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He has authored two books- *Praying: Reflections on 40 Years of Solitary Conversations with God* and *Leading the Presence-Driven Church*- and is in the process of writing more. He was co-editor of an HSRM collaborative work *Encounters With the Holy Spirit* (2019). John is a highly active blogger, posting on a daily basis at johnpiippo.com and covering a wide range of topics. John has a Ph.D in Religious and Theological Studies (Philosophical Theology) from Northwestern University and a D.Min. in Renewal of the Church for Mission. John has taught as an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at the Monroe County Community College, Monroe, Michigan (Logic, Philosophy of Religion, and Western Philosophy); Adjunct Professor of Spiritual Formation at Payne Theological Seminary; Adjunct Professor and Project Director, Palmer Theological Seminary (1995-2010), and as a visiting Professor at Faith Bible Seminary in New York City. John and his wife Linda have been married since 1973, have two sons, and are grandparents.

28 Letters to My Church on Discipleship

**by
Dr. John Piippo**

NOTES

NOTES

Greetings!

I have written, for my church family, twenty-eight brief devotionals on discipleship. The Church's purpose is: to make disciples. So, in the name of disciple-making, I offer you this little booklet. There's so much to say on the meaning of apprenticeship to Jesus! I know I have not said it all here. My prayer is that this will help you in your Jesus-following, and that this February would be a season of accelerated growth in you.

Blessings!

PJ (Pastor John)

AN APPRENTICE TO JESUS CARVES OUT TIME TO MEET WITH HIM

Dear Church Family,

I am so thankful you are doing this 28-day focus on discipleship.

A disciple is an apprentice. I will be sharing with you how I have learned to apprentice myself to Jesus as my Teacher.

I was taught, by my early mentors, that salvation is a life—a way of living each moment of my day with God. As Galatians 2:20 says: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

I was taught to carve out focused times with God. We called these “quiet times.” It was just me and Jesus.

This was so important to me that I carved out time with God, every day. I believe you have time to do this, too. A disciple has time to meet with Jesus!

Eugene Peterson said that some people were too busy to meet with God because they were lazy. By this he means that they let others decide what they will do, rather than deciding for themselves. If this is you, today it all can change.

Peterson writes:

“I mark out the times for prayer, for reading, for leisure, for the silence and solitude out of which creative work can issue. I find that when these central needs are met, there is plenty of time for everything else.”

Choose to make more time for God in your life. God will honor this. You will begin to experience the effects of this!

In Joshua 24:14-15 we read:

*“So fear the LORD and serve him wholeheartedly. Put away forever the idols your ancestors worshiped when they lived beyond the Euphrates 3 River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD alone. 15 But if you refuse to serve the LORD, then **choose today whom you will serve.** Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? **But as for me and my family, we will serve the LORD.**”*

DECLARATIONS

I do not see people as my true enemies.

Today I am engaging the enemy.

I defeat the enemy using weapons of righteousness, such as love, and truth.

I am a spiritual force that sets captives free.

My mission is to tear down strongholds the enemy has erected in the hearts of people.

The enemy has been defeated! Sin and death have lost their power!

Here are some declarations to carry with you today. Say them several times throughout the day. Let them get inside you.

Love, PJ

DECLARATIONS

As for me, and my house, I am choosing to serve the Lord.

I am taking control of my schedule so that my schedule will not control me.

I am finding time to get alone with God and meet with Him.

I am making time to meet with Jesus every day.

God is giving me a plan for tomorrow. I will meet tomorrow with Him, at _____ (time), for _____ (minutes).

I am a disciple, an apprentice, to my Lord Jesus Christ!

February 2

A DISCIPLE EXPERIENCES UNION IN CHRIST AS THEY ABIDE IN HIM

Dear Church Family,

I am a disciple in the School of Jesus. He has taught me many things. He has told me, "John, go deeper."

I am still learning about the depth of living united to Christ.

When I became a follower of Jesus, I became fascinated with words. Perhaps it was because I began studying harder and longer and deeper than I had ever before. Maybe because I changed my college major to philosophy, which is "the love of wisdom," and wisdom gets expressed in words. I even wrote a song called "Words." To top it off, my doctoral dissertation was on metaphor theory.

I felt called, by Jesus, to study words. Jesus told me, "John, I am the Word."

As a new believer, I was drawn to something called the philosophy of language. How do words successfully refer to reality? What is the meaning of "literal" language? Why does figurative language speak so powerfully to people? Why did Jesus speak in parables?

And why, why, is the most important word in the letters of Paul the tiny, two-letter preposition 'in'?

In.

In' is a container metaphor. I am now in my home office. Which means I share whatever is now transpiring in my home office. 'In' is a participatory metaphor. Such as, I am in a marriage. I am a coparticipant in a lifelong, covenantal union with my wife Linda.

As my Teacher, Jesus teaches me about 'in'. Gary Moon writes:

"According to [Lewis] Smedes, Paul's writings are driven by one consuming theme. One hundred sixty-four times Paul makes reference either to our being "in Christ" or to Christ's being "in" us. Apparently, the apostle believed there was something even more important and transforming than the moral teachings of Jesus. It was the great mystery revealed. It was the present possibility of entering into union with Christ—the center and condition of authentic human existence." (Moon, Apprenticeship with Jesus: Learning to Live Like the Master, pp. 44-45)

To be a disciple of Christ you do not have to study words as intensively as I have. But an apprentice to Jesus will be instructed about the importance and greatness of living in Christ.

I read my Bible and see that Jesus confronting satan and demons, all the time. My Teacher believed in demons, and engaged in battle against them.

As an apprentice in the School of Jesus, I have been taught that my true enemies are not people, but are demons. I am not to wage war against flesh and blood, but against the dark spiritual agents who are against Jesus.

In my Lutheran church we sang Luther's worship song "A Mighty Fortress." I still love this song! Look what the lyrics say.

For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;

His craft and pow'r are great, and, armed with cruel hate,

On earth is not his equal.

And though this world, with devils filled,

should threaten to undo us,

We will not fear, for God hath willed

His truth to triumph through us;

The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;

His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,

One little word shall fell him.

This song was in my DNA years before I became a disciple. When that happened, the words took on rich, new meanings.

My dear brothers and sisters, we are in a spiritual battle. Our weapons are not of this world. Engage the real enemy of our souls.

Love,

PJ

One more for the road!

March 1

DISCIPLES OF CHRIST UNDERSTAND

THEY ARE IN A SPIRITUAL BATTLE

Dear Church Family,

I was once physically attacked by a demon.

It happened in 1970.

I was a twenty-one, and a brand new follower of Jesus. I had become the youth leader in my Lutheran church.

I was asked to come to a meeting with our pastor, a few church leaders, and a husband and wife who were long-time church members.

The husband and wife said they had experienced something new to them. They wanted to share it with us. They had begun to pray in tongues.

I didn't know what the manifestation of tongues was about, but was interested.

As the meeting went on, the atmosphere felt tense. This had never happened in our church. I could see that the leadership was not going to allow this. The pastor said we should stop and pray about this.

That's when a demon attacked me.

I had never felt anything like this in my life. It was as if something evil was inside me. I was sitting in this meeting, head bowed, eyes closed, praying, "Help me Jesus! Help me Jesus!" I had no training for this. What was going on inside me?

The prayer time, and the meeting, ended. I went to a phone and called Linda. I was crying. "Pray for me. I don't know what's going on. I think I've been attacked by a demon."

Since that time I've learned more about spiritual beings like demons. I concluded that, yes, I was under a demonic assault in that meeting. Over a spiritual gift. Can you believe it?

You are in Christ! You share in things that are now transpiring with the trinitarian being of God!

Therefore, abide in him. Dwell with Jesus. Remain in him. Then, as Jesus told his disciples in John 15, your life will bear much fruit.

Moon writes:

"I don't believe the transforming power of Christ is present with us now because he once said, "Love your neighbor as yourself," but because the living Christ can love my neighbor through me by being in me. The difference here can be as vast as the chasm that separates reading a prayer about God from experiencing praying with God." (pp. 45-46; emphasis mine)

This is big.

I bless you with experiencing the reality of union with Christ!

Love, PJ

DECLARATIONS

I experience Christ living in me.

Christ, the hope of glory, is in me! (Col. 1:27)

I can do all things in Christ. (Phil. 4:13)

In Christ I have been brought to fullness. (Colossians 2:9)

I am united with the Lord, therefore I am one with him in spirit. (1 Cor. 6:17)

I am a temple, and the Holy Spirit indwells me. (1 Cor. 6:19-20)

I do not live under condemnation, for I am in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

Jesus, I want a total transfusion of your life into my life!

February 3

AN APPRENTICE TO JESUS IS A PRAYING PERSON

Dear Church Family,

The year was 1977. I had just graduated from seminary. My theology professor, Dr. Tom Finger, asked to meet with me. Dr. Finger said, "What theology class do you think our seminary needs?" I thought for a moment. Then answered, "Prayer. We need a class on prayer."

"Would you teach this class on prayer?"

"No," I responded. "I need a class like this, and am in no position to teach it."

How many of you know that a teacher, especially a beginning teacher, often learns more than their students? God was speaking to me through Dr. Finger. He persisted. I acquiesced.

In the fall of 1977, I taught a class on prayer at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. My main requirement for the students was: to pray. I thought this was a stroke of genius!

One result was that, in my prayer class I, the teacher, acquired a praying life that has lasted to this day. I became a student of Christ in the School of Prayer.

What is praying? Praying is talking with God about what God and I are thinking and doing together.

Praying is communicating with God about The Mission.

In praying I meet with my Commander, and receive my marching orders.

This is what Jesus was doing in Luke 5:16: Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Jesus prayed. Therefore I, as His apprentice, pray.

Where do I take my praying times? I pray at what I call "places of least distraction."

I carry with me a Bible, my spiritual journal, and usually a devotional book (some book I am reading for spiritual direction). During my praying time, when God speaks to me, I write it down in my journal.

When I was twenty years old and said "yes" to Jesus, I told him I would be his disciple for the rest of my life, and into eternity. This spring I will celebrate fifty years of discipleship.

The Bible presents life as a race, where people run to a finish line that has a prize. Linda and I not only plan on finishing, but finishing well.

Discipleship, like a marriage, is a life commitment. Disciples don't retire from the great race.

You are Jesus' disciples.

May you run well, and finish strong!

Love, PJ

DECLARATIONS

I am running with Jesus, stronger than ever!

I have placed the cross before me, and the world behind me.

I love You, Lord, and I'll never stop loving You.

I thank God that He has not asked me to retire from following and serving Him!

February 28

DISCIPLES OF JESUS FINISH WELL

Dear Church Family,

Disciples of Jesus never retire.

We never graduate from the School of Jesus this side of heaven.

Linda and I had parents who followed and served Jesus until the day they died. My parents' church had a large outdoor concert amphitheater that sat 3000 people. During the summer months famous Christian musicians came and did concerts. After the concerts were over, the place was littered with waste paper. My parents, who were in their seventies, and other elderly couples, would stay and pick up all the trash. They were great servants!

Linda's father lived with us for seven years. He was in his eighties. Every Saturday morning I would drop him off at the local mall. He would stay in the food court, and approach people to tell them about Jesus. The mall managers heard of this, and asked him not to bother people anymore.

Linda's dad was not to be stopped! He had a t-shirt made, with the words on it: "Let's talk about Jesus." He kept going to the mall on Saturday mornings, wearing the new t-shirt. After he died, we had it made into a pillow. Here it is.



When I enlisted in the Army National Guard, I signed up for six years. I kept my commitment. When I said my vows to Linda on our wedding day, we signed up for life, until death separates us. We have kept our vows.

In praying, I experience comfort, healing, deliverance, and rescue. I receive encouragement. I am told that I am loved. I get corrected and directed, which calls for obedience. I find out what God wants from me and what he wants me to do.

Praying, to me, makes following Jesus more exciting and more real. God really does expect me to follow him!

I have found that I can be myself, and use my own words and ways of talking, when I pray. I don't have to learn a special language. God is not impressed by my words, but by the attitude of my heart.

I bless you all with a deep, conversational relationship with the Lord Jesus!

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

I am a praying person.

I pray because Jesus, the Lord of my life, prayed.

When I pray, I pray from the heart.

Praying is exciting to me, because I am communicating with the Maker of Heaven and Earth!

I am gaining control of my schedule. Therefore, I am finding more time to pray.

I am a prayer warrior, defeating satanic strongholds, and bringing in the Kingdom of God!

(My experiences in The School of Prayer are recorded in my book Praying: Reflections on 40 Years of Solitary Conversations with God.)

February 4

AN APPRENTICE TO JESUS LEARNS TO HEAR HIS VOICE

Dear Church Family,

I began hearing the voice of God before I became a follower of Jesus.

One time, when I was twenty, I was playing in a band, in a bar. Out of the blue, the thought came to me, "John, you are messed up." I thought... This is true.

I heard this in a way that was different, and deep. In retrospect, I saw it was God, speaking to me, calling me to himself.

Today, I am a disciple of Jesus.

A "disciple" is an "apprentice." An apprentice learns to do what their teacher does. This requires hearing from God.

My life is apprenticed to Jesus. I am a student in The School of Jesus My Lord. This is the greatest opportunity I have in life! If you are a disciple, you are in this for life, and joyfully so.

Jesus is my Teacher.

I know what a teacher is. Linda and I are both teachers. Linda did her bachelor's degree in education, focusing on special needs kids and behavior-disordered kids. I taught for eighteen years at Monroe County Community College, and in several theological seminaries.

I know what it is to be a student. When the teacher teaches, the student hears their voice. This is basic.

In the same way, Jesus is my Teacher. Jesus is mentoring me to be like himself in his character, and in his abilities. As Jesus once said, *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."*

Jesus knows his committed ones. He speaks to his disciples. His disciples recognize his voice. His apprentices follow Jesus as their Lord.

I want this for you, too.

One Wednesday night a friend called. He was putting on a conference, and the main speaker got sick. My friend was under pressure as he asked if I could fill in on Friday night. I said, "I'm sorry, but I cannot." He asked, "Why not?"

I said, "Linda and I have a date, and have the evening scheduled."

I could tell this answer frustrated him. I did not feel I had to defend myself. We said good-bye. Five minutes later, he called to apologize. He told me he understood, and valued my commitment to my marriage.

What would you have said? Maybe you would have agreed to speak. As for Linda and I, we have set a fence around Friday nights. Only weddings, funerals, and medical emergencies may interrupt this.

The first disciples said "no" to many things, in order to say "yes" to Jesus. I have learned to do this.

I want the freedom of boundary-setting for you, too.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

Every day I say "yes" to Jesus, and "no" to the values of this world.

I place the cross before me, and the world behind me.

I have placed a godly guard around my heart.

Having boundaries has set me free to love as Jesus loves.

I walk in the wisdom of knowing what to do, and knowing what not to do.

I often help others establish godly boundaries in their lives.

February 27

DISCIPLES HAVE HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

Dear Church Family,

Disciples of Jesus know when to say "yes," and when to say "no."

Disciples say "yes" to the moral values of Jesus, and "no" to the secular values of their culture.

They do this by establishing godly, healthy boundaries.

Before I became a disciple of Christ, I had few boundaries. When I became a follower of Jesus, he began to teach me about them.

One week after I became committed to Jesus as my Lord, I was invited by friends to a party. Drugs were there. I believed I had been set free from a daily habit of smoking marijuana. At this party, joints of marijuana were being passed around. My friend, Bob, took a hit, and then passed the joint to me.

I took it, said "No, thanks," and passed it on. A few minutes later I left the party.

I had set a boundary. This was an important lesson for me! And I have never gone to a party like that again.

A boundary is like a fence. A fence keeps good things in, and bad things out. Disciples of Christ set a fence around their hearts. They learn to say "yes" to the values of God's Kingdom, and "no" to the falsehoods of the kingdom of darkness.

When the *Boundaries* materials came out in the 1990s, they were a huge help to me and Linda. Much of our counseling ministry is about helping people understand and apply godly, healthy boundaries.

We have learned that sometimes we even say "no" to things that are, in themselves, godly and good. For example, one of our habits in marriage is having a date night, every Friday night. Linda and I estimate we have had at least 2,400 Friday night dates, spanning forty-six and a half years of marriage! This habit is rooted in a core value: *We will take time to invest in our marriage.*

I have been a follower of Lord Jesus for fifty-one years. I have grown in learning to hear His voice. I have discovered that hearing the voice of Jesus is directly related to intimacy and familiarity with Jesus.

Because of this, I recommend focusing on intimacy with Jesus, rather than on hearing his voice. With greater intimacy, hearing God will come.

You will learn to hear God's voice by spending time with God.

I want this for you, as well.

Grow in intimacy with Jesus; advance in hearing Jesus speak to you.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

I take much time to spend with God.

I am more familiar with Jesus than I have ever been.

I find that God, as my Shepherd, has much to say to me, His sheep. God speaks to me about many things.

I love hearing the voice of God.

I am a student in The School of Jesus Christ, and He is my Teacher!

February 5

AN APPRENTICE TO JESUS READS THE BOOK

Dear Church Family,

I read the Bible.

I read, and re-read, the Gospels and the Letters of Paul. As I write these words, I am – again! – in the book of Exodus. I always read from Proverbs and the Psalms.

Why do I do this? Because: I am a disciple of Christ. The required reading is: the Bible. The Greek word for 'bible' is biblios. It means, simply, Book.

I read The Book. Because Jesus is training me to be like him, in character and behavior.

An apprentice to Christ studies the Great Manual of Instruction. I do this, as a Guide for living. It is a guide for my life.

Reading and meditating on the Book helps me see earth, through the lens of heaven. I do not recommend the opposite strategy, which would be seeing the Book through the lens of earth.

I doubt my father knew this, but God used him to influence me to read the Bible. I remember seeing dad read his Bible, usually in the evening before he went to bed. He read it so much that his thumb almost wore through the leather cover. I have his Bible. See the thumbprint.



I received a leather-covered Bible when I was confirmed in our Lutheran Church. I was twelve years old. My fingerprints were not on this Bible. I never touched it. My mother stored it somewhere - I don't know where, and I didn't care. I never picked it up and read it. Until...

I was 21. That's when Jesus rescued me out of a deep enslavement to evil. Instantly, my life began to change for the better. I was now an apprentice to Jesus. I needed a Bible!

I drove to my parents' home. I asked, "Mom, do you know where my Bible is?"

I wonder what she felt when I said these words. She retrieved it for me. I began to read. And read. I wore the leather out on it so much that the cover finally tore off. I still have this Bible.

This is not how it happens to every disciple of Jesus. It is the story of one disciple, me. I also do not think someone is not Spirit-filled if they do not manifest all the spiritual gifts. Remember: the gifts are essentially manifestations of the Spirit, for the edifying of the people of God, distributed by the Spirit as He wills.

Here is one way I see this.

Some people, when it comes to spiritual things, are divers. I'm not. I am a wader. I have seen some enthusiastic divers fade away when the initial thrill is gone. Meanwhile, I am still wading, sometimes slowly, even methodically. I have seen all the spiritual manifestations, working around me in the Jesus community, and many of them through me. God has healed through me, delivered people from darkness through me, and prophesied through me, all to my amazement.

I just keep going deeper. Today, I lift my head and observe that I am swimming in the deep ocean waters of the Holy Spirit, expecting more to come.

I want this for you.

I want you to pray, "Come Holy Spirit. Have your way in me."

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

Come, Holy Spirit, have your way in me.

Manifest spiritual gifts through me.

I see You working through me to strengthen, comfort, and encourage my brothers and sisters.

The Holy Spirit is having his way in me.

Breakthrough is happening around me.

I love being God's Church, the body of Christ!

In my church, spiritual gifts are manifesting all the time.

February 26

DISCIPLES OF JESUS EXPERIENCE

MANIFESTATIONS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Dear Church Family,

In 1972 I read, in the Bible, about the manifestation of "tongues." 1 Corinthians 14 says a lot about this spiritual gift. Verses 39-40 told me, *Be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.*

I had never heard about this spiritual gift, or any other, for that matter. I had also never been exposed to the idea that the spiritual gifts have stopped manifesting. That idea would have confused me, since the Bible presents these wonderful manifestations as needed to strengthen, comfort, and encourage the church.

At that time I was the youth leader at Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church, in Rockford, Illinois. This was my home church. One night I could not get away from the idea of this strange Spirit-manifestation called *glossalalia* ("tongues"). The thought came to me, "I want this."

After a youth group meeting, I went into Tabor's large, empty sanctuary. I lay on my face, on the carpeted floor, and said this to God: "God, if you want me to have this gift, I am willing to receive it."

Nothing happened. But I did not feel discouraged. I sensed that God was pleased that I was asking.

Almost twenty years later, it happened. In 1991. Linda and I lived in East Lansing, but had driven a hundred miles to a gathering at Redeemer Church in Monroe. This is where we still are. After the meeting, some of Redeemer's people surrounded us and prayed for us. One of them prayed for me, saying, "God, give John all that he needs."

As we were driving back later that night, Linda fell asleep in the car. While she was sleeping, I began to pray in tongues. It did not feel pressured or forced. It felt natural, and beautiful.



Here it is.

I am my father's son. Like father, like son, right? I have been reading and studying the Bible for fifty years. Disciples of Christ do this. They study to show themselves approved, as they rightly handle the Word of God. (2 Timothy 2:15)

I want this for you.

The apostle Paul wrote: Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)

And: Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. (Philippians 3:17)

I am a disciple, a student, in the School of Jesus. Jesus teaches us through the Word, and through other disciples, like my father.

Follow my example. Read and re-read your Bible.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

I am a student of God's Word.

I love reading the Bible. It is a guide to my life!

I read portions of the Bible every day.

I sometimes write powerful verses on a card and carry them with me, looking at them often.

God regularly speaks to me through the words of the Bible.

The Bible nourishes me. It is food for my soul.

I have time to read my Bible.

The Bible is getting inside me and transforming me.

(For a good book on understanding the Bible, see *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stewart.)

February 6

A DISCIPLE IS A SERVANT

Dear Church Family,

I want you to serve others.

I want you to place others before the cultivation of your own self.

This is one thing my Lord has taught me.

As a boy, and a teen, I served in some ways in my parents' house. I helped out, usually upon being asked, and took out garbage, shoveled snow, and mowed the lawn. When I could drive, I ran errands for my mother. I served in my parents' home. But I did not have the heart of a servant. That came in the spring of 1970.

That was when I got saved. Jesus was now my Lord, and I was his apprentice. I was enrolled in the Lifetime School of Jesus. This was, and remains, exhilarating to me!

Part of me was anticipating doing big things for Jesus. Jesus, on the other hand, was teaching me small things. While in God's eyes it is no small thing to be a servant, a servant specializes in small things. Like doing the dishes.

On a Sunday, in the spring of 1970, I sat with my father and mother at our dinner table. Church was over, and we went home and ate the meal my mother had prepared for us.

After eating, I left the kitchen and went into our family room to watch sports on TV. This was my habit. Little did I know this was to forever change, on that great day in the School of Jesus.

A new thought came to me. One I had never heard before or, if heard, then never attended to. It was: "Go back in the kitchen and help your mother clean up." I knew this was God, instructing me.

I lifted my body off the family room couch and went back into the kitchen. "Mom," I said, "let me do the dishes today."

My parents were raised in a patriarchal culture. Making meals and cleaning up afterwards were things the women did. Some of my mother's self-worth came from cooking, cleaning, and making the house look good.

DECLARATIONS

I love You, Lord.

I walk through the day filled to overflowing with God's love.

I never ceased to be amazed at how much Jesus loves me.

I never take God's love for me for granted.

The love of God, in me, changes atmospheres.

The love of God, flowing through me, brings healing to the people I meet.

I experience the love of Jesus as a force that defeats my enemies!

February 25

DISCIPLES OF JESUS LOVE AS HE LOVES

Dear Church Family,

My Teacher, Jesus, has instructed me that love is greater than faith and hope. (1 Corinthians 13)

The love of God is a power. It is a weapon against darkness, hatred, and violence.

The love of God is a force.

My life with Jesus began when God told me that he loves me. As much as my parents loved me (which was a lot!), I needed to be touched by the One who *is* love, whose love is *without limits*. That moment was transcendent and transforming.

The School of Jesus is a School of Love. All the power, and all the spiritual gifts and natural talents, are nothing if the love of God does not flourish in my heart.

God's love grows in me. More of it captures me today than ever before. The love of God is a bottomless well of supernatural treasures, to be discovered, by me, one of His disciples.

I'm now thinking of a Promise Keepers event I attended. The main speaker was talking about "success." I have never forgotten what he said: "Success is being on your death bed, surrounded by your family that loves you."

I think this way. If love is the greatest of all the spiritual manifestations mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13, then the end-game of not only my life but of all reality is *Christ*, and his perfect power and love. Therefore: *people get ready*.

I am ready. Love has a Name.

Love,

PJ

"No, Johnny," she said, "you go back and watch TV."

"Mom, I'm going to do the dishes!"

I insisted on this. After protesting, she gave in. Little did we both realize that I just advanced in the School of Jesus. I became a servant in my father's and mother's house. I consider this one of the greatest things Jesus has ever done for me.

Jesus once said to his disciples, "The Son of Man did not come to be served. He came to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many people."

Above our kitchen sink is a window. Through the window I see the beautiful pine trees in our backyard. My bird feeders are there. My mother used to love feeding and watching birds. So do I. Here I am today, like mother, like son. I wash dishes. I do this gladly, with joy and thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

I want you to serve others.

I want you to place others before your own desires.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

Just as my Lord Jesus came to serve others, so do I.

I love serving in the name of Jesus!

I place my desires behind the needs of people.

I am learning more and more about servanthood every day.

I am a servant in my church family.

I wash dishes to the glory of God.

When it comes to serving, I take the initiative.

February 7

AN APPRENTICE TO JESUS FORGIVES OTHERS

Dear Church Family,

I want you to forgive others who have hurt you.

I want you to pray for people who harass and persecute you.

There came a point in my life as a disciple of Jesus where I began praying the Lord's Prayer with my new-creation, born-again heart. I was deeply affected by this part of the prayer: *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

This became real to me in my marriage with Linda.

We were dating, and – finally – had our first argument. We were upset with each other. During the argument I remember thinking, "This is over." I was under the illusion that, in a love relationship, there will be no anger because we would be the perfect couple.

During the verbal fighting Jesus gave me a lesson I have never forgotten. It happened this way.

I thought of myself as a powerful arguer. I felt I was defeating Linda in this conflict. Then God said, "John, you are arguing powerfully, but you are wrong. You're going to confess this to her."

So what did I do about this? I kept arguing, even though I knew I was wrong. Then God said, "John, not only must you now confess you are wrong. You must also ask her forgiveness for continuing to argue even though you knew you were wrong."

At that point I stopped. And said, "Linda, I see I was wrong in this argument. And, when I saw this, I kept on arguing anyway. Would you forgive me?"

This was new spiritual territory for me! To my memory, I can only recall one other time when I asked someone for forgiveness. What would happen now?

Immediately, Linda said, "I forgive you."

And the wall came down.

I was driving to a leader's meeting at the church building. I was still praying about James 4:6, still stunned by the dream and the card Linda gave me. Then, another Bible verse came into my head - Proverbs 16:18 - *Pride goes before destruction; a haughty spirit before a fall.*

That's it! God was telling me if I don't get rid of pride in my heart, I will take our church for a fall. As this word came into my heart, I felt relieved, and joyful. Every warning God gives contains a rescue. I shared the entire story with our leaders. None of them disagreed.

This was another important lesson in the School of Jesus. Humble disciples experience the outpouring of God's grace.

A humble heart is one that is good soil for God's Spirit to plant seeds of renewal in. A humble heart is teachable.

Humility is the foundational attitude for spiritual transformation.

May this attitude be formed in you.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

Lord, if there is any conceit in me, remove it.

I have a teachable, trainable spirit.

I am growing in humility.

My constant prayer is, more of Jesus, less of me.

February 24

DISCIPLES OF CHRIST ARE HUMBLE

Dear Church Family,

A humble heart is the key to experiencing the grace of God.

One of the first books I read as a new Jesus-follower was C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. One of the chapters is called "The Great Sin." What, I wondered, could that be?

Lewis said it was pride, or self-conceit. Pride is the complete anti-God state of mind. Francis Frangipane calls pride "the armor of darkness." As I read Lewis, I agreed with him. I am also sure I did not realize how much pride I had in me.

In 1993 Jesus gave me a lesson about pride. It began with a dream.

One night I dreamed I was driving a tour bus in the Smoky Mountains. The roads were curved and twisted. I could barely get the bus around the corners. Then, after an exceptionally sharp curve, the bus came to a cliff, with a deep drop-off. That's when I woke up.

The dream shook me up inside. Nevertheless, I eventually lost sight of it, and went through my day. When I came home in the afternoon Linda had bought a card for me. She sensed I was struggling with things in our church. When I opened the card and saw the cover, I was stunned. It was a drawing of a road, twisting through mountains, that came to a cliff that dropped off into nothing. How could she know? I had not told her, or anyone, about my dream.

God was trying to tell me something! I decided to take some praying time. I opened to a devotional book I was reading. It was on James 4:6: *God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble*. It was like God took a bright highlighter and lit this verse up for me to see!

When I drove to pick up my boys at school, I was early, and went into the gym. I walked around the gym several times, repeating James 4:6. While doing this, I felt led to fast from food until God revealed the meaning of the dream to me.

Two days later, the revelation came.

I began laughing at my foolishness. She laughed with me, not at me. I was experiencing the freedom of forgiveness.

Since then, Linda and I have asked each other for forgiveness, multiple times. It will happen again.

I, an apprentice to the Lord Jesus, was in the School of Jesus. He was teaching me to be more like Him. What a beautiful gift.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

I forgive those who have hurt me, from the heart.

I experience the beauty and freedom of God's forgiveness!

I live a forgiving life.

I live a forgiven life.

I exercise the power of confession and forgiveness.

When in conflict I initiate confession and forgiveness.

I understand and celebrate the power of forgiveness in relationships!

For more see my blog post "Forgiveness – Resources."

February 8

DISCIPLES OF JESUS MEET ON SUNDAY MORNINGS

Dear Church Family,

I want you to be with me every Sunday morning.

When I was a pastor in Joliet, Illinois, there was a man who was always with us on Sunday mornings. He was handicapped. And elderly. He lived alone. He walked slowly to the church building every Sunday morning. I mean “every.” No matter what the weather conditions.

My thought was, “This man is committed!”

Linda and I are committed.

When I was growing up, my family was there on every Sunday morning. We never missed. Sunday is the Christian’s Sabbath. This got inside me.

One of the Ten Commandments says,

Remember the Sabbath day, and be there.

Keep it holy.

My parents did. The DNA of Sabbath-keeping became my DNA.

Linda’s parents did the same with their children. Linda’s dad and mom were on fire for Jesus! Missing the weekly gathering of the people, the church, was unthinkable for them. It formed the center of their born-again life. As it says in Hebrews,

Do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing,

but encouraging one another—

and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Real disciples are in community. In “fellowship.” So much of what Jesus has taught me about being like Him has been learned in community.

The letters of Paul are not addressed to individual Christians. They are addressed to The Community. Nearly every time the word “you” is used in Paul’s letters, it is plural.

DECLARATIONS

Confession and forgiveness have become habitual for me.

I am free to be accountable for my behaviors.

When someone hurts me, I am able to forgive them.

When I hurt someone, I always ask for their forgiveness.

Confession and forgiveness are twin engines lifting me to life and freedom.

One night we were in an argument over something. It was our first fight. She did not agree with me about something. How was that possible? I had been personally invited to join the university debate team!

As I was trying to convince Linda I was right, this thought came to me: "You are wrong. She is right. Admit it."

But I did not, and proceeded to keep arguing. I have the ability to argue a point even when I know I am wrong. I can even make the person who is right begin to question themselves, and feel they are the one who is wrong. I was doing that to Linda. But I could not escape the truth that I was in the wrong. What should I do?

Beyond my eighth grade band incident, I had little experience in confessing. I assumed if I admitted I was wrong, this would be seen as weakness.

Finally, I stopped the argument, and said these transforming words: "Linda, you are right, and I am wrong. Would you forgive me for arguing with you even when I knew I was wrong?"

I braced myself for the worst. Why would Linda want to date someone who admitted they were wrong? Why would she want to be with someone who knew they were wrong about something, but kept arguing anyway? Yuck!

Linda said, "I forgive you."

And I began laughing, at myself. God released me from something. Linda forgave me. How good this felt!

People who are free can admit failure and wrongness and confess and forgive one another. Confession and forgiveness become twin engines of renewal and bitterness-removal that constantly hum in the background, day after day, giving life to all who practice them.

In the School of Jesus I have learned that *the foundation of all authentic relationship and spiritual renewal is confession and forgiveness*. Be accountable for your actions, before God, and before others.

Confess as needed.

Forgive those who trespass against you.

Love,

PJ

The precious manifestations of the Holy Spirit (the "gifts") only make sense within The Community.

Jesus taught me that the Bible is a tribal document. He is building His Tribe out of all kinds of people.

I need The Community.

The Community needs me.

We ARE the Church.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

I love meeting with my brothers and sisters on Sunday mornings.

There is something about being together that empowers me.

God often speaks to me as I worship alongside my people.

I am an important part of The Community Jesus is forming.

I am being built into the Body of Christ. I am a Sabbath-keeper.

I need the Community.

The Community needs me.

Coming on Sunday mornings is in my DNA.

February 9

A DISCIPLE OF JESUS MAKES OTHER DISCIPLES OF JESUS

Dear Church Family,

I want you to have at least one person whom you are training to be like Jesus.

As a new follower of Jesus, my mentors told me they were training me to train others in the Jesus Way. I was being disciplined, so I could disciple others. To me, this sounded like we were a movement, forming an army!

Almost immediately, I began to disciple others. I took the training I was receiving and transferred it to my church's youth group. Some of them became disciples of Jesus, and have since disciplined other new Jesus-followers.

As Lord of my life, Jesus taught me this principle: *disciples make disciples*. He told His own apprentices this:

Go and make apprentices of all nations.

Baptize them in the name of the Father,

the Son,

and the Holy Spirit.

Teach them to follow everything I have taught you.

I have done this. I want you to do this, too.

I am eternally grateful to those who mentored me. They met with me, taught me, prayed for and with me, exemplified servanthood, instructed me about Sundays, involved me in small groups, introduced me to worship, and were powerful role models in loving as Jesus loves. They were disciple makers, and I wanted to be like them!

I'm not through making disciples. I, and others in my church family, are developing our children into disciples. I still meet with people who want to follow Jesus. *Nothing is more fulfilling to me than this.*

My dear church family, let this be your life – teach others about Jesus.

Love,

PJ

February 23

A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST CONFESSES THEIR SINS

Dear Church Family, I want you to experience the freedom of confessing and forgiving. Prior to my conversion, at age twenty-one, I remember admitting I was wrong only once in my life. I was in the ninth grade. It happened in band class.

My teacher was Mr. Rudy Saarinen. Mr. Saarinen was a man I admired. Plus, he was Finnish, like myself. Plus, my mother's Finnish maiden name was Saari.

I felt connected to Mr. Saarinen. He was an excellent teacher, kind, and grace-filled.

I played clarinet. I was second-chair clarinet, sometimes third chair. But never first chair. A student named Bill was first chair. And deservedly so. He was a far better clarinet player than I was. I

f a player wanted to occupy first chair, they could offer a challenge. It went like this. The two players went into the instrument room and closed the door, so students in the band room could not see them. Then, both players individually played a piece the challenger had picked out. The students would vote for who they thought did the best job.

On the day I challenged Bill, I remember that, when it was his turn to play, I thought of something funny and started to giggle. I fought to suppress it, but failed. Bill tried to suppress laughing, but couldn't. The result was he laughed into the clarinet mouthpiece, and it squawked! The students heard the horrible noise. They voted that I won the challenge.

I took first chair. Bill occupied second chair.

I knew this was not right, and felt guilty sitting there. So, after class, I went to Mr. Saarinen and told him what had happened. He thanked me for telling him, and told me I would be moved back into second chair. The way Mr. Saarinen handled this left an impression on me. I felt relieved after confessing to him!

Eight years passed. I was twenty-one. I had become a disciple of Jesus. And, I was also falling in love with Linda.

DECLARATIONS

I am a disciple of Christ, and have access to God's power.

I have experienced God's power many times.

I see God's power healing people.

My desire is to know Christ and the power of His resurrection.

Because I have access to God's power, I can do all things through Christ who empowers me.

Jesus tells me I will do the things He has done.

DECLARATIONS

I am a disciple-maker.

I teach people about Jesus.

I pass on to others what Jesus has taught me about Himself.

I am always looking for potential disciples.

I love seeing Christ be formed in others.

Making disciples is how I spend my life.

I see the fruit of disciple-making, as my disciples are making disciples of others.

The call to teach others about Jesus is at the core of my being.

February 10

A DISCIPLE OF JESUS GROWS TO BE LIKE JESUS

Dear Church Family,

I see you growing to be more and more like Christ.

I was a boy when Elvis Presley became famous. My parents bought me an Elvis album after I saw him on TV. I wanted to sing like him, and play the guitar like he did. I even wanted to look like him.

One day I took my Elvis album into the bathroom, and propped it up next to the mirror. There was Elvis's picture, next to my face in the mirror. I found some hair gel, and a comb. I attempted to design my hair to look like Elvis's hair.

Afterwards, I remember walking to my friend John's house, feeling a lot like you-know-who. John burst my bubble when he said, "So, are you trying to look like Elvis again?"

Trying? *We want to be like the people we worship.*

1 John 3:2 tells me that one day, I shall be like Jesus. The apostle Paul writes, in Galatians 4:19, that I am now being formed into Christlikeness. This makes sense to me. This is my glorious destiny.

Every disciple begins to look like their teacher. Apprentices learn to do what their teacher does. Jesus says, "whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12) That makes sense, since a disciple is in training to do the stuff their teacher has been doing.

I learned this a long time ago. I believe it more today than when I first heard it. As one of the Lord's disciples, I get excited when I think of being like the One I have come to worship.

As I apprentice myself to Jesus, He forms himself in me; his character, his abilities.

Love,

PJ

When Grandma had spent what we assumed would be her last six months in our home, she went to live with my aunt and uncle in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. One day my aunt called. She told my mother that, while bathing Grandma, she noticed that the tumors did not appear to be there. My mother could not believe this, yet wanted to believe it. Mom traveled 400 miles to visually inspect Grandma and confirm it.

Grandma lived twelve more years. She bought three more dresses to be buried in. She died at age ninety-seven.

What happened? How can we explain this? I, and my mother, concluded two things: -

Grandma once was cancer-filled, and then one day the cancer was gone. - God healed Grandma.

In the book of Acts the disciples are told, by their Teacher, that when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, they will be "clothed with power." And they were, as one can see from reading the book of Acts.

In Acts we have the original church. It's made of disciples of Christ. They have access to the power of God, just as Jesus promised. This is the prototypical church, the way church is meant to be. It is an assembly of empowered followers of Jesus who do the things he did.

The apostle Paul confessed he wanted to know Christ and the power of His resurrection. Me too. I want to know this. I want you to know it, as well.

I have access to the power of Almighty God. I have this because I am a disciple. I have journals filled with examples. One of them is recorded in Lee Strobel's book *The Case for Miracles*, and in Craig Keener's monumental *Miracles: The New Testament Evidence*.

Often, in our Sunday gatherings, I see the power of God in operation, as we pray for people to be physically and emotionally healed.

Today is another power-filled day! You and I have access to supernatural power to heal, to deliver, to set captives free, to tear down dividing walls, and to save.

Love,

PJ

February 22

A DISCIPLE IS A VESSEL FOR THE POWER OF GOD

Dear Church Family,

I want you to know that a disciple of Jesus has access to his power to heal.

When I was a boy in Rockford, Illinois, we had a black and white TV. My father put an antenna on the roof of our house. It picked up three stations. Sometimes, when we wanted to watch a show and it was not coming in, dad would get the ladder, climb on the roof, and turn the antenna to get better reception. From inside the house we would yell things like, "No, that's worse!" Or, "There - that's good!"

One show mom and dad liked watching was Oral Roberts. Roberts was a Pentecostal preacher who claimed to have a gift of healing. Sometimes, I watched with them. I can still hear the voice of Roberts as he commanded people to "Be healed!" It seemed like power shot through Roberts's fingers, and people said they felt it. People cried as they were healed.

We were Lutherans. I don't remember us hearing about things like healing and power. We did sing some hymns, like "All Hail the Power of Jesus Name," and my favorite, which was "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." I remember thinking that Martin Luther must have believed in a powerful God to write a song like that!

And then... it happened.

My grandmother was healed of cancer.

She lived with us six months out of every year when we were growing up. When she was in her mid-80s, Grandma was diagnosed with breast cancer. She decided not to have it medically treated.

The cancerous tumors in her breasts grew. My mother used to bathe her, and visually saw, and physically felt, the hard tumors growing.

Grandma knew she was going to die. She had lived a long life, and was ready to leave this world for a better one. She even bought the dress she wanted to be buried in.

DECLARATIONS

One day I shall be like the Lord Jesus.

Today, Christ is forming His character in me.

I am learning to love people as Jesus loves people.

Christ is training me to deliver people from darkness.

The compassion of Christ grows within me.

I want nothing more than to be like Jesus!

February 11

A DISCIPLE GROWS IN DISCERNMENT

Dear Church Family,

I began taking guitar lessons at age five. I have taught and played guitar for sixty-seven years. (How old am I?)

How familiar with guitars am I? Very familiar! I am able to discern whether a guitar is in tune, or out of tune. I understand that some guitars are playable, and others are not. I have learned that there is a difference between acoustic guitar technique and playing electric guitar. I know what it means to practice. And, I have taught guitar to many people.

I became a disciple of Jesus just before my twenty-first birthday. I have talked and walked and lived with Jesus for fifty-one years. (How old am I?) Jesus became to me, as one scholar calls Him, a “familiar stranger.”

From the beginning Jesus felt familiar to me. I felt safe, at home, in him. Coming to Jesus was, for me, a great Homecoming!

Just as the first disciples found the ways and words of Jesus strange, like his use of parables, so did I. Yet I, like those disciples, was, and remain, attracted to Him.

I am familiar with Jesus, with more understanding coming daily. This helps me be able to discern what is of Jesus, and what is not of Jesus. The discipleship principle I have learned is:

Discernment is a function of familiarity.

Discernment is in direct proportion to intimacy.

I want you to be familiar with our Lord Jesus. I want your spiritual discernment to increase.

Apprentices become familiar with their teachers. My Teacher has taught me this: *The more I know Him, the more I see and understand Him.*

This is what happens to disciples of Christ. May it be so, in you.

Love,

PJ

My dear brothers and sisters, I want you to exist for His presence.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

I desire nothing more than to be in the Lord’s presence.

I sense God-with-me several times each day.

Because I dwell in God’s presence, I am empowered by Him.

Sometimes the presence of God overwhelms me.

I’m not making a move without being in His presence!

February 21

A DISCIPLE LIVES LIFE IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Dear Church Family,

I wish I was with you as I share this next part of being a disciple. For it would be better to be in your presence, than apart.

Linda and I love gathering with you on Sundays. To see you, to speak with you, to hear your voices as we worship together – how beautiful this is to us. Better is a Sunday morning in the house of the Lord than a thousand mornings elsewhere!

My Jesus-following life began in 1970, when I heard God tell me, “John, I love you.” Let me repeat: *I heard this*. It astonished me! I would never make something like this up. I felt God close to me, like nothing I’d ever experienced before. Good-bye, religion. Welcome, relationship.

This began what has become a love affair with God, in His presence. As one of Jesus’s disciples, He has made it clear to me that *He is with me*. And, that *He will never abandon me*. I understand “He is with me” to mean, I am in his presence. My Teacher has taught me that all that is of value and worth is found *in His presence*.

Soon I will be seventy-two years old. I feel the things of this world dripping off me as *my desire for His presence increases*.

To know Him. In experience.

To experience God, knowing and searching me out.

The reason the psalmist declares, “Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere,” is because of the earth-shattering, loving, presence of God in the Temple.

I resonate with the plea of Moses in Exodus 33 – “Lord, if Your presence does not go with us, we’re not going!”

Me either.

This is the disciple’s distinctive: the presence of God.

DECLARATIONS

I am becoming more familiar with Jesus every day.

I am able to discern spiritual realities.

I can separate the good from the evil.

Revelation from Jesus is increasing in me.

It excites me to think there is so much more to Jesus waiting for me to comprehend.

There is no greater privilege than knowing Jesus my Lord!

February 12

A DISCIPLE WORSHIPS THE LORD

Dear Church Family,

I want you to learn and grow in worship to our Lord.

It was 1984. I was praying in a forest preserve outside Lansing, Michigan. When I was assured that no one was looking. I raised both my hands high over my head. And I worshiped God.

This was the beginning of something new. I was learning more about worship. I am an ever-growing student, and Jesus is my all-wise Teacher.

I had already been a worshiper for fourteen years. I began by experiencing joy as I sang new songs to the Lord. Often, especially when alone, my joy flowed in tears. I learned that, not only was it OK to cry before the Lord, but my joy was a vessel that contained worship.

Worship is a lifelong learning experience.

Real worship springs from the spirit, and expresses truth. Disciples of Jesus learn to worship in spirit and in truth. (John 4:24)

Today is the day when authentic worshipers are being released, across the world. I am one of them.

So are you.

Remember - It's all going to end in worship.

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

"Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!

- Revelation 19:6-7

Love,

PJ

Thank you!

To Linda and I, one of our Christian heroes is Dallas Willard. Even though we never met him, he is a mentor to us. Not just with his words, but with his life.

We both read Gary Moon's excellent book on Willard. Gary Black, one of Dallas's close friends, was with Dallas when he died. Moon writes: "

Then, as Gary [Black] describes, "in a voice clearer than I had heard in days, he leaned his head back slightly and with his eyes closed said, 'Thank you.'" Gary did not feel that Dallas was talking to him, but to another presence that Dallas seemed to sense in the room." (Moon, *Becoming Dallas Willard*, p. 240)

Thank You Jesus.

I bless you with a renewed heart of gratitude.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

I am going through this day with a heart overflowing with thankfulness.

My constant attitude is one of gratitude to God.

I remember what God has done for me and given me.

I am thankful for knowing Jesus, my Lord and my Savior!

I have lists of things to thank God for.

The words "Thank you" are never far from my lips.

I throw myself at the feet of Jesus, and praise him, with thanksgiving!

February 20

AN APPRENTICE TO JESUS SAYS "THANK YOU"

Dear Church Family,

I have a habit of making lists of things I am thankful for. I put a list in my pocket, and carry it with me. I pull it out and re-read it. As a disciple of Jesus, he has given me much to be thankful for!

I was taught thankfulness by my parents. They trained me to say the words, "Thank you." Whenever I received a gift, my mother would make me write a thank you note to the giver. Thank you, mom, for doing this.

My parents had thankful hearts. I remember my mother telling me how, when a little girl, she once received an orange from her parents as a Christmas gift. That was it! Her family was poor. She treasured the gift, and was thankful.

Whenever someone helped my dad by lending him a tool, or working on a project, I could see gratitude on his face, and in the way he talked about the people who helped him. Dad lent tools out to many people. At his funeral, I addressed the people and said, "If any of you has some of my father's tools, please return them."

The attitude of a disciple is one of gratitude.

I could never understand the ingratitude of nine of the ten lepers in Luke 17. They see Jesus, and call from a distance because they are unclean, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" The Greek word for 'pity' is *eleison*, like "Kyrie eleison" - "Lord, have mercy!" "Bend down to our level and rescue us!"

He does. Jesus heals them. And then, nine of them just walk away, without saying even a simple "Thanks for the healing."

Then we read:

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him...

And here is the shocker - *he was a Samaritan.*

When I wake in the morning, get out of bed, walk down the stairs, prepare breakfast, I find myself, in my mind, and sometimes whispering quietly, these words: "Thank you." Jesus rescued me and became my lifetime Mentor.

DECLARATIONS

I am a true worshiper of Christ.

Sometimes I break out in spontaneous worship.

My spirit overflows in worship.

My worship today is preparing me for an eternity of worship.

When I think of all Christ has done for me, worship expands my spirit.

February 13

A DISCIPLE LEAVES THEIR COMFORT ZONE

Dear Church Family,

I am an apprentice in the School of Jesus. Jesus has taught me this:

Without leaving my comfort zone, it is impossible to please Him. (Hebrew 11:6)

The last thing I wanted to be was a public speaker. My comfort zone included staying in the background. Unfortunately, there were things in school that required me to be in the foreground.

In elementary school there was something called "Show and Tell." A student would bring something to show to the class. Then, they would tell about it. *I feared Show and Tell!*

One school day I told my mother, "I'm feeling sick. I think I should stay home." She responded with a question: "Do you have Show and Tell today?"

Yes.

When I was in Cub Scouts we were putting together a "TV show" for our parents. We made a large cardboard TV set, with a hole for the screen. Each kid was supposed to position his face in the opening and deliver some lines, like it would look on TV.

I had a diminished role in this production. I was to tell two jokes. I am horrible at this! To this day, no one has ever requested that I tell them a joke.

I was probably eight years old. We were in someone's basement. The TV was set up. Parents were sitting in folding chairs, in theater rows. I was nervous.

When the dreaded moment came, I got in the box, and looked out at my parents. I felt sorry they would have to witness what was about to happen.

I started telling the first joke. I made no eye contact with the audience. Then, I forgot the punch line. I just stopped talking. And that was it. I said no more. I exited the cardboard box.

Is it possible to die of embarrassment? I was a fish out of water, a square peg in a round hole, a stranger in a strange land. Out of my comfort zone.

I am a disciple of Jesus. Therefore, I follow Jesus as my Lord. But *why* would I do this? Because, as A. W. Tozer said, "When God lays His hand on a person, they are never the same again."

That's me. I was born again. I have never been the same since! Following what Paul wrote in Romans 10:10, my saving declaration was "Jesus is Lord!"

The Lordship of Christ is the end-game of life. God exalted Christ, and gave Him the name above all names: *Jesus*. Before Jesus, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess... what? That Jesus Christ is Savior? No. That JESUS CHRIST IS LORD! (Philippians 2:9-11)

As disciples of Christ, I want you to get this right. Position your lives under the Lordship of Jesus.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

Jesus, You are my Lord and my God!

I am one of Your followers.

To follow You as Lord has changed my life.

Today is another adventure of following You.

Where You lead me today, I will follow.

Since the day You touched me and rescued me, I have never been the same again!

February 19

A DISCIPLE FOLLOWS JESUS

Dear Church Family, In February many of us celebrated Valentine's Day. I remember, when I was in elementary school, we kids took a show box, decorated it, and cut a slit in the top for others to insert Valentine's cards.

Valentine's Day was seen as a day of loving others. Think of the countless songs that have been written about love. I'm now remembering an ancient song called "Love and Marriage." The song says they "go together like a horse and carriage." Now that's old! The song also says, "You can't have one without the other." Well, that's not true. You *can* love people you are not married to, right? Otherwise, you don't love me, and I don't love you. Now, think of "Savior and Lord," in relation to Jesus. Can you have one without the other? The answer is: *No*. You cannot have Jesus as Savior, but not have Jesus as Lord. Thankfully, when I was a new Jesus-follower I had spiritual mentors who showed me the meaning of Savior, and the meaning of Lord, and that I can't have one without the other. "Savior" represents what Christ has done for me. When it comes to Jesus as my Savior, I have done nothing. He paid it all; I paid nothing. "Lord" represents what I do for Him. Here, I lay my entire self before Christ as a living sacrifice. The Lordship of Jesus is about discipleship. I position Jesus as Lord of my life, and Lord of all.

"Jesus is Lord" demands my everything. "Jesus is Savior" does not. A disciple is someone who has been rescued by Jesus (Savior), and confesses and follows Him (Lord). "Jesus as Savior" requires a one-time decision. "Jesus as Lord" requires a lifetime of obedience. Jesus as Lord describes the *position* He holds in our lives, whereas Jesus as Savior describes the *work* He's done for us.

Every so often, somebody will say something like, "You know, when I was a child I accepted Jesus as my Savior, and that settled whether I was going to heaven or hell, and now I have made Him my Lord."

I am sorry. If Jesus is not my Lord, then Jesus is not my Savior. I don't pick and choose what I want about Jesus. Lordship is not something optional, like extra sauce on a pizza.

I told myself I would never do this again! And then, I met Jesus. I became His follower. I learned that, when you are following Jesus, *you are, by definition, out of your comfort zone.*

Just being out of your comfort zone does not mean you are following Jesus. But follow Jesus, and you will be out of your comfort zone.

Every time I follow Jesus, I am moving outside my comfort zone.

For His disciples, this is the normal Christian life.

Recently, Linda and I took a day off. When evening came, we counted six things that God called us to do that were out of our comfort zones. Linda observed, "That's just one day out of our life!"

Jesus has taught me that this is life in his kingdom. Every time I share my story with someone, minister to people, pray for their healing and deliverance, give sacrificially, and love unconditionally, I enter a different world.

I still get nervous when I speak publicly, which is a lot. I am so thankful Jesus calls me out of my comfort zone and into His redemptive kingdom!

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

When Jesus calls, I follow.

Jesus is always leading me out of my comfort zone.

My life is pleasing to Jesus, because I am a person of faith.

Like Jesus, my life is not about staying in some "comfort zone."

I am getting comfortable with the idea of being uncomfortable for Christ.

My life of faith is a day-by-day adventure!

February 14

A DISCIPLE GROWS IN COMPASSION

Dear Church Family,

Jesus looked on the crowds and, seeing they were like sheep without a shepherd, had compassion on them.

In my fifty years of following Jesus my compassion for people has grown.

The word compassion means *to feel with others*. Jesus told me, years ago, that my capacity for feeling with others must increase.

Here is one way Jesus has mentored me in compassion. I had just finished my seminary degree. My plans were to go immediately to a doctoral program. This did not happen.

I applied to two universities. Both my applications were late. So, I would have to take a year off my studies.

I needed a job. My sister-in-law Lora was working as a teacher at United Cerebral Palsy Center of Will County, Illinois. She suggested I apply as a teacher's assistant.

I interviewed with the Director of the United Cerebral Palsy Center. Her name was Gretchen Lantz. For part of the interview she took me to the boys' bathroom. She said, "I don't want to mislead you. You will be spending a lot of time in this room toileting handicapped boys and young men."

I took the position. Over the next year I fell in love with students like James, Helen, David, Jimmy, Tony, and Gail. My heart aches a bit as I write these names. I grew to feel with them. That feeling is still part of me.

Jesus, my Lord and Teacher, had a brilliant idea for me. He was mentoring me in having a heart of compassion.

When the year was over I enrolled in a doctoral program at Northwestern University. But I worked as a teacher's assistant at the Cerebral Palsy Center for two additional summers. The disabled students had become my friends, and my instructors.

I began to look at others in order to understand, not judge. The more understanding I gained, the more I felt with them. Just as Jesus is able to "sympathize with our weaknesses," so am I.

Then, Buck Herring spoke. He talked about the cost of following Jesus. He gave an altar call, unlike most I had heard. He said, "If you are not willing to give up everything for Jesus, then do not come forward. Jesus is looking for followers tonight, not attenders or spectators."

I remember thinking that this was not real seeker-friendly. I was wrong. Many came forward. Here were people looking for a great cause to spend their lives on. They found it, in the cause of Christ.

Is there anyone out there who will give their life, their being, their stuff, their time, their abilities, completely to Jesus as Lord of all?

All to Jesus, a disciple surrenders.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

I am giving everything I have for the sake of the Call.

I am turning my stuff over to Jesus, for His distribution.

As a disciple of Jesus I have discovered the art of letting things go.

My time belongs to Jesus.

All to Jesus, I gladly surrender.

All to Jesus, I freely give.

I surrender all.

February 18

A DISCIPLES LEAVES EVERYTHING TO FOLLOW JESUS

Dear Church Family, I've been a disciple of Jesus for fifty years. Jesus has taught me many things! One thing I have learned is this: *I'm not really one of Jesus' followers if I do not give everything up for His cause.*

This is not over-the-top Christianity for fanatics. This is mere Christianity. Jesus himself taught this, in Luke 14:33. The Message translation says it this way.

"Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple."

Linda and I have always believed that all we have, and all our time, and all our selves, belong to Jesus. We are stewards of what we have and what we are. God owns us, and redistributes his provision through us, his disciples.

Have we been perfect at giving up everything for His cause? No. Do we believe this is what our Teacher expects of us? Yes. Have we given up our plans for his purposes? Yes.

In 1975, when Linda and I lived in Joliet, Illinois, a band called The Second Chapter of Acts was scheduled to give a concert in our area. I knew the concert promoter. He asked me to do a thirty-minute set before the Second Chapter came on stage.

I was excited! Many of my friends came to support me. I arrived at the concert venue early to get set up. My friend, the concert promoter, greeted me with a not-so-happy face. He said, "The band's leader, Buck Herring, has requested that no one play before they come on."

This was disappointing. So, I kissed it good-bye.

Linda and I loved watching the Second Chapter that night! Their songs, and harmonies, were amazing. Matthew Ward's voice was ridiculously beautiful.

This is how disciples of Christ *feel*. Apprentice yourself to Jesus, and you will experience the same.

I would not be Jesus's disciple if I looked down on the people Jesus came to rescue. In my weakness, Jesus came to me and loved me. In the same way, I am to love others.

Disciples of Christ go deeper. This is where the Pharisee missed it, as he said, "Thank God that I am not like these other horrible people." He failed to understand that he was. The result was, no compassion.

The secret to a compassionate heart is understanding. The more I comprehend about a person, the more I feel as they feel. The more I feel as they feel, the more I love.

I want to be more like Jesus! He sympathizes with my weaknesses. His influence causes me to grow in compassionate understanding of others. Who am I to look down on others in their infirmities?

My dear brothers and sisters, I long for this to be your experience.

Love

PJ

DECLARATIONS

I am increasing in compassion towards others.

I focus on understanding people, not judging them.

I know that understanding always precedes evaluation.

My heart goes out to people who are struggling.

I am a rescuer of people.

As a student in the School of Jesus, I am learning how to love as Jesus loves.

February 15

A DISCIPLE OF JESUS IS INTERRUPTIBLE

I used to be irritated when something I was planning to do got interrupted. I saw interruptions as intrusions into my schedule. This has changed.

It happened when I positioned Jesus as my Lord. Jesus taught me that, in His kingdom, *the interruptions are my life*.

I was in the Illinois Army National Guard for six years. During this time of service I experienced several interruptions.

One time my unit was called up to do flood duty, as river waters were overflowing and threatening homes in Rockford, Illinois. We were out protecting against vandalism for a week. Needless to say, whatever plans I had were on hold.

Another time, when I was in college and had much to do, we were called up to do riot control. Campuses across the nation were protesting the war. Kent State University had experienced violence. It was a dangerous time in our country. I was dispatched to the campus of Northern Illinois University. That's where I was going to school! Now, I was on campus, dressed in military clothing, carrying an M-16. Obviously, I missed some classes.

Whenever our company commander called my unit to assemble and go somewhere, I got up and went. This is because I was in his "service." When in the service, my plans were set aside.

The same kind of thing happens with Jesus. He is my Lord. I am in service to Him. He is on a mission, and I am a spiritual soldier in the Lord's spiritual army. When He calls, I get up and go!

Linda and I live an interruptible life. Interruptions *are* our life. We've been living this way for our forty-seven years together, and we thank God for it. Yes, when we get a call in the middle of the night, we are tired. At least for me, I'd like to roll over and sleep some more. But it is exhilarating, often after the fact, when Jesus says, "Drop what you are doing, and follow me!"

We know the Lord has plans and purposes for us. We are in service to him.

This is not some special calling, reserved for a few extra-fanatical saints. This is basic, boots-on-the-ground Christian living.

I want this for you, too.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

I am a spiritual athlete!

I train, every day, in God's Gym.

I am growing in spiritual fitness.

I am a competitor for the souls of women and men.

I can feel my spirit getting stronger and stronger.

I live and love the connected-to-Jesus life!

February 17

A DISCIPLE EXERCISES IN THE SPIRITUAL GYMNASIUM

Dear Church Family,

My mentor, Jesus, taught me that I must exercise in the spiritual gymnasium. The game-changer for me was when I read Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. That was in 1982.

Few books have caused me to do something in response to what I read. Foster's was one of them.

I already knew that I must, as a disciple, be disciplined. I must discipline myself to dwell in the Lord's house, seeking His presence. I must abide in Jesus, like a branch, connected to the vine. What Foster gave me was that disciples of Christ must exercise spiritually, and that spiritual exercising *was* the way I will abide in Him.

For example, praying connects me with Jesus. He gives himself to me, as I pray.

I am not doing spiritual exercises to earn God's love. But, because I love him, and he has loved me, I desire to grow in him. I long to have Christ formed, in me. (Galatians 4:19)

I understand this to be the apostle Paul's idea when he writes, *Train yourself to be godly* (1 Timothy 4:7). What struck me about this verse was that the Greek word for "train" is *gumnaze*. Gymnasium!

1 Corinthians 9:25 reads, *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training*. The Greek word for "compete" is *agonizomenos*. Agonize! Which means, to compete in the gymnastic games. Again, I am not competing for God's love. He loves me. I compete to be empowered, led, relevant, and anointed.

After reading Foster I began to up my level of agonizing for the sake of Christ. I do worship reps in God's gymnasium. I do prayer reps, Bible reps, serving reps, solitude reps, listening reps, giving reps, thanksgiving reps, to grow stronger, and be competitive in life.

As Jesus' disciple, I long to be fit for his service.

Hardly a day goes by without Jesus calling us to go here, or do this, or reach out, or help with this, or call this person, or give to something. As this happens, our schedule changes. *We believe this is the normal Christian life*. I don't know how I could live without it.

Disciples of Christ are not too busy to be interrupted.

Life is a series of divine interruptions.

I want this kind of life for you.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

I love being interrupted by Jesus and responding to His callings.

I see the Lord's plans and purposes for me as superior to my own plans.

Jesus, I give you permission to call on me to help and serve any time, any place.

I see my life as a series of divine interruptions.

It is a great privilege to be in service to Jesus my Lord.

I am like Peter, leaving my nets behind to respond to the call of Jesus.

February 16

A DISCIPLE PRESENTS THEMSELVES AS A LIVING SACRIFICE

Dear Church Family,

Someone has said that the problem with a living sacrifice is that it can crawl off the altar.

I haven't.

In fifty-one years of following Jesus I have never entertained leaving Him.

The initial call of Jesus, to me, was: *leave everything and follow Me*. As I read the Scriptures, that's what I thought The Call was all about. I still think like this.

I was twenty-one years old, and just born again. Sitting in my Lutheran church on a Sunday morning, I was reading the bulletin. One announcement said: "Our church needs a youth leader. Please pray that God would give us someone to lead our youth."

As I read this, I felt a burden. To pray. I did.

Next Sunday came. The announcement was still there. I felt a burden. It felt weightier. I prayed for a youth leader for my church.

During that week the burden grew. I felt concerned. My church needs a youth leader!

Sunday came. I read the announcement in the bulletin. I remember thinking, "Oh no. You have to be kidding me!"

When I became an apprentice to Jesus, one of my leaders placed a book in my hands. It was *The Cost of Discipleship*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I read this:

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

At that time I was immersing myself in the four Gospels. I wanted to hear the voice of Jesus. Bonhoeffer sounded like Jesus to me.

Unbelievably to me, I became the youth leader of Tabor Lutheran Church. I am eternally grateful to Jesus for seeing something in me that transcended my human abilities. I learned that such things can only be discovered and experienced if I die to myself.

I am a living sacrifice, offering myself to the Lord.

I want you to do the same.

Love,

PJ

DECLARATIONS

I am my Beloved's and He is mine.

Every day I say to Jesus, "Have Your way with me."

I sacrifice my entire being on the altar of God.

In being a living sacrifice I am on the road that leads to life.

Here am I, Lord. Send me.

All to Jesus, I surrender. All to him I freely give.