

# *Program Transcripts*

For November 2013



IN  
**SEARCH**  
OF THE LORD'S WAY<sup>®</sup>

# **SEARCH PROGRAMS**

**November 2013**

## **NOVEMBER 3 – THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS**

Though Jesus bore the cross two thousand years ago, it still has a message for us in these postmodern times. In this lesson, we'll take a close look at what the Lord Jesus was trying to say to us through bearing the cross.

## **NOVEMBER 10 – WHATEVER**

Our world has grown increasingly indifferent to God and His ways. Someone has called this the “whatever” generation that seems undisturbed about anything. We may ignore God, but no one can ignore God for long.

## **NOVEMBER 17 – THE ANSWER IS GOD**

Someone commits a violent crime in America every 26 seconds and a murder every 36 minutes. Why? Sin has crept in their lives. The problem of sin starts in the heart, and the answer is in the Lord.

## **NOVEMBER 24 – GOD'S LOVE**

Paul prayed that we, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge. We can never learn too much about God's love.

## The Message of the Cross

Though Jesus bore the cross two thousand years ago, it still has a message for us. Today we're going to look at the cross. Jesus prayed at Gethsemane for the cup to pass from Him, but still chose to do His Father's will, knowing that he would be scourged and crucified. A crowd with swords and spears came for Him. Judas, His own familiar friend, betrayed him with a kiss. His disciples scattered. They arrested and bound him, taking Him away like a criminal. They falsely accused Him in a series of illegal trials. Peter denied Him three times, once in His presence. They slapped Him and mocked Him, spit upon Him, and in the end condemned Him. When Pilate placed Him before a crowd in the Praetorian, they called for His crucifixion. People earlier praised Him as their Messiah, but now they denied Him as their king. Roman soldiers mocked Him and scourged Him.

Jesus carried the very cross of His destruction through the streets. The Romans forced a stranger to help Him. Carrying that cross up to Golgotha, in the presence of all, they stripped Him of His clothes and drove nails through His hands and His feet into the cross. They suspended Him between heaven and earth on the nails and left Him to die. Imagine being mercilessly mocked and spurned, despised and rejected, while hanging in utter anguish for six long hours. Imagine the sins of the world laid upon Him. That includes your sins and mine. Imagine the sun being darkened, and an earthquake shaking the foundations. When He could last no longer, He cried, "Father into Your hands, I commit My spirit." The Lord Jesus gave everything for us.

Our reading today comes from the Gospel According to Luke 23:33-37. "When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, 'He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.' The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, 'If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!'" Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we are so grateful for the wonderful gift of Your Son, Jesus, that He was willing to suffer and die for our sins. Father, help us to love You because of the cross. In Jesus' name, Amen!

What was Jesus trying to communicate when He died upon the cross? I can't imagine His enduring that punishment without trying to relay some message to us. There may be other things He is saying, but here are three that I think really matter. First of all, Jesus was saying, "I love you." If anyone ever doubts the love of God, all he needs to do is look long and hard at the cross. The apostle John said, "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:8-10). We've all seen small measures of love in our lives; people were good to us and blessed us. Yet, I wonder if any love we've ever seen could measure up to what Jesus did for us. We know the meaning of love by looking at the cross. No one could be more eloquent, more determined, more willing to sacrifice, more moving with their love than Jesus. When Jesus says, "I love you," no one can doubt it.

Once in a while, I hear someone who says, “Phil, I don’t feel very loved by God.” These folks somehow feel forgotten or neglected. But when I hear someone say that, I recall the words of Isaiah. “But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.’” To which the Lord answers, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (Isaiah 49:14-16). God has never forgotten us, if we are one of His. We are engraved on His hands. We’re not a passing fad or an acquaintance or a stranger; we are His beloved child. If we are His child, God cares about us the way any good father would care for His child. We are always on His mind. God loves more than men are capable of loving. You remember the Lord Jesus said, “Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:9-11). God is better than the best of fathers. He really cares for each one of us.

The love of God implies something important. It implies that we, every one of us, are loveable. Some people regard themselves as unlovable, but Jesus sees things in us that we don’t often see in ourselves. People didn’t want to be around the tax collector, Zacchaeus, but Jesus went to his house. People were afraid of and avoided lepers, but Jesus touched them. The prodigal son was fearful and ashamed, “I am not worthy to be called your son”; but the father (that is God) said, “This is my son...” It’s a slam on God to say that we are worthless in His eyes – He loves every one of us. We may be sinful, but God loves us anyway. Sin makes a person feel small in his own eyes. But God sees not only what we are but also what we can become. He gives us hope. Paul said, “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:3-5). God loved us even in our sins. He didn’t save us because we had earned heaven for ourselves. He saved us when we were filthy with sin and He washed us clean through His mercy and grace by the blood of Jesus; and He does it in baptism. He knew what we could become. He took us as diamonds in the rough and made us shine as lights to the world.

Second, Jesus is saying through the cross, “I want to forgive you” – and I’ll pay the supreme price to do so. God is in the saving business, and Jesus went to the cross to save us from the sinful world around us. Paul said that Jesus “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Galatians 1:4). God couldn’t look down at this sinful world and do nothing. He wanted to change the direction of the world. He wanted to find a way for men to come out of sin and live righteous and good lives. By means of the cross, God made a way to save us from sin and to change our lives. Our salvation is personal to Jesus. It’s not a passing fad; it is what he was willing to live and to die for. Peter said, “He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24). Jesus wouldn’t have been willing to sacrifice His body if our salvation wasn’t important.

The Hebrews writer said, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22). Jesus couldn’t bring about our forgiveness any other way than shedding His

blood on the cross. Jesus said, “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down (that is, His life) on my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father” (John 10:18). Jesus out of love took the initiative to die for our sins so that we could be forgiven and live a new and different life.

The forgiveness of God implies something; it implies that we are forgivable. God wants to forgive us. Do you want to be forgiven? No matter how ugly, how terrible, or how mean you may think of yourself or say to yourself that you are such a sinner that God could never forgive you, sinners are the only kind of people that God saves, and God still loves you. Jesus told a meaningful parable in Luke 18:9-14. “He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, but (they) treated others with contempt.” (He said), “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.” No matter how far you’ve wandered away, God will let you come home if you will humble your heart and you’re willing to be obedient.

When Jonah preached to that ungodly city Nineveh, they repented; and God relented. God does have a criteria for those whom he forgives – repentance and confession. David said, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17). And again, “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18). God won’t despise you, if you come to Him humbly and penitently.

The third thing that Jesus says with the cross is “I have a cross for you.” Paul said, “For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). Jesus died for us to free us from sin so that we could make a difference for others. In Mark 8:34-38 the Bible says this when Jesus summoned this crowd and His disciples were there; He said to them, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father and the holy angels.”

Jesus wants us to follow Him, and that means we too must carry our cross. We must die to ourselves and live for Him. The old song says, “Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No, there’s a cross for everyone; and there’s a cross for me.” Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit said, “But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14). The cross was meant for the suffering of Jesus, but for every Christian it’s also a symbol of love and salvation. We carry our cross to say to the world that we have stopped living the way the world lives and begun living like Christ. Paul again says, “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”

(Galatians 5:24). The heart of a Christian longs to love the Lord and serve Him and Him alone.

Carrying our cross implies something; it implies that Christ has a work for us to do. God expects more of us than simply to attend church. Some folks think they have little ability so they are of little value to the Lord and His church; but every member of the church has a value in God's eyes. God has equipped every person with at least one talent and He expects each of us to use our talents for His glory. Paul uses the phrase that we are, "workers together with Him" (2 Corinthians 6:1). We are God's partners in this world; "we are God's fellow-workers" (1 Corinthians 3:9). How are you using your life for the Lord? How are you serving? If you'll take up your cross, God will use you to make a difference in this world no matter who you are.

Why have we spoken today about the cross? Because it has a true and powerful message for each of us. Jesus invites us to come to Him in Matthew 11:28-30, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." God wants your love and your help to rescue a lost and dying world. Will you help Him? When Christ is in your heart and life, you become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Will you take up a cross and follow Him? Let's pray together. Father, help each of us to live such lives that we recognize Your love, that we recognize and are grateful for Your forgiveness; and that we take up our crosses to follow You. In Jesus' name, Amen!

Imagine Jesus hanging upon the cross, suffering for our sins. He sacrificed His body and His blood to demonstrate to us His unquestionable love and His desire for us to be saved. While Jesus was on the cross, He was hoping and praying people would understand and respond. What more could Jesus have done to convince us of His love and His offering of forgiveness? His great love and sacrifice ought to touch our hearts deeply.

How would Jesus feel, if the people that He loved and wanted so badly to be saved instead simply ignored and forgot Him? Can you imagine anything more cruel than the way people ignore the cross of Christ? Can you think of anything more ungrateful than the way our society has told the Lord to hush about sin? Can you think of anything more arrogant than to say to the Savior who died for us that we don't need saving?

How would Jesus feel about people who took the cross to heart, changed their lives, and took up their own crosses to follow Him? What does Jesus think about you? Is He happy or hurt about the way that you have responded to Him?

Take a long, close look at the cross and let it touch your heart. If you wish to become a Christian, believe in the Lord Jesus with all your heart, love Him, repent of your sins, confess the name of Christ before others, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. That's what Peter told the Jews on the day of Pentecost to do in Acts 2:38; and these were people who had actually participated in crucifying Jesus. It was what they needed to do, that is to repent and be baptized. And it's what you need to do as well. Today is the best day to make a difference in the rest of your life. Don't put off obeying the gospel; take up your cross today.

## **"Whatever"**

Many say they love God, but do they love the truth? Someone has called this the “whatever” generation, because people will accept nearly anything. Is this wise? We love the Bible, because it reveals God’s eternal, unchangeable teaching. God’s Word is never fickle. Since God’s Word doesn’t change, we can count on His promises to remain true. When God promises to forgive sins, we can be forgiven. When God promises the obedient a home in heaven, we can freely choose to be obedient and enjoy that promise.

The U.S. Military Academy at West Point has a simple but rigorous honor code. It simply says, "A Cadet will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor tolerate those who do." Honesty and integrity have always been important to our nation’s military. I wonder how important it is to the rest of us. Sometimes gullible and sometimes deceptive, Americans today seem all too ready to believe whatever they like, whether it’s true or not. Many have lost their ability to distinguish between what is true and what is not, between what is right and what is wrong. Many believe “whatever” is popular at the time and they are undisturbed when “whatever” is false or harmful.

In a pluralistic society, where people feel pressured to believe that everything is okay, many believe that all religions are the same and they end up believing in nothing with any conviction. Many have ceased to search for the truth or to love it. If every belief is true, then no belief can be counted on. If every belief is true, then nothing is sacred. Nothing matters. People who say that all religions are okay are actually confused and deceived. People often say that we cannot say any doctrine is false, but is this true? What has happened to loving the truth and being faithful to the Lord Jesus?

Our reading today comes from Paul’s letter to the Colossians 2:6-8. “Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”

Colossae was a small town in the Lycus River Valley on the main route from Ephesus to the Euphrates. Other nearby cities were larger and more important. Colossae had lost much of its importance. Romans and Greeks and transplanted Jews lived there, and the frequent visitors made it a place that was susceptible to every new idea that came along. The inspired apostle Paul wrote the Colossian letter to deal with a strange doctrine arising among some members of the church. He wrote to warn them of the false teaching and the deception that was in worldly philosophy.

God’s Word says in Colossians 2:1-8, “For I want you to know (Paul says) how great a struggle I have on your behalf, and for those who are in Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God’s mystery, and that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument. For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

“Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” A smooth talking stranger can easily fool a naïve person with false promises and worldly traditions that sound good. Paul warned them not to be fooled by such nonsense. They would find the truth in listening to Jesus Christ.

Learning to distinguish what is true from what is false is one of the most important lessons of life. Some traditions are true, while others are false. A tradition is merely a belief or a practice that's been passed down from one generation to the next. When a belief is in error in one generation, it will be an error in the next; but the second generation has never heard anything else and so it assumes that what it heard was true. Once a deceptive tradition becomes accepted and is passed down from generation to generation, that idea can hardly be shown to be false. So, people get convinced of a lie, and they think it's the truth, and they remain in error. How very sad! How tragic!

Disbelief is the rejection of a belief or a doctrine; it's a refusal to accept it. To disbelieve in Jesus is to reject him as the Son of God. This might come in the form of denying His miracles or refusing to believe in His resurrection. It also might come in the form of refusing to believe the things that He teaches. The Lord Jesus said, “The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day” (John 12:48). Failure to believe Jesus is a serious matter. Many people will find themselves rejected on the last day because they failed to believe what Jesus teaches in the Word.

People misbelieve when they're convinced something is false; that is, they believe something false but they think it's okay, that it is correct. Some deceive by causing others to believe a lie and then fall into error. The Lord Jesus condemns those who teach falsehoods and errors. Paul was shocked at one point when some false teachers were misleading the churches of Galatia. In strong language, the apostle of the Lord said, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one that we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:6-9).

Why did Paul say teaching a false gospel leads one to be accursed? Because changing what God teaches leads people to believe a lie. When people believe a lie, they follow after something other than God and they separate themselves from God. Satan separates people from God by lying to them. The Lord Jesus said about the devil, “He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). The devil lied to Eve and caused her to sin against God and to die spiritually and physically. Lies still lead people into sin and spiritual death. It does matter what we believe.

People today are deceived by all kinds of falsehoods and half-truths. A half-truth is when someone tells you a truthful fact but leaves out other relevant information. For instance, it was true



that Sarah was Abraham's half-sister. Sarah was also Abraham's wife. So when Abraham, because he was afraid, told Pharaoh that Sarah was just his sister, he was only half right. Abraham's lie caused lots of trouble; and half-truths are some of the most dangerous kind of lies. There's enough truth to fool people into accepting them, but there is enough falsehood to lead to destruction. A Christian must be very careful to examine everything he hears.

Some false prophets in the days of Jeremiah began fabricating their prophecies. Jeremiah said, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; They speak a vision of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the LORD'" (Jeremiah 23:16). False prophets in every age have led countless souls away from the will of God. We don't want to be led into error and lose our souls; and this is why we must examine everything carefully. Acts 17:11 says, "Now these (talking about the Bereans) were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining (or searching) the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." We, too, should test every belief by God's Word to see what is true and what is false.

We hurt ourselves greatly when we lie to ourselves. God said, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give to each man according to his ways, According to the results of his deeds" (Jeremiah 17:9-10). Our hearts may tell us what we want to hear rather than what is right. If we listen to our hearts and our desires rather than to the Lord, we can easily do the wrong thing spiritually, morally, or practically. Solomon said, "There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death" (Proverbs 14:12).

When people wish for something to be right; and they want to believe it; they want to do it; they begin to justify in their own minds, that they can do it whether it's right or not. These folks set their minds to follow this error and can hardly be persuaded to repent. They must find out the hard way. The prodigal son was like that. He had to have his inheritance and live the way that he wanted. When his father gave in, he took his money to a far country and he wasted it in a sinful lifestyle. He had to ruin himself before he would admit how foolish and sinful he had been. We hope that you haven't allowed your heart to deceive you into making foolish choices. The prodigal son lied to himself until he couldn't believe his lies anymore. Then he came to his senses and repented, and went home.

Many people are ready to believe a lie, if they think it will benefit them. In a politically correct world people turn a blind eye to the truth and they focus on what's convenient and popular. They would rather give in to a popular lie than embarrass themselves by taking an unpopular position. Some people think it shows wisdom or love to take a position of neutrality on every controversial issue. Others think we can never determine what is true, so every view is as good as every other. But this idea is miles away from the heart and the teaching of Jesus. It may appear kind to accommodate others, but accommodating sin and lies shows no love for the will of God. God did not create every religion; and not every religion teaches His will. God wants His people not only to love Him but also to love the truth!

The Lord Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart

from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matthew 7:21-23). Being religious does not guarantee that one is righteous. Some people say they are saved by faith alone, but this passage makes it clear that one must in addition to believing also do God’s will. These people who lived lawless lives deceived themselves into thinking that they were still all right with God. Jesus, however, told them to depart. He never knew them or had a relationship with them.

It matters what we believe and how we live. For years I’ve heard people embrace the doctrine of salvation by “faith only.” They suggest that all one must do to be saved is just to believe, and once saved one cannot be lost. But this doctrine didn’t come from Jesus. People who believe in the “faith only” doctrine always have to take it back. They will confess, “Well, you can’t be saved without loving God (and that’s true), or without repenting (and that’s true), or without obeying the Lord Jesus (and that’s true).” You see, faith is essential, but you have to do more than simply believe. It takes more than simply believing to please God.

People say one religion is as good as another and all religions are the same; but the Lord Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). The only way to the Father is through Jesus Christ. Again, Acts 4:12 says about Jesus, “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” It’s popular to say that all religions are the same, but the Scriptures teach otherwise. I choose Jesus!

Why should we confess Jesus as Lord? Why should we serve Him? We serve Him because we love Him; He died for our sins. We serve Him because Jesus only tells the Truth. His teaching remains true until the end of time. Why would we hold to beliefs that change with the wind? William Inge said, “He who marries the spirit of an age soon finds himself to be a widow.” We need eternal truth that doesn’t change or compromise. We find eternal truth in the words of Jesus. No one but Jesus can forgive sins. No one but Jesus will come again in the clouds. No one but Jesus will judge us on the last day. No one but Jesus can take us to heaven. I want – I need – Jesus!

The psalmist David wrote, “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more” (Psalm 103:15-16). Life on earth is temporary; we won’t live here forever. The devil loves for us to be undisturbed about our souls. He would love to keep us confused about life, about the church, and about the truth. He would love for us to wait till another day to decide. When we want to do what is right, the devil will tell us, “later,” to get our minds off spiritual things. He doesn’t want us thinking about the cross, about the church, about our salvation, or about heaven and hell. He wants us to live for the present and to ignore our souls and the future. He wants us to remain confused and even apathetic.

Today is the only day that you have to make your soul right with God. Yesterday has passed, and tomorrow is not assured. If you love the Lord and want to be right with Him, put your faith in Him. Repent of sin and be baptized in water in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. When you obey the Lord by repenting and being baptized, God washes away every sin and He adds you to His church. You become a child of God and have the hope of an eternal life. There are no good reasons to think about it “later.” Why not attend one of the churches of Christ near you. Tell them that you want to obey the gospel and be right with God. Study with them. Get involved in the church, and serve the Lord. Make your faith a priority. Won’t you do that today?

## **"The Answer is God"**

Someone commits a violent crime in America every 26 seconds and a murder every 36 minutes. Why? Psalm 1:2 tells about the blessed man. God said, "his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." If you want a better world, it begins with you. Don't wait on others. Today, begin seeking the Lord and meditate on His Word. Learn what God desires from you and practice it. The Lord Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). We know you love the Lord and you want to serve Him.

Lately we have seen lots of violence and heard lots of the word "evil." The nightly news carries story after story of assault, and rape, and murder. Violent crime has grown dramatically in the last 50 years. According to the FBI, there were 288,000 violent crimes in 1960; but in 2011, there were over 1.2 million violent crimes reported. In December, we grieved when a young man in Connecticut took the lives of 27 other people, including 20 little children, and then killed himself. We wonder how anyone could be so cruel and hard-hearted.

While some psychologists spoke of this young man being mentally disturbed, others said that he was evil. Perhaps it takes crime as horrific as this for us to remember that there is such a thing as evil. Postmodern America has spent so much time excusing itself and justifying its sins, it has forgotten how wicked and how evil humans can be. More than anything, we need the teaching and the love of Jesus to change our hearts and to live righteously.

Our reading today from God's Holy Word comes from Paul's Second letter to Timothy 3:1-5. "But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these."

From the earliest days, the Bible speaks of violence in this world. In Genesis 4 God had regard for Abel and his offering but for Cain and his offering God had no regard. Cain became very angry and his face fell. God warned him, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it" (Genesis 4:6-7). But, Cain let his anger grow in spite of God's warning. Verse 8 says that, "Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him."

What Cain did was evil. He planned to kill Abel out of his jealousy. God said, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (Genesis 9:6). God has always considered taking the life of another as evil. The Lord's Ten Commandments say, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). Murder is and has always been wrong. Revelation 21:8 says, "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for the murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

The New Testament warns us not to follow Cain. "We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous" (1 John 3:12). Cain first thought evil and then put his deadly plan into action. We too must master our thoughts and not allow evil to overcome us.

The Lord Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said of those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; and whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:21-22). The Lord condemns the evil in the heart, even if we don’t act upon it. Anger, hate, and vengeance are as evil as murder itself. We shouldn’t even entertain the idea of harming or slandering another person.

The Lord Jesus said, “For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All of these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:21-23). Because our inner thoughts affect how we behave, we must be careful to keep our hearts free from evil. We have to decide if we will live above ugliness and malice.

According to Jesus, murder begins when people lose respect for another person. Spitting in the face of another, looking with contempt upon another, or releasing one’s anger are signs of a murderous spirit. Jesus forces us to consider our thoughts and our words, that we don’t allow our anger and hatred to overwhelm us. The Bible says, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31-32). We must learn to let go of ugly thoughts and be kind to others, even if they’re not kind to us.

Evil in the heart leads to the most terrible sins. Even religious people, if they allow jealousy or hatred to build up in their hearts can do unspeakably cruel things to others. The chief priests, scribes and Pharisees were behind the death of Jesus Christ. They chose Barabbas, the criminal, to be spared, while they cried out for Jesus to be crucified. They didn’t fool Pilate, however. Mark 15:10 says, “For he (that is, Pontius Pilate) perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.”

Why were they envious? First, because Jesus could perform miracles; but they couldn’t. After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, some men ran and told the chief priests and Pharisees. “So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, ‘What are we to do? For this man performs many signs (that is, miracles). If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take both our place and our nation’” (John 11:47-48). The second reason came from their fear of losing their livelihood at the temple. They figured it was better for Jesus to die than for them to lose their nation. Many people today do horrible things out of jealousy and envy.

Another cause of hatred is something you might not expect; it’s the truth. People don’t want the truth told if it exposes their sins. Jesus said, “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed” (John 3:19-20). Sinful people want the darkness to cover up their sinful ways. They hate for their sins to be exposed and they hate anyone who exposes them.

Herod had John the Baptist arrested. He bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her” (Matthew 14:4). Herod was grieved about the matter, (that is, John being put

in prison) but Herodias plotted to have John beheaded. An evil person who has hatred in his or her heart has no compassion. They will take vengeance into their own hands.

Selfish desire also leads people to commit murder. People who are greedy for power and gold will do anything to eliminate their competition. The Bible says, "When Jehoram had ascended to the throne of his father and was established, he killed all his brothers with the sword, and also some of the princes of Israel" (2 Chronicles 21:4). His lust for power caused him to do horrible things; he did it even to his own family. James 3:16 says, "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice."

Sexual desire can also lead to much evil. When David lustfully committed adultery with Bathsheba and got her pregnant, it led to many other sins. He tried to cover it up by getting Bathsheba's husband Uriah to come home to her. When nothing else worked, David arranged for Uriah to die in battle. Nathan the prophet told David, "Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites" (2 Samuel 12:9). Remember, when we sin against others, we're sinning also against God Himself. If we love God, we will not allow selfishness to dominate our lives.

The apostle Paul listed a number of fleshly sins in Galatians 5; and each of them arises out of this selfishness. When people rebel against God and must have their own way, they lose sight of everyone else. They grow callous and they don't care who they hurt. Paul said, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:19-21). People who hold to fleshly sin cannot live with God forever.

Therefore, we must be careful to set our hearts on serving the Lord rather than living like the world. "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever." (First John 2:15-17). Sinful desire has led many into ruin. Selfishness leads people away from God, and loving God leads people away from selfishness. The answer to evil is God's love.

Paul explains how loving God and loving people lead us away from evil. He said, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the 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: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:8-10). Just as filling your heart with anger and hateful things leads to sin, filling your heart with what is good and loving leads one to act righteously. There is a stark difference between the person who loves God and his neighbor, and the person who loves only himself.

Keeping God in our hearts isn't trivial. It's not a game. It is the most important thing that we can do. It affects our lives and the lives of everyone around us. Don't let anything come between you and the Lord. Jude 21 reminds us to keep ourselves in the love of God. When

God is our focus, we love what is right and good; but when we push God out, every evil thing comes into our lives. The Bible says, “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (And) Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them” (Romans 1:28-32).

Why are we so angry and violent in America? Why has evil become so prominent? It’s because we’ve forgotten our God; we no longer “see fit to acknowledge God.” We’ve stopped reading the Bible; we have stopped going to church; we’ve convinced ourselves that we are an accident of evolution rather than created beings with intelligent design. We have let sinful behavior and politically correct behavior overrule God’s Holy Word, so that what God calls sin is now morally acceptable. Without shame we’ve loved darkness and hated light; we have loved sin and blasphemed righteousness. We fill our media with every ungodly thought, every ungodly word, and every ungodly act. We glorify sin and mock righteousness, and when we choose to be godless, why should it surprise us that our society becomes ungodly? When we reject the love of God, why should it surprise us that we become angry, hateful, and callous?

When we shut God out of our hearts, we let the devil walk in. When God can’t enter our schools, Satan and his followers will. When we can’t read the Bible or pray in public any more, why should we be surprised that sin is everywhere. We won’t let the Bible into our schools, but we want them in our prisons. Shouldn’t that teach us something? We need God in our lives and in our hearts.

The solution to violence is this: the love of Jesus must be in our hearts and His teaching in our lives. When Peter cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant Jesus healed the man and said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

The Lord Jesus knew people get angry and are violent. He taught people a better way. He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:43-45). If we’re to be like God, we will love and even pray for our enemies.

Jesus did more than teach this; He practiced it. Do you remember how Jesus prayed when they were nailing His hands and feet to a cross? “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). The grace of God can even forgive the violent. Peter told the Jews at Pentecost that they were responsible for the death of Jesus. He said, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36).

They were cut to the heart over their sin and they asked what they could do to be forgiven. Peter responded 8, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). When we change our hearts and we are baptized, we, too, can find God’s forgiveness. The closer we draw to God, the better our world will be.

## God's Love

We can never learn too much about God's love for us. Today we're going to try to get a glimpse on a topic beyond our comprehension—the love of God. So stay with us. When you consider how much God loves us, it's only fitting that we give Him the full measure of our love and devotion.

You can't measure some things in life. You can measure the rain; you can tell the temperature; you can feel the wind; but you can't measure a smile, the twinkle in someone's eye, a kind word, or the value of a hug. To love and be loved are the greatest treasures in this life. Nothing can replace them. We all know what it is to be ignored, forgotten, or treated unkindly. We also know what it means to be comforted when we hurt, to be included, to be forgiven, or to receive a gift.

People know when they're loved, but they don't always realize how much God loves them or all the ways that He loves them. Today we'll explore that love, so that we may live everyday with thanksgiving in our hearts. Fully realizing how much God loves you can really be a life-changing experience for you. No matter who you are, God sees you as someone He wants to save and to make His child.

The more you know God, the more you'll love Him. The more you count your blessings, the more you will see the good that He has done in your life. God's kindness and goodness draw us to Him. James 1:17 says, "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow."

Our Scripture reading today comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians 3:14-19. "For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God."

The psalmist David wrote, "O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it" (Psalm 139:1-6). The Bible describes David as a man after God's own heart, yet David was a very imperfect man. He was deeply spiritual; he loved God and wrote beautiful songs like Psalm 23. Yet David was very much human and sinned against God.

David longed to build a temple for the Lord because he grieved that the ark of God dwelled in tents, while he lived in a house. But according to 1 Chronicles 22:8, God would not let David build the Temple because he had "shed so much blood on the earth." While David showed many godly qualities, he also committed adultery with Bathsheba and had Uriah her husband killed in battle. David is so much like all of us, sometimes doing good and sometimes doing evil. The Lord Jesus described the character of man in Matthew 26:41, when He said, "the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak." We want to do right but often find ourselves doing what is wrong.

It's the tendency of people to downplay their sins, to excuse or dismiss sin as some small thing of no consequence. We laugh at our sins and have forgotten at times how to blush. Selfishly, we would rather justify our actions than to confess that we're wrong. Some buy into the notion of situation ethics, that the situation determines whether an act is right or wrong. By doing so, they push God out of their lives. They think God doesn't see wrong in what they do, because they don't want to think it's wrong. But God has spoken clearly in Scripture about sin and its consequences.

Every sin, yours and mine, is utterly offensive to God. Habakkuk 1:13 says of God, "Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, And You cannot look on wickedness with favor." We may consider some sin as a small matter, but God sees sin very differently. He cannot approve evil.

The Bible teaches in 1 John 4:8 that God is love. That's so very true, and we are indeed grateful for that. However, the Bible also teaches in 1 John 1:5-6 that "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him (that is with God) and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth." Whatever understanding we have about the loving nature of God must also be understood in the light that He is utterly righteous and morally pure. We can't walk in darkness or live in sin and still have fellowship with God.

Proverbs 15:9 says, "The way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but He loves one who pursues righteousness." An abomination is something repugnant or detestable. God rejects the way of the wicked as an abomination, as unclean and loathsome. God's love does not change how He sees sin; God despises sin. But God's love will determine how He regards people. God utterly loves the person who makes it his business to pursue righteousness.

It is only when we see ourselves through God's eyes that we understand the full extent of His love for us. Our sins make us ugly and profane in His eyes; but God is able to see beyond our sinful ugliness to what we can become through His grace and mercy. The Lord sees our sin, yes; but He prepared a way to free us from our sins, so that we might become altogether lovely to Him. By sacrificing His Son Jesus, He was able to forgive us all our sins and to transform us into His children.

The love of God is not hidden; it was demonstrated beyond dispute in the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross. The Bible says, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8). We were weak, ungodly, and sinners; but Christ was still willing to die for our sins and to wash us clean in His blood. Such love is truly beyond comprehension.

The Bible says, "that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. And therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He (that is God) made Him (that is Christ) who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:19-21). God washes us clean in the blood of Christ to atone for our sins, so that we may be able to be reconciled, that is to have a loving relationship with Him.

The prophet Micah said, "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities



underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:18-19). God loves us, not because we are so loveable. God loves us because He is so loving, so good, and so gracious.

The Lord’s love is compassionate beyond measure. He treats us much better than we deserve. Have you ever considered just how often we sin against God? Most people sin every single day, day after day. Each sin is abominable to God. If a person sinned only once a day, he would have sinned more than 18,000 times by the age of fifty.

Even Christian people who want to do right find themselves doing things they regret. The Scriptures teach that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). First John 1:8 says to the Christians, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Verse ten says, “If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” The fact is we are all human. “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.”

Many people think if a Christian sins, he’s a hypocrite; but this is not so. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be something he does not intend to be. The faithful Christian may sin, but he wishes he hadn’t. In fact, he will penitently confess to God that he has done wrong and ask God to forgive Him. There’s a lot of difference between this person who loves God and the one who loves to sin and then pretends he’s righteous. Being weak is not the same as being a hypocrite.

God knows all about us; He knows our weaknesses, and yet loves us in spite of ourselves. Psalm 103:8-14 says, “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.”

God’s love is great toward those who fear Him and love Him. God doesn’t have our limits. We live and die on this earth, but God’s love lasts for an eternity. Psalm 103:15-18 says, “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.” God’s love for His people is not only for this life but extends into heaven.

God’s love reaches into our lives far beyond the cross of Christ. The Bible says, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32). When we become children of God, God blesses every aspect of our lives. Ephesians 1:3 says that God the Father “has blessed us with every (every) spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.” He gives us His Word to teach and guide us. He hears our prayers. He gives us life. He provides for our needs.

The promise of the Lord Jesus is still very true. He said in Matthew 6:31-33, “Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” God takes care of those who love Him.

We sometimes imagine God has somehow forgotten us. Isaiah speaks of Jerusalem or Zion thinking that idea in Isaiah 49. But here's how God answered Zion, "Can a woman forget her nursing child And have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; Your walls are continually before Me" (Isaiah 49:15-16). God cannot and will not forget you. The Lord invites us in 1 Peter 5:7 to cast all our cares, all our worries, all our anxieties upon Him, "because He cares for you."

God doesn't see us as numbers, as nations, as cities, or as families. He sees us as individuals. And each person matters greatly to Him. He created us as unique individuals with features that separate us from every other person in the world. We each have unique fingerprints, DNA, teeth, and eye patterns. Yes, the Lord loves the whole world; but He loves you for who you are. He deeply desires to have a relationship with you. He wants you as His precious child, not a meaningless slave. He wants you as His beloved friend.

Of all the blessings that we possess, nothing, nothing compares with being a child of God. The Bible says, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called the children of God; and such we are" (1 John 3:1). When you become a Christian, you become a child of God, holy, beloved, and chosen. God blesses you with His grace and favor and is preparing a place in heaven just for you. He wants you to come and live with Him in glory forever.

The Lord said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). The Lord wants to bless us now and to bless us forever. Will you accept His offer of love and blessing? Let's pray. O Father, help us to love You ever bit as much as You have loved us. This is our prayer in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen!

Someone, I don't know who, rightly said, "God didn't promise days without pain, laughter without sorrow, sun without rain, but He did promise strength for the day, comfort for the tears, and light for the way." God's love doesn't mean that we won't face pain and challenges. God doesn't stop pain, but He helps us work through the pain and often gives us blessing from it. In Christ we have an unconquerable love. In Christ we realize that the love of God and the grace of God is greater than whatever challenge we have.

To enjoy God's love for eternity is worth any sacrifice or struggle. The Bible says, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). God is utterly committed to us, and we must be utterly committed to Him.

To become a Christian, one must believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Without faith we cannot please God. Faith and love leads a person to repent of sin, to turn to what is right. The blessing of repentance corrects our lives and heals our souls. A penitent believer is willing to confess the Lord Jesus Christ before others and to be baptized. The Lord Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). This new birth happens in the waters of baptism. And we urge you to respond to God's love today.