



## **Theme: It's Ok to Ask**


### ***"How do Respond When Faith Gets Messy?"***


#### **Weekly Memory Verse:**

***<sup>24</sup> Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works.***

*– Hebrews 10:24*


**Monday, January 15** – Read **Matthew 7:1-5**. The word "hypocrisy" came from a Greek word meaning "to act, to play a part." Christian author Jim White, in the book *unChristian* by David Kinnaman, wrote about Christian hypocrisy as an obstacle to faith: "We must stop presenting ourselves as the message and begin presenting Jesus as the message. There will be disappointment with Christians as long as there are imperfect people. Since all Christians are imperfect, there will always be disappointment." We must not judge others' failures while ignoring or excusing our own.


 Jesus' vivid imagery showed the absurdity. Here stands someone who claims to be righteous, with a log in their eye, trying to remove a splinter from someone else's eye! What types of emotional "payoff" incline most of us to criticize others rather than face our own challenges? What spiritual truths, if any, have you found particularly helpful in allowing you to resist those inner forces?

 Has someone ever judgmentally tried to remove a "speck" from your "eye?" How did the experience affect your desire to try to live up to what they claimed was God's standard for your life? Has anyone ever graciously, compassionately offered you an insight about yourself while honestly admitting their own struggles and issues? If so, how did that experience differ from having someone judge and condemn you?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, help me live authentically in your love and grace, letting go of my need to try to make myself look better than I am. Teach me to own my struggles, claim your power to transform me and share that with others. Amen.*


**Tuesday, January 16** – Read **Matthew 6:1-4**. A major portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount dealt with hypocrisy, as real in his day as it is in ours. He pointed to certain activities as examples of how hypocrisy can spoil our service to God, even in actions that may be good in themselves. In today's reading, Jesus pointed out that giving can express generosity and gratitude, or it can be a something we do solely for the selfish purpose of making us look better to other people.


 Pastor John Ortberg, in his book, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, wrote about the challenge many of us face with what he called, "approval addiction." It applies to all the actions Jesus talked about. Today, ask yourself: how important is it to you that others know about your giving, of money, time, or service? That might be good, of course—you might influence others to be more generous. Or you might mainly want others to think well of you. What purpose does making your giving known serve in your life?

 Ortberg also suggested a way to correct the condition called, "impression management: Every once in a while, do something good and try to make sure no one finds out about it." Have you ever done something generous and worked to ensure that only you and God (not even the recipient) knew who did the giving? If not, try it soon. Keep a journal about the spiritual impact you experience from following Jesus' recommendation to give "in secret."

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, teach me how to do my giving, not for my ego's sake, but for the sake of those who need what I can give. Let your self-giving generosity shape my life. Amen.*

**Wednesday, January 17** – Read **Matthew 6:5-15**. Jesus didn't just address giving. He said that even in the act of praying a person can be hypocritical. That happened in his day (as it still does) in public prayers (though Jesus himself at times prayed for his followers to hear). But he said it could also happen in private prayers if the aim was to impress God rather than to communicate authentically. So, the prayer Jesus taught was simple and concise. True prayer is not a matter of saying impressive words, but of having the right attitude before God.

 As with giving, so with praying. Jesus said that doing it mainly to impress others or God of our personal holiness robs the act of its spiritual value. What in Jesus' teaching can help you discern the difference between praying for show (in public or private) and honest, worshipful prayer whose aim is to connect you with the heart of God?

 In verse 12, Jesus included a key antidote to hypocrisy: realizing that we need God's forgiveness. We can't truly accept forgiveness if we're unwilling to offer it to others. In verse 14, Jesus pointed to our readiness to forgive others as one key sign that our prayer for forgiveness is honest verse. Is there anyone you are struggling to forgive? Are you willing to enter the process of forgiveness, and to ask God to help you with it, no matter how long it takes?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, I can write an obvious, abstract definition: "Prayer is honestly talking to God." The reality is tougher. Help me keep growing so that I highly value talking to you and do it often and honestly. Amen.*

**Thursday, January 18** – Read **Matthew 6:16-18**. Jesus spoke about fasting, a spiritual practice that typically means not eating, or consuming, for some amount of time. Some Christians may choose to fast from social media, TV, some favorite activity, or even recreational shopping. The purpose of fasting is to focus on God's presence in every space of our lives, not on our lesser interests or wants. Any type of fasting causes some discomfort. Perhaps because fasting is more challenging than other practices, Jesus noted that we can fast, too, for show, rather than from an honest desire to draw nearer to God.



Some Christian groups put more emphasis on fasting than others. Many spiritually and mentally healthy Christians practice it regularly, but for others it has negative, medieval overtones. Have you ever fasted? If you haven't, what's stopping you? Is there something in your life that you value but could give up for a specific amount of time to focus your attention more fully on God?



An authentic life holds our humanness in proper relationship with God. We believe, but do not always act as though, God is first and the Lord of our life. We can only fully accept and value God's intense love for us when we accept and trust his Lordship. Have there been times in your life when you have made your wants more important than God? How do Jesus' words about fasting suggest ways to avoid those seasons?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, I enjoy food. I am uneasy with the idea of giving it up, even for a short time. Whether I fast from food or something else, help me do it to draw attention toward you, not toward me. Amen.*

**Friday, January 19** – Read **1 Peter 1:18 – 2:3**. 1 Peter gave a beautiful picture of the kind of authentic life to which God calls all Christ-followers. Many scholars believe the letter held the content of a message given to new converts in the early Christian church. It shows what happens deep inside when Christians get it right: they love deeply, sincerely, from the heart. They, "get rid of all ill will and all deceit, pretense, envy, and slander." Any time they find hypocrisy, which is inevitable for any human, they ask God to help them move beyond it.



1 Peter twice in the first chapter refers to followers of Jesus having been born again. Sometimes in today's world, the phrase, "born again," is synonymous people acting unloving, judgmental, or exclusive. In contrast, what qualities did Peter say characterize a person who has been born again by God's power?



Peter writes that hypocrisy, which can include deceit, envy, and unkind speech, leads to an empty way of life. How can you sense that God has made your life better by replacing those negative qualities with a divinely given capacity to love? In what areas of life do you want God to help you grow by filling you more fully during 2024?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, I want your love and goodness to fill me all the time. But I'm not there yet, and when I'm tempted to fake it, that can get ugly. Keep me growing in expressing your love authentically. Amen.*

**Saturday, January 20** – Read **Philippians 1:3-11**. The Apostle Paul wrote to his friends in the city of Philippi while he was in prison in Rome. He encouraged, affirmed, and

connected with them, expressing his deep gratitude for their support in prayer and tangible gifts. He prayed that their love might keep deepening, enriched by growing knowledge and insight into God's purposes. That, he said, would empower them to live "sincere" and not hypocritical lives, and to discern, "what really matters." Living with that kind of insight-fueled discernment and honesty would fill their lives with "the fruit of righteousness" in ways that gave "glory and praise" to God.



We don't always link "love," "knowledge" and "insight." N.T. Wright writes in his commentary *Paul for Everyone, The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, "We think of [love] as having to do with emotion and affection, not with knowledge and wisdom. For Paul they are all bound together: what we call the 'heart' and what we call the 'head' were not separated." When has learning more about Jesus' God-empowered mission to save the world, including us who follow him, caused your love for Jesus to grow "even more and more rich"?



Paul's writings in Galatians 5:22, 1 Corinthians 13:1–3, and Colossians 3:14 make it clear that without love, we are not spiritually complete as followers of Jesus. Paul's dream is that when his readers stand before Christ, their lives will have been filled with the spiritual fruit that comes from Jesus Christ, produced in them by the Holy Spirit. How have you seen Spirit-produced love grow other spiritual fruit in your life and the lives of others?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, I'm not interested in pretending to be spiritually complete. I want a life genuinely filled with the spiritual fruit you wish to grow in me. Shape me as you did Paul and his first-century friends. Amen.*