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**Sunday 10 September 2023 to**

**Sunday 17 September 2023**

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**Sin, forgiveness, prayer and presence**

by Ruth Olsen

***If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for ... (Matthew 18:19a).***

Read [Matthew 18:15–20](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+18%3A15-20&version=NRSVUE)

Each of us is responsible before our Heavenly Father for what we say and do. Matthew 18 begins with Jesus' disciples asking him who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. His response: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 18:3,4 NIV). But woe to anyone who causes little ones who believe in him to sin! Get rid of, or turn and run away from, anything that causes you to sin. For the Father doesn’t want any of his little ones to be lost (verses 1–14).

Next, Jesus is speaking to adults, where sin happens one to another. As adults, we are to exercise responsibility when something wrong is said or done; to go privately, one-to-one – where applicable – to try to deal with that wrong for the relationship to be restored. Of course, if the wrong is done to a child, or there is some other unequal level of power, a different strategy is needed.

Receiving correction is not easy for any of us; likewise, neither is giving it! Pride and fear get in the way. It takes courage to recognise and acknowledge wrongdoing. Like Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, we would rather hide from God and blame others when found out. Broken, fallen human nature resists truth.

But Jesus gives us the gifts of forgiveness, prayer and his presence to help us in any situation. And if we can agree with another person on earth about anything we ask his help in, knowing he is right there with us, that prayer can be answered. There’s power to change where there is agreement in prayer. Hearts can be softened, and courage received to acknowledge wrongdoing and receive help in repairing the wrongdoing where possible. None of it is easy.

Like Peter (verse 21), we ask, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive …?’ We feel justified in asking that question, not recognising it is the wrong question to ask. But when we forgive, we are ‘loosed’, set free from the wrong done to us, and our Heavenly Father can deal with it on our behalf.

**Lord, have mercy. Change our hearts; renew our minds. By the power of your Spirit, give us courage in dealing with these things. Amen.**

*Ruth thoroughly enjoys the opportunity that ‘retirement’ provides to see more of this beautiful country. When you are reading this, Ruth and Steen will be wandering somewhere in Western Australia, with their caravan, probably marvelling at the brilliant diversity of wildflowers to be found there.*

Monday 11 September 2023

**Opportunities?**

by Ruth Olsen

***… a great door for effective work has opened to me … (1 Corinthians 16:9a).***

Read 1 [Corinthians 16:1–9](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+16%3A1-9&version=NRSVUE)

How aware are you of what is happening in the church in another part of the country? If struggle or hardship was happening somewhere else, would you be willing to help in some way if you could, working through the leadership?

The Apostle Paul was very aware of the ‘wider picture’ of the church, from Jerusalem and through Asia, regularly keeping people in different places in his prayers, as he mentions in his letters. To the Corinthians in our reading, he gives some wise strategy on gathering and holding a financial collection to help the Christians in Jerusalem. Paul would write letters of introduction to go with those selected to take the gift, and ‘if it seems advisable for [him] to go also’, Paul is happy to do so. He doesn’t take over but submits to them for their decision in this matter, modelling servant leadership.

Paul then speaks of his possible travel plans and his hope of spending time with the Corinthians, God willing. But there is intention in verses 8 to 9 to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost because:

* A door for effective work opened to him.
* There were many who opposed him.

That sounds like hard work, tension and conflict, doesn’t it? But Paul sees it as an opportunity! He is willing to deal with the challenges and inconveniences caused by those who oppose him, looking beyond to the opportunity set before him. He will not be deterred by ‘the wind and the waves’ (Matthew 14:22,32) of opposing circumstances, but instead, he is available for what the Lord could do through him there in Ephesus. As the writer of Hebrews urges: ‘Let us fix our eyes on Jesus … who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame’ (Hebrews 12:2,3).

Struggles, difficulties, pain and suffering will come our way in our broken world. We are not immune. But are we willing to ask the Spirit to show us Father’s plans and purposes beyond our circumstances? To stand with Jesus, saying, ‘Here I am, Lord; send me’?

***Father, we give you our fears and insecurities. By the power of your Spirit, through Jesus, move us with you in what you are doing. Amen.***

Tuesday 12 September 2023

**Exhortations and assurances**

by Ruth Olsen

***My love to all of you in Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 16:24).***

Read [1 Corinthians 16:10–24](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+16%3A10-24&version=NRSVUE)

Following on from yesterday’s reading, Paul ends his letter with personal requests, admonitions and exhortations. He asks for Timothy to be accepted, respected and encouraged should he visit the Corinthian believers.

Like some of us, Timothy was quiet, not outspoken, and probably an introvert without extroverted self-assurance and directness. Each personality type is needed. We all need each other! It would become boring – or perhaps overrun – if everyone was a Type A extrovert go-getter. The challenge is to work together and bless one another, and in the process, some of our sharp edges are softened or smoothed out, or courage stretches into new steps of faith.

It also seems that the Corinthians didn’t respect Stephanas and his household, who were among the first converts in Achaia (Greece). Paul honours them and their serving of the saints. Paul urges the Corinthians to ‘submit to such as these’ (verses 15 and 16) and others who have refreshed and blessed Paul, for such blessing flows on through Paul back to the Corinthians.

Either of these situations could happen anywhere among us today! Our culture encourages us to question, assess, evaluate, criticise and analyse. Yet, our God-given purpose is to build up, not destroy. Jesus said he came to give life, life in fullness; it is the enemy, the thief, who works to rob, kill and destroy (John 10:10). It is easy to criticise and give a bad review. It takes courage, patience and care to encourage, strengthen and honour others.

Yet Paul seems rather blunt regarding any who do not love the Lord Jesus Christ – ‘a curse be on him’ (verse 22)! It seems to relate to the various dissensions among the Corinthians; anyone who says they are a follower of Jesus but whose actions do not show it needs to wake up to themselves!

Even as Paul addresses these relationship issues, he ends his letter with assurances of his love for them. Like a spiritual father, he desires them to grow in maturity in loving one another. And his message is equally valid for us.

***Lord Jesus, by the power of your Spirit, train us in extending your love to one another. Amen.***

Wednesday 13 September 2023

**Introductions**

by Ruth Olsen

***The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1)***

Read [Mark 1:1–13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+1%3A1-13&version=NRSVUE)

The introduction in my NIV Study Bible to the Gospel of Mark says it was generally accepted to have been written by John Mark, whom we also find in the Book of Acts. Mark was a close associate of Peter, and what he has written comes from Peter’s preaching, directed to the needs of the early Christian communities, though arranged and shaped by John Mark. See also Acts 10:37, where Peter’s sermon begins with John’s baptism and continues to the resurrection of Jesus, similar in outline to Mark’s Gospel. Perhaps John Mark’s gifting lay in writing, in preserving Peter’s preaching, since the early church fathers viewed Mark as the ‘interpreter’ of Peter.

There were previous connections. On the night of Peter’s miraculous escape from prison, led by an angel of the Lord beyond the iron gate leading to the city, when it dawned on Peter that this had really happened, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark. There, many people gathered to pray (Acts 12:1–12). This Mary was also the aunt of Barnabas (see Colossians 4:10), who partnered with Paul on a missionary journey. We are given a glimpse of connections and relationships among the early followers of Jesus, each with their different gifts and calling.

Mark’s Gospel starts with John the Baptist and his link with the Old Testament. For centuries, the people of Israel had no prophet, so John’s preaching of repentance followed by baptism created high interest, preparing the way for Jesus. Repentance involves a deliberate turning from sin to righteousness, to what is right with God, like the messages of the Old Testament prophets. And the people were responding.

Then, at his baptism, Jesus sees heaven torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove, and he hears his Father’s words of affirmation (verses 10 to 11). ‘At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert. (verse 12) – to be tested. There, angels ministered to him, as they have done for others also (see Hebrews 1:14).

***Lord, save us in our times of trial. Help us remember you are with us. Thank you that our lives are in your hands. Amen.***

Thursday 14 September 2023

**God-given authority**

by Ruth Olsen

***News about [Jesus] spread quickly … (Mark 1:28).***

Read [Mark 1:14–28](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+1%3A14-28&version=NIVUK)

Yesterday, we read of the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus at his baptism, anointing him for ministry. It’s the anointing Jesus spoke of in the synagogue at Nazareth after returning to Galilee from the temptations in the desert (Luke 4:14–19).

For centuries, God’s people had been waiting for the promised Messiah. Yes, they frequently lost their focus or tried to please God in ways they understood. But now, it is Jesus with the message: ‘The [*kairos*\*] time has come; the kingdom of God is here. Repent and believe the good news!’

Immediately, Mark writes of Jesus calling Simon and his brother Andrew to follow him and, likewise, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. ‘At once’ (verse 18) and ‘without delay’ (verse 20), they followed him. This immediate action is a distinctive characteristic of Mark, who uses a Greek word about 47 times that can be translated as ‘at once’, ‘quickly’ and ‘just then’. See how many times you can spot that nuance in this chapter!

Perhaps you have learned to discern, as you listen or read, whether the speaker or writer knows what they are talking about. We can speak of Jesus from the place of knowing about him or knowing and trusting him. With the latter, we have learned that he is real and God can be taken at his word. We can then speak of Jesus with an authority we didn’t have when we just knew about him.

The people at the synagogue were amazed at Jesus’ teaching and actions. They picked up on his authority in his teaching, which was so different to what they were used to hearing. They were amazed at how Jesus dealt with the evil spirit speaking through the man, evicting it and setting the man free. The evil spirit knew who Jesus was. But Jesus didn’t want evil spirits as his messengers. Jesus wants people who trust him to be his messengers, speaking in God-given authority by the power of the Holy Spirit at work through the messenger and message. It is no wonder that the news of Jesus spread quickly!

***Lord Jesus, open our eyes to who you really are. Awaken us to who we are in you, the authority you give us, and how we are to use it. Thank you! Amen.***

\*the time of God’s favour

Friday 15 September 2023

**Prayer – an oasis?**

by Ruth Olsen

***Jesus … left the house and went off to a solitary place where he prayed (Mark 1:35b).***

Read [Mark 1:29–45](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+1%3A29-45&version=NRSVUE)

As one reads these verses for today, one can sense action and movement, as if things are happening quickly. That’s a characteristic of how Mark writes. At the home of Simon and Andrew, Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. Jesus took her hand and helped her up. The fever left, and she began serving them. Mark records no words, just action – a demonstration of Jesus’ authority.

Word spreads, and people crowd in, seeking help for their loved ones. Jesus heals many, but again, silences demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew who he was – again, demonstrations of Jesus’ authority, the authority of heaven. Jesus probably wanted first to show by word and deed the kind of Messiah he was before he declared himself clearly, and he would not let the demons frustrate this intent.

Early the following morning, Jesus went to a solitary place to pray. Much had been happening, but time aside from busyness to pray was a priority. Time to listen and be still, time for heart-to-heart communication, to recharge and replenish – an oasis away from busy ministry.

Simon and his companions find Jesus, telling him, ‘Everyone is looking for you!’, to which Jesus said, ‘Let’s go somewhere else, to preach there also; that’s why I have come’. What would your response be? ‘But … but …?’ However, Jesus was focused and would not be distracted by popular demand.

A man with leprosy comes to Jesus, desperately seeking help. You can read Leviticus 13 and 14 for the regulations required for dealing with an infectious skin disease, including the seven days' isolation (lockdown?). Imagine the isolation of being untouchable. Yet Jesus touches him, speaks to him, and the leprosy is gone! Imagine the man’s delight and joy! But he is told not to tell anyone apart from the priest. Instead, his joy bubbles over to anyone nearby. Jesus, who is not seeking popular demand, retreats to lonely places, but people continue to pursue him even there.

***Lord, increase our capacity to receive from you and share from you by the power of your Spirit at work in us and through us. Amen.***

Saturday 16 September 2023

**He is worthy!**

by Ruth Olsen

***Bless the Lord, O my soul … (Psalm 103:1a).***

Read [Psalm 103:[12–7], 8–13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+103%3A%5B1-7%5D%2C+8-13&version=NRSVUE)

This is such a beautiful psalm!

* Let all that I am praise the Lord (NLT).
* Praise the Lord, my soul (NIV).
* Bless the Lord, O my soul (ESV).

Hebrew uses the word ‘bless’. To me, bless is a fuller, richer, deeper-nuanced word than praise is, embracing our whole inner being in us and blessing the Lord. He blesses us in so many ways so that we can respond likewise. What a privilege we are given to be able to do that! That’s what Jesus makes possible for us. He invites us into his relationship with Abba Father and Holy Spirit.

Telling ourselves to praise or bless the Lord is a conventional Hebrew way of addressing oneself, something we need to do more often because we otherwise forget! The angels and heavenly hosts are also called upon to join in praising and blessing the Lord!

David’s psalm celebrates what the Lord does for us and speaks again of God’s mercies to his people, Israel, now all made available to us in and through Jesus.

This psalm also gives us God’s own character reference: ‘The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love’ (verse 8, NIV), first used in Exodus 34:6, repeated in Joel 2:13, and Psalm 86:15 adds ‘and faithfulness’. He speaks this about himself – his character reference to us!

Can you hear his heart of compassion for you and those around you? It’s available to all but revealed to those who trust him and take him at his word. He means what he says! Jesus reveals God’s compassion to us, too. Jesus said, ‘Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14:9). Though we may not see him with our physical eyes, the Holy Spirit can reveal many unseen things to the eyes of faith.

He remembers that we are dust (verse 14), our days like grass or like flowers in a field (verse 15), here a brief while and then gone from this earth (verse 16). Yet his love is always with those who trust him; although it is way beyond our comprehension, it is revealed to anyone who asks.

***Lord, we praise and bless you. You are worthy! … [Add your own words.] Amen.***

Sunday 17 September 2023

**A kingdom of forgiveness**

by Neil Bergmann

***Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ (Matthew 18:21).***

Read [Matthew 18:21–35](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+18%3A21-35&version=NRSVUE)

The central message of Lutheran theology is explained by St Paul in his epistles – we are justified freely by God’s grace through faith in Christ Jesus. The gospels echo this message. For example, John explains that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life’ (John 3:16). Jesus says something similar to Martha before Lazarus is raised from the dead, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die’ (John 11:25).

However, Jesus also has another message that he repeats in the gospels over and over. In John 1:15, Jesus said, ‘The time has come.  The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’ This kingdom of God is also referred to as the kingdom of heaven, especially in Matthew’s Gospel. Whatever name is used, Jesus talks more than a hundred times about this new kingdom. It is like a sower in a field, a mustard seed, yeast, treasure in a field, a merchant looking for pearls, a net thrown to catch fish, a landowner hiring labourers, a wedding banquet, and ten virgins with lamps. It belongs to those with faith like children, those who are poor in spirit, and those who are persecuted. In Luke 9, Jesus sends out the disciples with just two instructions: ‘He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal those who were ill’ (Luke 9:2).

In the Lord’s Prayer, when we ask that God’s kingdom come on earth as in heaven, we ask God to grant us the strength to proclaim his kingdom in our lives through our words and especially through our actions. Today’s reading is a kingdom parable about forgiveness.  Because we have been forgiven more than we can ever repay, we proclaim the kingdom whenever we forgive others.

***God of unlimited forgiveness, please grant me the courage and wisdom to rejoice in that forgiveness, let go of hurts, and forgive others. Amen.***

*Neil Bergmann is currently the chair of Lutheran Earth Care Australia and New Zealand. A retired computer engineer, he worships at Our Saviour Lutheran Church, Rochedale, Queensland. He enjoys reading, cooking and spending time with his family.*