

As you read this Study Guide, please consider giving an additional monetary gift to “CovMissions.” All of the funding of our outreach around the world, and local missions projects come from “CovMissions.” We challenge you to continue to give to the church, but to go “above and beyond” the tithe and support the Missions outreach of Covenant. 100% of our CovMission funds are used directly for outreach.

Monday, February 19 – Read Matthew 25:34-40. Jesus gave a word picture of the final judgment, using his familiar technique of telling a short “parable” story. His judgment story clearly showed his Kingdom’s priorities. Kingdom people, he said, care for the hungry and thirsty, the poorly-clothed and strangers, the prisoners and the sick—the people whom Jesus called “the least of these brothers and sisters of mine.” Jesus knew that, most of the time, it’s relatively easy to serve people doing well. He said we meet him with those who are poor, sick, hungry—and in prison. We sometimes say we should “see the face of Jesus” in people in need, and help them. But in Jesus’ story, both those accepted and the ones turned away were surprised. Jesus said all people in need of help were his brothers and sisters. We’re one human family—and people treated unjustly, or facing poverty and illness, are “us,” not “them.” In what ways can you sense God reshaping your attitudes toward “the least of these” in your community and world? Some think following Jesus means giving up bad habits, learning large amounts of Scripture, or other “religious” duties. Jesus said those who inherit his kingdom live as his physical presence to meet the needs of the human family he loves. How can you bless Jesus, day to day, by actively seeking to help meet some of the needs of “the least of these” in your family, neighborhood, at work, or in the world at large? *Prayer: Lord Jesus, how many times have I met you, needing justice, food or healing, and turned away without recognizing you? Forgive me, and keep shifting my perspective to see and act with your compassion. Amen.*

Tuesday, February 20 – Read Matthew 5:43-46. Jesus was not much concerned with assigning blame for the bad things that happen in life, but rather with bringing healing. He taught that God doesn’t send bad things into our lives, but rather can find ways to redeem even those when they happen. Adam Hamilton wrote, “God does not take from us our freedom, nor does God miraculously deliver us from the consequences of our actions or the actions of others.... God does promise to sustain us and force good to come from the painful things we experience in this life.” What makes it important to you that Jesus pictured God as a just, loving, merciful parent, not a monster who makes bad things happen to us? Jesus said that God causes it to rain on the just and the unjust alike. How often are you tempted to limit your help and your efforts to bless only to people you like, or consider “worthy”? How do you understand the idea of loving your enemies? Do you believe Jesus meant having mushy, affectionate feelings about them, or choosing to act for their good despite what they have done? How can making those hard choices help you grow in character and maturity? *Prayer: Lord Jesus, hate is so tempting—and, in the end, so destructive to me, and to your purposes for my life. Teach me more each day about how to love and pray for even my enemies. Amen.*

Wednesday, February 21 – Read Luke 6:31-38. Luke used much (but not all) of the material from “The Sermon on the Mount” (cf. Matthew 5-7) in this passage. That does not mean we have to choose the “right” version. Most scholars believe these principles were likely the core of most of Jesus’ sermons. Too often, we are a bit glib about forgiving. “No big deal—it doesn’t matter,” we want others to say. But it IS a big deal to forgive. Forgiving as God forgave reminds us that it took the cross to show us God’s forgiveness. Luke linked the Golden Rule (“Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you”—verse 31) to Jesus’ words about how to treat enemies. In what relationships do you find it hardest for you to treat others as you’d wish to be treated? How can Jesus’ teaching help you discern how to live out the Golden Rule in ways that bless others while you maintain healthy boundaries and self-care? From Francis of Assisi to his namesake Pope Francis, from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Mother Teresa, many Christ followers have stood with the poor and victims of injustice. The Message rendered Luke 6:46 as, “Why are you...always saying ‘Yes, sir,’ and ‘That’s right, sir,’ but never doing a thing I tell you? These...are words to build a life on.” How are you building your life on Jesus’ values, as so many of his followers through the centuries have done? *Prayer: O Jesus, I’m not God—but you promised me that you can shape me to be more and more like you. I offer my life to your re-shaping hand, because ultimately your way of life is the best way of life. Amen.*

Thursday, February 22 – Read Romans 5:1-5. The apostle Paul sketched the spiritual growth process through which every Christ-follower can develop a character that meets challenges (like unfair conviction, or any of life’s dark twists and turns) with hope and trust, not despair. God, the apostle said, has the power to bend even bad things to good purposes in our lives. Paul said that as we meet trouble in God’s grace we grow in the kind of resolute, grounded hope needed to survive and thrive. The apostle didn’t write through naïve, rose-colored glasses. Human nature is not at all inclined to view tests as something to “take pride” in. That’s why he focused on God’s wisdom and love as the divine gifts that can turn hard times into times of growth. When has God given you wisdom to face a tough challenge, or surrounded you with love and support for the strength you needed? In what ways does God’s ability to “grow you” through life’s challenges help you view hard times differently? Later in Romans, Paul wrote, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13). How close to “overflowing” is your inner supply of joy and hope today, whether you face good situations, hard ones or a mix? How can you open your heart and allow God to fill you to overflowing with all joy and peace? *Prayer: Lord God, come and fill me. Replace fear, doubt and despair with your joy, peace, faith and hope. Let me walk every day in the light and love you pour into my heart. Amen.*

Friday, February 23 – Read Romans 8:37-39. “Nothing can separate us from God’s love.” When he wrote that, the apostle Paul knew all about “trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword” (verse 35). Those are the parts of life that often shake our faith in God’s love. But Paul said God allows us to face them, but never leaves us while we face them. Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “Look around at the many things that threaten to separate you from the powerful love seen through the cross and resurrection, and learn that they are all beaten foes. Learn to dance and sing for joy to celebrate God’s victory. The end of Romans 8 deserves to be written in letters of fire on the living tablets of our hearts.” The compound Greek word translated “sweeping victory” was *hupernikaō*. “Huper” was a superlative, the origin of the English “hyper.” And the “nik” in the middle of the word came from the Greek word for “victory,” a word we know from shoes and athletic gear—“nikē”! Paul asked two compelling questions: “If God is for us, who is against us?” and “Who will separate us from Christ’s love?” Both were phrased in a way that assumed the answer was “Nobody and nothing!” In what ways does that confidence shape your daily life for the better? What can help you, even on the hardest of days, to open your heart to the sweeping victory God offers you? Help Covenant offer Christ’s love to those who need it most. Make a gift to “CovMissions.”