

## The Perfect Heart

“If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent” (Matthew 12:7).

**Scripture:** Matthew 12:1-8

**Song:** “O for a Closer Walk with God”

“Here, Mommy,” the little child announced as he gave a bouquet of succulent yellow blossoms to his mother. “I picked you some flowers.” She felt sick to her stomach. The little boy had plucked all the squash blossoms from their garden. She had been excited at the prospect of those delicious squashes. But instead of scolding, she cradled her son in a hug and walked him to the kitchen, announcing, “Let’s put these in a vase, honey!”

The little boy’s performance was certainly not perfect, but his heart was beautiful! The mother acknowledged the perfection of his intent rather than the imperfection of his actions. In contrast, the Pharisees were fixated on perfect performance and had lost perfect devotion to God. Jesus called for mercy, out of devotion to God, rather than the habitual performance of sacrifice.

It seems that we are often more focused on how our performance looks rather than concerned that our hearts are pure before God. A pure heart trumps a legalistic keeping of rules when it comes to loving others well. And such a heart has the approval of the perfect God because His heart is bent on mercy.

**Father**, help me to lay aside my agenda and to seek Your heart for others so that I may serve them with Your mercy. In Jesus’ name, amen.

November 23–29. **Heather Wise** loves teaching English to adults in order to show them the love of Jesus.

## Sacrificial Love

**Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart** (1 Peter 1:22).

**Scripture:** 1 Peter 1:17-23

**Song:** “May the Mind of Christ My Savior”

The spitball whizzed across our seventh-grade classroom and hit the board in front of the substitute teacher with a splat. The room was silent. Our substitute turned around slowly. “Who threw that?” Silence. “All right. You will all receive a detention unless the person who threw that confesses.” Still there was silence.

This was broken at last as one of our classmates rose from the back of the room. “I did it, ma’am,” he announced. We were aghast. We all knew that he had not thrown the spitball, but he was willing to take a detention to allow the rest of us to go free. His display of unselfish love for his classmates left an indelible mark on me.

Our Lord sacrificed so much more for mankind. Shouldn’t such a sacrifice mark us with the desire to love each other with the same kind of sacrificial love that He showed in His death for us?

I want to love others well, but sometimes a little selfish gain is apparent in my actions. Our God judges our work impartially and so reveals our motives. So let us live in reverent fear in response to the precious blood of Christ, who redeemed us from empty ways of life.

**Father**, convict me of my selfishness and teach me to love unselfishly, as did Jesus. In His name, amen.

## Faith in the Promises

**Those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith** (Galatians 3:9).

**Scripture:** Galatians 3:6-9, 13-14

**Song:** “Faith of Our Fathers”

I planted somewhere around 30 sugar snap pea seeds in my garden one spring. The package said they would germinate in 7–14 days. I trusted what the package said and waited. And then I waited more, still expecting the seeds to sprout. Each day I examined the ground for any sign of the tiny seedlings that the package had promised. And my faith in those seeds was rewarded when one day I counted 25 little sugar snap peas emerging from the soil.

God initiated relationship with Abraham, and Abraham responded in faith by leaving Haran (Genesis 12:1) to travel to a land that God promised to give his offspring (v. 7). These people would become “a great nation” (v. 2), as well as part of the means of the blessing that would come to all people (Galatians 3:14) by faith through Abraham.

All who place their faith in Jesus are blessed with the privilege of a relationship with God. It was God who took the initiative for relationship with Abraham, and He has taken the initiative for relationship with us through the sacrifice of Jesus, a descendant of Abraham. The blessing for every person who responds to Christ by faith is the gift of salvation and the Holy Spirit. The more we live by faith, the more we will trust Him.

**Oh Father,** increase my faith in You, my love for You, and my desire for You. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Leave to Thy God

**Pharaoh's daughter said to [the baby's mother], "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him (Exodus 2:9).**

**Scripture:** Exodus 2:1-10

**Song:** "Be Still, My Soul"

After I was diagnosed with cancer and began treatment, medical bills piled up. I fell into the trap of worry. Unsettled in spirit, I spent a lunch break in a nearby park, lifting my fears to my Father, asking Him to provide and asking for grace to trust Him for these needs. As I prayed, the Lord brought today's song to mind. Singing through the first verse, the following words brought me up short: "Leave to thy God to order and provide." His peace flooded my heart as I walked back to work, praising Him for His provision.

Moses' mother did not know how God would provide for her infant son. By faith, she placed him in the pitch-coated papyrus basket and floated him on the Nile River. And God provided. Not only did God provide protection for Moses, but He provided a home among the royalty of Egypt. God did more than anyone would have expected.

God is able to provide abundantly for us—more than we ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). It seems we constantly have needs, but God is able to constantly provide for them in His way and in His time. I have seen God provide. My medical bills were paid, and my cancer is completely gone. To God be the glory!

**Holy Father,** teach me to trust You to "order and provide" for every need. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Faith That Acts

**Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead** (James 2:17).

**Scripture:** James 2:14-17

**Song:** “Trust and Obey”

I’ve known of people who respond to beggars in the name of Jesus with help and resources that are good for the needy. I have also known of people who respond by calling out, “God is generous.”

Both types of people outwardly exhibit some knowledge of God and exhibit even some faith. God certainly is generous. But today’s passage gives us the defining truth that those who respond with help and resources are more likely the hands and feet of God’s generosity—and also demonstrate a thriving faith. They are people who do good and give good things because of their life of faith in God. They speak words and do things that bless others, and they pray for others because of their faith. And they do these for all sorts of people, including those who are rough around the edges, might not wear clean clothes and are not well groomed, smell and use vulgar language, or even mistreat them (Luke 6:27-28).

Sometimes faith that is alive in our hearts becomes a little messy in our lives. But whenever we go where God calls and act in accord with our faith, then we can be assured that God will equip us to carry out His directives. He grants both faith and strength for action.

**Dear Father,** please give me faith to carry out Your commands and the ability to serve well. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Faith in Action

**[Abraham's] faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. . . . And he was called God's friend** (James 2:22-23).

**Scripture:** James 2:18-26

**Song:** "Jesus Is a Friend of Mine"

A family believed that God was calling them to Japan for ministry, but financial support was short. The father was still working to ensure that he could provide for his wife and young children. Wise believers counseled that they would probably need to take a greater step of faith in God and His call. And so, acting in faith, the husband quit his job and the family began visiting churches full-time to share their vision and ask for support. Within a year, the financial support they needed had been committed and the family had moved to Japan. The man's faith was evident and completed in tandem with his actions.

God sees our faith-filled actions that are in line with His will. He is able to provide all the resources we need for faithful obedience. He can provide what we need in order to have food and shelter while dedicating ourselves fully to His call. He can give us faith to trust Him while following the sacrificial path He might put ahead of us. Faith and action together, as was the case with Abraham, show us to be friends of God because we trust Him.

**Oh Father,** how I want that unquestioning obedience that delights Your heart! Help me receive strength and dedication from You as I step out in faith that is evident in righteous action. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Eat, Clothes, Eat!

**Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?** (James 2:5).

**Scripture:** James 2:1-13

**Song:** “Oh, How He Loves You and Me!”

A guest arrived at a dinner party, but the host sent him away because he was not dressed well enough. The man went home, changed into formal clothes, and returned to the party. He was received cordially. During the meal, the host was shocked to observe the man spooning food into his pocket and commanding, “Eat, clothes, eat!”

“What are you doing?” the scandalized host asked.

The man replied, “You did not welcome me at first because I was not wearing the right clothes. So I assume you had really invited my clothes to eat and not me.”

We might laugh awkwardly at this story, but I know that I have had prejudiced thoughts and have sometimes expressed favoritism toward people. It is all too easy to discriminate based on someone’s personal hygiene, clothing styles, or any number of other preferences. But all people are beloved creations of God, for whom Jesus died and whom God has invited to receive the inheritance He promises to all who respond in faith and love. And we can give ourselves to help them know about and receive God’s plan for their lives.

**Father,** help me become uncomfortable when I fail to bring the love of God to those who are different from me. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Serving Your Savior

**Serve the LORD with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling** (Psalm 2:11).

**Scripture:** Psalm 2

**Song:** “With All I Am”

After the last round of interviews and evaluation, it was obvious that Jack, the outsider, would be the next CEO instead of Richard, who had been at the company since day one. When asked how he felt after being passed over, Richard humbly replied, “I don’t want to be in a job that I am ill-equipped for. I will celebrate Jack’s leadership and follow him.”

God is above us, and we are to serve Him with a celebratory fear. This doesn’t mean be afraid of God like a slave would fear his master, but more like a child should fear his parents—with respect, love, and a desire to serve them.

We can forget that God alone is qualified to be God. There is an even greater divide between how big God is and how small we are than there is in the difference between workers and the CEO. As we grow in faith and love, we must remember that God saves us to reflect His glory to the world and that our work should not be obligatory but done with joy.

**Father**, with all that I am I want to serve You as my Lord and celebrate Your rule over me. In Jesus’ name, amen.

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November 30. **Jason Cybulski** lives in Oregon with his wife and three children. He moved there to go to seminary and liked it so much, he stayed. He is the pastor of community groups in a local church and enjoys coffee, cooking, and teaching people to live God’s mission.