



Summer Lovin' Devotions

Week Four

July 2-8, 2017



United We Stand?

As you begin each day: Take some deep breaths and acknowledge that you are in God's presence. As you read, pay attention not just with your mind, but also with your heart. Are there words or phrases that stick out to you? If yes, take time to consider them. Carry the words with you throughout the day and let God continue to work with you on what has been brought to your attention. If you get distracted as you read, that is okay. Use the distractions as a reminder to thank God for those happy distractions and as a reminder to give to God those troubling distractions.

All scripture is from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Day 1: Praying for Our Leaders

First of all, then, I ask that requests, prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving be made for all people. Pray for kings and everyone who is in authority so that we can live a quiet and peaceful life in complete godliness and dignity. This is right and it pleases God our savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. There is one God and one mediator between God and humanity, the human Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a payment to set all people free. -1 Timothy 2:1-6, Common English Bible

Christians are instructed to pray for all people, including our leaders. 91% of our current Congress identifies as Christian,¹ so surely they all pray regularly for one another and for our president, right? If that seems unlikely when we look at them, let's try pointing the finger back at ourselves. Do we pray regularly for our president and members of Congress? What about for those at the Statehouse or on City Council?

In 1 Timothy we are told to pray for those in authority for two reasons: so we can live a quiet and peaceful life in godliness and dignity – a good prayer for those at risk of persecution – and because God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of truth through Jesus Christ. As we pray for our leaders, we are praying for God to use their authority to further establish God's own kingdom, a kingdom of salvation and truth for all. 1 Peter 2:17 says, "Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor." A straightforward way to honor our leaders is to pray for them. How often do you pray for leaders? Why does praying for leaders please God? How does your own arrogance get in the way of your prayers? Who can you pray for today?

Prayer: Leader of all, forgive us for the ways we deny your leadership among us and act as if we know it all. Bless our leaders today with humility, discernment, wise counsel, mercy, justice, and hope. Use all the institutions we have created for your glory and as conduits of your love. Make strong the righteous and weaken the unrighteous. Guide us all in the way we should go. Amen.

Day 2: Light up the Sky with Fireworks

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your

light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. -Matthew 5:14-16

Watching fireworks is one of the fun traditions of celebrating America's Independence on the 4th of July. Chemists have come up with all sorts of different fireworks. There is variety in sound: bangs, crackles, whistles; there is variety in color: red, yellow, blue, green, purple, and more; there is variety in shape: streaming, blooming, circles, hearts, and more. Some sparkle, some are giant hot fireballs, and some are just for the noise. If you survey a group of people, some will like the loud ones best, others will like shimmering ones best, and some will like the hot fireballs. But they're all for the same purpose: to help us celebrate and commemorate Independence Day.

Similarly, God has created all sorts of different people with different gifts. We read about a vast variety of spiritual gifts in Ephesians 4. In our variety, we are created for a purpose too: to be the light of the world. Our scripture from Matthew reminds us to let our light shine so others can see God's good works and glorify God. We are the light of the world because we *have* the light of the world, Jesus Christ, in us. Like fireworks, our individual attributes are not all the same and we all have certain attributes we prefer. Jesus calls us to remember our purpose: to shine the light that Jesus has put in us and be the one we are created to be.

What is your light – the gift of God in you for the world? Who can you encourage with your light today?

Prayer: We are fascinated, O God, by the world you've created with a dazzling array of sights and sounds. As we experience a variety of fireworks, remind us of the variety you've created among us as well. Teach us the value of who we are that we might live as the bright lights you've intended us to be. Amen.

Day 3: Those Who Sacrifice

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. -John 15:9-14

One of the great American values is sacrifice. Several times each year Americans pause to remember those who have sacrificed for our country. For the most part, when we talk about sacrifice, we talk about those who have been killed in military combat. Often, in both secular and religious services, John 15:13 is used to honor military women and men. In addition to the sacrifice of one's life blood for others, many Americans participate in other types of sacrifice. Two-thirds of households give to charities and one-quarter of adults volunteer.² Jesus taught about sacrificial love – laying down one's life for one's friends. He did more than teach about it, in fact, he modeled it through his own death. In his teaching, Jesus tied obedience to sacrifice. *"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love....this is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."* As one might expect, Jesus' teaching is consistent with what God taught through the Prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 15. In this Old Testament story, King Saul was rejected as king by God because he didn't obey God. He was willing to "sacrifice" to God, though his offered sacrifice was spoils from the military, but he wasn't willing to obey God. Samuel asked Saul, *"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams."*

Which is easier for you: obedience to God or sacrifice? What sacrifices do you make? What might God be asking you to do in order to love another? In what ways do you already experience joy in giving of yourself for others?

Prayer: Jesus, we thank you for the example you've provided of both obedience and sacrifice. Though we often fall short, we are thankful for the courage you provide as we give our lives for others. Show us ways to live in greater obedience to you. We desire to live in your love. Amen.

Day 4: In God We Trust

Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord,... The Lord looks down from heaven; [God] sees all humankind. From [the throne, God] watches all the inhabitants of the earth—[the Lord] who fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds. A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast

love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you. -Psalm 33:12-22

Hope is an expectation of something good. Despair is the absence of hope. So, hope and despair can't exist together. However, we can experience both and sometimes, it seems like we fluctuate pretty quickly between the two. It may be that when you turn on the news or pick up the paper or login to social media that you see "the state of the world" and have a tinge of despair. Some days it seems that there isn't a lot of good news. Even the definition of "good news" is up for grabs. We may question if we are united at all.

If it's possible to take a step back, we can see hope as the Psalmist saw hope. Hope not in our army, not in our strength, but hope in the Lord. Hope in the God that watches *all* the inhabitants of the earth. Hope in the One who fashions our hearts and watches what we do. Hope gets stronger as we trust in God, period. It's not that we trust in God to have a certain bill pass or fail, or a certain court decision, or a certain election outcome, but that we trust in God's holy name. God is good. That is why we have hope. God sees us all. That is why we have hope. God loves us. That is why we have hope. God is present and active in the world, through God's people. Although the task can seem daunting, and at times even despairingly so, you are called and empowered by God to make a difference. The Holy Spirit of God in you and at work through you is hope in the world.

When have you felt despair? How do you regain hope during despair? What gives you hope? How can you live as hope in the world today?

Prayer: God of hope, enlarge our perspective giving us eyes to see all of your people. Cause us to truly trust in you as the only source of hope, even as you use the systems and objects that we hold as idols in your place. By your holy spirit, be hope in us and show us how to be hope in the world. We trust you to guide us today as we live in obedient hope. Amen.

Day 5: Heroes Among Us

Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. —Philippians 3:15-21

Every culture has remarkable individuals who are held up as heroes. Sometimes our heroes are from politics, sometimes from our military, sometimes from religion, sports, or pop culture. Society's heroes have qualities that members of society are called to emulate. American culture is broad with a variety of heroes and one citizen's hero is not necessarily a hero to another. Christian culture is also broad, and we don't all agree on some of our heroes either. However, as the Apostle Paul points out in today's scripture, we should emulate those who live as citizens of heaven and are subject to the lordship of Jesus Christ. As citizens of heaven, under the lordship of Jesus, we seek to be humble as Jesus was humble, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited" (Philippians 2:6). Humility may be an undervalued quality in American culture right now, but it is vital for honest followers of Jesus and cannot be discarded. Over time, neglecting humility can lead to beliefs of superiority and even acts of aggression. The Apostle Paul was writing in a time when there was not unity. People were not all of the same mind about what living faith in Jesus looked like. Some were clearly in it for themselves "their god is the belly....their minds are set on earthly things," but others just had differing opinions "if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you." With passion and "with tears", Paul urged them to hold on to what they'd attained: salvation in Jesus Christ and unity in the sharing of the gospel. He reminded them to live in humility, focused on Jesus, even in the midst of their differences.

Who is your hero? What qualities in a hero do you seek to emulate? If someone looks at you as a hero, what qualities of yours do you hope they emulate? How can you practice those qualities today?

Prayer: God, we have such difficulty understanding ourselves in light of you. You know much more than we do; our fullest understandings are always incomplete. Develop true humility in our hearts. Use our humility to show yourself to someone in your world today. You are the real hero. Amen.

Day 6: Hard Hearts

Again [Jesus] entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. -Mark 3:1-6

The Gospel of Mark hits the ground running. In the first chapter Jesus is baptized, tempted, calls a few disciples, and begin to do the miraculous. By Chapter 2 his oddities are questioned by the Pharisees, "*why don't your disciples fast?*" and "*why are they doing what is not lawful?*" And, already here in Chapter 3 the Pharisees are looking for a way to destroy him. For honest Christians, there is something uncomfortably comparable between the behavior of the Pharisees and our own behavior. For sure, the Pharisees are the bad guys of the Gospels, or at least some of the bad guys. They wanted to destroy Jesus. But, if we take a step back and try to forget that we know how the gospel story ends, we might see that the Pharisees are a pretty good crew. After all, In Mark 2, the Pharisees were just asking some questions about why Jesus and his disciples weren't following the Jewish law. Jesus and his disciples were Jews and the Pharisees knew they had good laws because it originated in the law God gave to Moses. Jesus broke the law by healing on the Sabbath – and he did it in the synagogue! Then he reinterpreted the law by asking, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" If we are being honest Christians, might we ask questions too? Might we defend our beliefs against a new teacher who breaks our rules right in our sanctuary? Might we be angry at a new teacher reinterpreting our religious rules? Is that uncomfortable? Is that a bad thing? Scripture doesn't say that Jesus was

upset with their questions, or bothered by their passion for being holy, or irritated that they didn't understand. No, scripture says Jesus "was grieved at their hardness of heart". His heart was sad because their hearts were stubborn. They couldn't be moved; they wouldn't be humble; they couldn't see something new. Likewise, we want our own way; we want our truth to be God's truth; we want my way rather than thy way.

How do we avoid being the Pharisees? How do we fix a hard heart? God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel about fixing a hard heart: "*I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.*" A hard heart is God's to fix and it's fixed by replacement. It is God who gives us a spirit to understand and, remarkably, even to obey when we don't understand.

How do you keep your heart soft? What parts of your heart need replaced? What is different today about your understanding of God or God's rules than when you first believed? What questions do you have for Jesus?

Prayer: We cannot thank you enough, God, for being open to our questions. And at times, we don't even think to ask because we are so sure we know all the answers. Soften our hearts, Lord Jesus. Teach us something new. Thy will be done. Amen.

¹ Pew Research Center. *Faith on the Hill: The religious composition of the 115th Congress*. January 3, 2017. Retrieved on June 23, 2017, from <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/01/03/faith-on-the-hill-115/>.

² Philanthropy Roundtable. *The Almanac of Statistics*. Retrieved on June 27, 2017, from <http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/almanac/statistics/>.