



## **Theme: Thoughtful Faith for Challenging Times** **“How Is Questioning Part of Living Faithfully?”**


### **Weekly Memory Verse:**


***But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church.***

– 1 Corinthians 8:1b

**Spiritual Formation or Family Activity Ideas for the Week:** Sometime this week, come up with something you’d like to learn about. It doesn’t need to be anything big. Look around for stuff in your day-to-day life that you don’t fully understand how it works or how it’s made or where it comes from. Here are some examples: How is peanut butter made? How does a ball point pen work? Where does concrete come from? The possibilities are endless! Now, do some research. Google it. YouTube it. Ask some friends. Go to the library! The point is to search for answers. Of course, finding an answer to how peanut butter is made is probably easier than answering difficult spiritual questions, but it’s important to learn that curiosity and asking questions is good! Thank God for giving us curious minds, resources where we can seek answers, and for being a God who wants to give us wisdom! (James 1:5)

**Monday, January 17** – Read Mark 1:9-15. This is the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as told in the gospel of Mark. As translated in the NLT, Jesus’ first ever “sermon” is pretty brief! “The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!” In this first message of Jesus, there are two commands: Repent & Believe. It’s important to take time and be reflective with these words as much as we’re able. One aspect of Jesus’ commands is that they’re not intended to be done once. They’re ongoing parts of what it means to pursue God.


 The literal meaning of the word repent is changing one’s mind. A change in mind/thinking is important, but it also involves a turning. The act of repentance involves two basic questions. What am I turning from? What am I turning toward? Both of these questions are important as we continue to seek to follow Jesus and his teaching, to have our hearts and minds continually changed and renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit.


 What comes to mind for you when you think of the word “believe”? Do you think of religious doctrines? Do you think about whether or not to trust what someone tells you? Whatever comes to mind, I do think the notion of belief Jesus is using encompasses more than

intellectual agreement. What might it look like if we understood belief as “living as if I trust”?

**Prayer:** *God, I want to continually follow you, continually experience your restoration and renewal in my heart and life. Help me to turn toward you today and to place my trust in you. Amen.*


**Tuesday, January 18** – Read Mark 9:14-29. Here we have a really fascinating story about one of Jesus’ healings. We could spend weeks diving into this story alone, but today, let’s focus on what the boy’s father says in verse 24. “I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!” As I read and reflect on this moment, two big things jump out at me. One, God’s ability to provide healing and breakthrough is not limited by the father’s faith, or lack thereof. Two, it seems to me that his proclamation of unbelief is itself an act of faith in God’s power.


 This is a pretty heavy question, but have you ever felt hopeless? It’s an extraordinarily difficult feeling that’s also an incredibly common human experience. We can be desperate for breakthrough while simultaneously doubting things will ever change. What might it look like to bring these things to God? We can ask for God’s presence and work in our lives even when we feel hopeless. And as we see in this story, we won’t be the first ones to do so.

 Belief and certainty are not synonyms. There’s nothing wrong with feeling certain about some things, but it’s not a prerequisite for belief. Belief and faith are more about trust. Even when we feel painfully uncertain, we can place our trust in God.

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, I believe, I want to believe, and sometimes I need you to help even in my unbelief. Continue to shape my life as I trust you through every high and low. Amen.*

**Wednesday, January 19** – Read Luke 5:33-39. Reading through the Gospels, it often seems like Jesus was doing something new. He often encountered a tension between the established ways and his ways. In this instance Jesus encounters people who ask why he and his followers don’t practice fasting in the same way and at the same time as other religious leaders. As is often the case, Jesus’ reply uses metaphor and imagery to communicate a spiritual truth. One of the best things about a metaphor is that it requires us to thoughtfully engage and reflect on the imagery. If Jesus only meant one thing, he probably could’ve said one thing, but he chose to use metaphor.


 In response to the questions about fasting, Jesus employs three different images: a wedding feast, repairing an old garment, and putting wine in wineskins. Which of these images resonates most with you? Which stands out? As you reflect on the imagery, what does it seem Jesus is trying to communicate to you?


 Metaphor is a living thing that requires us to thoughtfully engage, to bring who we are and what we think and feel to the images in an interactive way. Why do you think Jesus chose to teach using metaphors? Why would Jesus teach important lessons in a way that leaves room for interpretation? While we may never know exactly why, it does seem that Jesus encourages curiosity, interaction, and even questioning among those he teaches.

**Prayer:** *Lord, I don’t always know exactly what you’re trying to say through your teaching. By your Holy Spirit, continue to illuminate your word so that I can follow you well each day. Amen.*

**Thursday, January 20** – Read Matthew 21:28-32. Here again, we have Jesus teaching about faith and life by telling a story and asking a question. Interestingly, this is one of the times when Jesus gives some explanation after asking the question. Jesus’ explanation here is pretty specific to his time and context, but I think there’s a relevant observation for us to make as we reflect on the role of questions and curiosity in a faithful life. The first son is held up as the obedient son, and


the distinction is that, whether or not he said the right thing, he did what his father wanted. The life of faith is not just about making the correct proclamations and saying the right things (commendable as that may be at times). It's about how we live our lives. Here's what I'm getting at. Belief is not just about affirming the correct ideas. Belief is about active following. If the goal was having correct affirmations, faith would be static. But an active and dynamic life of faith includes questions and curiosity.


 Have you ever had a question but thought that asking it might make you look foolish? This can happen in any area of life. When it comes to our faith, we may even struggle with more than feeling foolish. What if we seem unfaithful or like we don't really believe? I believe God is big enough to handle our toughest questions, and that it's vitally important for us to continue to bring all of our questioning and curiosity to God.

 Is there a situation in your life that comes to mind when you read Jesus' parable in today's passage? Maybe you identify with one or the other of the sons. Maybe you identify with the father. How does this story inform your thinking on what it means to live faithfully today?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, I want to follow you faithfully, and I know I will need your grace to do so. Thank you for being generous and continuing to shape me into your likeness. Amen.*


**Friday, January 21** – Read Acts 11:1-18. In the earliest days of the Christian faith, there was a lot of figuring things out as they went. Which honestly feels pretty similar to life in today's world. The early leaders of the church had certain expectations about how God would work in the world, and it seems that God working among the Gentiles was unexpected! Whether or not we're consciously aware of them, we probably all have expectations about how God does and does not work, but as we see in this story, God's restorative work is not limited by our expectations.

 Have you ever been surprised by God? Maybe you've been surprised by God's work as described in scripture. Maybe you've been surprised by God's work in your own life or the life of someone close to you. If there are areas of our lives that seem beyond hope, what might it look like to ask for God to surprise us there?

 Can you think of any person or group of people who seem beyond God's reach to you? This can be a really difficult question to engage with. We may struggle to think about God reaching someone who has hurt us. We may even struggle to think about God reaching into an especially wounded place in our own hearts. While I don't believe God forces love, restoration, and/or redemption on anyone, what might it look like to carry hopefulness in our hearts about God working in the difficult places within ourselves and in the people who we find most difficult?

**Prayer:** *Lord God, your grace and love is so big and powerful that it can be surprising! Please continue to work restoration in the places and people that feel beyond hope to me. Amen.*

**Saturday, January 22** – Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-13. In this passage Paul is writing to the church in Corinth about knowledge and freedom, but he does so in a way that is pretty challenging. It seems that Paul is saying that while knowledge and freedom are good, they're insufficient as ends in themselves. Knowledge and freedom find their true goodness and purpose when they find expression in loving God and loving others well.

 In our spiritual lives, we will all experience times of growth in knowledge and freedom. What's something you've learned recently? How might that knowledge be expressed in a way that's good for the people around you?

**Prayer:** *Awesome Lord God, as you continue to bless us with knowledge of you and freedom in you, shape and empower us to employ those things by loving one another. Amen.*