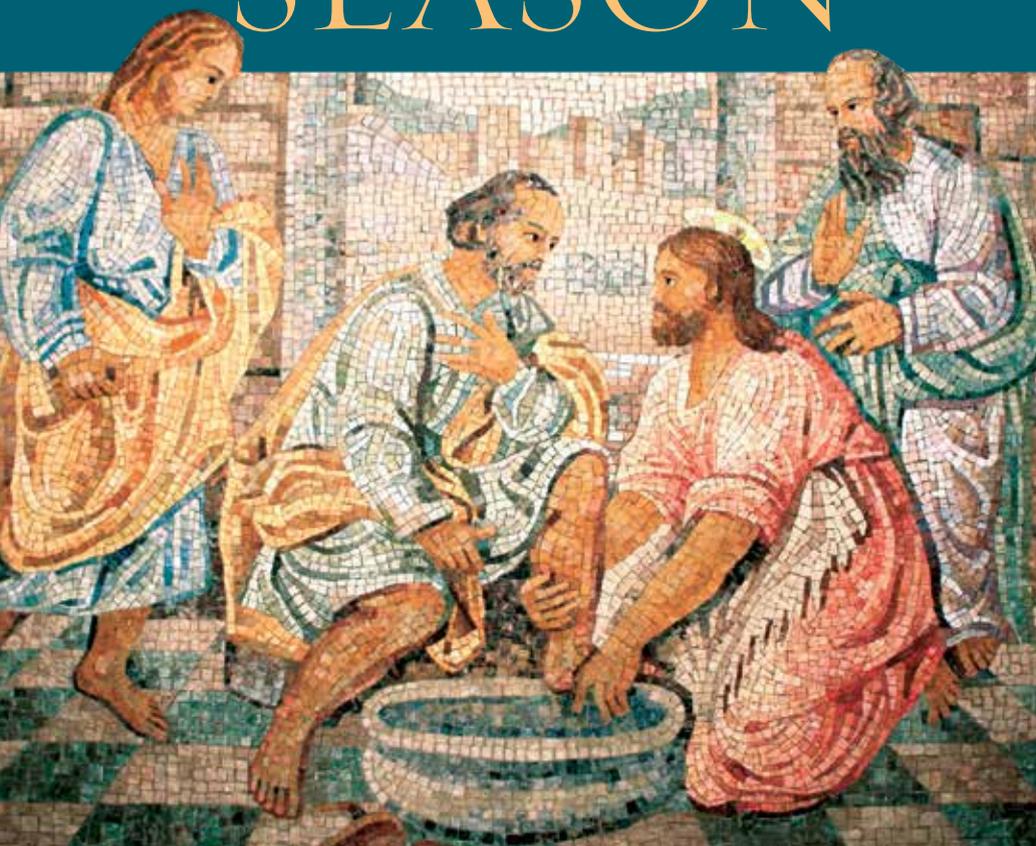


❧ LENT 2021 ❧

Daily Reflections, Actions and Prayers

EMBRACE THIS HOLY SEASON



JOSEPH F. SICA

Introduction

Nothing is more precious than a life fully lived. To live this way is to live with passion! Jesus wants you to live each moment with vibrancy, walk each day without fear, open your heart to others, and know and accept yourself in a deep, powerful way. How can you do this?

This Lent, roll up your sleeves, open your heart, and walk side by side with Jesus through my maintenance guide. When you work with this guide, you'll be filled with energy, purpose, and happiness. You will find yourself fully engaged in life, ready to leap out of bed each morning filled with determination and delighted with life.

Lent is a wonderful opportunity for us to stand up to all the cynics who sit in the back row of life, rolling their eyes and whispering negativity and nonsense. To them, we say, "in spite of all the chaos, every day is fresh and full of moments to be savored."

I wrote these reflections because I want you to enjoy life. Take your time reading every day, and absorb these pages. Each reflection includes *A Helpful Practice*: an encouragement to help you live with passion, and *A Handy Prayer*: a prayer to connect you to Jesus.

I am honored that you are taking this journey with me. I delight in this precious, present moment. "It's so good to be here."

EDITOR NOTE: *A few days after finishing this lenten booklet, Fr. Joseph Sica died, very unexpectedly, from a heart condition. His spiritual advice to live every moment with passion seems all the more poignant now. All who knew Fr. Joe mourn his passing. We at Twenty-Third Publications look forward to sharing his timeless wisdom and joy with readers for years to come.*

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Cancer-Free

“But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.” » MATTHEW 6:6

Three words turned my world upside down. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “You have cancer,” the doctor said. It was a Helpful Practice. A malignant tumor in my bladder made everything else in my life feel a bit less important. There were fewer worries and more appreciation of things I’d previously missed.

Surgery was a success. Six weeks of immunotherapy stopped the tumor from reoccurring.

Today, I am thrilled to say I am cancer-free. My outlook on life is cancer-free too. Free of the cancer of worrying about the little things. I’ve learned what I need (not much) and who the people are I can count on. Life is too short to let others steal my happiness.

Lent can be your Helpful Practice. It’s a time to make positive changes—reduce stress, clear clutter, deepen your relationships, focus on prayer, and prioritize your actual needs.

Choosing to answer the call instead of ignoring it is the hardest change, but once you do—get ready! Change is a-comin’.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► If you are facing a difficult time, look for reasons to have hope. Spend time with people you love. Pray or meditate. Do something every day that gives you hope.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, life can change in an instant; but knowing you are there to catch me, hold me, or carry me through it all makes a world of difference. Thank you. Amen.*

Time Out!

“The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes.” » LUKE 9:22

“I’ve got your back,” they say. “You can count on me!” But then, just when you need them, they’re a no-show. Promises are broken. Trust is gone. The pain of betrayal runs deep. Loved ones are disloyal. Friends are dishonest.

We often find ourselves disconnecting emotionally from people as we hide behind walls we construct of mistrust. We stay in hiding, protecting our vulnerability. We close people out, allowing fear and anger to prevent us from reconnecting to people who genuinely do care about us. The bottom line: not everyone is out to hurt us.

If you’ve been betrayed, give yourself a time-out to make sense of what happened. Then, when you’re ready, talk it out with the person who hurt you. Share how you feel and ask, “Why did you do this to me?” Then tell them what you need from them in order to move on.

The choice to tear down the walls, rebuild, and repair trust is yours. Your relationship just might come out stronger and better as it grows deeper.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► When trust is lost, it causes pain for everyone involved. While it’s not easy, it is possible to regain trust once you’ve hurt someone. It starts by behaving in a trustworthy way. Forget the cliché “I’ll never do it again” and replace it with consistent and dependable behavior.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, give me the courage and strength to restore a relationship I have damaged because of poor choices. Amen.*

The One and Only You

Jesus answered them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?” » MATTHEW 9:15

The quote grabbed my attention as it popped up on my screen: “Wanting to be someone else is a waste of time.” Comparative shopping. So many people specialize in it. “If only I were smarter.” “If only I were skinnier.” “If only I didn’t make so many mistakes.”

Spending time obsessing over what you aren’t prevents you from seeing your own God-given beauty, dignity, and goodness as a uniquely created person. You weren’t designed to be like everyone else. You were created to be you. Life isn’t one giant popularity or beauty contest to see who’s the prettiest, smartest, or most successful. It’s about being comfortable in your own skin and accepting who you are.

No matter how hard we try to be someone else, we’ll never succeed. Stop hiding from yourself and embrace all that is specifically you—the whole package, complete with abilities and achievements, as well as peculiarities and problems. Love yourself. It’s a basic premise, and it’s not dependent on the job you have or the weight you lose. It’s simply unconditional acceptance of yourself right here and right now!

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Look in the mirror at least once a day and say, “I love you, (your name), just as you are!” It’s an effective reminder to never take for granted the preciousness of who you are.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, help me to remember and celebrate that there is no one else in the whole world just like me. Amen.*

Complaint-Free Zone

The Pharisees and their scribes complained to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” » LUKE 5:30

After four years of not seeing each other, two neighbors met at a wedding. Twenty seconds into the conversation, one launched into a series of complaints—problems with her spouse, trouble with her youngest son, and intimate details of her health.

The complainers. When you see them headed your way, you want to run in the opposite direction. We all know a few people who have developed a habit of moaning and griping. For them, the glass is always half empty and nothing ever goes their way.

Some people can't seem to stop themselves from putting a negative spin on everything. When you're around them, it's frustrating, annoying, and draining. It's time to call them out on their behavior and tell them to stop it. Encourage them to notice how their complaining is pushing people out of their lives. Reinforce this by challenging them to take note of all the good things happening in their lives and all the reasons to be happy and grateful. Remind them to make this a permanent part of their conversation from this day forward.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Instead of sitting at home and whining about how no one calls, do something positive. Get out of the house. Attend a cooking class. Volunteer at a soup kitchen. Go for a run. Connect with a friend and enter into a complaint-free zone.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, nothing gets under my skin more than someone who can't see any good in life and other people. Give me patience with them. Amen.*

Reconnecting

At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days. » **MARK 1:12–13**

At the end of the day, there's no truer adage than "can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em." Just as our bodies need food and air, our souls need connections with other people. We are at our best when we are in healthy relationships and at our worst when we're not. Without connections, we just are not fully human.

After thirty minutes of listening to a husband and wife talk about their marriage, the therapist got up and gave the wife a big hug. "Your wife needs this every day," he said. The husband replied, "Okay, but I can only bring her in here on Mondays and Thursdays."

I know people who live with regrets after taking another person for granted and missing the opportunities to express and demonstrate affection. Saying "I love you" and following the words with hugs and kisses strengthens a relationship. Otherwise, it will die a slow death.

Lost moments are lost moments, and there's no going back. During Lent, ask yourself: "Have I been taking someone for granted?" Do something about it—a visit, a phone call, a text, a hug, a kiss... connect with them through words and actions.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Pick a day and reconnect with someone you once cared about but let slip away.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, it's my fault I've lost touch with people I care about. Help me to be more attentive to them. Amen.*

Getting Past the Past

“Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

» MATTHEW 16:19

“I never thought they’d do that to me!” I often hear about betrayals: rumors are spread, promotions are handed to someone else, friends turn on friends. When it happens to you, you have a choice: hold on to what has happened and rehearse it over and over in your mind or relinquish it and let it go.

Allowing the hurts of the past to take up permanent residence in your life steals your joy and deprives you of living your best life. It’s only after you decide to stop pushing the replay button that you’re able to sweep out the cobwebs of bitterness, anger, and resentment. After all, you can’t change the past.

When you find yourself being drawn back into the pain and negative experiences, choose to focus on the present—on what is happening right now—and recognize that history is history. To get past your past, you need to accept it as it was and leave it there. Then pay deliberate attention to this moment—a time that’s never been before and is loaded with opportunities and possibilities. All you have to do is seize them.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Tape this quote on your mirror: “Never look back unless you’re planning to go that way.”

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, sometimes I struggle to live in the present. Help me to see it’s the only healthy place for me. Amen.*

Set Free

“If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you.” » MATTHEW 6:14

Harsh words fly and tempers heat up. A friendship, once close, ends with a vow to never speak to each other again. Assets of a parent’s estate are divvied up, and now siblings, feeling cheated, go their separate ways. “I never want to see you again.” Words that would break their parents’ hearts.

Has someone cut you off cold? Are you obsessing over it? While you can’t force a resolution with them, you also can’t let what happened define your life. Reach out to the person estranged from you and make amends for anything you’ve done.

If they refuse to have a conversation with you and want nothing to do with a reconciliation, practice forgiveness. Remember, it’s not for them; it’s for you so you don’t end up a prisoner to the hostility of the other person. Let go of your desire to get even or cause them pain.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Write a letter offering forgiveness to the person who refuses to let go of the grudge. Describe your perception of what led up to the conflict. Express your feelings about it and don’t hold back. Get it all out and then... don’t mail it!

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, when I forgive, a tremendous burden is taken off my shoulders and my heart is freed from all those nasty emotions. Help me to continually practice forgiveness. Amen.*

Cease Fire

“The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation.” » LUKE 11:32

Critical people have an arsenal of weapons they use to get the best of you. They label you: dumb, weak, incompetent, or ugly. As your personal travel agents, they book you on elaborate guilt trips by putting past mistakes on your itinerary. “It’s not the first time you messed up!” they remind you.

No matter how hard you try to avoid them, it seems like they’re everywhere! From bosses to relatives to friends to coworkers... no matter what you say, they always have a way of zooming in on the negative and offering up huge doses of discouragement. “That won’t work.” “What a horrible idea!” “You’re going to look like a fool.”

Your best mode of action: disarm them! Since you can’t stop the verbal bullets from flying, just duck and get out of the way. Let it roll off your back and don’t engage them with return fire. Finish it off with a surprise—smile and walk away. Once you take the fun out of their game, they’ll look elsewhere to play.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Some people voluntarily offer criticism. Often, it’s out of line and in poor taste. Catch them off guard by treating them with kindness. Compliment them. Invite them to dinner. Overwhelm them with encouragement and appreciation.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, when people criticize me, help me hold back my words. I want to defuse the conversation, not add fuel to it. Amen.*

In God's Time

“How much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who love him.” » MATTHEW 7:11

A frog was playing on the rafters of a dairy farm one night and fell into a pail of cream. At first, he panicked. Scrambling for survival, he swam faster and faster. When the farmer arrived the next morning, he found the frog standing on a cake of butter, exhausted but happy to be alive.

When we let our problems overwhelm us, we stop jumping, hopping, and scrambling for survival. It's easy to give up and stop praying. We remember times when we got down on our knees and prayed and felt as if God didn't hear us. Our answer didn't come. We dialed the prayer hotline and it went straight to voicemail.

God does answer our prayers—in his time, not ours. Sometimes God may be saying “No!” because we're simply not ready to receive the answer. We need to grow. We may need to face an unresolved problem, change a bad habit, or stop an unhealthy behavior. Or maybe what we're praying for isn't the best thing for us right now. That person you hope to marry might not make the best spouse. Your dream job... it might be a nightmare. Listen. Give God your undivided attention and watch what happens.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Add this poem to your daily prayers:
Hold no problem back. Nothing large, nothing small.
When Jesus says, “Surrender,” he wants it all.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, I'm simply going to ask you for help and then sit quietly listening for your gentle voice. Amen.*

Thawing Out

“Leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled.”

» MATTHEW 5:24

After returning his wife’s cold shoulder, a husband realized he needed to have her wake him at 5:00 a.m. for an early morning flight to Chicago. Not wanting to be the first to break the silence, he wrote a note: “Please wake me at 5:00 a.m.”

At 9:00 a.m., he awoke and realized he had missed his flight. Furious, he jumped up, ready to confront his wife. There was a note by the bed: “It’s 5:00 a.m.! Wake up!”

There is a difference between the silent treatment and cooling off. Sometimes we need a cooling-off period to give each other room to sort through our feelings and not force a conversation. When we’re ready, we need to apologize for any hurt we’ve caused and acknowledge how much we care, assuring each other that we’ll do our best to not let it happen again. It’s never easy or pleasant, but it’s always worth the time and effort to build a stronger and healthier relationship.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Put the names of people who have hurt you into a large jar. Fill it with water and place it in the freezer. As long as the names are frozen, you can’t retrieve the papers. If you have frozen people out of your life, you have a decision—keep them on ice or thaw them out with a healing resolution you can both live with.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, don’t let me isolate myself by embracing my pain. Give me wisdom to melt the ice in my relationships. Amen.*

The Higher Road

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

» MATTHEW 5:44

“I don’t love you anymore.” The words cut deeply. “I want a divorce.”

“I’ve had it. Please don’t call me again.” Your friend’s words seem unfair.

“The bulk of the estate has been left to your brother.” After all you’ve done, your prodigal brother reaps the reward.

Hurt. Anger. Disappointment. People talk behind your back. They walk out on you. And as your heart fills with resentment, you entertain revenge fantasies. But Jesus offers another way: “Love them. Bless them.” Seriously? Yes, seriously.

Our behavior as Christians should stand out as detectable and different, even when others aren’t nice to us. Perhaps, *especially* when others aren’t nice to us. We need to choose to love our enemies and decide not to be angry and hateful. We’re not supposed to get even. While we may not think of them as enemies, necessarily, they just might be the outspoken family member, arrogant coworker, or disloyal friends who make us look bad.

Take the higher road. If you see them coming, don’t look the other way. Show courtesy—smile; shake hands; say hello. You’re not minimizing the hurt. You’re facing it and forgiving.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► List the people who have hurt you. Do you permit these people to stay in your life or shut them out? Is there a way toward resolution? If so, act on it.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, you’re not immune to people hurting you, yet you never retaliated but forgave. I want to do the same. Help me. Amen.*

Life-Changing Moments

And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white. » MARK 9:2–3

Elizabeth’s husband, Michael, has Alzheimer’s disease. She bathes and clothes him. She cooks. She sings Italian operas to him. And she only leaves him on Thursdays for groceries and Sundays to attend Mass.

After Elizabeth suffered a stroke, her son Patrick prayed with her and then left the hospital to break the news to his father. Arriving at the house, he found a letter addressed to him: “Dear Patrick, if you’re reading this letter, I’m either dead or so sick I can’t take care of myself. I’ve never asked you for anything, but now I need your help. Promise me you’ll take care of Dad. Some days he may recognize you; others he won’t—but he is still Dad. Help me! I love you! Mom.”

That evening, Patrick leaned over his mother’s bedside and whispered, “Mom, I promise I will take care of Dad. I love you.” Later that night, Elizabeth died.

There are defining moments of transformation in everyone’s life. Graduations. Falling in love. A life-changing illness. Death of a loved one. During these times, we clearly see what is most important, and our day-to-day outlook on life is forever changed. We’re never quite the same again.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Looking back over your life, list your defining moments and how they transformed you.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, thank you for those cherished moments that opened unlimited possibilities for me to remember and to love. Amen.*

The Judgment-free Zone

“Stop judging and you will not be judged.” » LUKE 6:37

A young couple enjoying breakfast in their new home noticed their neighbor hanging laundry outside. “Those shirts aren’t very clean,” the wife said. “She must not use the right detergent.” The husband remained silent. Every time their neighbor hung her clothes out to dry, the young wife made the same comments.

“Look,” she said, a month later, noticing the clean laundry hanging from the line. “She’s finally doing it right. I wonder who told her she needed new detergent.”

The husband replied, “She didn’t change a thing. I got up early this morning and washed our windows.”

We’re all guilty of seeing through dirty windows at times. When we sum up another person based on what we perceive, it limits us from seeing who they really are. We pass judgments on the way others dress, their hairstyles, jobs, ages, or any number of reasons.

Imagine living in a judgment-free zone where people accept each other as they are. Until we’ve stepped into their circumstances and viewed life through their eyes, it’s unfair of us to judge them. But it is possible to live in a judgment-free zone. It begins with each of us—being sensitive and kind when we talk about others by modeling Jesus: “Stop judging!”

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Go on a judgment-free diet for Lent and give others a chance to be themselves, even if it means biting your tongue a few times.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, you clearly said, “Stop judging.” I want to and need to. Amen.*

Spontaneous Kindness

“All their works are performed to be seen.” » MATTHEW 23:5

A spontaneous act of kindness was caught on camera and the photo went viral. Police Officer Larry DePrimo was walking his beat on a freezing cold night in New York City. He passed a homeless man with huge blisters on the soles of his bare feet. Officer DePrimo went to a nearby store and returned with a pair of boots and some socks, and as he helped Jeffrey Helmand put them on his cold feet, a tourist digitally captured the moment.

Acts of kindness create ripple effects. When we see someone touch another’s life for no other motive than to lift them up, we want to do the same. Perhaps it’s just showing up when we know someone is hurting. Our gentle words, smile, helping hand, or shoulder to cry on can make a world of difference to them.

Today, it’s easy to look around and see negativity. But when we hear stories about people like Officer DePrimo, it gives us hope that there are good people in this world after all. God’s children are crying out for help. If we listen with our eyes, we’ll see the opportunity to meet their needs.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Create a Spontaneous Act of Kindness Day each week. Don’t worry about whether it’s big or small, your kindness matters—open a door for someone. Buy them coffee. Send flowers to brighten someone’s day. Visit a shut-in.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, open my eyes to see those looking for some kindness. Someday, I might need some in return. Amen.*

A Nose in My Business

“But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

» MATTHEW 23:12

“Why aren’t you married yet? Don’t you want to have children?” Jacqueline’s aunt sticks her nose in her business all the time. She even tries to hook her up with her version of “the perfect man.”

Nosy people cannot mind their own business. They want to know what you’re up to, your relationship status, or how much money you make. They love to dig up the dirt on your personal life by asking awkward questions like: “Why aren’t you drinking tonight?” “How can you afford a new car?” And they not only wait for an answer, they expect one. It’s their purpose in life—to interfere. And they’re never at a loss to offer unsolicited and unwelcome advice.

You’re entitled to your privacy. If you wish to share what’s happening in your life, that’s your choice. But nobody deserves unlimited access to your business. Nosy people don’t get the hint when you purposely avoid their intrusive questions. The best way to handle them is to sidestep their interrogation. Change the subject, and if they persist, walk away.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Since probing comes naturally to nosy people, stand your ground with quick and witty comebacks: “I found your nose in my business.” “How would I ever survive without your input?” “My life. My choice. Not your business.” Come up with some of your own and use them as needed.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, give me the patience to respond calmly but firmly when people cross the line and get too nosy. Amen.*

The Regret-free Zone

Abraham replied, “My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad.” » LUKE 16:25

When you come to the end of your life, will Frank Sinatra’s “My Way” be your theme song or will you lament: “I could have. I should have. I wanted to. If only I had!”? It will be too late.

Regrets are painful and not fun for anyone. It’s miserable to be hanging out with them and unhealthy to wallow in them. “I wish I’d paid more attention in school.” “I should have taken that job.” “I never spent enough time with my family.”

Here’s the cure: Call out what you’re feeling by giving it a name—guilt, anger, shame, or disappointment. Cancel any past-time travel activity where you continually revisit regrets.

Finally, check out and embrace today’s opportunities. Override your fears and stop playing it safe, where you miss all those chances. Don’t leave the door open for regret ghosts to haunt you for a lifetime. If you lost someone close and you’re regretting the lack of time spent with them, stay close to those in your life right now. Stop beating yourself up over the past and enter into the regret-free zone of a future spent with those you love.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► When an opportunity arises, seize it! Write the letter. Schedule the interview. Start the project. Be committed to living in the regret-free zone.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, you never intended for me to carry the heavy baggage of regrets. Give me the strength to let them go. Amen.*

Seeing Red

“Finally he sent his son to them, thinking, ‘They will respect my son.’”

» MATTHEW 21:37

How often have you gone to bed with your anger and woken up with it the next day? Are you one to fly off the handle? Are you hot under the collar? If so, I’m guessing joy and peace are hard to come by.

Some people are more hotheaded than others. The littlest thing can set them off. When a person criticizes us, breaks their promises, or continually lies, it’s easy to “let it rip!” We need to cool down and tame our anger before we ruthlessly hurt everyone who is the brunt of it.

When anger creeps up on you, it needs to be kept in check in order to not cloud your judgment or damage your relationships. *Recognize anger’s warning signs.* Is your heart rate increasing or are you breathing faster? *Calm yourself down.* Close your eyes, breathe, relax, or take a walk so you can release the hot thoughts and cool down. *Imagine the consequences if you lose control.* Picture the damage it can bring if you snap. *Ask: why am I angry?* Have friends excluded me? *Consider creative and healthy solutions to correct the problem.* Remember that you can’t change what’s happened in the past or what’s been said. You can only change your response to it now.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Use this Lent to attempt reconciliation for a situation where anger damaged your relationship with someone.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, help me not to let my anger control me as I seek out reconciliation. Amen.*

God Doesn't Pick Favorites

“You never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends.”

» LUKE 15:29

Favoritism. It creeps into families. One child gets away with everything. Another caters to their aging parents. When the distant one shows up, it's “Let's throw a parade” time.

The older brother in the parable feels unfairly treated. “This son of yours wasted everything,” he spits at his father, “and now you're killing the prize calf and throwing him a party!” Anger pours out as he accuses his father of favoritism.

The father favors both sons without basing it on their merit or worth. He doesn't respond to his firstborn by lecturing, “It's my money and I can do with it what I want. Now get in the house and be nice to your brother.” Rather, he responds with gentle tenderness and sincerity, “You're always with me and everything I have is yours.”

Does God play favorites? Why do certain people have all the luck and others never get a break? Why are some prayers answered and others seem not to be? Doesn't God want to help everyone? We're all part of God's inner circle. We all matter the same to him and are equally loved unconditionally. God favors us by telling us, “I'm here for you. I'm on your side. Always!”

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Fill your life with gratitude. Start a Thank You, God journal to write down all the blessings God sends your way each day.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, knowing you care about me gets me through every day, even the hard ones. Amen.*

Choose Carefully

Many Samaritans came to believe in him because of the woman's testimony. » JOHN 4:39

Mark Twain said, “I can live for two months on a good compliment.” On the other side of the coin, Cher sang, “I’d take back those words that hurt you...words are like weapons, they wound sometimes.” The power of words. They can heal or hurt. Build up or tear down.

In every marriage, careless words are often said at the wrong time. Aggressive words, putdowns, accusations, and sarcasm that escalate conflict. Like pouring gasoline on a fire, we strike back when attacked rather than disarming the hostility with kind, gentle, and sensitive words—words that express peace, love, and concern.

Jesus put the spotlight on the woman at the well. He let her talk about her life without throwing her past in her face. His words made her feel valued and loved. Imitating Jesus, we need to choose words that encourage, enable, and empower those who are going through difficult times and have messed up. Our words, spoken at just the right moment, can boost someone’s confidence, heal their pain, and give them the hope they need.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Leave notes for your spouse, parent, or child highlighting their strengths and endorsing their God-given worth and beauty. It’s simple and costs nothing, but it can be priceless to someone starving for acceptance.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, may all my words be immaculate and inspiring, lifting up others. Amen.*

Who's in the Driver's Seat?

*And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage...
but passing through their midst; he went his own way.* » LUKE 4:29–30

It's not unhealthy to want to please a parent, spouse, or friend. But when pleasing others dominates our lives, we've entered the danger zone. We simply can't say no, even when we want to or should. Or we get a makeover in order to be liked. We hold back our feelings so we won't rock the boat and lose friends.

Going along just to get along drives your real self into hiding. Others miss out on getting even a glimpse of who you really are. What a tragedy it would be to leave this world and realize very few people connected with you and got to know the real you.

Now's the time to do something about it. Give yourself permission to say what you think and express how you're feeling. No apologies allowed! Set boundaries and look out for yourself. When you want to say "No!" say it without offering an explanation. Reclaim and embrace you and let others form their own opinions of you. After all, whatever they're thinking is none of your business. Being your genuine self and living life on your terms is all that matters.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ At the end of the day, ask yourself, "Who's driving the bus of my life?" Are you sitting in the driver's seat? Remember, no one else has the right to direct your life.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, I am one-of-a-kind. Let me shine in my uniqueness and not be shadowed by futile attempts to please others. Amen.*

The Hurry-it-up Generation

“Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.” » MATTHEW 18:26

“Alexa. I need an answer now.” And you get it. We’re the “hurry-it-up generation” who wants, and expects, everything now. Waiting isn’t an option. There are movies on demand and instant messaging—conveniences in life that require little to no patience.

Hurry-it-up dictates our lives. Drivers honk because traffic is moving too slowly. Foot tapping accompanies the wait as the computer reboots. Frustration increases as an elderly parent repeats the same story again. If we allow it, impatience can ruin our lives, as stress, anxiety, and irritation become regular house guests.

You need to stop and ask who, what, and how to effectively manage impatience. Who is testing your patience? What situations get the best of you? A friend who is always late? Slow-moving lines at the store? Promises not fulfilled according to your timetable?

All these things are beyond your control. Rather than giving them over to anxiety or annoyance, let them go.

How do you change the circumstances that try your patience? Sit down with the person who triggers it. Frame your comments with “When you ____, I feel ____.” Listen as they respond and work together on positive changes.

Only “God has perfect timing; never early, never late. It takes a little patience...but it’s worth the wait” (Anonymous).

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Know your impatience triggers. How do you feel right before you lose it?

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, I’ve gotten used to getting things right away. Give me an extra dose of patience to wait. Amen.*

Someone to Look Up To

“Whoever obeys and teaches these commands will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” » MATTHEW 5:19

After four years at West Point, Ryan is now a commissioned officer in the United States Army. His father is his role model. “Dad taught me how to live—family first. A simple concept but once I left for the Academy, I realized the importance of my family and never taking them for granted. He stressed that education is everything and to never back down from any challenge or let any obstacle stop me.”

Ryan’s father taught him to have respect for all people, from his professors to the cafeteria workers. When Ryan left for school, his dad handed him a note: “Dear Son, remember hard work always pays off. Try your best to never use these three words: ‘can’t,’ ‘impossible,’ and ‘but’ at the beginning of a sentence. We love you and are extremely proud of you.”

We need to surround ourselves with role models who showcase integrity, possess a positive frame of mind and attitude, have faith, and deliberately seek to understand people’s differences.

Role models run their lives on empathy, encouragement, optimism, and inspiration. They’re not defeated by their mistakes, and they demonstrate how to contribute to life and leave the world a better place.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Send a note to your role model, thanking them for helping to shape your life.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, you’re my role model. Every day, you inspire me to do the right thing and act with gentleness and care toward all who enter my life. Amen.*

Save the Platitudes

“He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me, scatters.” » LUKE II:23

Back at work after the death of her brother, Cindy was hurt that none of her coworkers reached out in support. They were polite, but never mentioned Tyler or asked how she was doing.

One day, while Cindy sat in the break room, a cleaning woman put her hand on her shoulder and said, “It’s difficult and it’s going to hurt for a long time.” They hugged, exchanged a few words, and cried. “That moment,” Cindy explained, “was when healing began for me.”

Often I’m asked, “What do I say?” A friend’s daughter was in a fatal accident. A brother’s cancer has spread. There are no well-phrased combinations of words to magically remove their pain. Often, we say inappropriate things or launch into litanies of clichés and trite comments, like “God never gives you more than you can handle” or “Everything happens for a reason.” Really? Platitudes do not help at all. Say nothing.

Simply reach out. Brokenhearted people need a hand to hold, a hug, a smile. For someone to say, “I care! I’m here.” Allowing them to cry or get angry is the best remedy for the pain they’re in. A quiet presence is appreciated more than a lengthy speech.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► When someone is going through a rough time, show up with lasagna and a vacuum cleaner, not a litany of platitudes.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, I feel your comfort in the kind gestures of others when I’m wading through my pain. Amen.*

A Limited Edition of One

“The second commandment is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” » MARK 12:31

At 46, Gina knew she had to prepare her family for the fight of her life. She’d just learned she had an extremely rare form of cancer.

Stepping up, her family rallied around her, sharing household responsibilities and giving Gina time to listen to music, go for walks, watch movies, and read books. “With all this downtime my family gave me,” Gina said, “I met a stranger I was living with and that stranger is me.”

Are you living with a stranger? Too often you’re busy trying to fit in and please others in order to be accepted. Craving others’ approval chases your real self into hiding.

No matter your age, it’s never too late to ask yourself: “Who am I?” It grounds you so you don’t keep becoming someone new, pushing you further away from the real you.

Accept, embrace, and love yourself. Each day, grow into the person God created you to be—an awesome, unique, and uncloneable person, precious in God’s sight. You’re wonderfully created by God as a limited edition of one. Find you. Be you. Cherish your God-given worth and dignity. You have intrinsic value because you’re God’s child. It’s wrong to settle for anything else.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Contemplate this Judy Garland quote: “Be a first-rate edition of yourself, rather than a second-rate edition of somebody else.”

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, thank you for the words you whispered in my ear the day I was born: “Become who you are!” Amen.*

The Rest of the Story

Two people went up to the temple to pray... » LUKE 18:10

I wish we could hear the rest of this story. Both of these men must have experienced tremendous change. Did the tax collector get a new job? Was he more accepted? Did he make amends to the people? What about the Pharisee? Did he live up to his reputation? Did he become more spiritual? We don't know the rest of their stories. It doesn't matter. What does matter is the rest of our story.

The one thing that most of us want, need, and fear the most, is change. The process can be frightening. The question to ask is this: When it comes to change, am I a Talker or a Doer?

Talkers end up stuck in the same ruts. They ramble on and on about change, yet never get around to it.

Doers know their lives have been out of control. They take action to create a better life. It may be difficult and it may take them in a totally new direction. Like the tax collector and the Pharisee, Doers become an inspiration to others, reminding us, "If I can change, so can you." God is calling us to live, respond, grow, improve, and change. Decide to be a Doer and watch remarkable new adventures unfold in your life.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Talk to Jesus and tell him your plans for changing your life. Write down your ideas for being happier, healthier, more creative, and more successful.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Dear Jesus, remind me that change starts with two words: "I can." With your help, I will. Amen.*

Crazy Busy

“How did he open your eyes?” » JOHN 9:26

“Life is a one-time offer; use it well.” How often do we ignore the wisdom of this quote, spreading ourselves too thin and taking on more than we can handle? “I’m sooo busy,” we brag.

Is all that busyness worth it? When your plate is always full, you compromise your health, happiness, and relationships. Running all day and rushing past each other creates distance and isolation. You end up with nothing left to give to those who matter most.

It shouldn’t be dire moments that force you to focus on what’s important. You need to realize there is always going to be something that needs doing. Tame all the busyness and don’t let it control you. It’s simple, actually. Step down off the busyness treadmill and say, “Enough is enough!” Then slow your pace, downsize your “to-do” list, and place yourself and your family first. Just like going on a diet—don’t overload your plate; practice portion control. At the end of the day, you’ll find you have breathing room.

You don’t want to leave this world with an “I wish” list—I wish I hadn’t worked so hard. I wish I hadn’t let my family and friends slip away. Peace comes from knowing you experienced every moment as a treasure because you stopped and paid attention.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Plan a “do nothing” day and unplug your devices. Spend your time with family and friends.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, slow me down so I can see who and what really matters. Amen.*

When You Walk Through a Storm

There was a royal official whose son was sick at Capernaum.

» JOHN 4:46

Adversity. It's inevitable. An unfaithful spouse, a life-changing health condition, a neglected child who cries herself to sleep, financial loss, an ugly divorce—adversity backs us up against a wall. We fear what's ahead. While some people are unrattled by adversity, others struggle to climb out of bed each morning.

When you're raw, hurt, and bleeding, don't curl up in a ball and give up. Find a way through the storm, just as the royal official did in the gospel. Choose faith, not fear. They cannot coexist. Fear forces us to throw up our hands in despair, thinking it's over and there's nothing we can do. Faith, on the other hand, propels us forward in prayer as we take our storms to Jesus, asking him for courage and confidence, patience and perseverance.

Healing from deep wounds only begins when we realize it isn't healthy to go it alone. Stop depending on yourself and welcome assistance. Let those with similar trials support you and offer their perspective and experiences. They already know what you can expect on your journey and can ease the fear of the unknown. The pain will subside. You will make it through.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Make a “hurt survival basket” for someone facing difficulties. Fill it with flowers, a coffee mug, uplifting quotes, Bible verses, poems, or cartoons. Don't forget to include your phone number!

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, life sometimes throws me a curve. With you to help catch me, it's easier to bounce back. Amen.*

The Power of Empathy

“I have no one to put me into the pool.”

» JOHN 5:7

Grandpa often spilled his food, sometimes dropping his bowl and breaking it. Frustrated, his daughter-in-law gave him a wooden bowl and forced him to eat in a corner. One day, the man’s grandson was working with pieces of wood. His father asked him what he was doing. “I’m making bowls for you and Mom for when you grow old.”

Empathy is a unique quality that allows us to step into someone else’s shoes for a bit. We see the world through their eyes. But this is easier said than done. When someone shares their troubles, we need to resist rattling off comparisons—how much worse our situation is.

Two gentlemen were comparing their knee replacements within my earshot. Each tried to one-up the other with their surgery’s complications. It’s difficult to share the pain of others when we’re only focusing on our own. We show empathy when we say, “I can’t imagine what it’s like.” Or if we’ve experienced something similar, we simply say, “Me, too,” and listen to their story without sharing ours.

For thirty-eight years, people passed by our disabled brother. Jesus connects with him and asks, “Do you want to be well?” Jesus helps us realize that we, too, may need his help some day.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Share a smile, touch, kind word, listening ear, or honest compliment—all of which have the potential to transform a life.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, help me listen with my ears, eyes, and heart to those who are hurting. Amen.*

Mend the Fence

“Anyone who hears my words and believes...has eternal life.”

» JOHN 5:24

Marcus Aurelius said, “Perfection of character is this: to live each day as if it were your last, without frenzy, without apathy, without pretense.”

If you knew today was your last day, to whom would you say, “I love you” or “Please forgive me”? What’s stopping you from doing all of this now?

Living each day as if it were your last doesn’t imply living irresponsibly. It’s making today, this moment, matter. It’s taking God’s precious gift of 1440 minutes each day and not wasting it.

Death is the greatest teacher, urging us to realize life’s finality. This is all that’s real. The time to tell people how we feel is now, because tomorrow is not guaranteed. No more excuses.

Live today knowing your days are numbered.

Do you have unresolved disagreements with family or friends? It’s time to act now. Put your ego on the shelf and say, “Let’s talk.” “I always wanted to tell you ____.” Then express those held-back feelings and resolve those lingering issues. Get it out. Let it go. Life is just too short.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Make your “mend-the-fence” list and call the people on it. Work out the issues so you don’t leave this world with unfinished business.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, I want to be able to say I did my best at reconciling with those whom I have hurt and who have hurt me. Amen.*

The Sting of Rejection

“I came in the name of my Father, but you do not accept me.”

» JOHN 5:43

Rejection stings, whether it’s from friends, coworkers, or teammates. But it’s especially hard to handle these words from a sweetheart: “It’s over. I don’t want to see you again.”

Breaking up is hard to do. It doesn’t matter who walked out or stayed. It hurts. Avoid finger pointing—who did this, who said that. Take responsibility for your own part in the downfall of the relationship. Then work on the issues of yours that contributed to it, and don’t repeat those same behaviors next time around.

Practice self-care. Don’t define your life by the rejection, but put it in proper perspective. It’s a hurdle you need to get over, not a cheapening of your self-worth. Everyone bounces back differently. Surround yourself with people who love you and make you feel valued. Face your pain head-on and don’t minimize it, saying, “It’s no big deal.” It *is* a big deal. But avoid beating up on yourself, and silence your inner critic—“It’s all my fault.” Drown out that voice with compassion. Eat well and get plenty of rest. Pray. Go for walks. Be kind to yourself. Never let rejection stop you from living your life.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Inflate your self-worth by listing three things you like about yourself and three qualities you bring to a relationship. Refer to the list to bolster your self-esteem whenever you feel it drooping.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, you are no stranger to rejection and can easily connect with me when I’m dumped by others. Amen.*

Closer than a Brother

“Have no fear about taking Mary as your wife.” » MATTHEW 1:20

“I’ve got your back!” Joseph gives rich meaning to this phrase. Rather than walking out on Mary, he remained loyal, not only as a husband-to-be, but as a friend. Mary knew she could count on him.

That’s what friendship is. We casually toss the word around, yet friendship is serious business. To exist without a true friend is to have missed one of the most satisfying human experiences. Friends stick together through joy and sadness, good times and bad, thick and thin—they’re there for each other. There is no tallying of mistakes and no broken commitments; only encouragement for us to try again when things get tough.

When they sense something is wrong, our friends show up and ask if we need to talk. They’re there when everyone else isn’t. They connect with us, get involved in our lives, make sacrifices for us when we’re in need—sitting with us in the ER or handing us a tissue to dry our tears. It’s not when things are good that we discover who our real friends are. It’s during adversity.

We have lots of people who are friendly. But true friends, loyal friends, best friends are a treasure. It’s not their profound words or great abilities—it’s simply their presence. Keep them close!

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Send “just because” cards to those you have the privilege of calling friends, reminding them you cherish their friendship.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, thank you for those permanent fixtures in my life—my true friends. Amen.*

Shhh! Listen!

“Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing them?” » JOHN 7:51

I asked a high school senior, “What moment in your life do you wish never came to an end?” Amanda said, “My mom and I went shopping and to dinner. We just talked and listened to each other for about two hours. It was so great!”

Being fully present with someone means talking less and listening more. Put down the cell phone, power down the laptop, and have an eye-to-eye conversation with each other. Listen by trying to see the world through their eyes for a moment. What are they feeling? What’s weighing them down?

I don’t always listen. During conversations, my mind wanders into a dialogue of its own, thinking what to say next. If a person is seeking someone to hear them out, we often jump into trying to solve their problem. It’s the inner dialogue we have with ourselves: What do I say next? What quick answer can I give?

Tweak your listening skills by giving someone your undivided attention. Invite them to express their doubts, fears, dreams, and passions without being judged or interrupted. It’s okay not to have an answer. Just by listening, we provide comfort, recognition, and understanding. We give the best possible gift to another person—the gift of caring.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Practice understanding another’s perspective by setting an egg timer to its maximum amount of time. Listen and don’t speak until it goes off.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, you never interrupt to give me advice; you listen and then whisper the words I need to hear. Amen.*

Laugh Out Loud

“I am troubled now.” » JOHN 12:27

A gentleman traveled to Miami where he planned to meet his wife the following day.

After settling into his hotel, he shot off a quick email to his wife, mistakenly omitting one letter in the address.

When the recipient opened the email, she promptly fainted. She was a Methodist minister’s wife and her husband had just died. The email read: “Dearest Wife. Arrived safely. Everything is set for your arrival tomorrow. P.S. It sure is hot down here.”

Ah, laughter. A good belly laugh stirs the blood, expands the chest, and clears cobwebs from the brain. If laughter is missing in your life, the cure is simple—put it back! Laughter begins at home when you get in touch with your inner sitcom—especially the most embarrassing episodes of your life. Let go of the inner red-faced anguish and let the laughter rip. Take a tip from a comedian: turn awkward moments into hilarious routines!

Laughing at ourselves is a healthy sign of maturity. Rather than living with a chip on your shoulder, tune into the funny side of it all. There’s no value in beating yourself up. Laugh and people will laugh with you. Remember—he who laughs, lasts!

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Make a Ha! Ha! Kit. Adorn it with smiley faces and fill it with amusing stories, jokes, cartoons, and other funny stuff. It will come in handy when the clouds roll in.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, help me believe that laughter makes life the merriest of go-arounds. Amen.*

Throwing Stones

When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one. » JOHN 8:9

“Strong minds discuss ideas,” Eleanor Roosevelt said. “Average minds discuss events. Weak minds discuss people.” How true. We love to gossip about the faults of others. We nitpick and point out all they do wrong—being wishy-washy, procrastinating, or stretching the truth. We feel it’s our responsibility to let everyone know. Like the fault-finding Pharisees and scribes who claim they caught the frightened woman in the act of adultery, we often fail to see our own unaddressed faults. We’d rather focus on someone else’s failings. Pointing the finger becomes second nature.

When we obsess over others’ mistakes, we miss out on their goodness. Instead of offering compliments, we make them feel unworthy and unlovable. In order to grow in healthy relationships, we need to stop being a fault-finder and become a good-finder.

Good-finders are comfortable with who they are. They don’t have to feel superior by pointing out the flaws of others. They affirm and reinforce the good in people. Good-finders free people from their past, believing change is possible.

Everyone messes up from time to time. We’ve said something in the heat of the moment or let people down. We don’t need others to rub it in. When you hit the pillow, remember Scarlett O’Hara’s classic encouragement: “After all, tomorrow’s another day!”

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ When someone points a finger at you, remind them they have three pointing back at themselves.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, your words are so true: “Let those without sin cast the first stone.” I’d be walking away with the crowd. Amen.*

I'm Still Standing

“When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM!”

» JOHN 8:28

During Sunday Mass, a gregarious child couldn't resist the urge to stand up on the seat and look around. His mother kept murmuring, “Sweetheart, sit down.” He'd sit for a few seconds, then hop back up. “I said, sit down!” she reprimanded softly.

After several recurrences, he stood up and refused to sit down. His mother put her hand on his head and gently, but firmly, pushed him into the seat. The boy sat there smiling. Finally, he turned to his mother and said, “I may be sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside.”

Life can change in an instant. Maybe you're facing a serious setback—bad news from the doctor, a broken relationship, the loss of a loved one, or some other crisis. Whenever heartaches and problems arise, our real inner strength is called upon. Even if our circumstances temporarily knock us down, we must envision ourselves standing up on the inside, filled with resilience and tenacity. Jesus urges us to walk forward and experience the next opportunity waiting for us. When the dust settles, we'll be standing strong because we can hear Jesus say, “Stand up, take my hand, and move forward, one step at a time.”

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Contact a friend who's been hurt and is having a hard time getting back to normal. Offer a hug, a shoulder, or an ear.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, I'll keep the faith when you supply the power to keep me standing. Amen.*

Help Me!

“The truth will set you free.”

» JOHN 8:32

Marco started using heroin at 17, buying into the lie to try it just once. “I did and wanted it again and again!” Throughout his addiction the lies grew: “I can stop whenever I want.” “It doesn’t affect anyone else.” Now, at 24, he’s been clean for three years. “I woke up one day,” he said, “and finally realized I have value and I’m worth more than this burnt foil and these dirty needles. I checked myself into a rehab center.”

When we feel like we’re bound in chains, we have the ability to break free. First, we have to recognize that nothing is impossible to get past. People face all kinds of heartaches—bankruptcy, addictions, conflict with relatives, rejection, and loss. We need to stop pretending we’ve got it all together and admit: “I’m hurting. I need help!”

Reach out to those offering to walk with you through your troubles, knowing others have traveled this road before you. You need a safe place to let out your tears, anger, and disappointment without feeling ashamed. And you need a place to find hope again. When you see others who are happier and healthier, you can believe that you will be like them too, someday.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ You’re not alone in your pain. Help is there for the asking. Find a support group with others experiencing the same issues. They’ll help you navigate through the tough times.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, healing comes once I cry out for help and am willing to accept it. Amen.*

You Have Something to Offer!

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be?” » LUKE 1:34

Blindsided. Caught off guard. Shocked. Taken aback. Mary was blindsided by Gabriel when she was told she was going to have a baby. “How can this be?” she asked.

It hits us from nowhere—a health issue, family problem, work conflict, emotional upheaval, financial disaster. We never saw it coming. “What am I going to do now?” we ask.

What do you do when your partner suddenly proclaims: “It’s over”? They back it up with “Something is missing” or “It’s just not working.” You’re devastated, but you need to take a step back, try to make sense of what’s happening, and believe you will get back on your feet.

Distance yourself as you start to recover emotionally. Try a change of scenery. Healing can happen in a new environment, free of all the reminders of your partner. Don’t bury your hurt—drain the pain and get it all out. Set a limit on how long you cry, scream, or get angry. Don’t let it consume you. Then move on with your day.

Eliminate all the negative chatter in your head and replace it with positive affirmations: “I’m worth more than this.” “I have something to offer.” Don’t keep looking in the rearview mirror. Life is meant to be lived moving forward.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► When you’re blindsided, follow this recipe: Take time to heal. Be tender with yourself. And talk to others.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, when I’m blindsided, help me pick myself up and recognize the new opportunities awaiting me. Amen.*

Whatever, Lord!

They tried to arrest him, but he escaped their power. » JOHN 10:39

“Why me?” Everything was going great and then your routine checkup revealed a suspicious lump. Or you’re suddenly left alone when your partner leaves or dies.

We all encounter difficult times. We cry out, “I can’t handle this!” If you’re facing a tough situation, instead of becoming a sole proprietor and going it alone, choose to be a soul partner with God.

Run to God and find strength in trying times. Allow God to draw you into a deep, lasting peace and comfort. Don’t wait until you’ve been hit with a tidal wave of heartache and pain.

A partnership with God requires you to check in with him every day and fill him in on the details of your life—the peaceful as well as the painful. When you recognize the consistency of change, you can transfer your problems to him through praying by saying, “Whatever, Lord”: *“Whatever finds its way into my life, I believe you will push, pull, tow, drag, or carry me through it all and I will not be defeated.”*

What matters isn’t what happens to you but how you handle it when it hits. Go it alone?

Choose the healthier choice—run to God and transfer your problems to him.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Print “Whatever, Lord” on index cards.

Embellish them with stickers and hand them out to those facing hard times. Include a prayer of healing on the back.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, I’m accepting your invitation to come to you, because I need you. Amen.*

An Infection Worth Catching

Many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in him. » JOHN 11:45

It was the spring of 2020. Wash your hands regularly for 20 seconds. Maintain social distancing. If you're sick, stay home and self-isolate from others in the household. Wear a mask while out in public. As the first cases of COVID-19 in the USA were confirmed, restaurants, businesses, schools, and churches started shutting down.

The pandemic forced all of us to slow down. Our lives were downsized, our calendars blanked out. Instead of having ten places to go, we had one place to stay. Our priorities were reordered, and we rediscovered that the smallest things have significance. Sharing meals together. Reading books. Watching movies. Playing games. Praying. Listening to music. Families interacting and having time to do fun things together.

It shouldn't take a scare like the coronavirus of 2020 to open our eyes to what matters and who is important to us. It's never about possession of power; it's about people. The experiences we have with our family are invaluable and the lessons far-reaching.

We're all infected with the same needs—love me. Do things with me. Be interested in me. Let's spread *that* infection to our families and world. It's contagious!

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Create Instant Hugs and Listen Time coupons for your children to redeem whenever needed. And give some to the grownups. They need them, too.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, help me cherish and treasure the priceless gift of family. Amen.*

How Sweet It Is

“One of you will betray me.”

» **MARK 14:18**

According to Shakespeare, betrayal is “the unkindest cut of all.” Your spouse is having an affair, your friends are lying to you, secrets are shared—betrayals change us forever. The trust is broken and the wounds won’t heal. We’re angry and bitter, and we want others to feel the pain and embarrassment they’ve caused us. So we jump onto the revenge treadmill, looking for ways to get even.

Sometimes it feels good to get back at people and inflict pain, doesn’t it? But spending time on the revenge treadmill makes healing impossible. It prolongs the pain, drags it out, and magnifies it in our hearts.

First, we rehash it by telling everyone we meet, “I was stabbed in the back.” Then, we slash the person by casting a shadow over their character. Or, we trash it and let it go. How? Through forgiveness. We jump off the revenge treadmill and stop rehashing and slashing. By trashing it through forgiveness, we no longer allow the betrayer to have power over us. We can reclaim our lives, learn from the experience, and then move on.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Let your anger out. Release it without hurting anyone. Scream, hammer nails, jog, or punch a pillow. Let it all out and forgive.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, if I’m still angry after I’ve been betrayed, help me to forgive so the pain softens until it disappears. Amen.*

Chipping Away the Excess

He said this, not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief and held the money bag and used to steal the contributions. » JOHN 12:6

I watched a little girl fly a kite in our parish parking lot. She was totally caught up in the moment, mesmerized by the gentle movements of her kite. There she was, with a few sticks, paper, string, a little wonder, and a great stretch of sky—pure simplicity.

When asked how he made his statue of David, Michelangelo responded, “It was easy. You just chip away that which doesn’t look like David.” What if we were to apply this philosophy to our lives? Downsize by eliminating the excess. Chip away, take one step at a time, and clear out the clutter that overloads and stresses us.

While there isn’t a magical instant cure, you can start small with just ten minutes a day, adding another ten minutes as you go along. Think tall by using the three-box method. Label the boxes: Toss It, Give It Away, and Keep It. You’ll soon discover that your enthusiasm to simplify will just keep growing and growing.

Once that closet or room contains less stuff and fewer distractions, you’ll experience a new world of freedom and peace. The possessions you accumulated and stuffed away will no longer possess you. Remember, there’s no room for a U-Haul in a funeral procession.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Take three relaxing breaths. Then look deeply at what’s important in your life. Your health. Your relationships. Your faith-based values.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, help me take stock, downsize, and simplify so my stuff doesn’t keep getting in the way. Amen.*

How Can I Help?

Jesus was deeply troubled.

» JOHN 13:21

In the movie *The Way Back*, construction worker Jack Cunningham is a functioning alcoholic who hides his booze in a coffee cup. When Father Devine calls him from his alma mater to coach a winningless team, the former high school basketball star's drinking intensifies. After coming to practice reeking of alcohol, he is asked to resign. A terrible fall lands him in a rehab center where he faces the pain in his life and works to turn it around. Jack is a nice person with a wounded soul.

We all face tough times in life. There are financial problems, deaths, broken relationships. It's up to us to choose how we respond to them. Consume or connect? We can shut down emotionally and drown out the tough times by consuming too much alcohol, food, or unsafe drugs, or we can be consumed with anger, causing us to lash out at others.

The right choice is to connect. Call a friend. Don't isolate and suffer alone—reach out and share your struggles. Talk about your feelings. Attend a support group. Others have been there and can offer helpful insights and encouragement. Take it to God. And if you still find yourself struggling, seek out a professional.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Use this week to reach out to someone who is going through a rough patch. Ask, "How can I help?" Then listen.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, you never ignored a hurting person. Rather, you asked them, "How can I help?" I want to follow your example. Amen.*

Soulful Happiness

“What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?”

» MATTHEW 26:15

A husband noticed his wife’s unrest after seeing her friend’s new car. Trying to encourage her, he said, “Look at all we have: a beautiful home, two vehicles, packed closets, yearly vacations. What do you want?” Without hesitation, she said, “More.”

It’s easy to get caught up in the “more” game. But does *more* guarantee happiness? When is enough enough?

Judas sold out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Happy. Got it all. But did he? The sight of Jesus dragged before Pilate, accused, and sentenced to death was devastating to Judas. The guilt accompanying the knowledge of what he did was intense and excruciating.

Happiness isn’t based on happenings or things. The luxurious home, fast car, and swelling bank account don’t last. To find happiness, we have to pack up and leave the “Someday Island,” where we live for the next promotion, successful diet, or financial windfall. We need soulful happiness that says, “Right now, I’m happy with who I am and what I have.”

Soulfully happy individuals cherish all the people God has placed in their lives and never take them for granted. They own their faults and mistakes, liberating themselves from shame and guilt. There isn’t a day they don’t count their blessings and say, “Thank you!”

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Start an “I am happy because...” journal. Every day, add something that brings you happiness.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, instead of looking at what I don’t have, help me to be thankful for all that I do. Amen.*

Remember Me As...

“Do you realize what I have done to you?”

» JOHN 13:12

When asked, “How do you want to be remembered?” Kobe Bryant said, “I want to be remembered as a player who didn’t waste a moment; didn’t waste a day. I felt blessed with God-given talent; I never took it for granted.”

One of the privileges I have as a priest is to be invited into the final days of someone’s life. At that point, most people drop all the pretense and live authentically. They focus on telling stories and sharing memories that say, “This is who I really am; this is how I want you to remember me.”

On this evening, Jesus had one last chance to say to his disciples, “This is who I really am; this is how I want you to remember me.” A teacher true to his word, Jesus made himself vulnerable and approachable. As the disciples shared their last meal with Jesus, their minds were flooded with memories of the sick being healed, the weak gaining strength, outcasts being welcomed, the dying knowing peace, and sinners being given a fresh start.

When you die, how do you want to be remembered? You’re creating those memories right now. So focus on living a meaningful life so people will talk kindly of you long after you’re gone.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Complete this phrase: Remember me as...
Revisit it occasionally, and revise as necessary.

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, help others remember me as someone who did their best and encouraged others to do the same. Amen.*

Is This Your Last Friday?

“Woman, behold, your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold your mother.” » JOHN 19:26–27

“Death is the only impartial friend we have!” Mark Twain knew it played no favorites. No fear plagues our hearts more than the fear of death. Rather than fear it, befriend it. Live the lessons it’s teaching. Yesterday is over and done. Tomorrow may never come. We can either waste the 1440 minutes we’re given each day, or use them wisely. We’re not guaranteed even the next breath. This could be someone’s last Friday.

Keep life in perspective. Thomas Watson, Sr., founder of IBM said, “Everyone from time to time should take a step back and watch themselves go by.” It’s all in how we look at life. Many people live with their finger on the panic button, making mountains out of mole hills. Perspective, folks. Step back and see the bigger picture.

Keep people close. In the end, it’s never about what we drive or our financial worth—it’s about people. It’s saying, “I love you,” or “I’m sorry.” Treasure the people around you while you can.

Every day is a new beginning. It’s an opportunity to change the direction of our lives so, in the end, we don’t leave this world with a pile of regrets.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Schedule time throughout the year to spend time with family and friends, free from cell phones, laptops, or any other devices that get in the way of real human connection.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, since tomorrow isn’t guaranteed, remind me to pay attention to the people I love now. Amen.*

Time to Reboot

“He has been raised; he is not here!” » MARK 16:6

When our lives have gone off track and nothing seems to be going right, it’s time to reboot and start again. We can ignore the opportunity to change, or we can reboot by looking and letting go.

Take a step back and look at your life. Are you happy with the direction it’s going? If not, change it. Sift through the healthy and unhealthy habits. Are your relationships intact? Is an addiction squeezing the life out of you? Do you come home from your job stressed out every night? If you’re stuck, not growing, and unhappy, it’s time to make a change.

Decision time! Either continue on with the bad habits, behaviors, or issues, or let them go. What’s holding you back? Are you afraid of moving out of your comfort zone? Or is it the past? Are you unable to shake loose the grudges you’re carrying? Set yourself free! Let go and don’t look back. It’s not about quitting or giving up, it’s about backing away from what’s not contributing to your potential growth as a person, harming your relationships, and preventing you from living a full life. It’s choosing to open up more space in your life to welcome new opportunities and see what God has waiting for you.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ► Create a “Ta-Da” list. Focus on all the good stuff you’ve accomplished. No negativity allowed!

HANDY PRAYER ► *Jesus, every day is an opportunity to reboot. Thank you. Amen.*

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Liturgical calendar for

LENT 2021

FEBRUARY

17 WED	ASH WEDNESDAY
18 THU	Thursday after Ash Wednesday
19 FRI	Friday after Ash Wednesday
20 SAT	Saturday after Ash Wednesday

21 SUN	FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT
22 MON	The Chair of St. Peter the Apostle
23 TUE	Lenten Weekday <i>St. Polycarp, bishop & martyr</i>
24 WED	Lenten Weekday
25 THU	Lenten Weekday
26 FRI	Lenten Weekday
27 SAT	Lenten Weekday

28 SUN	SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
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MARCH

1 MON	Lenten Weekday
2 TUE	Lenten Weekday
3 WED	Lenten Weekday <i>St. Katharine Drexel, virgin</i>
4 THU	Lenten Weekday <i>St. Casimir</i>
5 FRI	Lenten Weekday
6 SAT	Lenten Weekday

7 SUN	THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
8 MON	Lenten Weekday <i>St. John of God, religious</i>
9 TUE	Lenten Weekday <i>St. Frances of Rome, religious</i>
10 WED	Lenten Weekday
11 THU	Lenten Weekday
12 FRI	Lenten Weekday
13 SAT	Lenten Weekday

14 SUN	FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
15 MON	Lenten Weekday
16 TUE	Lenten Weekday
17 WED	Lenten Weekday <i>St. Patrick, bishop</i>
18 THU	Lenten Weekday <i>St. Cyril of Jerusalem, bishop & doctor of the Church</i>
19 FRI	ST. JOSEPH
20 SAT	Lenten Weekday

21 SUN	FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT
22 MON	Lenten Weekday
23 TUE	Lenten Weekday <i>St. Turibius of Mogrovejo, bishop</i>
24 WED	Lenten Weekday
25 THU	ANNUNCIATION OF THE LORD
26 FRI	Lenten Weekday
27 SAT	Lenten Weekday

28 SUN	PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD
29 MON	Monday of Holy Week
30 TUE	Tuesday of Holy Week
31 WED	Wednesday of Holy Week

APRIL

1 THU	HOLY THURSDAY
2 FRI	GOOD FRIDAY
3 SAT	HOLY SATURDAY
4 SUN	EASTER SUNDAY OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD

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