatment can be practiced without normal protective measures taking place. Persecution can arise from the state, the police or military, extremist organizations, paramilitary groups, anti-Christian sub-cultures and even representatives of other religious groups. The irony is that in many parts of the world, the accusations of the attackers turn the victims into the villains.

This stage is the end result and includes the “big three”: torture, imprisonment and martyrdom which are most often the examples used for persecution. A specific example would be the imprisonment of hundreds of evangelical Christians in Eritrea without formal charges—many kept in metal shipping containers.

In Iran, a Christian couple were detained and physically and psychologically tortured for four days. The authorities even threatened to lock up their four-year-old daughter in an “institution.” Twenty-eight-year-old Tina Rad from Teheran was accused of “activities against the holy religion of Islam,” because she was reading the Bible with Muslims. Her thirty-one-year-old husband, Makan Arya, was accused of having endangered national security. Both of them had only been Christians for three months. Muslim converts meet together in small groups to talk about the gospel, to grow in the Christian faith and to encourage one another. They have made a vast transition from Islam to Christianity and they have a great need of training, security and a sense of belonging. The church tries to provide for this need and becomes the new “family.”

When they were released, the threats started. “If you don’t stop with your Jesus, next time we will charge you with apostasy,” Tina was told. In Iran, this can mean the death penalty.

Jamaa Ait Bakrim in Morocco is also serving time for his faith. Moroccan Christians and advocates question the harsh measures of the Muslim state toward a man who dared speak openly about Jesus. An outspoken Christian convert, Bakrim was sentenced to fifteen years prison for “proselytizing” and destroying “the goods of others” in 2005 after burning two defunct utility poles located in front of his private business in a small town in south Morocco.

Advocates and Moroccan Christians said, however, that the severity of his sentence in relation to his misdemeanor shows that authorities were determined to put him behind bars because he persistently spoke about his faith. “He became a Christian and didn’t keep it to himself,” said a Moroccan Christian and host for Al Hayat Television who goes only by his first name, Rachid, for security reasons. “He shared it with people around him. They will just leave him in the prison so he dies spiritually and psychologically,” said Rachid.

RESPONSE:

Today I will do everything possible to represent my persecuted brothers and sisters.

PRAYER:

Pray for Christians experiencing mistreatment and persecution around the world today.

14-REJOICING IN PERSECUTION

"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets."

Luke 6:23

This Scripture verse follows Jesus' statement about the blessings of persecution: hatred, exclusion, insult and rejection in Luke 6:22. This description is of persecution that is like Indian curry. It can be mild, medium or hot! And this verse parallels Jesus teaching in Matthew (5:12) about how we should respond when persecution comes our way.

Jesus does not just say accept it or receive it gracefully. He seems to almost go overboard in indicating that we should be glad and rejoice by leaping for joy when we receive this kind of treatment. Some would say Jesus goes over the top here.

The reason for rejoicing is because the persecuted disciple of Jesus is going to receive a great reward in heaven and is in the company of the prophets of old who also received this kind of treatment.

Can we realistically "jump for joy" in the face of persecution?

Pastor Richard Wurmbrandt was languishing in a Romanian prison cell after months of torture and now isolation. He was meditating on this Scripture and decided to make a literal application. So Richard danced—as much as anyone could dance in a cell three paces square—leaping about the room like a madman. The first time he did it, the guard really did think he had gone mad. It was one of the guard's duties to watch for signs that a prisoner's mind was beginning to crack under the strain of imprisonment, for if he went to pieces a prisoner would be of no more use for questioning. So the guard rushed off to his canteen and came back with a hunk of bread and some cheese and sugar, and broke the rule of silence as he tried to soothe this strange, laughing, capering figure. Richard ate the food gratefully. It was a very large hunk of bread, far more than he usually had in a whole week!

In his book, *In God's Underground*, Richard Wurmbrandt shares how encouraged he was at responding literally to Jesus' direction to react to persecution with great joy and rejoicing! He had received a reward on earth as well as in heaven.

RESPONSE:

Today I will respond to even mild persecution because of Jesus with great rejoicing realizing I will receive a wonderful reward in heaven.

PRAYER:

Thank you Lord that You expect me to take Your word literally. Help me to be joyful in the face of any persecution for You.

15-BEING SALT OF THE EARTH

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot." Matthew 5:13

Jesus is making a statement of fact here when he says, *"You are the salt of the earth!"* It is not a command or wish list. It is to be reality here and now. The implication is that we are to be what God has already made us to be.

The context is Christians facing persecution. Their numbers are small and they are insignificant. Salt is cheap in some places and expensive in others. We have the saying that a man is worth his weight in salt! Its value may vary yet it has unusual properties that far exceed its value.

This is what should happen when Christians take their stand for God in society. That stand for good renders society infertile for the growth of evil and ungodly influences. When England went through revival under the ministry of the Wesley's and George Whitefield in the 18th century, a possible bloody revolution such as afflicted France was averted.

Usually it happens on a more moderate scale. Conversations moderated, consciences pricked, respect for others heightened.

The disciples of Christ do not remain silent about their faith. They do not hide themselves, but live and work in places where their influence may be felt. The light that is in them can then be most fully manifested to others so that they may see that the light of real Christian goodness. It is a light not of this world but coming from God, and may in consequence be led to give honor and praise to its Giver.

I was blessed to visit a seminary in Indonesia that reflects this teaching of Jesus. They are surrounded by a Muslim community where many live in poverty. Rather than live in an isolated enclave, the school and students serve this community with the love of Jesus. They teach literacy lessons; they provide first-aid medical care; they distribute food and clothing to the hungry and naked.

During an outbreak of violence by extremists against churches in the area, an angry Muslim mob approached the seminary one night chanting their slogans and waving their machetes. When they arrived at the buildings, they found a circle of Muslim people surrounding the campus holding hands in a large circle. They said to the extremists, "We will not allow you to destroy this school. These people help us and our children with all our needs. You may not harm them!" The mob disappeared.

Being salt and light in community also has its rewards.

RESPONSE:

Today I resolve to live my life for Jesus in a way that will positively "salt" my community.

PRAYER:

Help me, Lord, to stand for the good and be a salty influence for You in the world around me.

16-THE VALUE OF SALT

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. Colossians 4:6

At the end of His Beatitudes, Jesus stated that His followers were to be salt and light in the world. Salt was highly valued in the ancient world for four special qualities:

- a. **Its purity** - glistening white and coming from the sun and the sea, it was the most primitive of all offerings to the gods. If we are to be salt, we must be an example of purity. In the world, efforts to lower standards of honesty, diligence in work, conscientiousness and morality are going on all the time. The Christian must be the person who holds aloft the standard for purity of speech, conduct and thought. Words cannot be effective unless backed up by pure living.
- b. **It was inexpensive but precious** - Christians may seem few, insignificant and of no consequence to society. In 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, Paul addressed the early church with the concept that though few in numbers, lowly and unimportant, Christians are called to exercise godly influence over the whole of society.
- c. **As a preservative to keep meat from going bad** - salt rubbed into meat slowed the rotting process. Christians whose lives exhibit “blessedness” will have a preserving impact upon a society that, if left to itself, will rot and deteriorate. In Judges 9:45, Abimelech, after defeating the city of Shechem destroyed it and scattered salt all over it. Spiritually, this is what the Christian does when he takes his stand for God in society. He makes that society, be it his friends in school, his fellow students at college, his co-workers, or those with whom he plays sports, less fertile soil for other ungodly influences. We too can have a preserving witness, by being involved with this world gone wrong, if we will pay the price.
- d. **To season food** - salt brings out the distinctive flavor of food. The increase of God’s people should increase the flavor of life in many different ways. By His very presence, Jesus raised the spirits of people. There was a quality about His life that could not be explained in natural terms. As our verse for today says, our speech especially should be seasoned with salt. In this context Paul also talks about not grieving the Holy Spirit. Since speech is linked to a person’s spiritual state and has tremendous potential for building up or tearing down (James3:3-12), the constant reminder is to watch not only what is allowed to come forth but how it comes.

By our presence, participation and penetration of society, in our daily contacts in our neighborhood and community, we are to bring the flavor of Christ to an unbelieving world.

RESPONSE:

Today I will check my conversation and be sure I season it with the salt of purity.

PRAYER:

Lord, forgive me when I grieve Your Holy Spirit by what I do and what I say and how I say it.

17-THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house."

Matthew 5:14-15

Jesus is also the great light of the world (John 8:12). Those who believe in Him are brought out of darkness into His light (Colossians 1:12-13) and in turn become lights also. In essence, they live the Beatitudes. What does light do?

- a. **It exposes dirt** - If Christians live holy and righteous lives, it will show up the unrighteous deeds of others (Ephesians 5:8-14). An example is that people who take bribes feel very vulnerable if there are others that don't. Christians who work in government offices can, by their uprightness and integrity, diminish the amount of corruption just by their very presence and principles.
- b. **It lights up the way so that we do not stumble** - If Christians walk by the principles of the Word of God, their lives take on a higher purpose and direction than that of self. This will not fail to attract the attention of a watching world. The world then is faced with a choice—to accept or reject such a model. To those who reject, that light becomes darkness. But for those who accept, that light illumines their lives and they will not make wrong choices.
- c. **It discourages works of darkness** - More crimes are committed at night than in the daytime.
- d. **It dispels fear** - When light shines, the phantoms of the night just fade away. People who are afraid of the dark prefer to sleep with the light on.

Light even enables discernment to be made—between friend and foe and between truth and counterfeit. It enables work to be done. Light enables plants to grow. Used in modern technology, it aids in telecommunications (fiber optics), helps to heal (lasers), and aids in publishing books.

The light of the gospel also blesses in so many ways. And Christians who walk in it can in turn help others by sharing the knowledge they have concerning life, death, sin, salvation, God, the devil, heaven and hell. For these are the issues that plague man on a wide scale and for which they are striving to find adequate answers. The light will be recognized, not just in words, but in “good deeds” which lead others to praise our Father in heaven.

In Kumasi, Ghana, African Enterprise has been organizing city-cleaning teams. Before an evangelistic campaign, Christians often ask government leaders if they can clean it up. Then they send out teams of people with makeshift straw brooms and pails of soapy water to scrub the city. Christian workers have cleaned hospitals, city parks, and government grounds before major outreaches to exemplify practical love.

RESPONSE:

Today I am determined to shine for Jesus—the true light of the world!

PRAYER:

Lord, I want my life to count for You and Your kingdom. Help me be a lighthouse for You.

18-TRANSFORMING INITIATIVES

But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Matthew 5:39-41

When we read these verses about non-violent resistance we usually think this is a defensive directive of Jesus. For example, a leading church bishop in Nigeria, amidst severe Muslim-Christian conflict, has repeatedly been quoted in the press as saying, “We have turned the other cheek so many times, we have no more cheeks to turn!” This statement is often repeated by young people in the conflict zones of Nigeria who have become frustrated by Muslim attacks.

Palestinian Christians involved in peace, reconciliation and non-violence movements have helped me see this teaching differently. When Jesus teaches about “*turning the other cheek,*” it was an offensive—not a defensive—act of peace using a culturally relevant example of His day. A person who slapped another on the cheek normally used the back of the right hand as an act of insult by a superior to an inferior. Thus, by turning the “other” cheek, the one hit (the perceived powerless person) takes an initiative to force the aggressor to now return the swing and hit his face a second time. This time the “hit” must be with an aggressive open palm or fist thereby transforming the nature of the relationship. Very counter-cultural.

The Christ-like response of turning the other cheek says the person does not assume the inferior place of humiliation the striker had in mind but views himself as an equal. The supposedly powerless person has redefined the relationship and forced the oppressor into a moral choice: escalate the violence or respond with repentance and reconciliation.

Other transforming initiatives are to give your cloak when sued for your tunic and to carry a load for two miles for a person who can legally demand that you carry it for only one mile.

We all must seek “transforming initiatives” within our own particular context.

In the sixteenth century a renegade group of Christian leaders rebelled against their own religion. These dissenters called for the church to separate from the state and to reject all forms of violence. They waged their war with weapons of peace, and many died for their radical cause of calling Christians back to the way of Christ.

Known as “Anabaptists,” they dared to think that Jesus should be taken seriously when he taught his followers to turn the other cheek, love their enemies, and do good to those who hate them. These “Inglorious Pastors” paved the way for all to lay down arms and acts of violence even at the expense of our own lives and liberties.

RESPONSE:

As a peacemaker for Jesus, I will seek out “transforming initiatives” wherever I see conflict.

PRAYER:

Lord, give me the attitude of Your peace and Your methods of not resisting an evil person that will prompt repentance and reconciliation.

19-NO ORDINARY LIFE

And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Matthew 5:40-42

An Open Doors co-worker shares this personal experience from the Middle East:

The serenity of the pastor walking beside us seemed to calm the hustle and the bustle of the small village. He suddenly came to a stop, carefully looked around and then said, “Some time ago, exactly on the spot where you are standing now, a Christian brother was slaughtered to death because of his faith. He was abducted and brought here to be executed. Life in a mid-eastern village like this is not easy if you confess Jesus to be the Son of God. It could cost you your life.”

I looked at this servant of Christ and asked him the obvious question “Why do you choose to live here? Why do you choose to follow Christ under such severe circumstances?”

Without hesitation he looked at me and his reply became a challenge and guideline for my walk with the Lord, even if it is in the safety of my home. He replied **“I refuse to live an ordinary life in Christ.”**

As Christians we are called to refuse an ordinary life in Christ. We are commanded to reject worldly standards, to reject mediocrity, to reject compromise and to value people more than possessions, even more than our own lives.

To truly follow Jesus means His will is more important than my life. As well, while alive, I must adopt a lifestyle that puts people ahead of possessions, even one of my most valuable possessions—time! We tend to cherish stuff and comfort more than souls.

In the *Shepherd of Hermes*, an early church writing, we are urged, “Instead of fields, buy souls that are in trouble according to your ability.”

RESPONSE:

Today amid the comforts of my environment I will refuse to live an ordinary life but seek to be more like Jesus.

PRAYER:

Lord, I want to live the Jesus way, valuing people more than things even to the point of sacrifice. Help me to escape the bonds of the ordinary Christian life.

20-TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK

If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.

Luke 6:29

An Open Doors colleague shares the following incident from an SSTS seminar in Indonesia:

I remember standing in front of nearly 800 pastors on the island of Timor facing a serious dilemma. Most of the pastors were victims of attacks by Muslims on the island of Ambon. They had lost homes, churches and even family members during these attacks. They were hurt, devastated and needed answers to the challenges they faced.

As soon as I started preaching, one pastor stood up and interrupted me: “Must we accept the persecution from the Muslims or must we retaliate? We are tired of forgiving just to be attacked again. We believe it is time to defend the honor of God and retaliate. What must we do?”

I understood perfectly the challenges. I had met those who were attacked and I have seen the scars on the bodies of those who simply accepted it. I understood there was no easy answer. Then another pastor interrupted: “No, pastor, tell this brother he is wrong. The Bible tells us to accept our suffering. We will dishonor God if we retaliate. Seventy times seven we need to forgive. Isn’t this true?”

I looked at the pastors and replied, “The Bible is clear. You **MUST** retaliate!”

There was silence. I sensed the division. I could see the smiles on the faces of those who agreed and saw those who disagreed getting ready to leave the hall.

“Wait, brothers!” I intervened. “Before you leave, let me finish my sentence. Luke 6 teaches us clearly to retaliate, but in doing so, we need to choose our weapons. When someone curses you, you don’t just accept it. You retaliate by blessing him. When someone mistreats you and persecutes you, you don’t just accept it. You retaliate by praying for him. When someone takes your cloak you retaliate by giving your undercoat. When someone slaps you in the face, don’t stand for it. Retaliate! Turn your other cheek.”

The burden of just accepting suffering was broken. They were satisfied.

RESPONSE:

Today I will retaliate against attacks upon me using the spiritual weapons of Jesus.

PRAYER:

Lord, may I always remember how You want me to respond when others treat me badly.

21-LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. Matthew 5:42

The second part of the Great Commandment (Luke 10:27) is “***Love your neighbor as yourself.***” Jesus then tells the story of the Good Samaritan. In this story Jesus defines our neighbor as anyone in need of help. This kind of love is very practical.

It was the middle of winter and the elderly Christian in prison had a badly infected ear. He thanked God that he had been able to keep his fur hat affording him some protection from the biting cold. At least he had a pillow at night.

One day one of his cellmates asked him for his fur hat. The Christian had been willing to share food with his cellmates, but felt he could not give up his hat. After all, he had an infected ear. He needed that hat.

Through the night he wrestled with his conscience. He was haunted by this Scripture: “***Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you***” (Matthew 5:42).

After a night of prayer, he sought forgiveness before God and was ready to hand over his hat. In the morning he learned that during the night the guards had taken the cellmate to another prison with a more severe climate.

That same morning, the guards held a routine check of the cell and among the personal objects confiscated was the believer’s fur hat.

He had tried to keep something that he was about to lose and God wanted to see the hat used for continued good with the other prisoner. Many years later, this believer remembered that lesson in Christian maturity which the Holy Spirit taught him.

RESPONSE:

Today I will live in the realization that people are more important than things.

PRAYER:

Help me, Lord, to not be tied down by my possessions but be open to sharing what You have given me with others in need.

22-LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."
Matthew 5:43-44

Nigeria is divided religiously along the tenth parallel. On the north side Muslims are in the majority. On the south side Christians are in the majority. Along the border between these two groups much blood has been spilled repeatedly in recent years.

One pastor says, "We are facing persecution from our neighbors, the Muslims. They don't want to see the gospel progressing...and they feel envious that we have more church buildings...and our businesses are expanding as well."

Another pastor adds, "They see that they must stop the expansion of Christianity into the north, and that has to be done physically."

And a bishop of one church denomination is wearying from the many attacks. He is quoted as saying, "We have turned the other cheek so many times, we have no more cheeks to turn!"

One violent incident took place in Tudun Wada. It began when a young student was accused of drawing a picture of Islam's prophet Mohammed. All of a sudden, the matter was taken seriously. They started burning churches and rioting with all kinds of weapons.

Nineteen Christians were killed that day, leaving behind mourning widows, family members and friends. Ten churches were burned. Thirty-six homes and one hundred forty-seven shops belonging to Christians were destroyed. But, God gave spiritual courage to His followers on that terrible day. And they refused to run.

Looking back on the situation, a pastor in the area says, "The churches that were destroyed...in fact there is none that has been rebuilt that is not bigger than what it was before. And the attendance by members has grown astronomically."

As soon as Open Doors co-workers heard about the violence, they rushed to Tudun Wada to see the circumstances for themselves. They provided for the spiritual, emotional and practical needs of the pastors and the entire Christian community.

Again the pastor comments, "They distributed to us Bibles and other reading materials. All of us pastors were very, very excited. We were happy."

Another added, "Open Doors through the *Standing Strong Through The Storm* seminar has lifted up our hearts, and has given us a heart of love for our enemies...Just like Jesus Christ said that we should pray for our persecutors...our attitude towards them is actually to pray for them, and love them."

The critically important need facing Nigeria is forgiveness. Christians are seeking to express it in tangible ways as they live out the love of Jesus Christ, just as He did two thousand years ago. He forgave the very people who nailed Him to a cross. That is the example Nigeria is witnessing today. And it is what will open the hearts of millions to the truth of the gospel.

RESPONSE:

I will be an example to others in loving, forgiving and praying for those who hurt me.

PRAYER:

Lord, bless the believers in central Nigeria today as they struggle responding to violence.

23-PRAY FOR PERSECUTORS

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

Luke 6:27-28

In Luke chapter six, Jesus defines persecution with four verbs: hatred, exclusion, insult and rejection (Luke 6:22). But later in the chapter Jesus gives much more emphasis on how you and I are to respond to persecution that comes our way.

One of the great lessons from the Persecuted Church is praying for those who persecute you. This is a parallel principle with loving your enemies. Multiple examples can be shared how God has honored this principle of prayer.

Noskie was a former Imam in the southern part of the Philippines. He was a devout Muslim and one who generated respect from that little community in which he lived. Coming home from a fishing expedition one day, he was shocked to discover that his two daughters had converted to Christianity. He was well aware of the shame that this would bring to the whole community.

In his anger, he mercilessly beat them hoping that they would renounce their new faith. But the daughters remained faithful. They loved their father and knew that nothing was impossible with God so they started praying for their father's conversion.

Sometime later, while fishing, Noskie felt a sudden piercing pain in his stomach. As the pain intensified, his belly began to balloon. He writhed in unbearable pain. He prayed but nothing happened. In desperation he cried out to the God of his daughters, Jesus Christ, and was instantly healed.

Noskie emerged from the experience a new person. He submitted his heart and surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Today he faithfully serves the Lord as a lay pastor. His daughters help in the ministry.

RESPONSE:

I am committed to respond to persecution with non-violence as Jesus taught.

PRAYER:

Lord, I realize today that when I pray for my enemy and love my enemy, he or she is no longer my enemy. Help me to always respond this way.

24-LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...

Matthew 5:44

Perhaps the most difficult of Jesus' commands is to love even our enemies. A true Christian always seeks another person's highest good—even when mistreated. Brother Andrew says **“The Christian's only method of destroying his enemies is to ‘love’ them into being his friends.”**

Romanian pastor, Dr. Paul Negrut, was visiting an old friend in Romania named Trian Dors in his humble home. As Paul entered, he realized that Trian was bleeding from open wounds. He asked, “What happened?”

Trian replied, “The secret police just left my home. They came and confiscated my manuscripts. Then they beat me.”

Pastor Paul says, “I began to complain about the heavy tactics of the secret police. But Trian stopped me saying, ‘Brother Paul, it is so sweet to suffer for Jesus. God didn't bring us together tonight to complain but to praise him. Let's kneel down and pray.’”

“He knelt and began praying for the secret police. He asked God to bless them and save them. He told God how much he loved them. He said, ‘God, if they will come back in the next few days, I pray that you will prepare me to minister to them.’”

Paul continued, “By this time I was ashamed. I thought I had been living the most difficult life in Romania for the Lord. And I was bitter about that.”

Trian Dors then shared with Paul how the secret police had been coming to his home regularly for several years. They beat him twice every week. They confiscated all his papers. After the beating he would talk to the officer in charge. Trian would look into his eyes and say, “Mister, I love you. And I want you to know that if our next meeting is before the judgement throne of God, you will not go to hell because I hate you but because you rejected love.” Trian would repeat these words after every beating.

Years later that officer came alone to his home one night. Trian prepared himself for another beating. But the officer spoke kindly and said, “Mr. Dors, the next time we meet will be before the judgement throne of God. I came tonight to apologize for what I did to you and to tell you that your love moved my heart. I have asked Christ to save me. But two days ago the doctor discovered that I have a very severe case of cancer and I have only a few weeks to live before I go to be with God. I came tonight to tell you that we will be together on the other side.”

RESPONSE:

Today I will destroy my enemies only with love.

PRAYER:

God give me Your kind of love for my enemies—so they too will love You.

25-FORGIVENESS IS FOR OURSELVES TOO

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Matthew 6:12

Corrie ten Boom often thought back over the horrors of Ravensbruck prison camp and realized that it was hard to find forgiveness in her heart—the true Christian attitude for the former Nazis that would reveal through her the Spirit’s goodness. Where was love, acceptance, and forgiveness in a horror camp where reportedly more than 95,000 women died? How could she ever forget the horrible cruelty of the guards and the smoke constantly coming from the chimney of the crematorium?

A few years later, Corrie was speaking in a church in Munich, and when the meeting was over she saw one of the cruelest male guards of Ravensbruck coming to speak to her. He had his hand outstretched. “I have become a Christian,” he explained. “I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein, will you forgive me?”

Conflict raged in Corrie’s heart. The good Spirit of God urged her to forgive. The spirit of bitterness and coldness urged her to turn away. “*Jesus, help me. I can lift my hand. I can do that much.*” As their hands met it was as if warmth and healing broke forth with tears and joy. “I forgive you, brother, with all my heart.” Later Corrie testified that “it was the power of the Holy Spirit” who had poured the love of God into her heart that day.

Philip Yancey gives a pragmatic reason why we must forgive that seems very foundational: **forgiveness alone can stop the cycle of blame, pain as well as vengeance and violence.** The meaning of the New Testament word “**forgiveness,**” he says, is literally “to release, to hurl away, to free yourself.” The only way to break the chain or cycle of hurtfulness is to stop and ask forgiveness. This allows a relationship to start over and begin anew. The Russian writer, Solzhenitsyn, believed this forgiveness is what truly makes us different from animals. Only humans can perform that most unnatural act of forgiveness that transcends the relentless law of nature.

The only thing harder than forgiveness is the alternative. A teacher once told each of her students to bring a clear plastic bag and a sack of potatoes to school. For every person they refused to forgive in their life's experience, they chose a potato, wrote on it the name and date, and put it in the plastic bag. They were then told to carry this bag with them everywhere for one week, putting it beside their bed at night, on the car seat when driving, next to their desk at work. The hassle of lugging this around with them made it clear what a weight they were carrying spiritually, and how they had to pay attention to it all the time to not forget and keep leaving it in embarrassing places...Too often we think of forgiveness as a gift to the other person, and it clearly is for ourselves as well!

RESPONSE:

Today I will give myself the gift of forgiveness. Is there someone I need to forgive?

PRAYER:

Father, I pray today for the power of Your Holy Spirit to enable me to release any cycles of hurtfulness in my life by forgiving others.

26-SPIRIT OF FORGIVENESS

... "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

Matthew 6:14-15

A Spanish father and son were estranged. The father later went to search for his son. When he could not find him, the father put this ad in the Madrid newspaper:

"Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father."

Saturday noon, 800 Pacos showed up at the office looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.

Forgiveness is one of the most powerful actions that Christians can perform. The world does not understand the ability or reasons to do this because it is most unnatural in a dog-eat-dog world. There is also pain to be overcome because behind every act of forgiveness lies the wound of betrayal; but there is far more pain and emotional, social, physical damage done when we do not forgive.

An Asian Christian apologist says, "If I am asked what separates Christianity from other religions, or what's different about Christianity, aren't all religions the same when you get down to it?", one of the first things that I would say is bound up in this one beautiful word: **forgiveness.**"

Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive a brother who sins against him. He thinks he is magnanimous and suggests seven times! Jesus makes his famous reply, "...**not seven times, but seventy-seven times** (Matthew 18:22).

Jesus then shares a parable about a man who, after much pleading for mercy, was forgiven for much and yet would not forgive another person who owed him little. In the parable, the master throws the man into jail to be tortured until he pays back his large debt. Then comes the conclusion: "**This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart**" (Matthew 18:35).

RESPONSE:

Today I will forgive others who hurt me because God has commanded it and because my own forgiveness depends on it.

PRAYER:

Lord, give me a spirit of forgiveness toward others who hurt me, just as You have forgiven me.

27-REAL LIFE FORGIVENESS

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Luke 6:37

Alexander Puerta has seen more than his share of tragedy. Raised on a small farm in Urabá region of northern Colombia, he was 17 when his father was murdered by an angry neighbour.

At 19, Alex nearly died of malaria. He called on a Christian evangelist to pray for him and experienced a miraculous recovery. That convinced him to accept Christ. He soon became a fervent evangelist himself and took a job at the Rancho Amelia banana plantation in Urabá.

A guerrilla army operating in the area mistakenly believed Rancho Amelia harbored a paramilitary squad. One morning in September 1995, they ambushed a bus carrying plantation employees, tied them up and threw them face down into a gully. The guerrillas then opened fire with machine guns on the helpless workers.

In the midst of the shooting, a bullet struck Alex Puerta at the base of his left eye, fractured his skull from the inside and exited, destroying his right eye and cheekbone. Amazingly, Alex did not lose consciousness, despite the excruciating pain and nearly suffocating in his own blood.

"The guerrillas came down the rows to find those who were still moving, finishing them off with a machete blow to the neck," he recalls. "They reached me and I told them that Christ loved them. 'This one's alive!' they said, and hit me twice very hard. They broke two teeth and cut off an ear lobe, but the machete did not penetrate my neck. Then they left.

"At that moment I heard a voice say, 'Fight for your life.' I felt such a strength and vitality that I succeeded in breaking my bonds. It hurt, but God gave me strength. When help arrived, they found me sitting up." Alex was the only victim to survive the massacre. Twenty-five of his Rancho Amelia co-workers, including several women, lay dead in the gully.

Survival has been difficult. Alex underwent five surgeries to rebuild his shattered face. Doctors told him that he would never see again. He remembers the long months of convalescence with nothing to do but sit at home with only the family dog.

Today Alex serves as a voluntary chaplain of Prison Fellowship, preaching in chapel services at the Bellavista National Penitentiary and counseling inmates. Some of the prisoners with whom he has shared the gospel are former guerrillas. At least one, he has learned, was involved in the massacre at Rancho Amelia.

Alex let it be known that he has forgiven each of the assailants who blinded him and killed his friends. "If one decides to follow Jesus, the foundation is forgiveness," he says. "Without it, there is no real Christian life."

Alex accepted an invitation from Open Doors to become a regular trainer for Standing Strong Through the Storm seminars offered throughout Colombia. Feedback from seminar participants indicates that Alex is particularly effective in teaching about forgiveness.

RESPONSE:

Today I will obey the Lord and forgive everyone who has hurt me.

PRAYER:

Pray for Alex as he teaches SSTS seminars in Colombia. Pray his students will also forgive.

28-THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
Matthew 6:17-18

Jesus assumes in this passage that His followers practice fasting. He says “when” you fast—not “if” you fast and then goes on to give these instructions. Fasting is a significant spiritual activity that goes along with intensive prayer times. To fast means to put God first. Fasting is an attitude of the heart in which we interrupt our normal life to pray for a specific matter or cause. It means to abstain from food—and for some, even drink—so that we can focus on God and be more sensitive to spiritual matters. Fasting is also perseverance in prayer until you have received an answer—be it yes, no, wait or something different. In essence, fasting means that we rend our hearts before God, confess our sins and turn to the Lord anew (Joel 2:12-13).

Fasting is biblical. Consider the following: Moses fasted twice for forty days (Exodus 34:28); Daniel fasted (partially) for twenty-one days (Daniel 10:3); Joel called for a day of fasting (Joel 1:14; 2:12); Ezra withdrew for a period of fasting and mourning (Ezra 10:6); Elijah fasted for forty days (1 Kings 19:8); Leaders of the church in Antioch fasted (Acts 13:2-3); Jesus fasted for forty days (Luke 4:2); Paul and Barnabas fasted (Acts 14:23; 27:33).

Captain Bill Tinsley was arrested on false charges under President Marcos in the Philippines following the completion of Project Pearl in 1981. As the days of his confinement passed, Bill fasted from eating. After a few days of fasting, his blood pressure rose very high. A doctor visited him daily. Everything possible was done to get him to eat. He was accused of staging a hunger strike. Bill carefully explained to his captors many times, “My fasting is a *spiritual* exercise. If I want my God to take my part, I must become weak that He may become strong. President Marcos is a very powerful man. I cannot fight him. I must let God take my part.” His explanation brought only a certain resignation by his jailers. They did not understand.

Each day during his captivity Bill went for a walk. A soldier always went along to guard against possible escape. On that tenth morning, after reading of Elijah’s running a great distance while fasting, Bill jogged. The soldier that went along couldn’t keep up and was forced to take shortcuts across the fields to stay with him.

“How can you be so strong without eating?” a colonel asked referring to the jogging incident that morning.

“It’s the power of God,” Bill told him sincerely. “And if you keep me here, you’re going to see me grow stronger and stronger!” The eyes of all the men present grew large. They believed him and that prospect was not to their liking. It was with some reluctance Bill later walked out of his cell for the last time. He had experienced God’s presence there. His captors, the same ones that had falsely arrested him, gave him a send-off as they would a dear friend.

RESPONSE:

Today I resolve to practice all the spiritual disciplines...including fasting.

PRAYER:

Help me, Lord, to practice fasting as a spiritual discipline without making it obvious.

29-WHERE IS YOUR HOUSE?

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:19-21

This Scripture is best illustrated by the testimony of a nameless (for security) Arab Christian woman:

"My grandfather was born in one village, grew up, got married and died in the same village. I was born in one city, and by the age of ten, I already had lived in three different countries and moved five times because my parents were looking for better job opportunities. After marriage, and by the age of thirty-five, I had already moved fifteen times mainly because of three different war situations in my home country!

Is there some kind of prize for people moving so often? Some of the changes were done willingly but for most of them, I had no choice! I lived in stone houses, brick houses and even in a prefabricated one (with thin walls like cardboard) and that was at a time when Beirut was being bombarded! I have to admit that I had fears not because of the bombardment but because of not being able to find a place we could afford to pay rent!

One day, I was so worried that I couldn't sleep; so, I sat down to figure out how I would overcome this fear. I thought to myself, *What is the worst thing that can happen to me? If I cannot afford to sleep in a building, I will go and sleep under a tree; no one would charge me money for doing that and no one has died because of sleeping under a tree!*

Then, I looked back into the past years and saw how God had taken good care of me, helping me not only to survive during wartime, but also to be productive and render services to my community. If, by faith I am God's child, according to His promises in the Bible, He will continue to take care of me. So, having these thoughts, I began singing, **"You are my hiding place, You always fill my heart with songs of deliverance, Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in you!"** That was it, my fears were gone! I still do not own my own place to live, but I carry the same song in my heart and in my laptop, to listen to whenever I change the places I sleep!

I discovered that the best thing to do is not to get attached to material things or even people, because they will be there for some time and will be gone soon. The best thing is to get my heart attached to God, because He will go with me everywhere, will provide for me what I need and in the end take me to live in the heavenly city where my eternal house is! So, where is your house?"

RESPONSE:

Today I will seriously evaluate where my "treasure" and "house" are because that's where Jesus says my heart will also be.

PRAYER:

Help me Father to accumulate treasures in heaven and not on earth.

30-SERVING TWO MASTERS

"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." Matthew 6:24

Riches are dangerous because their seductive power often causes people to reject Christ and His kingdom. The rich young ruler who turned sadly away after being told that he had to part with his riches to inherit salvation prompted Jesus' statement, "**How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.**" (Luke 18:24; Mark 10:23; Matthew 19:23)

A desire for riches can cause people to do almost anything—even to the extent of selling their souls. The result, Scripture warns, is anguish now and damnation later (1 Timothy 6:9-10). An abundance of possessions can easily lead us to forget that God is the Source of all good. The people of Israel were warned of this before they entered the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 8:11-17).

The pursuit of wealth often results in wars. James 4:1-2 says this clearly and it is amply confirmed from world history. Instead of fostering more compassion toward the poor, riches often harden the hearts of the wealthy. Rich persons are often unconcerned about the poor at their doorstep. (Luke 16:19-31; Isaiah 5:8-10; Amos 6:4-7; James 5:1-5)

Money is not neutral; it is a power with a life of its own. It is a power that is even demonic in character. When Jesus uses the Aramaic term *mammon*, translated as *money* in the NIV, (Matthew 6:24) to refer to wealth, He is giving it a personal and spiritual character as a rival god. Mammon is a power that seeks to dominate us.

Hence, money is an active agent. It is a law unto itself—capable of inspiring devotion. It is tremendously instructive to stand back and observe the frantic scramble of people for money. And this does not occur just among the poor and starving. Even the super-rich still seek it furiously. The middle class continue to buy more houses, acquire more cars and purchase more clothes than they need. If money were only a medium of exchange, it would make no sense at all to attach such prestige to it. We value people in relation to their income. We give people status and honor in relation to how much money they have or appear to have. **We can have all the Christian externals and yet be complete materialists in our hearts.**

RESPONSE:

I choose to serve God, so I will not give money any place of prominence in my life or in my heart.

PRAYER:

Lord, I need Your help today to stay focused on You and not on all the "things" around me.