

Monday, November 27. Read Luke 8:4-8, 11-15. In this parable, Jesus said our priorities matter. He used images of various states of the human heart (soil) to show how each one affects our ability to hear and follow God's word (seed). When we cultivate an open, "good soil" heart, he said, then "concerns, riches, and pleasures of life" won't be able to crowd out the good fruit God is at work to bear in us. What's most important in your life? Who or what first planted "the seed" of God's Word in the soil of your life? What are some concerns or interests that have become less prominent in your life as you've made God your top priority? Which of the four types of soil in Jesus' parable best describes how receptive you are to the seed right now? What are the concerns or interests that most often compete with God's kingdom to be the top priority in your life? What key choices have helped to open you to God's work in helping you to cultivate that "good soil" heart? What shifts in attitudes, actions and values would move you further in the direction of being "good soil" for God's Word to grow in?

Tuesday, November 28. Read Proverbs 13:4, 11; 16:8, Hebrews 13:5-6. Scholar John Walton saw this theme in the Hebrew wisdom of Proverbs: "While wealth is considered a good thing and even a gift of Yahweh when acquired honestly, it is not the most important thing by far. If a decision must be made between wealth and a right relationship with Yahweh or with love or peace, the latter are far better." Hebrews echoed that view—life may bring us much money, or not so much, but in either case contentment is possible and highly desirable. Proverbs noted that, as a general rule, steadily working toward financial goals is wiser than chasing "get rich quick" schemes. Have you ever worked steadily toward a goal, and felt the inner satisfaction when your disciplined pursuit paid off? On the other hand, have you ever had a financial windfall, and then regretted impulsively "blowing it"? Reflecting on Hebrews 13, scholar N. T. Wright wrote a helpful rule of thumb: "When you love something or someone, you make sacrifices for them. When you find yourself making a sacrifice of something else in your life, simply so that you can follow where money is beckoning you, regard that as a danger signal." What relationships, activities or values would you never choose to sacrifice just to pursue more money?

Wednesday, November 29. Read Philippians 4:10-13. From a prison cell (Philippians 1:13), Paul shared his inner response to gifts he had received from the Christians in the city of Philippi. His words showed how "needs" and "wants" fit together in his life, in good times and bad. In Christ, he said, he had "learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance." Paul did not glorify or glamorize poverty or hunger in these verses. (If it's true that money does not guarantee happiness, that's certainly also true of poverty!) Paul expressed heartfelt gratitude for what the Philippians had sent. How did those gifts represent God's care for Paul's needs? In what ways are you able to be God's physical presence to bless someone else who is in need? Paul had learned to be content in every situation. How did he express his "secret" (verse 13)? How, if at all, have you learned to take strength from God's presence when you deal with scarcity? On the other hand, do you ever have trouble finding contentment when dealing with plenty? If so, how does God help?

Thursday, November 30. Read John 13:3-17. On the night before he was crucified, Jesus gathered with his disciples, and washed their feet. It was a shocking act—washing feet was slaves' work. Then Jesus told the disciples they were right to call him "Teacher" or "Lord." His lesson for them (and us) was that when he acted as a servant, he did it, not to abdicate leadership, but to redefine our ideas of glory and power. His life was guided by God's standards, not earthly ones. John, a very precise writer, quoted Jesus saying, "I give up my life so that I can take it up again" (John 10:17). He used the same Greek words to describe Jesus "taking off" and "putting on" his robes before and after he washed the disciples' feet. So John was saying that Jesus washing the disciples' feet was an acted-out parable of the way he would give himself up on the cross. Have you ever had an experience in which acting humbly toward someone else felt almost like dying? "Washing feet" was a practical act in a dusty land where people wore sandals. What are some practical ways you can serve another person that will tangibly make their life better? Who is God nudging you to bless with a concrete act of service?

Friday, December 1. Read 1 Peter 5:2-7. Peter wrote a stirring call for all of God's people. He had learned the hard way how vital it is to bring all our anxieties to God in trusting prayer. He had seen the risen Lord, victorious over death after terrible suffering. He called all, leaders and followers, to live with humility before God and toward one another. If humbling yourself triggers feelings of fear in you, you can trust your anxieties to God, "because he cares about you." The CEB Study Bible noted that "Humility was most often associated with status categories (humble versus high status). It wasn't considered a virtue in Greek and Roman circles. Peter's encouragement, then, goes against cultural expectations." Down deep, under certain behavioral veneers, does our culture consider humility a virtue? How easy or hard do you find it to humble yourself with other people, and with God? When you think about the future, whether that future is distant and abstract at your stage of life or whether it seems to be "right around the corner," what are some of the questions that trigger anxiety in your heart? What does it mean (or what would it mean) for you to "throw all your anxiety" onto God? How deeply are you able to believe that, at every stage of life, God cares for you? In what parts of life, if any, is it still hard for you to trust that?