

## LOOKING UP - February 15

### “Praying for your Family”

Many of us work really hard to provide for the needs of our family, show them appreciation, give good gifts and keep in contact - but the most valuable thing we can do for them is to lift them up to God in prayer. I want to share a simple encouragement for you today to pray for your family. I bet most of you do that regularly and if that is you, keep it up! But, sometimes we all need a reminder of just how valuable our prayers are and the impact they make in the spiritual realm. This Family Day will likely be a very different one for most of us and probably a bit quieter than usual. So, let me encourage you to take time right now in the calmness of this day to make prayer for your family a priority.

If you don't know where to begin, here are some ideas:

- >Thank God for each member of your family by name and speak a blessing over them...
- >Lift up loved ones who do not know Christ - pray for their salvation...
- >Ask for divine strength and wisdom in your family roles... (husband, mother, aunt, grandfather etc.)
- >Pray in the mighty name of Jesus against generational patterns that have hindered your family...
- >Invite God's blessing for your home to be a place of nurture and peace...
- >Pray for the families next door to you and your witness to them...
- >Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to show you how to pray specifically for them...

May God bless you and your family with a deep sense of his favour and blessing on this Family Day.

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Steven Amarin - First Baptist Church Tillsonburg

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## LOOKING UP - February 17 - "Fasting"

For many Christians around the world, today marks the beginning of Lent. Traditionally, this has been a forty day period of reflection and preparation leading up to Resurrection Sunday. During this time it is customary for people to fast from certain foods and desires of the body in the hope of showing remorse for sin and to identify with Jesus as he fasted in the wilderness. Now, since observing Lent is a human tradition and not necessarily a command of God, we are not required to follow it.

Traditions aside, I think it needs to be said that fasting has a vital place in the Christian life. It is one of the core spiritual disciplines we discover throughout the Bible... The people of Nineveh turning to God in repentance (Jonah 3), The exiles preparing to return to Jerusalem in Ezra's time (Ezra 8), Anna the prophetess waiting for the Messiah (Luke 2), Jesus in the wilderness for forty days preparing for his ministry (Matthew 4), Paul and Barnabas as they appointed new church leaders (Acts 14)...

God has given His children the opportunity to use times of denying our flesh so that we can fill our soul. Fasting has tremendous proven effectiveness in cleansing us emotionally, physically and spiritually. It can help to reveal the true condition of our relationship with God and His guidance on where we need to grow. Some people might fast from food for a few days and devote mealtimes to feasting on God's Word. Some might fast from entertainment and social media for a period of time to disconnect from the world and connect more deeply with God in prayer. In all, fasting is meant to deepen our connection with God.

Whatever form fasting takes in our life, Jesus gives us some excellent guidance for us to do it effectively...

"When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:16-18).

First, we see Jesus say "when you fast" not "if you fast" - he is assuming that his followers already practice fasting and value it. Second, fasting loses its point when we draw attention to ourselves or seek approval doing it - like sharing and comparing what you are fasting from with others during Lent! Third, there is a promised reward from our Heavenly Father when we fast with integrity and humility.

So traditions and watchful eyes aside, take some time today to consider what will you secretly surrender to God in this season ahead.

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Steven Amorin - First Baptist Church Tillsonburg

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## LOOKING UP - February 18 - "I'm So Offended!"

I have noticed that people these days seem increasingly primed for offence. Just look around and notice how quickly people are to vent their outrage. How often we hear news stories of a notable figure's career being cancelled by the crowd for saying the wrong thing however long ago they said it - how people will take to social media to express their anger over poor service at a business or someone who slighted them. How quickly we are to assume the role of a victim at even the smallest of offences and work to win allies that will fight our bitter cause. It is sad that we hear so much about petty offences while grave injustices in our world so often go unnoticed.

As followers of Jesus we are meant to operate differently in this world. I have come to learn that one of the goals of the Christian life is to become unoffendable. There is simply not enough time in a Christian's life to manage all the potential offences that come our way in a given day. Consider this simple proverb: "Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offence." (Proverbs 19:11)

When we are offended it can very quickly lead to bitterness; bitterness to unforgiveness; and ultimately unforgiveness to hatred. This proverb is a reminder to nip offence in the bud before it grows, takes root and bears its bitter fruit in our lives.

I have come to learn that some of the most offensive, arrogant and mean spirited people I have met in my life have a heartbreaking life story that led them to that place. The old adage is often true, "Hurt people hurt people". Let me be clear, this does not mean we excuse serious abusers to continue perpetrating their harm on others. This is about our feelings of being offended by another and whether we will hold on to it in bitterness or release it's hold on us in forgiveness.

Think about this; Jesus was the most innocent man who ever walked this earth, yet, he was falsely condemned in three courts - a known murderer was freed in his place - abandoned by his friends and mocked by the crowds, he carried the very cross he would be crucified upon. If any one had the right to be offended it was Jesus, yet in that very moment he looked at those gathered at the foot of the cross and said, "forgive them Father, for they know not what they do". He bore our offence and in return gave us grace.

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## LOOKING UP - February 19 - "I'm So Offended!...PART 2"

Lately I have been preaching a series of messages on the armour of God and reflecting on the verse, "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). This passage speaks to the spiritual reality behind all that we see and reminds us that each soul can either be yielded to the power of God or to the powers of darkness.

Our enemy's #1 strategy is "Divide and Conquer". It was Niccolo Machiavelli who famously wrote about this devious tactic in his book *Art of War*. He instructed military captains to, "Endeavour with every art to divide the forces of the enemy". This was accomplished by sowing seeds of suspicion, mistrust and offence among the people you desired to rule. A captain need not even lift a sword or lose a soldier if he could get a nation to conquer itself from within. This is nothing new, Satan has been doing this since the dawn of humanity.

Did you know that Satan has a plan for your friendships, marriage, family, church, class, workplace, community etc.? Satan's plan is to pit us against each other and to turn allies into enemies because we are more vulnerable and easily dominated when angry and alone. But, we do not need to let him win. He only has as much power as we give him in our lives. Our enemy has a plan, but more importantly, do you have a plan?

We cannot control the actions of others, but we can control our response. As Christians we are to anticipate trouble with others in this broken world, Jesus even expects us to run into trouble with fellow believers and gives us crystal clear direction to follow when they sin against us (Matthew 18:15-20). As followers of Jesus we are meant to keep short accounts with those around us and not be a pawn in the enemy's game. There will be moments that kindle our anger but, "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." (Ephesians 4:26,27). When we are slighted, disrespected, unappreciated and filled with offence, we must remind ourselves of who our real foe is and what is at stake if we play into his hands.

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