

## Heart-to-Heart: Women of the Word



You are holding the new 2006-2007 Women's Ministry Bible study resource of which we are very proud. The Beatitudes are probably some of the most favored and memorized passages from God's Word...right up there with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments! The words have been cross-stitched and framed, songs written using these words, and innumerable sermons and Bible studies prepared focusing upon these precious words. Cumberland Presbyterian Women's Ministry will now have these words as our theme for the coming year.

This year's writer comes well-equipped to help us open up God's Word and learn from it. *Geneva Searcy* is an active member of St. Luke Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Ft. Worth, Texas. She is a teacher of an adult Sunday school class, sings in the choir, plays hand bells, and is a newly ordained elder. She and her husband Jim are parents of two grown children and the proud grandparents of three grandchildren (with one on the way!). Geneva has been active in Women's Ministry for years serving in many leadership capacities, on local and regional levels. She is also a certified teacher in the Bethel Bible Series. Many churches participate in the Bethel Bible Series, which covers the entire Bible in two years. Geneva's email address is [gsearcy@earthlink.net](mailto:gsearcy@earthlink.net). We know that you will be enriched and challenged as you uncover God's Word for you in these studies.

Also included in this resource are programs for two very important times of our church year – Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter. *Deanna Phelps* is the writer of these two unique programs. Deanna is a member of Christ Church of Monrovia in Huntsville, Alabama, where her husband, Bob is pastor and where she serves as Director of Christian Education and Music. She also teaches elementary children in Sunday School and CPYF. She teaches piano in her spare time. She and Bob have two grown sons. Her e-mail address is [christchurch@knology.net](mailto:christchurch@knology.net) or [dphelps@knology.net](mailto:dphelps@knology.net). We hope you enjoy these seasonal resources and will find them useful in your Women's Ministry group.

### **How to Use this Resource:**

These Bible studies and programs are about 45 minutes in length, depending upon how the leader structures the time. Unlike past Women's Ministry resources, these studies are best when presented in sequential order, following the Beatitude scripture text of Matthew 5:3-12. The background text is provided for the leader to help prepare a brief presentation. You're encouraged to not "read" the background text, but rather let it come to life through you and your leadership. In order to draw out comments and insights from everyone in class, suggestions are given for conversation in pairs or small groups. Even though your group may be small (5 or 6 people), you are encouraged to discuss part of the questions provided in pairs. This will give EVERYONE an opportunity to share her thoughts even if it is only with a partner.

There are several devotionals offered this year as part of the resource. The devotional writers are *Debbie Cox, Melissa Reid Goodloe, Mary Long, Ellie Miller, Peggy Nottingham, Michelle Rackley, Wakana Suzuki, and Margie Vanderlaan*. All of the devotionals are focused upon the theme of how God's Word has enriched these women's lives. For those groups who may not utilize a full, complete Bible study, it is hoped that these devotionals will meet your needs and will complement the theme for this year. In addition, you are encouraged to find other women within your church that might be willing to give a devotion along this theme.

## Bible Study Resources

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume I, (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1956) C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1953).

M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VIII, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995)

Douglas R. A. Hare, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Preaching, Matthew*, (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993)

George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans, 1974)

Herbert Lockyer, Sr., General Editor, *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (Nashville, Tennessee, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986)

J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Discipleship*, (Chicago, Moody Press, 1990).

John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, (Downers Grove, Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 1978).





## **The Beatitudes**

### **Matthew 5:3-12**

*NOTE: The study leader should read aloud or should ask someone else to read aloud the scripture text, Matthew 5:3-12.*

The Sermon on the Mount was delivered by Jesus near the beginning of his ministry. Matthew pictured Jesus sitting on a hill with his disciples seated around him. Others were also there listening, but primarily Jesus was teaching his disciples. This sermon is Jesus' own description of what his followers were to be and to do.

As we see throughout the Bible, it is God's purpose to call out people who are set apart for God's cause. The Sermon on the Mount describes what human life and human community look like when they submit to the rule of God. The citizens of God's kingdom are to be very different from others. Their characteristics are to be totally different from those characteristics that are honored by the world. Jesus said that "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20) Only in the scripture will we find how we are to live as Jesus calls his followers to live.

The Beatitudes are Jesus' description of Christian character and conduct and the divine blessing which is promised to those who exhibit these characteristics. Some have said that the standards taught in the beatitudes are not attainable. They are attainable, but only by people who have experienced God's forgiveness and saving grace. Jesus was setting these high standards for those who were already his disciples. We may never be perfect in our pursuit of these characteristics but we must desire to be a reflection of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who was perfect.

Each beatitude is not directed to a separate group of people. But all these qualities are to be possessed by the same group of people. Christians are to be meek, merciful, poor in spirit, pure in heart, mourning, hungry, peacemakers and will be persecuted. These qualities are not to be considered as the gifts of the spirit which he distributes to different members of the church in order to equip them for service. But through his grace Christ's followers can have all these Christian graces working in themselves.

The Beatitudes are not meant to contain ideals which we can only dream of attaining nor are they only promises of a futuristic existence. They point out a form of living in the present that gives Christ's followers triumph over the world and a way of life which produces a joy that is permanent. The rewards Christ described are not rewards of merit but are gifts of grace.

Neither can the characteristics which Christ desires in his disciples be attained once and for all time. They are disciplines which must be cultivated in the daily living of our lives. The early disciples learned Jesus' teachings and way of life by being with Jesus every day as they listened to Him, talked to Him, walked with Him and observed His lifestyle; living Heart-to-Heart with

Jesus. Jesus' disciples had doubts and made mistakes at times. But Jesus forgave them for their weaknesses and they continued to grow in his love.

Jesus calls us to walk with Him daily just as His disciples walked with Him. If we have already declared our faith in Him, then He calls us to equip ourselves to live out that faith by reading God's Word daily, talking with God daily in prayer, and putting what we learn into action in our daily lives. As we do this, the characteristics of a true disciple of Christ will begin to emerge in our lives and we will become "Women of the Word."

### **Heart-to-Heart Activities:**

1. The study leader should prepare ahead paper hearts (made from construction paper or other suitable material) which have listed on one side the Christian characteristics: joyful, courageous, sanctified, trusting, merciful, pure, peaceful, wise, fruitful. On each of the backs of the hearts place the name of one of the members of your group. Place the hearts in a box and have each member draw a heart out of the box. Then ask each member to commit to pray for the person whose name she draws throughout the year. The prayer should be for this person to shine forth with the Christian characteristics which we will be studying as well as any other needs this person might have. You may choose to reveal the name of the prayer partner each has drawn immediately or you may choose to wait until the end of the year to reveal the name.
2. Supply each member with a pencil, paper and an envelope. Ask each one to read through the scripture text silently and then list those characteristics which they do not think they possess or which they feel they need to work on. Also, ask them to write a brief description of what they feel those characteristics mean. Each one should seal her paper in an envelope and write her name on the front. The leader should collect the envelopes and hold them for use at the end of this year's Bible studies. In the leadership changes, then simply tell the women to put their envelopes in a safe place and be prepared to bring them back for the final Bible study.

### **Reflection Questions:**

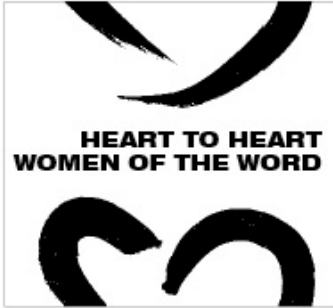
- ♥ Place yourself in the sandals of one of the disciples on the hillside listening to Jesus. What did he say that perplexed you the most? What did you understand right away? Share your thoughts with a neighbor or with the whole group.
- ♥ Discuss with a neighbor the idea that as disciples or "Women of the Word" we possess all the beatitudes. Share the beatitude(s) that you feel you possess. Now share the one(s) that you would like to grow or nurture in your life.
- ♥ Name some ways that as women, we can develop or nurture the beatitudes or characteristics taught by Jesus.
- ♥ Why is it important to be in daily communion with God? Use Proverbs 8:30, Luke 9:23, Acts 17:11 to inform your comments.

- ♥ With a partner, name some activities you do daily (or would like to do) in order to gain the strength to live your faith daily.

**Prayer:**

Our Righteous God,

We have listened to your word and now we wish to quiet our minds and hearts and enter the sanctuary of your peace. Sometimes when we look into our hearts we find we are holding on to our pride and unwillingness to admit wrong. We may become impatient and insensitive toward people who irritate us. Sometimes we have secret joy when another person fails. Righteous God, at this moment, we fix our heart's eyes upon you. Place in our hearts your compassion, kindness, and humility so that others may feel even a small breath of your spirit as we pass through their lives. As Jesus' followers and in his name we pray, Amen



## **The Joyful Heart**

Matthew 5:3, Jeremiah 29:11

In Matthew 5:3 we read the first of what we call the Beatitudes. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” It seems to be a total paradox that Christians can be poor and blessed at the same time. Many of us think of the poor as one class of people and the blessed as another class. We may also feel proud of the fact that we are not poor.

It is ingrained in us to be proud. From birth we are taught to be proud of our country, our economic system, our culture, our wealth, our family trees, our race, our gender and various other things. And so it is a little difficult for us to see being poor as a good thing. But Jesus tells us that we must be poor in spirit in order to inherit the kingdom of heaven. What does this mean to us if we are not materially poor?

In the Old Testament to be poor meant to be in literal material need. But gradually, because those in poverty had no refuge but God, the word “poor” began to have a spiritual connotation and came to suggest a humble dependence on God. Therefore, the poor in spirit are those who have the attitude of humble dependence upon God’s grace. We must depend less on our on abilities and more on God’s power working through us.

If we are not righteous in our own sight (self-righteous) then we are able to reach out to accept God’s righteousness. Luke chapter 18 tells the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went into the temple to pray. The Pharisee thanked God that he was better than others. His pride would acknowledge no neediness in himself. He was self-righteousness. But the tax collector was poor in spirit and he laid down the burden of his heart to God asking for mercy realizing he needed help from outside himself. The condition to receiving the kingdom of God is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty. There is nothing we possess and no action we can perform that will make us worthy of God’s favor. Only through the mercy of God are we extended the gift of salvation.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis (paraphrased) compares Christians to ships and says it is no good to tell the ship itself to steer to avoid collision. There must be something that directs the ship from the inside. This is where our dependence upon God is important. If we declare our total dependence upon God and then we allow God to steer our thoughts and actions our hearts will be free from trying to be righteous in our own selves. Only then are we able to claim the righteousness of God. Real righteousness is open, honest and transparent. It is not what we are doing that impresses God; it is what we are inside.

There should be happiness in realizing that we are poor in spirit. When we give ourselves totally over into God’s hands more wonderful things than we could ever imagine are possible for us. Jeremiah 29:11 tells us “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to

prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” We will not be steered wrong if we allow God to control the direction of our lives. It is exciting to contemplate the plans that God has for our future.

Our journey of faith should be a joyful journey. Allowing God to be our righteousness enables us to have joy in our hearts through any situation or problem which life brings to us. Even when we suffer from sickness, poverty, disabilities, loss of loved ones and seemingly insurmountable problems our hearts can retain the joy that only a total dependence on the grace of God can give us. Joy is not some fleeting emotion that we feel when everything is going well for us. It is the abiding feeling of security we have from being totally in God’s hands.

Because of the authority of Jesus who spoke the words of the Beatitudes to his disciples these blessings are not only some future dreams but they are conveyed to his disciples at the time of his speaking. And the blessing which we have in the present will be perfected in the future fulfillment of the Kingdom of God.

The undeserved bonus of being “poor in spirit” is that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” The “poor in spirit” are “blessed” not only because they will have participation in God’s future kingdom but can also participate in God’s kingdom in the present. God’s kingdom is that over which God rules. Those who are subject to God are a part of God’s kingdom.

The kingdom of God came to earth through the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not offer it as merely a future hope but as a present reality. God’s kingdom can be seen partially here on earth, at the present time, alive in those who have accepted his reign in their hearts. God’s kingdom in heaven is eternal and perfect but that kingdom is not fully actualized on earth. It is “now and not yet.” In heaven God’s kingdom will be fully realized. Those of us who are citizens of God’s kingdom on earth will also be citizens in the heavenly kingdom.

### **Heart-to-Heart Activities:**

1. Leader should have a group member to look up “joy” or “joyful” in a Bible Dictionary or Bible Concordance before the study. This person will then be prepared to give a good definition of “joy” along with supporting scriptures. This person may assign other persons in the group to read aloud the scriptures desired.
2. Sing the hymn, “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee,” as a group. If hymn books are not available read verses one and three aloud together:

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;  
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, Praising Thee their sun above.  
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, Drive the dark of doubt away;  
Giver of immortal gladness, Fill us with the light of day!

Thou art giving and forgiving, Ever blessing, ever blest,  
Wellspring of the joy of living, Ocean depth of happy rest!  
Thou our Father, Christ our Brother, –All who live in love are Thine:  
Teach us how to love each other, Lift us to the Joy Divine.

**Reflection Questions:**

- ♥ In your own words and in your own life what does “poor in spirit” mean? Share your thoughts with a neighbor. Compare ideas and feelings.
- ♥ Discuss with a neighbor someone you know who truly exhibits the characteristic of being “poor in spirit.”
- ♥ With a neighbor discuss the significance of what “humble dependence” means in your life. How are you dependent upon God? What can you do (or not do) to become more dependent upon God? What is standing in the way of you exhibiting this characteristic more fully in your life this week?
- ♥ In what ways can we lay down our own righteousness in order to accept the righteousness of God?
- ♥ What does Jeremiah 29:11 mean to you?
- ♥ In what way do we participate in God’s Kingdom here on earth? In what way will we participate in His future kingdom?

**Prayer:**

Our Lord and Creator of our joy,  
Guide us to live in a daily dependence upon your grace and empowerment. May our joyful hearts throughout our journey of faith be a witness of your grace to the world. Help us to live purposefully in your present kingdom while we wait expectantly for the realization of your perfect kingdom of the future. Amen





## The Courageous Heart

Matthew 5:4, Philippians 4:11-13

In Matthew 5:4 Jesus says “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” The word *mourn* conveys the idea of grief of the deepest kind. This is an emotional response to being “poor in spirit.” It is a grief over loss. There are three times in the Bible when Jesus wept. He wept when his good friend Lazarus died. He wept over Jerusalem because of the peoples’ unwillingness to accept the truth. He wept in the Garden as he was about to be made sin for us by his death on the cross.

As Jesus wept over the sins of others and over the sin of the city of Jerusalem which would not receive him, we too should weep more over the evil in the world. Psalm 119:26 says “My eyes shed streams of tears because men do not keep thy law.” In Philippians 3:18 Paul weeps over the “enemies of the cross of Christ” because he knows that “their destiny is destruction.”

In this beatitude Jesus is not speaking of those who are feeling sorry for themselves but he is speaking of those who are in grief from a real loss and about those who mourn over the lack of righteousness of the world. They lament the fact that God’s kingdom has not yet fully come and God’s will has not been done. When Jesus says “Blessed are they who mourn” he is making an objective statement about these people based upon what God thinks of them not about what they themselves feel.

We mourn over sin and failure, over the slowness of our growth in likeness to Christ—we mourn over our spiritual bankruptcy. In the real world no one is exempt from the experience of sorrow. It is a part of the human maturing process. But spiritual maturity is shown in the way Christians handle sorrow. A dependence upon God to lead us through our sorrows and a sure knowledge that God is the one who is ultimately in control of this world is a comfort that only Christians can know.

Luke 6:21 says “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” We are not blessed because we weep, we are blessed because God comforts us when we weep. Comfort is not just a warm fuzzy feeling. When we are comforted by God we can have the courage Paul speaks of. (*Read Philippians 4:11-13*). We become aware that with God’s help we can do things which we never believed possible before. God comforts us by enabling us to be strong in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

Comfort may also come through a new idea or a new calling. For example, a person who has lost a loved one through death may experience comfort by starting a grief support group and helping others to share their grief. A person who mourns over the unsaved in the world may be comforted by accepting God’s call to ministry or missionary work. Real comfort is not in the people gathering about you to pat you on the back and feel sympathy for you. God’s comfort

comes in being enabled to move on through your grief and to resume a productive life. He enables our hearts to be courageous in any circumstance.

The forerunner to Matthew 5:4 is Isaiah 61:1-4 “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.” In this scripture those who mourned were mourning the devastation of Israel and this mourning was brought about by the disobedience that brought punishment upon the nation. The distress of these mourners could only be relieved by the forgiveness of God.

In Jesus’ day the nation was fairly prosperous. So it was not devastation he was talking about when he said blessed are those who mourn. But as in our day it was easy for the affluent to be unconcerned for the poor. The prosperity was not shared. Jesus is assuring the mourners that the God of justice is not asleep. So this particular blessing is not only for those who mourn for the realization of their own spiritual impoverishment or that of the world but also for those who mourn over the hurts and hardships of life.

Any mourning that we do is caused by evil in the world. This evil may come in the form of such things as sin, sickness, death, disaster, greed or injustice. But God can bring us true comfort and bring us through our mourning to a brighter day and with hope for the future.

Revelations 7:17 tells us that “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” So in the final state of glory Christ’s comfort will be complete, for only then will sin be no more.

### **Heart-to-Heart Activities:**

1. Divide into groups of two. Each person may share about a time in their life when they experienced grief about something or someone and how they felt God’s comfort during this experience. Allow about ten minutes for this exercise.
2. If a member of your group or someone else you know has been helped through grief by a support group such as Forward (or some other Grief Recovery group), DivorceCare, etc., ask them to share a brief testimony. This might also be a good time to invite a local chaplain or counselor to visit your group and share about their ministry or how your group can provide grief support for others.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- ♥ What are some things we grieve over in our communities? Cities? States? Country? World?

- ♥ In what ways does God comfort us in our grief?
- ♥ Discuss with a neighbor how our grief can lead us further along the path toward Christian maturity?
- ♥ With a partner, name someone that you know who has (or had, if that person is now deceased) a courageous heart in any circumstance.
- ♥ With a different partner, name two or three ways you have allowed God to lead you through your mourning into a hope for the future?

**Prayer:**

God of all comfort,

As we each walk through periods of mourning in our lives, help us to accept the comfort which you have promised. May we each face our grief with the knowledge that You are still in control and that we cannot fail if we continue to depend upon You. Give us courageous hearts and show us how to extend the comfort we have received from you to others that we encounter on our faith journeys and may your name be glorified by our willingness to do so. In Jesus' name, Amen



## **The Sanctified Heart**

Matthew 5:5, Ephesians 6:10-17

Jesus said “Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.” (Matthew 5:5). We may not find it so hard to be meek before God and to acknowledge that we are miserable sinners to Him. But what happens when someone else calls us a miserable sinner? Where is our meekness then?

The original Greek word (praus) which is translated as “meek” in Matthew 5:4 means gentle, humble, considerate and courteous. We know that these attributes are impossible to achieve without self-control. We should also understand that meekness is not weakness. It is power under control of the Master. This concept of meekness has been compared to a wild horse that has been broken and domesticated. All of the energy and power are still there but they are under control and can be directed by the Master.

Meekness is seeing yourself as you truly are and expressing it in your conduct toward others. If we are truly meek we are amazed anew each day that God and even people can think of us as well as they do. Understanding ourselves in this way will make us more gentle, humble, sensitive, and patient in all our relations with others. We will reflect Christ’s image to glorify God.

Moses is an example of Godly meekness. Numbers 12:3 says “Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.” When Miriam and Aaron were criticizing Moses because he had married a Cushite woman he did not quarrel with them, although, they did receive punishment from God. We see Moses in another light when he came down from Sinai and found the Israelites worshiping the golden calf. He was so angry he broke the tables of stone on which the commandments had been written.

Jesus described himself as meek. “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.” (Matthew 11:29) Jesus was always seen as gentle and patient with his disciples when they questioned him and when they bickered among themselves. But he also became angry when he saw God’s temple being used by the moneychangers to take advantage of the poor in order to make great profits for themselves.

Meekness challenges the world’s standards of aggressiveness and self-assertiveness. Jesus and Moses were both described as meek yet, this was not a spineless quality in either of them. Both were ignited with a sinless anger when the interests of God were challenged. They were both people who dealt with others in a humble and gentle way because they had first humbled themselves before God.

As believers we are set apart in sanctification for the worship and service of God. We are not sanctified completely in this life. But it is a process that continues throughout our lives. Christ

is our example of the sanctified life. His life is reproduced in us as we grow in grace. It requires a strong person to follow Christ because the way of Christ is different from the way of the world. But Christ gives us all we need to be strong in the Lord. (Read Ephesians 6:10-17) Paul tells us that God has given us a full armor to protect us from evil and he has given us two mighty weapons in the “shield of faith” and “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” If we use the weapons which he has given us instead of struggling in our own human strength then we will be able to remain meek (under the Master’s control) and we will claim the promise of inheriting the earth.

It is a paradox indeed that self-renunciation can lead to world dominion. But Christ promises us that very thing if we are under his control. In Matthew 19:28 Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.”

*(Have someone read these scriptures aloud to the group: I Corinthians 3:22, Psalm 37:11, Isaiah 57:13, II Corinthians 6:10.)*

All these scriptures tell us that when we belong to God, who is in control of everything and owns everything, we are his children. As his children we will inherit what He already owns. Every Christian, even if he or she is like Paul in this present world “having nothing,” will “possess everything” through Christ. Do we really want to continue to try and control everything on our own when we have these promises from God, who is truly in control?

### **Heart-to-Heart Activities:**

1. Pictures or stories sometimes help us to better grasp an idea. If your group has seen the movie or read the book, “The Chronicles of Narnia, The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe” divide into groups of four to review the story and tell how you may see a picture of the meekness of Christ in Aslan (the lion). If many have not seen the movie, this might be a good time for a “Movie Night!” Watch the movie together at someone’s house and then have the Bible study.
2. In our study we saw how both Moses and Jesus were people who had been given great power but when they were dealing with others they did not always show this power but showed their meekness instead. On a chalkboard or chart have members of the group list particular persons they know or know about who are powerful in some way but demonstrate meekness (power under control) unless a show of authority is necessary. Then ask in what way each of these display the characteristic of meekness.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- ♥ What is the world’s view of meekness? What is a Christian view of meekness? Discuss the pros and cons of both views.

- ♥ In what ways do you see yourself as sanctified (set apart for God's service)? In what way is this process in your life?
- ♥ How is it possible to deal with someone who criticizes you without getting angry and returning the criticism?
- ♥ Name some ways in which you gain strength, if not from being self-assertive or aggressive.
- ♥ What does it mean to you to hear Jesus say that the meek will inherit the earth? What will those words mean to the world?

**Prayer:**

Almighty God,

We come to you as your children whom you have given breath and life. We admit to you that we are miserable sinners but we know that you have forgiven us and have given us the gift of salvation. Help us to remember Christ's example daily as we live in a world that does not understand us. Show us how to live meekly so that your strength will appear in us as power under control of the Master. In Jesus' name, Amen.



## **The Trusting Heart**

Matthew 5:6, John 14:1, Isaiah 43:1-4

After we mourn over past sin, then we become hungry for righteousness. Jesus spoke these words: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Matthew 5:6) The Lord’s kingdom is not for the self-sufficient but it is for those who have realized their own need. The world’s hungering and thirsting is in the pursuit of material

possessions. The Jews sought to establish their own righteousness through the law but failed to submit to God’s righteousness. As Christian we are first justified to gain the right relationship with God and to accept God’s righteousness, then we are to seek it continually in our daily living.

The Pharisees practiced external righteousness through legalism (following the rigid letter of the law) but Christ wants inner righteousness of heart, mind and motive. Moral righteousness is that righteousness of character and conduct which pleases God. As Christians we are to hunger and thirst for this righteousness. We do not seek righteousness through our own works. Our righteousness comes through a right relationship with God.

A dictionary will tell us that to be righteous is to be morally right or virtuous and law-abiding. Anyone can aspire to this description, but having God’s righteousness means to be living according to God’s standards. We do not become righteous by our own goodness but God sees us as righteous because of our faith in Jesus Christ.

To the Christian, righteousness is not for the benefit of the individual only. It extends through the Christian to the home, business and civic organizations. A healthy, hearty spiritual appetite means progress in a Christian life. Psalm 107:9 says “for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.” God promises a day of judgment when right will triumph and wrong will be overthrown. “But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.” (II Peter 3:13)

Hunger and thirst are perpetual characteristics. They are satisfied at times but one must keep returning to the food and water that satisfies them. Our hunger and thirst will not be totally satisfied until we enter heaven. “Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7:16-17)

This hungering and thirsting should not be only for the blessings that God gives but it should be hungering and thirsting after God himself. This is what David was speaking of when he wrote Psalm 42:1, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.” God longs to fill us with His righteousness. Happiness comes as a by-product of God’s

righteousness.

When we are God's children and trust in Him we have nothing to fear. In Isaiah God tells the Israelites that they are His and therefore have nothing to fear. Ask someone to read Isaiah 43:1-4 aloud.

In the New Testament, Jesus confirms that His followers should fear nothing. When Jesus was comforting his disciples in the upper room before his death he said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me." (John 14:1) Jesus knew that His disciples were facing a time of fear and disillusionment and even shame. His answer for them is to completely put their trust in God and their Savior. His words also speak to us in today's world when we face our own fears. We may have fears for the security of our families and of ourselves, fears about finding the right partner or of losing a partner, fears of inadequacy, and many other kinds of fear. Whatever the situation in which we find ourselves, whether at the present time or in the future, our assurance is that we can trust in God and do not have to deal with our fears alone.

### **Heart-to-Heart Activities:**

1. As a group, sing the hymn, *As the Deer*.
2. On a chalkboard or chart make two columns. In the first column have women of the group list the types of fears they are currently facing in their lives. In the second column list what they believe Jesus' response to their fears might be. When this list is finished, the leader may use these fears in a responsive prayer with the participants responding after each fear named: "In God I trust; I will not be afraid."

Example:     **Leader:** When I fear for the security of my family;  
                  **Everyone:** In God I trust; I will not be afraid."

(Continue in this way until you have covered all the fears.)

### **Reflection Questions:**

- ♥ What does the word "righteous" mean to you? With a partner, discuss your thoughts and feelings about being called "righteous."
- ♥ Name some ways in which you hunger and thirst after righteousness. As a "Woman of the Word" how have you tried to fill your hungering and thirsting? What happened? What did you do? What can you do tomorrow to try to fill your hunger and thirst? Next week? Next month? Next year?
- ♥ Can we ever be satisfied with being righteous enough?
- ♥ With a partner, name some things that make you fearful. What do you do to try and overcome your fears? With your partner spend a few moments praying for each other. Pray for courage, fears, presence of God, comfort, etc. Should Christians lead



fearful lives?

**Prayer:**

Righteous God,

Thank You for giving us Your great standards to guide our living. Forgive us for those times when we do not measure up to those high standards. Renew in us the desire to align our lives more closely to Christ's example. Help us to place absolute trust in You at those times when we become fearful. May others be able to glimpse You through the efforts we make to be like Christ. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen



## **The Merciful Heart**

Matthew 5:7, Romans 12:3-8

The world in general is unmerciful. Often people find revenge delicious and frown upon forgiveness as an action which is taken only by the weak. But Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” (Matthew 5:7) Mercy is compassion for people in need. It is not the same as grace. Mercy extends relief or cures, heals, and helps. Grace extends

pardon and cleanses and reinstates.

Jesus said that those who show mercy find mercy. We don’t merit mercy by being merciful just as we don’t merit forgiveness by being forgiving. But we cannot receive God’s mercy unless we repent and we can’t claim to have repented unless we are merciful and forgiving toward others. In our meekness we acknowledge that we are sinners and in being merciful we have compassion on others because they are sinners, too.

It is not always to the deserving that mercy must be extended. If it must be deserved then it would no longer be mercy but mere justice. What moves Christians to mercy is the knowledge that they themselves were undeserving but have been forgiven.

Mercy is the ability to enter into another’s situation and be sympathetic toward her plight or problem. This is a distinctively Christian grace because humans are naturally geared more to criticism than to mercy. The old adage “hate the sin but not the sinner” is true. We can love and forgive a person without approving of her actions or denying the sin she has done. If a person’s own action puts her in need of our mercy, it does not mean that we condone that person’s sin when we extend mercy to her.

Sometimes we think that pity and mercy are the same. Pity is merely an emotion. Mercy is both an attitude and an activity. It goes beyond pity to become compassionate action. It does not condone sin, but works to repair sin’s devastation. It encourages the one who has failed to begin again.

Deuteronomy 4:31a says “The Lord your God is a merciful God.” God’s chosen people, the Israelites, turned against God to worship idols but God promised them when they returned to the true God they would not be abandoned or destroyed. God did not forget the covenant made with their forefathers. They did not deserve God’s mercy but God chose to give it. They were in need of mercy because they had broken the law of God. But others need mercy through no fault of their own.

James 1:27 reminds us to look after widows and orphans. They represent those who cannot be blamed for their circumstances and are in need of our mercy. We are not to judge them or look down upon them because of their condition but we are to show compassion to them. When we

remember how merciful he has been to us, how can we not imitate him when others need our mercy?

Paul reminds us, as “Women of the Word,” to be realistic and objective when we look at our own lives. Read Romans 12:3-8. We are a part of the body of believers and cannot separate ourselves from it. We all have God-given abilities to serve in the community of faith. Paul urges each one to use her gifts for the well-being of the whole body since others need the gifts we have to offer.

Paul lists mercy as one of the gifts. As one of the spiritual gifts, the gift of mercy means someone is particularly sensitive to the needs of others and is able to show this by relieving the suffering of others. As Christians each of us has a ministry. We may not all possess the “gift” of mercy but we all are commanded to be merciful by Jesus himself. In Luke 6:36 he says, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” Jesus tells us that when we minister to others we are actually ministering unto Him. “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ “ (Matthew 25:40)

Paul reminds us that as God’s chosen people we are to be compassionate. “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” (Colossians 3:12) The many Bible references we find to mercy serve to remind us that in God’s eyes mercy is an important characteristic of his children. If we show mercy then we have Christ’s promise that we will receive mercy.

### **Heart-to-Heart Activities:**

1. Leader should list on chalkboard or chart particular programs, projects, or ministries which involve an aspect of mercy their particular church or community is involved in. (Example: Nursing home ministry, Prison ministry, etc.) Describe what the goal of each is. Then ask participants in your group to prayerfully consider making some kind of commitment to one or more of these.
2. The leader should make sure there is a small trashcan in the classroom. Give each participant a pencil and paper. Ask each to write down ways she has received mercy from God or from other people. Then invite each woman to tear their paper into tiny pieces and toss away in the trashcan in recognition that God has been merciful to her, as the group sings “At Calvary”.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- ♥ Name some ways that you are merciful as an individual; as a church; as a community.
- ♥ Why do you suppose we find it easier to extend mercy to some than to others?
- ♥ Why do we sometimes mistake pity for mercy or compassion? Why are they not the same?

- ♥ Name some examples of truly merciful people (either living or dead).
- ♥ Whatever our particular gifts are, how can we include mercy as a part of our individual “ministry”.

**Prayer:**

Merciful God,

We thank you that you had mercy upon us when we were the worst of sinners. As your children we realize that your mercy has brought us to the place we occupy at the present time. Help us to fulfill your command to extend the mercy we have received from you out to others who may be in need. May we show a spirit of mercifulness to all, even those who may not deserve it. And may that spirit be a witness to our Savior, Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



## **The Pure in Heart**

Matthew 5:8, Colossians 3:16-17

In Old Testament days it was known that no one could go into the holy places of God unless he had clean hands and a pure heart. David realized the importance of a pure heart when he prayed "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." (Psalm 51:10) Sometimes we do good deeds through a sense of duty and consider that enough. But God can create such a heart within us that every intention

of our heart is good. When we have the word of God in our heart and obey it our hearts desire is toward good actions and a right relationship with God.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (Matthew 5:8) Jesus emphasizes an inward purity rather than an outward respectability. It is a heart righteousness rather than a rule righteousness. Jesus indicated that he is not impressed with outward "purity" when he told the Pharisees "on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." (Matthew 23:28)

Sin clouds the vision so that sinners cannot see the reality of God. It is not the intellect that grasps the reality of God but it is the pure heart that sees God clearly. The pure in heart are those who are free of hypocrisy and self-deception. The spiritual reward of seeing God should be the sincere goal of every Christian. If we earnestly work toward that goal then it becomes the intent of all our activities. We will desire to place each thing that we do or say in the light of God's purpose not in the light of our own desires.

Purity of heart manifests itself as sincerity and transparency. The whole life of a person of pure heart, both public and private, is open to both God and others. When a person's heart is pure, it is undivided. If a person does good deeds only out of a sense of duty and does not have pure intentions in her heart then she is a divided individual. Her relationships may suffer because her motives and actions do not agree. The person who possesses a pure heart does not wear a different mask to suit each occasion or situation.

The pure in heart see God now through the eyes of faith and will see the reality of God's glory in the hereafter. Only the pure can bear to be seen in the light of God which exposes all darkness and deceit. When our hearts are not pure, we tend to try and hide in a shadow hoping that God does not notice us.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Colossians 3:16-17) If we are to live with the label of Christ upon us (Christian) then we must have God's Word in our hearts because it contains the

wealth of God's wisdom which must guide each of us in our journey of faith. "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." (James 1:5)

As Christians we are called to a great responsibility of teaching and admonishing others. Christians are living examples of what God's grace does in human lives. We can only know how we should live if we have God's Word alive in our hearts. God's Word contains all the commands, promises and support that we need in order to fulfill that calling. When God's Word is in our hearts, we will be instructed by it every day.

Our praise and worship are to be done with the knowledge and consciousness of what God desires. In community worship as well as individual worship it is God who is to be extolled. We are not worshiping God if we demand praise for the talents we use in our singing, speaking, and praying. In worship we are to use our talents but always with God as their center. Romans 12:1 tells us that our "spiritual act of worship" is to be "holy and pleasing to God."

Some would say that we are trying to live in a "dream world" when we always have Christ on our minds and hearts. They believe that thinking of God constantly makes a person weak and otherworldly. But they are uninformed about how God's Word in the heart makes his children strong enough to live in a sinful world without taking part in the sin. It is God's strength in us that enables us to go through any criticism, hardship, or disaster and still remain thankful to God for God's goodness. The Christian of pure heart knows that God is relevant to all aspects of life.

### **Heart-to-Heart Activities:**

1. Supply each participant with a pencil and paper. Ask each to list three rules their parents required them to live by when they were growing up. After they have done this then allow them time to consider each of these rules and then ask the following: (a) How did each of these rules express your parent's love for you? (b) How did these rules result in more freedom for you?

Discuss with a neighbor how this example relates to how God's command to obey, shows God's love for us and results in freedom for us.

2. On a blackboard or paper chart list (as a group) hymns and worship songs which are sung commonly in your worship service. Then list beside each how many times the song contains the word "I" and how many time it contains the word "God", "Lord" or "Jesus". After looking at your list then ask the question: Which ones are more God centered and truly worshipful? Do you think some are more pleasing to God? (You may want to provide hymnals for the participants to use in this activity)

### **Reflection Questions:**

♥ With a partner discuss ways in which you "see God" in your everyday life.

- ♥ Explain how it is possible (or not possible) to have a pure heart if we are not respectable in the eyes of the world.
- ♥ List a typical day's activity from waking to going to bed (draw a chart or timeline if that helps), marking off the day in 30 minute intervals. Place a (!) beside those activities which you think are pleasing to God. Place a (?) beside those that you are not sure about. Place a (X) beside those that you think displease God. Share with a neighbor or the rest of the class as you are comfortable.
- ♥ When we attend worship services are we obeying God if we *observe* all the activities of worship (singing, prayers, preaching, etc.) or must we *participate* in some way? If so, how?
- ♥ When you have erred or made a mistake what do you usually do? Read again what David did in Psalm 51:10. What can you learn from David's example?

**Prayer:**

God of purity,

In the busyness of our daily activities we sometimes forget that we need to consider whether this particular activity honors You. Forgive us for getting so caught up in our activities that we fail to filter everything through Your light which exposes all darkness and deceit. We thank you for the freedom we experience when we allow Your Word to guide every thought and action. Show us where we have failed and allow each of us all to continue to grow in Your grace. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



## The Peaceful Heart

Matthew 5:9, Ephesians 2:13-17

We as Christians are called to be peacemakers in our churches and in our communities. While it is true that the presence of Christ in the world and in our hearts sometimes brings conflict, we should never seek conflict or be responsible for it. (*Read I Corinthians 7:15; I Peter 3:11; Hebrews 12:14; Romans 12:18*) We are to actively pursue peace, to “strive for peace with all people,” and if possible to “live peaceably with all.”

Jesus said “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9) The meaning of peace is reconciliation. The ultimate initiator of peace and of reconciliation is God. It was God who planned through Christ and the cross to reconcile all things to himself. (Colossians 1:20) We, as peacemakers, seek to do what God has done in loving others as he loved us. And Jesus’ promise is that the peacemakers “will be called children of God.”

It was a costly act for God to allow His only son to be sacrificed for our sin and we also may find it a costly activity to be a peacemaker. Many times there is pain in peacemaking. If we are involved in a dispute, it may be painful to apologize or to forgive the other party. In the case of trying to reconcile two other disputing parties, we may find it painful to listen and try to understand their opposing points of view and we may also find it painful to risk misunderstanding and failure.

Evangelism is a form of reconciliation. It seeks to bring sinners to Christ. But the peace of God is not peace at any price. We cannot proclaim a gospel that does not include the cost of discipleship. This weakens the gospel. We are not to try to adapt the gospel to the sinner. We are to proclaim the gospel and God will “make it come alive” in the sinner’s heart.

As peacemakers we also strive for unity in the church. But we must be careful not to try to attain peace at the expense of purity of doctrine and purity of conduct. Being peacemakers calls us to harmony with others but that harmony cannot be at the expense of harmony with God. Our reward for being peacemakers is not what our families, friends, and communities will say about us but what God thinks of us when he calls us “children of God.”

Read Ephesians 2:13-17. How does God make “one new person out of the two?”(v.15) It was God’s purpose to bring to an end the hostility between peoples. In Ephesians, Paul is speaking of Jews and Gentiles in particular. They were alienated from each other by culture, nationalism, and form of religion. In God’s family the barriers are broken down and access to God is open to all. The walls of prejudice and tradition are also broken down so that lines of communication between the two can be established. This describes not only reconciliation (peace) between God and men and women, but also reconciliation of one person to another person. The walls dividing them were destroyed by Christ. He did not ask the Gentiles to become imitators of the Jews nor



did he ask the Jews to become more like the Gentiles, but he changed them both. He didn't just join them together but he created something new with its unity in Christ. This can still happen in our lives today when we place our focus on Christ as our unity instead of placing the focus on ourselves as individuals and on our differences.

As Christians we are relational beings. Peace comes to us through our relationship to God and then flows through us to the corporate community. The center of our individual and our corporate worship is in Christ. He is the one who unites us all and who is our access to God. Christ is the way to peace. God is the ultimate peacemaker.

### **Heart-to-Heart Activities:**

1. Have a "brainstorming" session. Allow all participants to suggest ideas to the solution of a problem as soon as an idea pops into their heads with no judgement or criticism from the group. Pick one of the problems below and brainstorm for about 5-8 minutes.

Problem one: Your church is located in the community in which you live. This community was once made up of one race of people. In recent years many families of other nationalities and cultures have moved into your community. How can you as an individual promote and maintain peace in the changing community?

Problem two: How can your church promote peace in the community?

How did you feel about the process? What thoughts about peacemaking came out that you would like to explore further? How could this approach be used in an actual conflict or disagreement between two parties?

### **Reflection Questions:**

- ♥ As a peacemaker, what does it mean to be called "daughters (sons) of God?"
- ♥ With a partner, name some areas of your family life where a peacemaker is needed; in your church; in your community; in the world.
- ♥ In what ways is it our responsibility to promote peace in our families? churches? communities? world?
- ♥ As citizens of the Kingdom of God is it our responsibility to promote peace not only within the Kingdom, but also within the "secular" world? List several ways in which your Women's Ministry group can promote peace in secular settings.
- ♥ How can Christ bring reconciliation between the different races and cultures in our society today? In what ways can we be a part of bringing that about?

**Prayer:**

God of all peace,

We thank you for making it possible for us to have the peace in our hearts that comes from receiving your Son, Jesus Christ as our Savior. As citizens of your kingdom we ask you to show us ways of promoting peace in our world. Give us a renewed consciousness of those around us who need to receive Your peace. May we make our hearts and minds and lives available to be used as peacemakers. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.



## The Wise Heart

Matthew 5:10, Ephesians 6:18-20

Even though we try hard to make peace with some people, they may refuse to live in peace with us. In an imperfect world not all attempts at reconciliation will succeed. This happens when people reject the Christ we choose to follow. The clash of two different value systems may result in persecution of the

Christian. This is a persecution that is not caused by the incorrect actions of the Christian but is simply persecution “because of righteousness”. Righteousness or proper conduct before God is offensive to the world. Persecution is as much a mark of Christian discipleship as purity of heart or mercy. Every Christian can expect opposition at some point in her life. We may be rejected, despised or slandered. But Jesus gave us reassurance for those times when He spoke these words, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:10)

The values of the Christian faith appear upside-down to the world. Above all, the world values money, power, and technological progress. It is a well known fact that what one values is where one spends one’s time, money and energy. The Christian, on the other hand, places higher priority on the coming of Christ’s kingdom and learning to live as a part of it. Christians are not satisfied with being a part of the Kingdom themselves but they are intent upon bringing others into the kingdom also. Therefore, the Christian’s time is spent on imitating Christ. Those with wise hearts claim Christ’s promise that the kingdom of Heaven will be theirs. All of the rewards Christ promised in the beatitudes were not just arbitrarily chosen but are a nature outcome of living under the kingdom standards.

The dictionary tells us that to be wise is to be able to follow the best course of action based upon knowledge and understanding. For the Christian this means that we must have knowledge and understanding of God’s Word. The actions we do will then be wisely guided by God’s word. “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise.” (Proverbs 11:30) But winning souls is not seen as wisdom by the world. When Christians follow Christ’s command to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), they may be scorned by the world. Since the world sees only power, wealth, and fame as valid reasons to “go out into the world” they cannot grasp the fact that Christians “go” for the purpose of building God’s kingdom and not for personal gain.

Along with our knowledge and understanding of God’s word Paul tells us we need to pray. (Ephesians 6:18-20) “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” Paul asked for prayers for his ministry and for other Christians. We must allow the Holy Spirit to guide us in our prayers and to especially pray for those who are in the full-time ministry of winning souls for God’s kingdom. Our church staffs, missionaries, evangelists all need our prayers to sustain

them in their work. This is one of the ways we fulfill Christ's command to "go into all the world and preach the gospel." Without our support whether it is in the form of physical assistance, finances, or prayer these workers in God's kingdom would not be able to go and win more souls.

Christians must also pray for those who persecute them. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:44 and Luke 6:28 to "pray for those who persecute you." After Paul tells us to "put on the whole armor of God" (Ephesians 6:11), he then tells us to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions" (Eph. 6:18). The world, in general, recognizes only resistance, revenge and retribution as valid ways of dealing with those who oppose them. Christians can never expect their values to be accepted by the world because it requires a heart-change in order to understand the values of God's kingdom. We must understand that the world is simply unequipped to understand. This is why Christians are only called to go and tell the world. It is God's place to prepare hearts and cause the seeds we sew to germinate.

As Christians we should make our performances match our profession. If we say we believe the teachings of Christ, then our daily living should be a witness of Christ to the world. Much of this involves learning to place our priorities correctly. When we each face death, will we regret not spending more hours on our jobs, or not keeping our homes cleaner, or not driving the right kind of car? No. We will then realize, if we haven't done so beforehand, that the highest priority in our life should be to live in the manner Jesus calls us to live. We can't relegate Christ's teachings to the seminary classroom or the weekly Bible study. The important thing is not in the teaching itself but in what we do with that teaching. "Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." (James 1:22) The wise heart will recognize the reality that passive listening impresses no one. The one thing that will make our lives attractive to nonbelievers is that we live what we say we believe.

### **Heart-to-Heart Activities:**

1. Ask the group to imagine what would happen if they were asked to play a game and the correct set of rules was given to one team while a different set of rules was given to the other team. List those results on a chalkboard or chart. Then ask how they might relate this to the clash between worldly values and Christian values.
2. Have each person create a drawing or some type of artwork. Give only paper and crayon to some, while giving lots of supplies to the others. After about 10 minutes, invite the women to talk about the process and share their feelings and ideas. Then ask them how this process might relate to a clash between worldly values and Christian values.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- ♥ With a neighbor, talk about a time you felt as if you were persecuted for righteousness. How did you react to this persecution?

- ♥ How is it possible to live in modern society and still hold on to the characteristics which Jesus taught in the Beatitudes?
- ♥ How can the way we handle persecution witness to others?
- ♥ On your own, list on paper the names of some people that you would like to bring into the Kingdom of God. Then list ways and ideas for accomplishing this goal. Find another person and compare ideas.

**Prayer:**

God of all wisdom,

We thank you for giving your Son, Jesus Christ so that we might be reconciled to you through Him. Guide us in listening to the voice of Jesus in his teaching and then give us the desire to put those teachings into action in our daily living. Help us to have that beckoning brightness from you that shines through us to others in darkness. We ask for your wisdom to lead those we encounter each day toward Your light. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

**NOTE FOR THE LAST LESSON:**

If there is only one more study left for the year (“The Fruitful Heart”), remind the women to bring with them to the next meeting the envelope with its contents from the first, introductory Bible study session. If the leader kept those envelopes, then be prepared to return them to their owners during the final study session.



## **The Fruitful Heart**

Matthew 5:11-12, Ephesians 4:30-32

All of the Beatitudes point out the benefits and blessings of allowing God's will to be done in our lives. When we are persecuted because of Christ we are assured that we will have a reward in heaven. We may take this as a sign that we truly belong to Christ because he was persecuted before us. "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus, will be persecuted." (II Timothy 3:12) However, the reward we are

promised will surely make our trials and persecutions seem insignificant. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12)

Jesus reminds us that the prophets before us were also persecuted. The prophets received their call directly from God and spoke with God's authority. Their predominant theme was to call God's chosen people to repentance when they strayed from His commands. Some prophets were called to do strange things: Isaiah went barefoot and naked (Isaiah 20:2-3), Ezekiel lay on his left side 390 days (Ezekiel 4:1-8), John the Baptist lived in the wilderness and wore camel's hair clothing. (Mark 1:6) But God enabled them to withstand the bias and criticism of the people to whom they were called to speak. Many prophets were persecuted and some were killed because those who were not following God refused to hear their message. Jesus himself was the greatest prophet and was rejected, insulted and persecuted in many ways before he was crucified.

Despite opposition of the political and religious leaders Christ forgave those who persecuted Him and continued to preach his message of redemption to the people. He is our example of how to live in a world that will never know how to appreciate us. Jesus continued to teach despite all opposition. He was not overbearing and did not force assent from his listeners. He did not give them dogmatic answers but lead them into thinking for themselves. Most of all he taught by example. His loving spirit, when his disciples questioned or failed, overcame all their doubts and fears. When they fully understood the message they went out to imitate him and to fulfill the Great Commission to "go into all the world and preach the gospel".

As "Women of the Word," we will never go wrong by following Christ's example. Read Ephesians 4:30-32. Often we are tempted to be bitter or angry and to seek revenge on those who have wronged us. But if we follow Jesus' example we must forgive those who sin against us. As long as we do not forgive, the person we bear a grievance against is more in control of our lives than we are. In forgiving we are released. We then can follow in Jesus' footsteps to be forgiving to our persecutors and compassionate to our brothers and sisters. If we only stop to think what a great event it was when we received God's forgiveness and what he forgave in us, how can we not be forgiving of others who need our forgiveness?

When clay is put into a mold, pressure must be applied in order to form the clay into the exact shape desired. If we study God's word daily, it will apply pressure on us each day and mold us into what God desires for us. Dedicating our lives to being the best disciples of Christ we can possibly be will cause our lives to become models that will draw others to Christ.

Some followers of Jesus are physical followers only. They hear His teachings but never take them into their hearts and apply them to their lives. Some think His teachings are only for the spiritual realm and are not possible to follow in reality. They may believe that there are just too many worldly pleasures to which they would have to say "no". They just do not see that it is not what we say "no" to that is important. What is important is depending completely on the power of the One to whom we say "yes".

Whether we witness evangelistically with teaching and preaching or if we simply allow our lives to be a witness for Christ, discipleship does have a cost. It requires a commitment to take Christ at His word and to put all our trust in Him. Jesus did not make all the promises of rewards we have studied in the Beatitudes as only an inducement to get us to do the things we should be doing. Christ desires to see us blessed. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."(John 10:10) Possessing the Christian characteristics as Jesus taught in the Beatitudes will result in the fullest life possible.

### **Heart-to-Heart Activities:**

1. If your group participated in "activity one" after the first Bible study of the year, then you should now disclose the names of prayer partners to one another. Give an opportunity for sharing about prayers that have been answered during this year.
2. If your group participated in "activity two" after the first Bible study of the year, the leader should pass out the envelopes that were collected during that session to the person whose name is listed on the front (or the women brought their own envelopes back). Give a few minutes for each to review what each had written. Then give an opportunity for each to say if they believe they have made progress on their Christian characteristics.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- ♥ Think of a time when you were persecuted. What is your typical reaction or response when you are persecuted? Are you able to live out Matthew 5:12?
- ♥ Jesus was persecuted but forgave his persecutors. Why is it important that we forgive those who persecute us?
- ♥ How does a person we refuse to forgive have control over our lives?
- ♥ Why is it important that we model forgiveness to those who are not Christ's disciples?

- ♥ With a neighbor, discuss the idea that we are to live exactly as Jesus taught. How can we do that? Is it possible? What prevents us from living that way? What happens when we do?

**Prayer:**

God of abundance,

Enable us as disciples of Christ to be prepared for persecution when it comes. Help us not to become disheartened by it but to “rejoice and be glad” because our security is in You. May we submit to be molded into what you desire for our lives. Teach us to be forgiving of others as you have been forgiving of us. Give us hearts that are faithful in following your message so that fruit will be harvested for Your kingdom. In Jesus’ name, Amen





## **Mary's Heart: Advent Bible Study Luke 1:26-38, 46-55 and Luke 2:16-19**

### **Introduction to the Study:**

Protestants in general have tended to shy away from placing much emphasis on Mary in our theology, for fear of being considered Catholic. Other than as a serene, but usually silent, figure in the Christmas program and a grief-stricken character in the Easter pageant, we don't see much of Mary as we preach and teach our way through the year. Such tendencies rob us of things Mary's witness has to teach us. This Advent study will provide opportunity for learning from Mary during one of the seasons in which she has much to teach us.

### **What Kind of Heart?**

Among all the people in the Gospel story, Mary is a character of such holiness and esteem that we allow ourselves to forget that she was human. Biblical scholars are not uniform in their estimate of her age or station when God's Messenger, Gabriel, came to her with astounding news. She must have been quite young because marriage occurred much earlier in her time than in ours. She may well have been poor, but then most of the people about whom we read in Scripture were, when compared to the lifestyle we have come to take for granted. Among all the things we will never know about Mary, many of us continue to ask what it was about her that made her a suitable choice for the role God chose for her to play in the salvation of the world. What kind of a heart must she have had to gain such favor with God? How can we nurture those same attributes in our own hearts?

### **An Open Heart (Luke 1:26-38)**

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." "Hail, Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with you." However we say it, Gabriel's greeting to Mary must have come as a surprise. For a young girl already betrothed to the man her family had chosen for her, such a greeting must have been unsettling. Nazareth was not a big or influential place. Mary was looking ahead to the same kind of life most of the other women she knew would have, a life of faithfulness to God and service to her family and community. She hoped that the relationship her family had arranged for her would be a good one, but, at the very least, she knew she would be provided for and would not be a burden to her family. Most women in her time hoped for much more.

Gabriel, however, spoke of things she could not have imagined. She barely understood the relationships that existed between men and women and was probably apprehensive about the things that would be expected of her when she and Joseph were married. And now here was Gabriel announcing that she would have a child who already had a name, and a mission.

For many people, anything outside the parameters we have already drawn around our lives is not conceivable. We know how things are supposed to go, and we are not much interested in things

that do not fit into our plan. Mary's heart was different. To be sure, she had questions, and she was not hesitant to ask, "But how can this be?" But when Gabriel told her that God had chosen her to bear the Christ, she was open to things she could not have considered possible before. Her experience with God, nurtured in worship and prayer, had taught her that God was able to do great things. She knew the stories of God's interaction with people for generations. If God had led Noah and Moses and David and all the others whose stories she knew so well, then who was to say that God would not lead her, too.

There must have been many other questions in Mary's mind that day, too. What would people think? What would they say? How would Joseph respond? What about her family? Would they be shamed or supportive? Whatever apprehension Mary experienced, her confidence in God's providential care and her assurance in God's ability to care for her overcame them. As difficult as it must have been for her to consider what lay ahead, Mary's heart was open to God's call and empowerment in her life.

### **To Think About Together**

How much of your own life has become so predictable that you have all but stopped expecting anything different?

How much of the ministry of your Women's Group or even your whole congregation is that way?

The Advent season is a time for hope, a time to look for signs of God's promise among us. Pray with other members of your group for openness to God's continuing call, especially when it comes in unexpected ways.

Read through the Advent hymns in your hymn book or in other collections of seasonal songs. Look for lines that speak about Mary's openness to God's call in her life. Select one or more of these songs to sing with your group. (Maybe even learn a new one!) Pray together for similar openness to God in your own hearts.

### **A Hopeful Heart (Luke 1:46-55)**

Until God's Messenger visited Mary, there was not much that was hopeful in her life. Her people, neither her immediate family or her broader faith community, were not prominent. Her future was pretty well set. Women in her day did not have educational or career opportunities. To be betrothed to a man who could provide for her and to be able to bear him children and care for her family was goal enough for most women.

Mary, like everyone else who shared her faith, went to worship week after week and year after year. She heard the leaders read from the scroll of Isaiah about how God would send the Messiah to make things different and about how the Messiah would be born to a Virgin. Like many other young women had for generations, Mary may well have wondered if she might be the one. Those hopes may have seemed pretty futile to a young woman without much to recommend her for such a position. However, Mary had learned from her practice of her faith to place her hope in God and in no other.

When Mary went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant, events most of us would

consider strange occurred again. God revealed something special about Mary and her child to Elizabeth, and she shared that revelation with Mary. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” are words Catholics recite in prayer as part of the Hail Mary or Ave Maria prayer. Many Protestants are not even aware that the words come from Luke’s Gospel and from Elizabeth’s encounter with Mary. In response to Elizabeth’s greeting, Mary speaks powerful words we have come to know as the Magnificat. The word comes from the Latin word which opens Mary’s speech, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Mary’s words quickly turn from her own situation to describe what God is doing through her for the benefit of all people.

The Hebrew people were not powerful or influential among the world powers of their day. When Mary speaks of scattering the proud and bringing down the powerful, she expresses the feelings of generations of faithful people who wondered why God allowed others to prosper while God’s faithful people languished. Lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things are metaphorical ways of saying that God has good things in store for God’s people. Mary may have hoped and even dreamed that those good things might come her way, but she could never have known how directly she would be involved. Her confidence, as her bold words indicate, was in God. And God’s fulfillment of the promise of a Savior in the form of Mary’s child demonstrated God’s worthiness of the confidence of Mary and of all faithful people.

### **To Think About Together**

In the hymn book or other collection of Advent songs again, find “For Ages Women Hoped and Prayed.” Read the text of the hymn aloud carefully for the group. Sing the hymn together. Then discuss how you as individuals and as a group respond to the final stanza and its effort to connect Mary’s experience with our own.

What are your most sincere hopes, for yourselves as individuals, for your Women’s Ministry group, and for your church and its ministry?

How do your hopes relate to your understanding of God’s hopes for yourself, your group, and your church?

How confident, honestly, are you of God’s willingness and ability to fulfill your hopes?

### **A Reflective Heart (Luke 2:16-19)**

How many Christmas pageants can you remember in which the final scene presents Mary holding the baby Jesus in her arms, draped in her borrowed blue shawl, after the burlap-wearing shepherds and the velour-bathrobed Wise Men have left, while someone off stage reads the words, “But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” As the light fades to darkness, and everyone prepares to celebrate another successful Christmas program with cookies and punch, Mary’s reflection on all the events surrounding the birth of her child remain as the closing image of the season.

The Advent and Christmas seasons are some of the busiest times of the year for church people. In addition to all the responsibilities that come with trying to finish a school term before the holidays, getting all the shopping done, preparing for and attending all the special gatherings that are so much a part of the season, cooking, decorating the house, the church has extra activities

for children and families, practices for programs and choir special events, and we think we have to do it all if we are to celebrate a meaningful Christmas. There is little time for reflecting on the real meaning of the season—the birth of a Savior who will set us free and bring us new and everlasting life. The church may provide or recommend special things to read and guides for prayers with our families, but we rarely have time to use them. Day after day, our intentions are good, but we find ourselves falling exhausted into bed without having lit Advent candles with our children again, and we feel like failures as spiritual guides for our families.

Finding time for reflection is essential during this season. Mary’s time of reflection came after all the excitement had died down, perhaps before the full reality of what had happened had dawned on her. Traveling does not come easy even today in the late stages of pregnancy. Consider Mary’s plight, journeying to Bethlehem with Joseph, and delivering her child while there. Away from the comforting presence of her mother or others who had planned to help, Mary delivered her child in a borrowed place amid strange people and even stranger circumstances. Then came all those visitors. And don’t forget the animals with whom Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus shared their lodging.

Still, when it was all over, Mary reflected on all that had happened and took time to remember God’s care through it all.

This holiday season will not likely be any less busy and hectic than any other for members of your group. Take advantage of the opportunities your congregation or community will provide for some quiet time during this season. You’ll need them. And you’ll be thankful for them.

### **To Think About Together**

It’s difficult to think about adding one more thing to the busy schedules we all keep during Advent, but consider setting aside a time when you might open your sanctuary or other place at your church and simply invite people to come and enjoy some quiet time. If your congregation has a Christmas tree or Advent wreath in your worship space, perhaps you could set aside one or more times during the week when the sanctuary is not in use and provide some suggestions for scriptures or devotional material to read, perhaps some seasonal music to listen to, or, better yet, just some silence. Check with those who coordinate the schedule for your building about scheduling some time for reflection.

If possible, arrange for a soloist to sing “Mary, Did You Know?” for your group. Provide copies of the text for group members to follow as the soloist sings. Encourage participants to think quietly about Mary’s ponderings throughout her time of preparation and delivery of our Savior.

### **Prayer**

God of hope and promise, give us hearts like Mary’s heart: open to your call and power; hopeful for your will; and reflective of your love’s wonders. Then help us to share what is in our hearts with those with whom we share the joy and wonder of this season. Bless us, God, and help us to bless others. Amen.



## **The Renewed Heart: Lenten Bible Study** **Romans 10:8b-13**

### **Introduction to the Study**

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Can there be a statement of belief more central to Cumberland Presbyterian theology and practice? Our denomination came into being because of a desire to see people come to faith in Christ without obstacle. This study will provide opportunity to examine some of Paul’s clearest teachings about how that happens and the rewards that accompany salvation.

### **Changing the Rules**

One of the most frequent complaints men make about women is that we are not consistent in our expectations. We tell him we want him to be more sensitive to our needs and to help out around the house. But then he winds up underfoot, and we tell him to get outside and do some manly things! We tell him to be more tolerant of our mothers, and then we complain when he takes her side when she’s driving us crazy! We tell him to pay more attention to the kids, and then we complain when they start acting like his side of the family! While many cling to the conviction that changing our minds is a female prerogative, it can make for some interesting family dynamics.

Many people sometimes feel about their spiritual lives like the men in our lives sometimes do. Just about the time they think they have figured out what it is God wants from them and decide they can do it, it seems that God, or some of God’s messengers, change the rules. One of the strongest affirmations of Paul’s writings to the Romans comes in 10:8b, in which he quotes the prophet Isaiah who said, “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.” In other words, what God wants us to know, God will find a way to say to us clearly. Then Paul sets out to help us understand how we come to faith and how that confession changes our lives forever.

### **To Think About Together**

Discuss with members of your group times when you have felt that people in authority over you have changed the rules.

How did you feel about their behavior?

How did their actions change your relationship?

Have there been times when you felt that God, or God’s representatives, were behaving in similar ways?

How did those times affect your spiritual growth and your ability to trust God?

### **The Rules Are Simple**

I teach piano. I began studying and playing when I was very young, and have continued to play through all the years and places I’ve been since then. I now play for worship in our congregation every Sunday. I also teach a few students. I have played the piano for so long that it is almost second nature to me. I sometimes have to stop and remember that my students have not played as long as I have, and that they have not developed the habits and practices I have. Teaching them those things is not easy, but it is a part of my

responsibility. While it all sounds so simple to me, I must remember that they are just beginning to develop skills.

That same kind of sensitivity is a good thing to keep in mind as we share our faith in Jesus with others. Paul makes it sound so easy: “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Too often, people who hear those words from Paul through us become frustrated when we start all the add-on’s and conditions that we apply to Paul’s (and God’s) simple call to discipleship.

Confessing with our lips that Jesus is Lord may sound easy, but acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our lives is anything but easy. An old adage says, “Talk is cheap.” Saying that Jesus is Lord is the easy part. Practicing the kind of discipleship that reflects that conviction is often not.

### **To Think About Together**

Discuss how group members’ understanding of what it means to be faithful has changed since their initial commitment to Christ.

How does their maturing understanding of being a follower of Jesus differ from where they began?

### **A Renewed Heart**

Believing in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 10:9b) requires changing our hearts. The Confession of Faith for Cumberland Presbyterians, while affirming that salvation is available to all who seek it (2.01), also states clearly that salvation is something all of us need. When the Confession says that our first parents “became inclined toward sin in all aspects of their being (2.03),” it sets up its own next statement that we, all of us, “become slaves to sin and death (2.04).”

Professing faith in Christ is not something we can just wake up and decide to do one day. Our natural inclination is to do things our way instead of God’s. Like rebellious children, we convince ourselves that we know better even than God does what is good for us. Even those of us who are reared in the Church and in faithful families find submission of our will to God’s to be an obstacle to changing our hearts. The truth is that changing our hearts is something we cannot do. The Good News is that God can.

God has a variety of ways to change our hearts. Music has always been a powerful way God speaks to me. It soothes my spirit. It provides ways for me to give back to God the gifts God has given me. Not everyone, I know, is musically inclined. Preaching is another important tool God uses to change hearts. (And since my husband is also my pastor, let me hasten to say that good preaching is important to me, too.) Prayer, Bible study, sharing in community with other Christians, and, borrowing more language from the Confession of Faith, “ways beyond human understanding” (4.02) are all ways God employs to change our hearts and to call us to commitment. No one way or combination of ways is right for every individual, but God knows how to reach us, and God is able and willing to do whatever is required to call us to faith and to empower us to respond.



### **To Do Together**

Sing “Change My Heart, O God” with your group. The song is included in many recent hymn books and other music resources.

If you can plan ahead for this time together, you might want to ask group members or guests to prepare special music which is helpful to their spiritual formation to share with the group.

Invite members of your group to talk about the ways God has used and continues to use to call them to faith and encourage them to grow in faith.

### **No Distinctions**

Another thing a renewed heart offers is openness to others. Just as someone cared enough about us to share the Good News about Jesus with us, so God calls us to share what we have found in Christ with others. The Church often does a good job of sharing the Good News among our own people. When it comes to sharing Good News beyond ourselves, however, we are not always what we claim to be. Think about people in your community who know little or nothing about God’s love for them. How would they be received in the programs and activities of your congregation? Would the worship, educational programs, service opportunities, and community-building events be meaningful to them? Or have we in the Church retreated so far into ourselves that we take good care of our own needs, but have forgotten our responsibility to share what we believe with those who are still searching?

American Protestant congregations tend to be pretty homogeneous groups. Most of our congregations are made up of people who pretty much look and act the same. The Sunday morning worship hour continues to be one of the most segregated times of the week in most communities, regardless of whether we are talking about racial, socio-economic, or other distinctions among us. When we do extend our ministry to people who are different than we are, it usually comes under our understanding of outreach or mission work we do somewhere else, not in our own backyard.

Paul insists in Romans that, in God’s eyes, there is no distinction between any of us. All of us stand in need of renewal of heart and spirit. “The same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him” (10:12). Too often, entry into the Church is more of a matter of educational level, ability to dress in a particular way, or some other artificial criteria than it is a matter of searching for renewal and new life. Sometimes we need to be reminded that the criteria for entry into God’s Realm are not the same as the ones we have set for life in the Church. Sometimes it is easy for us to think about the generosity of God’s grace to people we have decided need it worse than we do. Paul’s words remind us that we all stand in need of God’s saving grace and that many will not find it if we do not become more generous about sharing it. Renewed hearts are so grateful for the transformation they have experienced that they are not threatened by opportunities to share what they have found with others.

### **To Think About Together**

Examine the programs and activities of your congregation. How many of them are open to participation from people who don’t already know about them? How are they publicized to people outside the church? What can you suggest in response to what

you discover?

What can your Women's Ministry group do to help other women in your community experience renewal of heart? How can you encourage your whole congregation to join you in this ministry?

**Prayer**

God of renewal and new life, help us to be so thankful for the change you have wrought in our hearts that we look for opportunities to help others experience it, too, instead of running from them. Remind us that your love is for all who seek it, and make us thankful for what we have found. Amen.