

September 10 - 16, 2017

Advent's weekly Bible Challenge is based upon the readings assigned for each Sunday. The Basic challenge is to re-read the texts that were read on Sunday morning and included in the Sunday bulletin. The Adventure and Explorer challenges are suggestions of different ways to deepen your knowledge of the Bible. The challenge is organized as one reading for each of five days, but find a pace or style that fits your schedule.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a part of relationships and life in community. Jesus' words in today's gospel are often used in situations having to do with church discipline. The prophet Ezekiel tells of warning the wicked to turn from their ways, and Paul reminds us that love is the fulfilling of the law. We gather in the name of Christ, assured that he is present among us with gifts of peace and reconciliation.

DAY ONE: Ezekiel 33:7-11

God appointed Ezekiel as a sentinel for the house of Israel. Ezekiel must faithfully convey God's warnings to the people. Remarkably, God—who is about to attack Jerusalem—gives a warning with the hope that repentance will make the attack unnecessary.

⁷So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ⁸If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. ⁹But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life. ¹⁰Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" ¹¹Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Adventure Challenge: Ezekiel 33: 1 – 20 (or Ezekiel 33).

Explorer Challenge: *Option A.* Research Ezekiel; who was he and to whom did he prophesy? *Option B.*

Often, prophesy is considered telling the future; based on this passage, what is the Biblical view of prophesy and the role of a prophet?

DAY TWO: Psalm 119:33-40

Beginning with the phrase, "Happy are those ... who walk in the law of the Lord, Psalm 119 celebrates God's law. The psalmist uses eight different words for that law, and views law not as restrictions but as a guide on how to gain the most from life.

³³Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes,
and I shall keep it to the end.

³⁴Give me understanding, and I shall keep your teaching;
I shall keep it with all my heart.

³⁵Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for that is my desire.

³⁶Incline my heart to your decrees
and not to unjust gain.

³⁷Turn my eyes from beholding falsehood;
give me life in your way.

³⁸Fulfill your promise to your servant,
which is for those who fear you.

³⁹Turn away the reproach that I dread,
because your judgments are good.

⁴⁰Behold, I long for your commandments;
by your righteousness enliven me.

Adventure Challenge: Psalm 119:1 - 40 (or all of 119, the longest psalm in the Bible).

Explorer Challenge: *Option A.* Research Psalm 119 to learn how it is organized. *Option B.* Identify the eight different terms used for God's law; consider how each term helps us understand a different aspect or value of God's law. How is this broad understanding of law different from the way the word *law* is generally used in current times?

DAY THREE: Romans 13:8-14

The obligation of Christians is to love one another and so fulfill the heart and goal of the law. Clothes make the person as we "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" and live today in light of the future God has in store for us.

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. ¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Adventure Challenge: Romans 13.

Explorer Challenge: We usually connect the word *owe* (verse 8) to financial obligations; read the opening of Chapter 13, particularly verses 5 – 7, to learn of a broader range of obligations we have. How is *love* the culmination of the list of obligations in verse 7?

DAY FOUR: Matthew 18: 12-20

Jesus offers practical advice to his disciples on how individuals—and the church as a whole—should show wrongdoers their need for repentance.

[Jesus said to the disciples] ¹²What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

¹⁵"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Adventure Challenge: Matthew 18.

Explorer Challenge: *Option A.* Read Deuteronomy 19:15-21 to learn the Old Testament context for Jesus' words. Does the approach in Matthew accord with our modern understanding (from psychology and sociology) of how to handle conflicts? *Option B.* Verses 12-14 are often read separately from 15-20; in your judgment, are these two separate teachings or two related teachings? *Option C.* Consider how the verses immediately following this passage (Matthew 18: 21-22, next week's reading) provide another response to the situation when *another member sins against you.*

DAY FIVE:

PRAYER OF THE DAY

O Lord God, enliven and preserve your church with your perpetual mercy. Without your help, we mortals will fail; remove far from us everything that is harmful, and lead us toward all that gives life and salvation, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (*2 Cor. 5:19*)

Challenge: Option A. These days, confrontation and conflict seem particularly strident within society, between different religions traditions, even among fellow Christians; think about your position within these conflicts as you pray “lead us toward all that gives life and salvation.” **Option B.** We are entrusted with a message of reconciliation; how do you understand that message?