



COMMITTING OURSELVES TO **IMPOSSIBLE COMMANDS**

GROUP GUIDE

When we consider setting up “goals” for ourselves, we aim for things that are achievable. If you are studying, you might aim for a 10% increase in your current grade. If you just started a business, you might set profit goals within the 3-year period. Yet, when we read the Bible and see the standard or “goal” of the Christian life, we will quickly notice that the commands, expectations and goals are impossible.

The goal of salvation is *“to be conformed to the image of his Son (Jesus)”* (Rom. 8:29). The way we should live now is to *“be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us”* (Eph. 5:1-2). The expectation of followers of Jesus is to *“be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Mat. 5:48). How is that possible? Although all these commands relate to how we were originally created (Gen. 1:26-27 - in God’s image), we also know Genesis 3 happened and so all humanity has been corrupted by sin (Gen. 6:5).

And when you wrestle with these commands, there are generally three possible conclusions (all three evident in the history of the church) ...

- a) The command implies I am able to do it, so set some targets and get going until you achieve it. The Christian life is just a matter of self-motivation.
- b) The command implies I am not able to do it, so I need forgiveness (the Cross of Jesus). So, the Christian life is a confession about our sin and gratitude that we are forgiven at the Cross.
- c) The command implies I am not able to do it, so I need forgiveness (the Cross of Jesus), but also God’s empowering presence to enable me to begin doing it (the resurrection power of Jesus).

We believe these commands point us to the Cross for forgiveness, but also to Jesus’ resurrection power to become what we are called to be. It is our prayer that as we delve into some of the “impossible commands” we will see a) God’s standard in Jesus, b) our own inability to do it and c) the hope we have for forgiveness and Spirit-empowered change in Jesus.

So, this is a really important term for us as a church. We will discover that commitment to the Gospel commands is not a matter of self-motivation or despair but a call for us to rely upon God’s grace freely available in our Lord and Savior, Jesus. It is also a term in which we look to the future - outlining some of the plans for St. Peter’s in 2020 and asking everyone to consider their financial pledge to church giving. Like every area of Christian living, the hope is that our financial giving is inspired by the grace of God.

In Christ with much affection,

Carel
Phil. 1:21

Yes, they are impossible...

STUDY 1

“Lord command what you will and grant what you command!”
(Augustine, 5th Century)

1. Why do you think Augustine would pray this? What does he understand about God’s commands?



Investigating

Read Mark 10:17-31... The impossibility of following Jesus

In Mark 8:34-9:50, Jesus has been explaining what it means to be a disciple. In Mark 10:13-31, we are shown how you become a disciple and receive eternal life. Furthermore, Mark 10:17-31 is part of a contrast of two “candidates” for entering God’s Kingdom. The first is children (vv. 13-16), who are the most helpless and dependent in Jewish society. The second is the rich man...

1. What do we learn about the man in vv. 17-20, 22?
 - How would some have interpreted his wealth? (cf. Psalm 128:1-2)
 - What does Jesus point out the man misunderstands? (v. 18)
2. What does Jesus command the rich man to do (v. 21)? How does this command possibly mirror Mark 8:34-37?
3. How does the rich man respond to Jesus’ command (v. 22)? How does his response mirror Mark 4:19?
4. What does Jesus conclude about this man’s salvation? (vv. 23-25)
5. How do the disciples respond? (v. 26)
6. What does Jesus conclude about salvation? (v. 27)



Thinking & Living

Following Jesus has never been a matter of possibility or human ability. Jesus and the Apostles repeatedly point out that without God's empowering presence or call, we are not able to follow Jesus...

1. How do the following words of Jesus enforce this truth?

<p><i>“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit”</i> (John 3:3-8)</p>	<p><i>“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him... No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father”</i> (John 6:44, 65)</p>
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2. If following Jesus (obeying His commands) are humanly impossible (like the commands at the introduction). How do these passages...
 - Challenge our pride or self-reliance?
 - Encourage us to not despair?
3. How does the following hymn reflect on what we just learned? Use this hymn as a closing prayer in your time together...

*Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount, I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of Thy redeeming love.*

*Sorrowing I shall be in spirit,
Till released from flesh and sin,
Yet from what I do inherit,
Here Thy praises I'll begin;
Here I raise my Ebenezer (stone of help);
Here by Thy great help I've come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.*

*Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed His precious blood;
How His kindness yet pursues me
Mortal tongue can never tell,
Clothed in flesh, till death shall loose me
I cannot proclaim it well.*

*O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

*O that day when freed from sinning,
I shall see Thy lovely face;
Clothed then in blood washed linen
How I'll sing Thy sovereign grace;
Come, my Lord, no longer tarry,
Take my ransomed soul away;
Send thine angels now to carry
Me to realms of endless day.*

(Written by Robert Robinson, 1735-1790)

Born in 1735, Robert Robinson was apparently quite a rebellious son. At the age of 14, his mother sent him to London to become an apprentice of a barber. Alone in London, he joined notorious gang and followed a very wild lifestyle. When he was 17, he heard that George Whitefield was going to preach in his area. The gang decided to go so that they can have a few laughs. Yet, that day Robert was struck by George Whitefield's message on Matthew 3:7. Dread overcame him and for the next three years Robert would wrestle with the reality of his sin and the fear of God's judgment. Finally, at the age of 20, Robert turned to Jesus, became a Christian and later a pastor. He wrote this hymn as a song of thanksgiving for God's grace in calling and transforming him in Jesus.

How can we do the impossible?

This is not the first time Jesus will make such a radical point. In John 3, Paul tells Nicodemus, *“No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again”* (Jn. 3:3). And this act of being “born-again” is not something we can bring about by ourselves. Instead, it is something that is brought about by *“the Spirit”* who moves as the wind wherever *“it pleases”* (Jn. 3:8). Repeatedly, in John 14-16, Jesus explains to His disciples that *“apart from me you can do nothing”* (Jn. 15:5). The only reason the disciples have any hope of fulfilling their calling is because Jesus will send, *“another Counsellor to be with you forever – the Spirit of Truth”* (Jn. 14:15-16).

The Apostles maintain the same line in their letters to the churches. For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5, Paul repeatedly explains that the only reason any person believes and follows Jesus is because they have experienced, *“the power of God... the power and wisdom of God... a demonstration of the Spirit’s power... God’s power”*. And they have experienced God’s power because in God’s mercy *“God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong... so that no one may boast before Him”*.

How can we do the impossible? By God’s empowering presence... The gift of the Holy Spirit who applies Jesus’ life, death and resurrection to our lives. It is only in Him that we have any hope of becoming what we are called to be: followers of Jesus. We need to pray that God would continually empower us by His presence to be the followers of Jesus He wants us to be...



Be Perfect!

STUDY 2

1. What do you think it means to “be perfect”?



Investigating

In Matthew 5:17, Jesus claims to be the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. In fact, in Matthew 1-4, we see Jesus mirroring Moses and Israel's journey. Like Moses, the baby boys in Jesus' town are killed by a wicked king (Matt. 2:16-17). Jesus comes out of Egypt and has His own wilderness journey (Matt. 2:19-23; 4:1-11). Now, like Moses, Jesus speaks to His people on a mountain (Matt. 5:1). As the New Moses, Jesus will now expound the heart of the Law, which culminates in vv. 43-48...

Read Matthew 5:43-48... Be Perfect

1. Leviticus 19:18 teaches that we should “love your neighbour”, yet how was this being interpreted by religious leaders in Jesus' day? (v. 43)
2. How does Jesus broaden the idea of who our “neighbour” is? (v. 44)
3. Why should the disciples love in this way? (vv. 45, 48)
4. How is this way of love different from how people normally love? (vv. 46-47)



Thinking & Living

1. How do the Apostles' command the same high standard Jesus sets in Matt. 5:43-48?

“Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”
(Ephesians 5:1-2)

“He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’... Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart”
(1 Peter 1:15-16, 22)

But also in the Apostolic writings, it's clear that something needs to happen prior to us being able to begin to love like God loves...

2. What do we need to experience and see?

<p><i>"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, <u>made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved</u>"</i> (Eph. 2:5)</p> <p><i>"And in Him (Jesus) you too are being built together to become a <u>dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit</u>"</i> (Eph. 2:22)</p>	<p><i>"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, <u>since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God</u>"</i> (1 Peter 1:22-23)</p>
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3. Have you personally experienced and seen what these passages speak of? Are you a disciple of Jesus?

4. How has God's love...

- Changed how you understand what "love" is?
- Challenged you in how you love others? (your family, friends, associates etc.)
- Challenged whom you love?

5. How does Jesus' command to love, change how you approach the following scenarios?

- You know someone (friend, family member or work colleague) who is highly critical of or antagonistic towards you. Whatever you do seems to be greeted with hostility (whether in their words or attitude towards you).
- You had a major falling out with someone...
- You are serving in a ministry, but rarely receive words of appreciation from others. It seems no one is noticing what you are doing. Sadly, when people do speak to you (and seem to notice you), it is a complaint about what you are doing.
- You have repeatedly invited someone to church, and you have shared the Gospel with them, but they continually said "no" and asked you to stop speaking about Jesus. Mentioning Jesus just brings "tension". There seems to be no possibility of the person changing.

6. How does the following hymn reflect on what we have just learned?

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heav'n to earth come down:
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown:
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter ev'ry trembling heart.*

*Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit
into ev'ry troubled breast;
let us all in thee inherit,
let us find the promised rest:
take away the love of sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith, as its Beginning,
set our hearts at liberty.*

*Come, Almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return, and never,
nevermore thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.*

*Finish, then, thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be:
let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory,
'til in heav'n we take our place,
'til we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

(Written by Charles Wesley, 1707-1788 – biography in study 6)

- 7. Use this hymn as a prayer** that God would continually empower you by His Holy Spirit to live as Jesus commanded us to be.

To love like God, you need to experience God's love

The command to *“be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”* (Eph. 5:1-2) is impossible. Yet, it is possible with God's grace upon our lives! It is important to keep in mind that Paul's command to love (which mirrors Jesus' command) is the conclusion of a long discourse in which Paul explains God's grace to us.

The only reason Ephesians 5:1-2 is possible (or we can begin to learn to imitate God's love in Jesus), is because God the Father has *“blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ”* (Eph. 1:3), which Paul unpacks in Eph. 1:4-14. By God's sovereign grace in Jesus (vv. 4, 5, 11) we are viewed as holy and blameless (v. 4), adopted as His sons (v. 5), redeemed and forgiven (v. 7), given the revelation of His purposes (v. 9), and sealed by the Holy Spirit as the guarantee of our eternal inheritance (vv. 13-14).

Paul explains in Ephesians 2:1-3 that we were *“dead in your transgression and sins”*, enslaved by our own desires, the world and the devil. Yet, by God's grace, in love for us, *“God... made us alive with Christ”* (Eph. 2:4-5). God has gifted/graced us with this new life (2:8) and He has transformed us *“created in Christ Jesus to do good works”* (Eph. 2:10). In Christ we are now *“a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit”* (Eph. 2:22). It is God the Holy Spirit who indwells us, empowers us to see this truth (Eph. 1:15-18) and to grasp the wonder of God's love for us (Eph. 3:14-21).

It is only if the above is true of your life that you can begin to live in accordance with Ephesians 5:1-2 or Jesus' command in Matthew 5:48, *“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”*. We need to pray for a greater vision of God's love displayed in Jesus.

Don't Worry

STUDY 3

“You can't change the past, but you can ruin a perfectly good present by worrying about the future” (Anonymous)

1. What are some common antidotes/advice people give to combat worry?



Investigating

Keep in mind that Jesus has made the radical call, *“If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me”* (Lk. 9:23). Jesus will send His followers to be like *“lamb among wolves”* (10:3). Yet, we are not alone in this journey; we have our Father in heaven (11:1ff)...

Read Luke 12:13-21... Greed, Wealth and Eternity

1. Apart from fearing death (Lk. 12:4), what other danger should the disciples guard themselves against? (v. 15)
2. Jesus uses the parable of the rich fool to explain why we should heed His warning...
 - How did the rich man view his wealth and how did he plan to use it? (vv. 16-19)
 - What is God's verdict on the rich man? Why does God view him this way? (vv. 20-21)
 - How does this echo Luke 9:23-25?

Read Luke 12:22-34... Trusting the Father and Living for the Kingdom

Rather than seeking security in wealth, Jesus commands His disciples, *“Do not worry about your life”*, in particular their basic needs (v. 22)...

1. What reasons does Jesus give that we should not worry? (vv. 22-30)
2. Apart from our present needs, what assurance does Jesus give us of our future? (v. 32)
3. If we believe these things, how should that change how we live or use our possessions? (vv. 31, 33-34)
4. How is this different from the rich fool in vv. 16-19?



Thinking & Living

“Half our miseries are caused by things that we think are coming upon us” (J.C. Ryle)

Although Jesus commands us not to be anxious (worry) about ourselves (cf. Phil. 4:4:6), we are encouraged to be concerned/anxious for another people’s welfare (cf. 1 Cor. 12:25; Phil. 2:20). Yet, our tendency is to focus on ourselves (like the rich fool). Considering our passage...

1. What do we need to believe to break free from the crippling effect of self-worry?
2. How will we be able to believe this? Is it something we can do by ourselves? Consider **Luke 10:21-22**
3. If we have experienced what Jesus describes in Luke 10:21-22, what type of relationship do we have with God now? (consider **Luke 11:2, 13** - How is God described here?)
4. If we have this relationship with God and we experience anxiety/worry, what should we do with that anxiety? (consider **Luke 11:2-4, 9-13**)
5. Read the hymn written by Joseph Scriven, *“What a friend we have in Jesus”* (next page) and discuss how this hymn echoes what Jesus is teaching us here...

*What a Friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!*

*Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.*

*Are we weak and heavy-laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Saviour, still our refuge –
Take it to the Lord in prayer;
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer;
In His arms He'll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a solace there.*

(Written by Joseph Scriven, 1819-1886)

Joseph Scriven was born in Ireland in 1819 and studied at Trinity College in Dublin, earning a bachelor's degree. Yet, his life was filled with grief and sorrow. As a young man, Joseph fell in love and was engaged to be married. Yet, the day before their wedding, his fiancée fell from her horse while crossing a bridge over the River Bann and drowned.

At the age of 25, Joseph moved to Canada, becoming a tutor. During this time, Joseph met Elisa Roche, fell in love and became engaged again. Sadly, tragedy struck again. Elisa Roche died of pneumonia before their wedding could take place. At Port Hope, Canada, Joseph dedicated the rest of life serving the poor and widows. It was during this time that he wrote the poem we now call "What a friend we have in Jesus".

In the latter years of his life, Joseph experienced poor health, financial struggles and seasons of depression. The words were far from theoretical but were written from the experience of pain and suffering.



Rejoice in the Lord (always!)

STUDY 4

1. What are the things in your life that you feel rob you of your joy? Do you think it is possible to always be joyful?



Investigating

Read Phil. 4:4... Rejoice in the Lord (always!)

Phil. 4:1-9 is a series of commands that do not necessarily interrelate with one another, but rather with the entire letter (conclusions on the discourse that started in chapter 1 and closes in chapter 4). The command we will be focusing on is, *“Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: Rejoice!”*

1. What is happening with Paul and the church when this letter was written? Look up the passages below and discuss...

PAUL'S SITUATION	THE CHURCH'S SITUATION
Phil. 1:12-20	Phil. 1:27-30 Phil. 4:1-3

It is in these circumstances that Paul gives the command to rejoice in the Lord. So we need to see what Paul meant by being “in the Lord”...

Read Phil. 3:7-11... What/Who we have “in Christ”

In the letter to the Philippians, the phrase “in Christ” or “in the Lord” is rich in meaning and significance. In many ways, Phil. 3:7-11 is the summary of what we have and are “in Christ”. This is also Paul’s most personal confession of his deepest heart desires and joys. Paul is inviting us to have the same heartbeat and joy (Phil. 3:15-17) ...

1. What relationship does Paul have “in Christ”? (v. 8)
2. What status does Paul have “in Christ”? (v. 9)
3. What identity and hope does Paul have “in Christ”? (vv. 10-11; cf. Phil. 3:20-21)
4. What is the tense of the verbs in vv. 7-11 (past, present, future etc.)? What does it say about being “in Christ”? (cf. Phil. 3:12-14)
5. How do we become united to Christ or be “in Christ”? (cf. Phil. 2:1; 3:3, 9)
6. How has “in Christ” transformed Paul’s response to his circumstances? (cf. Phil. 1:18; 4:10)



Thinking & Living

“True Christian joy is both a privilege and a duty”
(Jerry Bridges)

1. How have these passages helped you understand why rejoicing in Jesus is a privilege and duty?
2. Paul calls us to follow his pattern of life in Jesus (cf. Phil. 3:7-11, 17). Yet, we know this is especially difficult in tough circumstances.
 - How has this passage helped you see where to go to rediscover true joy?
 - How can we help one another in difficult situations to find joy? What should we do and maybe be careful not to do?

3. What is the problem if we base our sense of joy on...
 - Our circumstances: our financial strength, job satisfaction, personal health or political and economic stability?
 - Our relationships: our spouse, friends, family, work colleagues etc.?

4. How does the following hymn mirror what Paul is writing about here?
Read and reflect... (read at the story behind the hymn as well)

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot Thou hast taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul!"*

*Chorus:
It is well with my soul!
It is well, it is well with my soul!*

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.*

*My sin – oh, the bliss of this glorious thought –
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to His Cross, and I bear it no more;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!*

*For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live;
If dark hours about me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul*

(Written by Horatio Gates Spafford, 1828-1888)

Horatio Spafford was a successful businessman, happily married with five children. Yet, that happy situation would not remain. In 1871 their son died of pneumonia and in that same year Horatio lost a lot his business due to the great Chicago fire. On 21 November, 1873, Horatio sent his wife and four daughters to Europe on the ocean liner Ville du Havre, planning to join them a couple of days later. Yet, tragedy struck when the ship collided with a Scottish ship "Loch Earn". Horatio's wife, Anna, survived, but their four daughters drowned along with 226 other passengers. When Anna arrived in Cardiff (Wales) she sent a message to her husband, "*Saved Alone, what shall I do?*" Four days into his journey across the Atlantic (wanting to join his grieving wife), the captain of the ship pointed to the place where the ship Ville de Havre sank. It was during this time (while sailing to Wales) that Horatio wrote the hymn, "*It is well with my soul*".

Union and Communion with God, in Christ, by the Spirit

2nd Century Church Father, Irenaeus grasped what Paul was writing here. Our union and communion with Jesus (being found in Jesus) transforms us, renews us and ultimately makes us fully alive (filling us with real and glorious joy).

Irenaeus explains that, *“The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God”*. Yet, we can only behold God the Father (be in relationship with Him) through the Son (the Lord Jesus). The *“revelation of the Father which comes through the Word (Jesus), give life to those who see God”* (Against Heresies 4:20:7). Yet, this revelation is not external “knowledge”, but a literal union with Christ; being in Christ.

A literal union that happens when we experience the spiritual circumcision caused by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. When Phil. 3:3 is true of us, *“For we are the circumcision, who worship **by the Spirit of God** and glory in Christ Jesus”*; if we have *“any **participation in the Spirit**”* (Phil. 2:1). It is only in the Spirit that we are united to Christ and are able to know Him. It is only through the outpouring of the Spirit of the Father that we have *“union and communion of God and men”* in Jesus (Against Heresies 5:1:1).

In many ways, Paul’s deepest and most personal expression of his relationship with Christ (Phil. 3:8-11), being in Christ, echoes Jesus’ own words in John 17:20-26 for His church (where Jesus describes our union with Him and the Father through the Spirit). It is here *“in Christ”* alone that we experience true love and joy that lasts into eternity.

Real joy, everlasting joy, is only found when these words of Jesus are true of you...

“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

(John 17:20-26; cf. John 14:15-23; 17:13)

Be a Willing & Cheerful Giver

STUDY 5

“A giving Saviour should have giving disciples” (J.C. Ryle)

1. Why do you think *“generosity”* should be the mark of a follower of Jesus?



Investigating

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-15... Willing Generosity

Paul mentions the churches of Macedonia as examples of Christian generosity (vv. 1-7). One particular church from Macedonia worth considering is the church of Philippi...

1. How was the Philippian church excelling in the *“grace of giving”* (v. 7)? Look at the following excerpts from Philippians...

<p><i>“In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy, because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now...”</i> (Phil. 1:4-5)</p>	<p><i>“But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow-worker and fellow-soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs”</i> (Phil. 2:25)</p>	<p><i>“Yet, it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the Gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in respect to giving and receiving, except you only”</i> (Phil. 4:14-15)</p>
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2. How did the churches of Macedonia respond to God’s grace in Christ? (vv. 2-5)

3. How does the Macedonian churches' response mirror 2 Cor. 9:7?
4. We know the Corinthian church was "enriched in him (Jesus) in all speech and all knowledge" (1 Cor. 1:4-5), yet what does Paul want them to excel in as well (v. 7)?
5. Paul gives three reasons why the Corinthian church

First Reason (vv. 8-9)	Second Reason (vv. 10-12)	Third Reason (vv. 13-15)
(How does Phil. 2:6-8 demonstrate this?)	(How does Phil. 4:14-18 demonstrate this?)	



Thinking & Living

“What we spend in piety and charity is not tribute paid to a tyrant, but the response of gratitude to our Redeemer”
(James Denney)

Being cheerful and willing givers (using whatever gifts we have received in service of Jesus and His people) is not something that comes naturally to us. Our vision of God needs to change from viewing Him as a tyrant to viewing Him as a loving redeemer. We first need to see and experience the truth of 2 Cor. 8:9. Turn to **2 Corinthians 3:12-4:6...**

1. What needs to be removed from our “hearts” in order to see this truth? (2 Cor. 3:14-15; 4:3-4)
2. How is this removed from our hearts so that we might see this truth? (2 Cor. 3:16-18; 4:6)

3. At as a church family, the Macedonian churches' example is one we are also called to follow. In the fourth term of each year, everyone at St. Peters is asked to prayerfully consider their giving to support the ministries of St. Peters, the Masi church plant and cross-cultural mission over the coming year. So, take time in the coming weeks to prayerfully consider your own pledging for next year.
4. The Christian life is one of generosity. Here are other avenues to consider being generous in...
 - Get involved in a Mercy Ministry (Love Meals, Soup Kitchen etc.)
 - Get involved at Ithemba School (financial support, offering specific skills that might be useful to the school)
5. How does the following hymn echo what we see in 2 Corinthians 8:9?

*When I survey the wondrous cross
 On which the Prince of glory died,
 My richest gain I count but loss,
 And pour contempt on all my pride.
 Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
 Save in the death of Christ my God!
 All the vain things that charm me most,
 I sacrifice them to His blood.
 See from His head, His hands, His feet,
 Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
 Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
 Or thorns compose so rich a crown?
 Were the whole realm of nature mine,
 That were a present far too small;
 Love so amazing, so divine,
 Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

(Written by Isaac Watts, 1674-1748)

When Isaac Watts was a youth, the churches in England only sang metrical Psalms. Growing up with this tradition, he started to dislike the fact that the church of England restricted its singing to Psalms only, since they failed to celebrate and appreciate in song the fullness of the Gospel as revealed in the New Testament. Tired of his complaints, Isaac's father challenged him to write something better than what is currently sung. Taking up the challenge, in 1707, Isaac Watts published his first hymnal. Later in 1719 he published another hymnal on renditions of the Psalms (giving a variety of tunes to each hymn to fit various congregations). Although well received by many, there were just as many critics who argued that, "Christian congregations have shut out divinely inspired psalms and taken in Watts's flights of fancy". Some dubbed the hymnal, "Watts' whims". Even so, eventually his new style of singing triumphed. Even though he suffered from ill health his adult life, Isaac Watts dedicated himself to the writing of new songs that were accessible to the common man; as he wrote, "Where the flights of his (David's) faith and love are sublime, I have often sunk the expressions within the reach of an ordinary Christian." He gave his soul, his life, his all to glorifying Jesus...

Loving God with all of your “strength”

In Mark 12:30, Jesus answered said that the most important command of all is to, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”* (cf. Deut. 6:4-5). When we read the last word “strength”, we might think Jesus is asking us to love God with our physical strength, yet that is not what the word means. It actually means, with all of your “muchness” or “everything”. This includes your physical strength, but also your time, your possessions/wealth. It means devoting everything, all of your “muchness” to loving God.

In many ways, this is what Jesus called the rich man to do in Mk. 10:21, *“one thing you lack... Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me”*. Jesus is not necessarily calling the man to literally leave everything. We see Peter still having a house (Mk. 1:29), even though he *“left everything”* (Mk. 1:18, 20; 2:14; 10:28). Joseph of Arimathea remained a wealthy man (Mk. 15:43). What Jesus is calling the rich man to do, is to change the course of his entire life (all of his muchness) to follow Him; to put everything in the service of Jesus, who is the Christ (Mk. 8:29, 34-38).

Peter used his home as a base for ministry (cf. Mk. 1:32-34). The woman in Mk. 14:3-9 used expensive perfume to anoint Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea gave his tomb for Jesus. Everything is surrendered to be at Jesus’ disposal. They surrendered whatever lifestyle they lived to *“follow Jesus”*. They *“denied themselves, took up their crosses and followed Jesus”* (Mk. 8:34). Everything we have should be “sold”/used for Jesus, God’s Kingdom.

Yet, loving God this way is radical. It means surrendering what we normally place our security on. And this is also what Jesus wants the rich man to do; realize his own state of helplessness and relying on Jesus alone (like the little children in Mk. 10:13-16). Like children who have nothing in this world, yet had Jesus in the end.

Loving God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) with all our “strength” means to put everything at His disposal for His Kingdom: *“your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”* (Matt. 6:10). Yet, also relying upon Him fully to provide for us: *“Give us today our daily bread”* (Matt. 6:11). To worship God fully (Phil. 4:18), knowing, *“my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus”* (Phil. 4:19).

Forgive Each Other

STUDY 6

“Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive” (C.S. Lewis)

1. Why do you think C.S. Lewis would make this statement?



Investigating

Read Matthew 18:21-22... Forgive

Jesus has been teaching His disciples to pursue the lost sheep (Matt. 18:10-14) and to seek reconciliation *“if your brother sins against you”* (Matt. 18:15-20). Peter has also heard Jesus teach His disciples to pray, *“forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”* (Matt. 6:12). So, Peter asks the question, *“How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?”*

1. Peter expected 7 times to be generous, yet what is Jesus' answer? Should we understand Jesus' words literally? (v. 22)

Read Matthew 18:23-35... The Unforgiving Servant

Keep in mind that during one period, 1 silver talent represented 6000 drachmas or 6000 days' wages. A Denarii was the compensation for 1 day's common labour..

1. To really appreciate the parable, you need to compare the two scenes (their parallels and their differences). Read, discuss and compare to see what Jesus is highlighting...

Compare	Scene 1 (vv. 23-27)	Scene 2 (vv. 28-31)
The Debts	Vv. 24-25	V. 28
The Pleas	V. 26	V. 29
The response	V. 27	Vv. 30-31

2. How did the King respond when he heard what had happened? Why do you think he would respond in this way? (vv. 32-34)
3. How does Jesus conclude the parable (v. 35)? How does this compare with Jesus' words in Matt. 6:12, 14-15?



Thinking & Living

1. Considering that Jesus describes sins as “debts”, what did it cost God to forgive/absorb/cancel our debt of sin? (cf. **Matt. 26:27-28**)
2. Why is it expected of us to act in forgiveness towards those who have sinned against us?
3. “So, we’re forgiven by God because we forgive others?”... Is this right or wrong? Discuss...
4. How does this passage help you understand what forgiveness is?
5. Discuss how you can apply this to a particular relationship in your life. How does this passage help speak into that situation?

6. Read and discuss how this hymn reflects what we have learned about forgiveness...

*Forgive my foes? it cannot be:
My foes with cordial love embrace?
Fast bound in sin and misery,
Unsaved, unchanged by hallowing grace,
Throughout my fallen soul I feel
With man this is impossible.*

*Great Searcher of the mazy heart,
A thought from thee I would not hide,
I cannot draw th' envenomed dart,
Or quench this hell of wrath and pride,
Jesus, till I thy Spirit receive,
Thou know'st, I never can forgive.*

*Come, Lord, and tame the tiger's force,
Arrest the whirlwind in my will,
Turn back the torrent's rapid course,
And bid the headlong sun stand still,
The rock dissolve, the mountain move,
And melt my hatred into love.*

*Root out the wrath thou dost retain;
And when I have my Saviour's mind,
I cannot render pain for pain,
I cannot speak a word unkind,
An angry thought I cannot know,
Or count mine injurer my foe.*

(Written by Charles Wesley, 1707-1788)

Charles Wesley was a prolific hymn writer, who averaged 10 poetic lines a day for 50 years. He wrote a total of 8989 hymns (in 56 volumes). Yet, his hymns also have story. Many of Charles' hymns are rooted in his own conversion (1738) under the influence of the Moravians and reading Luther's commentary on Galatians.

Later under the influence of his friend George Whitefield, wanting to reach the masses of Britain with the same Gospel message that changed him, Charles and his brother (John Wesley) began to "be more vile" (as they put it) by preaching outside church buildings. This was a very fruitful endeavour. For example, between 1739-1743, Charles was able to preach to 149 400 people.

Yet, their desire to evangelise the masses (and the writing of hymns that suited the lower classes - miners) was not well received in the beginning. They were considered "marked men" and experienced strong opposition from the clergy of England, who viewed their teaching on new birth and justification a threat. Many of their former colleagues in the Anglican church ostracised them. Almost in every town, angry mobs formed that resorted to violently oppose them (using clubs, cleavers, stones etc.).

When we read a hymn like "Forgive my foes?", we need to realize that it was written in a context of great opposition and suffering.

Understanding Forgiveness...

- **What is Forgiveness?**

It is quite striking that Jesus describes sins or offences as “debts” in His prayer (Matt. 6:12; cf. Lk. 7:41-43) and in this parable (Matt. 18:21-35). Even the term “*forgive*” can also be translated as “*release*” or to take leave of a debt (Nolland 2005:290). The parable makes this vivid in the king cancelling the debt (at his own expense). The language and imagery are reminiscent of the Year of Jubilee; when all debts were to be cancelled on the Day of Atonement (cf. Lev. 25:8-54).

Considering this, we should see that forgiveness implies cancelling a debt that someone owes you (whether spiritual or material). God has released us from an impossible burden of making full restitution for the wrong we have done against Him. We are called to “release” and “cancel” debts owed to one another for the wrong we have done against one another. Yet, this is costly, since it implies that you will need to absorb the debt. Sin remains a debt and restitution can only be made if someone actually “pays” for it or absorbs the cost. To forgive means to absorb the debt yourself, at your own expense.

This is painful, yet the power to forgive (take this pain) is found by...

- **Looking to the Cross**

Ultimately, we need to see that sin demands restitution, in particular the penalty of death (cf. Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23). It is only if a life is given for a life that restitution for sin can be made (symbolized by blood, cf. Lev. 17:11). God’s promise to forgive Israel (and us) and restore His relationship with them in the new covenant will come at a cost. The cost of His Son embracing/absorbing the debt of our sin (eternal death) (Matt. 26:28). This is what the Cross is: God absorbing our debt of sin (releasing us from the impossible debt we owe) at the painful cost of Himself (the Son embracing our death-hell on the Cross).

- **Being Wise in the pursuit**

In our pursuit of “*sinners and tax collectors*”, Jesus also taught us that our mission is dangerous, “*Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves*” (Matt. 10:16). You do not approach a wolf recklessly or foolhardy, not expecting the possibility of being bitten. Consequently, although we pursue reconciliation and offer forgiveness, we should also be wise in how we pursue.

For example, you might have suffered abuse (in whatever form) from someone, and you do not know how to approach the situation (in particular when the person is considered “*dangerous*”). Although we are called to forgive, that does not imply a reckless and foolhardy approach to the offender. The person might be unrepentant and would continue in their abusive behaviour, with the same depraved motives. It would be foolish to expect a wolf to act like a sheep when there are no signs of God’s transforming power in their lives.

Consequently, here are some things to keep in mind in such a situation...

- a) Remember that forgiveness is a gift given by the offended person, not something that can be demanded. It is utterly crass to demand forgiveness as some form of compensation (owed to the offender), when it is a gift freely given at the cost of the offended person. Grace is freely given, not demanded or coerced.
- b) Approach the person, but on your own terms. They cannot call the “playing field” for when and where you meet. For example, if the person is known to be violent, it is best not to allow the person to meet or see you at your home. You can meet in a public space (like a coffee shop), removed from a space where you could be in danger. Furthermore, you set the tone regarding when you meet. This might be once a week, once a month, once a term or even once a year (depending on the person and situation).
- c) Take your time. Rome wasn’t built in a day and the same applies to trusting someone. Trust cannot be demanded (especially being vulnerable to someone who formerly abused your vulnerability). Consequently, it will take time for you and this particular person to build any form of trust. There is no rush.
- d) Keep pursuing. Although this takes time (weeks, months, or years), and you pursue the person on your own terms... keep pursuing. Don’t give up, especially if the person is still willing to meet. What will motivate you to keep pursuing is the fact that God pursued you patiently, tirelessly, and lovingly.

Even so, there are situations, when we are pursuing the “*lost sheep*”, “*tax collector and sinner*” that the person shuts the door on us. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees did with Jesus. Like Jerusalem did. As Jesus cried, “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing*” (Matt. 23:37). Their rejection was so final that they crucified Him (Matt. 27:15-23).

Realise, in those moments (when you are rejected), that Jesus went through the same. God was faithful to His covenant promises to forgive, yet sadly many rejected His gift of forgiveness. Many rejected the message of reconciliation and shut the door on Him. We have a Saviour who understands and has experienced the same rejection and suffering (cf. Heb. 2:18; 4:15; 5:8).

