

*John 10:10 (NIV)*

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

*Psalms 37:4–5 (NIV)*

<sup>4</sup>Take delight in the LORD,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

<sup>5</sup>Commit your way to the LORD;  
trust in him and he will do this:

*Ephesians 3:14–21 (NIV)*

<sup>14</sup>For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup>from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. <sup>16</sup>I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup>so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup>may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup>and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup>Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

*What keeps us from the life God offers? Often, it is pride.*

Have you ever gotten in your own way, i.e., ended up undermining your own efforts? I'm pretty sure most of us have stories to tell on that score. Perhaps it was gluttony or lust, avarice or anger, that threw us off track. We want to lose weight or control our temper or stay faithful or be content with what we have, but then anything from a buffet table to a shiny black Audi rears up in front of us and we think to ourselves, "I've earned it," or "I deserve it" and we are back where we started. But it often goes deeper than that.

Directly to the point, we say we want a deeper relationship with God or to grow as a disciple of Jesus, but we often actually work against this. It all goes back to where this series started. Our hearts are our autopilots, for we are all driven by our desires, our loves. We do what we love. Yet our hearts are disordered. We love the wrong things or we love the right things the wrong way, often without realizing it. It all seems right and good, until we discover that our choices have led us into yet another mess.

The long line of Christians who have come before us tell us that, at the root, our problem is pride, which is problematic for us. Is there really something wrong with being proud of our accomplishments or our children? Bishop Will Willimon considers this in his book on the vices:<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the Fathers of the Church called Pride the chief sin, the very first sin, in an admirably honest attempt to address that particular sin of "good" people first, the sin one most likely would find hanging out at the church, the sin most likely to breed among faithful, good people—such as people who might read a book on the Seven Deadly Sins. I'm proud that the Fathers put Pride first. Downright humble of them. C. S. Lewis called Pride "the great sin" and devoted an entire chapter of *Mere Christianity* to Pride alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon, William H. *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the 7 Deadly Sins* (pp. 33-35). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

We are what we worship. Aquinas noted that Pride is a turning-away from God. It is worship wrongly ordered. It is the sin of Faust, the sin that is the refusal to stay in one's proper place, the sin of the upwardly mobile. It is thinking of oneself as the Creator rather than the creature. In fact, without a belief in God, I can't figure out why Pride ought to be condemned. Perhaps that is why Pride has become a virtue, with the pushing of God out of the world. Pride is essentially a liturgical matter, a matter of wrong worship. Whereas most of the other sins really need no theological justification, when it comes to Pride, without the theology, I can't figure out much justification for considering it a sin. Pride may make people annoying, difficult to live with, in need of some good-natured deflation, but it is not a "sin" — *unless Jesus says so*.

Christians are trained to agree with the Jewish mystic philosopher Martin Buber when he says, "The struggle with evil must begin within one's own soul." My sin is the problem, not yours; my Pride, not yours. If you are not attempting to be a Christian, I can't imagine why you would be troubled by your sense of Pride. If there is no God, then Pride can be a healthy, creative response to the emptiness of the world.

But for those of us who are following the way of Christ, stumbling along after him, to be sure, but still following, then our Pride—our subtle, deceitful, intra-ecclesial Pride—is the first sin that we must consider and confess. Our Pride is part of our self-deceit, our lying about our real situation. As frail, mortal, vulnerable creatures, we react to our vulnerability in futile ways, one of them being our Pride. There is something incredibly pitiful about modern, twenty-first-century North American people telling ourselves that our greatest need is for more self-esteem, more self-confidence, more self-assurance—pitifully revealing how little esteem, confidence, or assurance that we have in ourselves. Or course, from a Christian point of view, that's the problem—ourselves.

*What can we do?*

But what can we do in the face of our self-deceit, of our insistence on our self-sufficiency? As in most things, the place to begin with Jesus, who after telling his disciples to set aside their worries, pointed them in God's direction:

"But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus points us toward this great truth: the kingdom of God is to be the first priority in our lives and, if so, all else will follow. Our energies and passions and devotions are to be poured into the kingdom. We are to see the world as God sees it. Then, our desires, our loves, will become more and more in line with God's.

In the Greek, "strive" is an imperative, a must do – we are to keep striving. This is not about a hoped-for someday coming of God's kingdom but about its reality today, for our own lives. D.A. Hagner puts it this way in his commentary on Matthew: "This imperative means that one should make the kingdom the center of one's existence and thus experience the rule of God fully in one's heart." Even this is a bit abstract for me. How do we experience God's rule in our hearts?

The kingdom of God is exactly what the words say: it is the place where God is king, where God rules. Even though we live in a world that is plagued by tragedy, violence, illness, materialism, and selfishness we can choose to live according to God's teachings, pursue the virtues and turn away from the vices. In other words, we are to keep striving to live according to God's moral will, for that is true righteousness and an essential part of our heart's transformation.

*The stuff of life*

Jesus says if we strive first for God's kingdom, then "all these things will be given to you as well." What sorts of things? What we eat. What we drink. What we wear. (v. 31).

Though I doubt that Jesus had in mind a diet of bread and water and trousers made of sackcloth, I also suspect he wasn't speaking of dinner at a four-star restaurant, Moët-Chandon, and designer clothes.

We have a way of making "wants" into seeming "needs." To an extent, this is a good thing. Increasing standards of living have resulted in numerous benefits for millions of people. But, still, we seem to chase an unreachable goal. No matter how far along we get, we just redefine the target further away. Somebody always has a bigger house or a more luxurious car. George Will wrote, a need "is defined in contemporary America as a 48-hour-old want," leading to "a blurring of needs and wants." The result is what he calls the "tyranny of the unnecessary."

If we are going to find our way to Real Life, to the abundant life that Jesus promises and desires for us, we have to begin by recognizing that our own desires are misplaced. Too often, we seek the things of this world, whether it be stuff or status, rather than the things of God. Our journey begins with the transformation of our minds and hearts, our desires and dreams. By the grace and power of God, such transformation can be ours. Indeed, you might take a moment and read the passage above from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. God is the one "who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us." Amen.

### The Kingdom of God

When Jesus says, "strive first for the kingdom of God," what is he talking about? It is a lot less abstract than you probably think and, no, it isn't a place in your heart. The kingdom of God is a matter of geography. It is the place where God is king. The Jews of Jesus' day waited for the coming of this kingdom – an actual kingdom. When God again reigned, there would be no war, no hunger, no hatred, no sick, no crippled, no blind . . . and the Jews had waited for a long time.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus' very first words are a blazing proclamation: *'The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent! And believe in the Good News!'*

Wow. Jesus brings the news that the wait is over, that God is doing great things, that God's kingdom is at hand, that the Day of the Lord has come . . . that all of this is breaking in upon Israel through the ministry of Jesus himself. God's glory was shining upon them all and the world would never be the same.

Of course, this seems an odd claim to make. Evil was then and is still a present reality. There is simply too much pain and suffering in the world to suggest otherwise. So again, how could Jesus proclaim the coming of God's kingdom or tell us to strive for it?

Richard Hays answers such questions this way, "Why do the powers of wickedness continue to operate effectively in this world? Because the story is not over. The climactic victory has been won on the Cross, but there is still much residual resistance. So we live in a tension-filled interval where skirmishes are still under way." The kingdom of God is present, but not fully consummated. We are to strive to live as if God's kingdom is fully present, leading lives of righteousness, loving God and loving neighbor. From this will flow our heart's true desire.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. *Real Life*. Abundant life. The good life. What is it? You might begin by discussing what *you* would mean by these phrases. Then imagine that you are a public opinion researcher. What do you think most people would mean by “the Good Life?” Do you think that the responses of Christians would differ from non-Christians? How might they differ? What do you make of the fact that market researchers can find very little difference between the lives led by committed Christians (those who would say that they are trying to live as a disciple and attend church regularly) and those who are not?
2. *Striving for the kingdom of God*. This can seem so abstract. How can we make it more concrete? Discuss my analogy to living by U.S. law even in a lawless land. Is the analogy helpful? How? What do you think it means to be strive for “righteousness?” Could it be as plain as always seeking to do what is right? How do we know what is right? What does doing right have to do with achieving the Good Life? If you think of God’s Law as a list of arbitrary rules, it may be hard to see the connection between doing right and Real Life. But if God’s Law shows us the way toward being truly human, then the connection is clearer.

## Daily Bible Readings

*More on real life, the good and abundant life*

**Monday, Deuteronomy 30** God is faithful and desires that his people choose life, the Good Life. This begins with God’s Law, the expression of God’s moral will.

**Tuesday, 1 Kings 3** Solomon’s prayer for wisdom. Note how God promises Solomon more than Solomon ever imagined, so long as Solomon follows God’s Law.

**Wednesday, Psalm 16** A song of trust and security in God – “You show me the path of life.”

**Thursday, Proverbs 3:13-33** The true wealth and the true security

**Friday, Matthew 6:25-33** Don’t worry. Really!

**Saturday, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12** Paul writes about the shape of a life pleasing to God

## Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

This class will not meet on Oct 8 and 15

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

This class will not meet on Oct 9 and 16

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning October 21: Scott will teach a new series, *The Virtues*.