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study guide

Week One – July 2

I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE—TO THE KING

READ: 1 Samuel 8:4-9

Be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as you come to study.

PRAY: “What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?”

OPENING QUESTION: How have you followed the Spirit’s lead this past week?

OVERVIEW: We have a tendency to look for a human solution to fill the God-shaped hole in our hearts. We want a king—and as a result, we settle for something far less than God’s design or desire. We have a King—His name is Jesus!

This scripture passage records the back story which led God to select and have the prophet Samuel anoint Saul as the first king of Israel—but the text makes it clear: they already had a King.

The Israelites had been warned about the qualifications and consequences of a king by Moses in Deuteronomy 17:14-20. Later, God’s people took the land under Joshua’s leadership—but they quickly forgot the Lord and entered into a cycle of broken covenant in which God lifted His hand of protection and favor from His people and allowed them to be attacked and harassed. They cried out to God when they suffered the consequences of their disobedience—being delivered by a judge God raised up to lead them—and restoring their covenant...for a season. For 200 years, a series of judges (men and women) were raised up by God to restore God’s people into covenant relationship—before they would descend into disobedience and chaos all over again.

The kings that followed were Saul, David, and Solomon—a divided kingdom that rose or fell on each king’s faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the things of God. It was an unmitigated disaster with the northern kingdom of Israel falling first and the southern kingdom of Judah falling second. This would lead to an exile—out of which a remnant would return to fulfill the prophecies which paved the way for the Messiah—the anointed one—the Son of God—the true King would come. Jesus came to establish a Kingdom—which will place us at odds with the empires of this world and their competition for the place of primary importance in our hearts.

This passage takes place toward the end of Samuel’s life. He had been a faithful priest and prophet of God ever since God called him as a boy sleeping in the Tabernacle—but now he was getting older, and it was time to think about succession planning.

Let’s consider the following as we look at, consider, and get in touch with what it means to pledge our allegiance to God’s Kingdom:

EVERY LEADER HAS A SHELF LIFE (1 Samuel 8:1a)

Because we're finite human beings with a limited lifespan, no one can lead forever. The time comes when every leader in human history has had to exit stage right—either because they retire, their life ends, or the circumstances of leadership change. That's the problem with swearing our allegiance to a human king. We need to examine where our loyalties lie—are we committed to human leadership that shifts and changes like the weather and time—or have we staked our allegiance to the One who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords? If we do, we can have peace during times of uncertainty and the changes of human leadership. In the verses that come next, the people of Israel reveal they forgot to depend upon the One who had delivered them from bondage.

CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP CAN MAKE US ANXIOUS (1 Samuel 8:1-5)

National anxiety continues to rise as we approach next year's election. Leadership matters—especially from leaders who are dedicated and committed to knowing, loving, and obeying God. Samuel had appointed his sons to serve as priests at Beersheba, but they didn't share the same faith and values as their father. The elders of the land could see the difference between Samuel and his sons, and they were anxious. They wanted a king so they could be like everybody else, but they weren't supposed to be like everybody else. In their anxiety, they pursued a human solution rather than inquiring of the Lord. Instead of asking the Prophet Samuel to inquire of the Lord about who should lead them in His place, they wanted a KING—and forgot they already had one!

OUR DESIRE FOR HUMAN LEADERSHIP OFTEN REJECTS GOD (1 Samuel 8:6-8)

Samuel was obviously upset, so he prayed—and God answered. God reminded Samuel they weren't rejecting him or his sons—but ultimately, they were rejecting God as their King. One of the most dangerous things in Christian history has been the politicization of the Christian message for political gain. It started in the Roman Empire with the establishments of Christendom—and as the Christian Church became mainstream, we lost our zeal for evangelism and dependence on God. In more recent times, the Church has been compromised by aligning with political parties and flawed candidates for public office—all of which is a veiled attempt to find a human solution to a problem that can only be solved by divine influence and intervention. Our quest for a "king" or a "queen" to set things right will always fall short because we'll not only be judged by our own merits, we'll also be subject to the consequences of our actions.

GETTING "THE KING" WE WANT HAS CONSEQUENCES (1 Samuel 8:9-18)

God instructs Samuel to give them what they want, but also to warn them about the consequences. God was their King and had promised to bless them—as long as they kept covenant with Him—which involved following His commandments, statutes, and ordinances. Those remained in place—including the tithe—but a king would also have the right to impose his own rights—to enlist their sons and daughters into service, to take the best of their fields, vineyards, orchards, servants and livestock for his purposes by charging a second tithe. They would become "slaves" to the will and whim of the king. This is God's prediction of "taxes"—and when they cried out for relief, God did not answer. To put this in modern terms, elections have consequences. We keep looking for a king to make things right—and while we live with the consequences of our actions, this will never be the best solution.

WE WANT A KING (1 Samuel 8:19-22a)

At the end of the day, the people rejected the God they could not always see, but could always trust—for a human being they could always see, but rarely trust. They forgot how Jericho fell because of God's command

and not because of military might—they forgot how Gideon had delivered God’s people with only 300 soldiers—they forgot that, when they were faithful, God had gone before them and always won the day. They forgot and asked for a king to lead them into battle—to tax them—to enlist their children and take their property—and upon whose faithfulness and unfaithfulness God would judge them.

We need to remember: human leaders come and go—but the One who holds the future is the One who has been faithful in the past. Be a good citizen, but remember—no one—no single leader—will ever be able to do for you—for us—for a nation—what God can do. We’re called to pledge our allegiance to God and pray He’ll raise up leaders who’ll do the same.

RESPOND:

- Do we tend to put our faith and trust in human leaders—or in God?
- Do you think we take the time to consider God is the One who’s in control?
- In what ways are we like the Israelites who looked past God and wanted a human ruler?
- Do we see ourselves as citizens of the Kingdom? How might that change our outlook?
- What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?
- What next steps do you need to take?
- Who do you need to tell?
- How can the group help?

Week Two – July 9

I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE—TO HIS KINGDOM

READ: Matthew 6:25-34

Be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as you come to study.

PRAY: “What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?”

OPENING QUESTION: How have you followed the Spirit’s lead this past week?

OVERVIEW: Ever since the Christian faith became the house religion of the Roman Empire, the distinctives of the Kingdom have been in danger of being blurred by the agenda of the Empire. Christendom at its best made Christianity legal. But at its worst, it made Christianity domesticated—and as church and state worked together, the state gradually took the soul and vitality of the Kingdom away from the church and made it an agent of the Empire. The time has come to reclaim the distinctive between the Kingdom and the Empire and put our allegiance in the proper order.

Jesus was born into the Roman Empire, yet He began His ministry by proclaiming the Kingdom of God had come (Mark 1:14, 15). In Jesus’ day, there was a dichotomy between the Empire and the Kingdom—and that dichotomy still exists for us today. We must operate in the Empire but live by Kingdom principles to be like Christ.

The Empire elevates the rich and forgets about the poor, teaching us to seek wealth above all else. The Empire teaches us to be selfish and self-serving, to be ruthless and violent to get what we want, and to oppress the poor and vulnerable in pursuit of our own pleasure. The Kingdom stands in stark contrast to the Empire, though. The Kingdom belongs to the poor, and they are called blessed (Luke 6:20). Those who live by Kingdom principles are loving, generous, and merciful—even to their enemies (Luke 6:35). Those in the Kingdom don’t take advantage of the vulnerable but love them as they love themselves. The Kingdom is based on humbling yourself, rather than exalting yourself over others (Luke 14:7-14).

The Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew chapters 5-7 contains the core teaching of what it means to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God in this world. These verses in chapter 6 speak to the heart of what often distracts us from our devotion to the Kingdom—our misplaced priorities about money and its inability to relieve our worry and anxiety.

Let’s consider the following as we look at, consider, and get in touch with what it means to pledge our allegiance to God’s Kingdom:

PURSUE THE RIGHT TREASURE (Matthew 6:19-21)

Jesus understood the number-one competitor for the allegiance of our hearts is money—and the “stuff” it can purchase. He also knew nothing we chase after here lasts forever—it all has a limited shelf life—and the day will come when everything we’ve scratched and clawed to attain will be worthless and taken away by someone else. Jesus makes it clear: our single-minded focus on the pursuit of the treasures of this world is flawed—we need to focus first on eternal treasure in heaven.

So—what do we get to take to heaven with us? Cars? Houses? 401K balances? Nope—all of that will someday disappear or be used up by those who inherit what we’ve left. The only thing we get to take to heaven with us is other people. We need to be single-minded in pursuing the treasure that lasts forever—salvation and sharing it with others.

PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT YOU PAY ATTENTION TO (Matthew 6:22, 23)

We tend to become what we watch. That’s because our eyes are the window to our souls. We tend to become what we watch. The psalmist said, “Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word” (Psalm 119:37). How much time do we waste putting useless things in front of our eyes—personal devices—mindless TV shows—biased propaganda? How much better off would our souls be if we governed what we watched?

SERVE GOD FIRST (Matthew 6:24)

In the Apostle Paul’s letters, he warns the reader about being double-minded—trying to live in the flesh and the Spirit. He concludes it’s impossible because our behavior will always gravitate to the lowest possible level of what we tolerate and fix our eyes upon. That’s exactly what Jesus is getting at in this verse—we can’t serve two masters. He says in the end we can’t serve both God and money. God is the One who promises us a future with hope—and money is what the world uses to tempt us to take our eyes off eternal things. This is not to say we shouldn’t work or be concerned about providing for ourselves—but it is to say we should do so as citizens of the Kingdom who understand that all we say, do, and are is based upon our understanding that we live our lives for an audience of One.

DON’T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF (Matthew 6:25-29)

Worry is one of the greatest sins of our time. In the light, these verses define worry as the failure to trust God for what we need. All too often, we see followers of Jesus whose lives are consumed with worry over temporal things. If we understand Jesus is King, and we live in response to His grace and trust in His promises—the things we worry about begin to pale in comparison. God knows what we need—and therein lies the rub: we are often not content with what we need because we want what we want when we want it. And when we do, we become susceptible to worry and anxiety. We live in the U.S.A.—one of the greatest and most prosperous nations in the history of the world. Yet, social scientists tell us we’ve never been more worried, anxious, depressed, restless, and unhappy. Why? Because we spend too much time sweating the small stuff!

TRUST GOD TO PROVIDE WHAT YOU NEED (Matthew 6:30-32)

We’re called to never forget God is ready, willing, and more than able to give us what we need. We serve the God of the universe who loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love. God knows what we need—but we often have not because we ask not. We’re called to cease worrying about clothes, food, shelter, and all our material needs—and to seek to know our place in God’s world and trust Him implicitly. Our lack of faith shines through in our failure to trust that God will give us what we need. But God does expect something from us—which brings us to our next consideration.

SEEK GOD’S KINGDOM FIRST (Matthew 6:33)

“Therefore...” means our worry, anxiety, and general unrest is due to our having the wrong priority in our lives. When we seek God’s Kingdom and His right living first, He recalibrates our wanters—adjusts the way we keep score—and helps us understand the things of this world will never scratch the deepest itch of the human soul. Seeking God’s Kingdom first establishes our worldview—shapes our home life—determines our work ethic—regulates our citizenship—and in the process, frees us for joyful obedience to the One who saves us. It also helps us not to sweat the “small stuff” because we come to realize...

IT'S ALL SMALL STUFF (Matthew 6:34)

"Therefore..." do not worry about tomorrow. It'll arrive with worries all on its own—which will only compound today's worries. We're called to seek God's kingdom first—and as we do, all the small stuff we worry about will be cared for. When we pledge allegiance to His Kingdom, it changes our priorities—mends our broken wanters—and guides us into keeping score in terms of eternity.

RESPOND:

- What Kingdom allegiance is shaping your life? Is it the kingdom of this world (that will pass away)—or the Kingdom of our Lord (that will never end)?
- Why is the answer to this question so important? How will it shape our priorities?
- What needs to happen in your life to trust God more and to seek His Kingdom above everything else?
- What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?
- What next steps do you need to take?
- Who do you need to tell?
- How can the group help?

Week Three – July 16

I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE—TO HIS VALUES

READ: Deuteronomy 8:6-11, 19-20)

Be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as you come to study.

PRAY: “What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?”

OPENING QUESTION: How have you followed the Spirit’s lead this past week?

OVERVIEW: In a day when people of faith often look like a mirror of the culture—rather than reflecting the light of Jesus—we need a renewed movement of Kingdom people who are committed to pledging their allegiance to the values of Christ’s Kingdom. While all the commandments can be summarized with Jesus’ instruction to “love God” and “love people,” what our world often confuses for “love” isn’t “love.” The world around us doesn’t need us to look, act, and speak like it—the world needs us to live the values of the Kingdom in our day and time.

The Book of Deuteronomy reads like the Last Will and Testament of Moses. Before he dies in Deuteronomy chapter 34, he spends most of the book giving parting instructions on how God’s people are supposed to live distinctive and peculiar lives among the nations. God was about to send them across the Jordan River to seize the land he’s promised to Abraham—while at the same time using Israel as His instrument of judgment against the centuries of sin of the many tribes of the Canaanites. Chapter 8 was the pivotal moment in Moses’ instructions to God’s people.

There’s no doubt we’re in a battle for the soul of our nation in our time. The question is: will the Church readily and willingly obey God, name sin, and announce grace during this critical time in our nation and in our generation? Or will we forget the Lord and be like everybody else?

There were three commonly repeated sins to be avoided in these chapters: idol worship resulting in sexual immorality —child sacrifice —and forgetting to depend upon God as they prospered. Their prosperity would cripple their faith and dependence upon God—the Northern Kingdom first—and the Southern Kingdom second. As we look at the day and time in which we live, we find these three sins evident in our culture today and are in direct correspondence with the systematic dismantling of distinctively Christian, biblical values in the culture around us.

Let’s consider the following as we look at, consider, and get in touch with what it means to pledge our allegiance to God’s values in this world:

IT'S IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER GOD'S FAITHFULNESS (Deuteronomy 8:1-4)

Moses begins by reminding God's people to remember His faithfulness. They were quick to follow Moses out of Egypt, but it took them a long time to learn to follow. God humbled them by teaching them to depend upon Him for daily bread and to listen to every word that came from the mouth of God. God faithfully fed them—prevented their clothes and sandals from wearing out—and gave them the pillar of cloud and fire to lead them—all to teach them humility. If we're going to learn to be obedient to God in the future, we need to remember His faithfulness in the past—especially in those times when He humbled us—brought us to our knees—and taught us to depend upon Him. God doesn't waste a thing in our lives. It's important for us to remember God's faithfulness.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO WALK IN OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S COMMANDS (Deuteronomy 8:6-8)

God was about to allow His people to cross over the Jordan River and take possession of the land—the one they'd missed out on 40 years earlier because they listened to ten faithless spies rather than obediently acting on the promises of God as expressed through Joshua and Caleb. The land was flowing with milk and honey—livestock and harvestable crops—fruits and vegetables—barley and wheat. The land was with rich reserves in copper and flint—suitable for developing weapons to arm and protect themselves. The most important phrase in this passage is the first one—OBSERVE THE COMMANDS OF THE LORD YOUR GOD. This should have been fresh in their minds since they'd been learning them for 40 years.

DON'T FORGET THE LORD (Deuteronomy 8:9-16)

Israel was to obey the Lord—following His commandments—not serve any other gods—abstain from sexual immorality and child sacrifice (like the Canaanites)—and to move forward with God as their King. God was about to give them cities they didn't build—wells they didn't dig—vineyards and orchards they didn't plant. And in this chapter, Moses reminds them all they were about to experience is the gift of God's favor on their lives—which was contingent upon their ability to faithfully remember Him—worship Him—obey Him—represent Him. When they forgot the Lord and began to think it was all about them, during the time of the judges, God would lift His hand of protection and allow them to experience enough adversity to cause them to remember and cry out to the Lord.

DON'T GET FAT, DUMB, AND HAPPY (Deuteronomy 8:17, 18)

Sometimes, personal or national success can have a devastating effect on the faithfulness of people. Israel was about to become one of the richest nations on earth—collecting taxes from tax routes—selling grains to neighboring lands—mining and smelting copper and bronze. Over the next 500 years, God prospered them—except for the times when the people or their king forgot to give God His due and bought into the lie of how important or successful they were. This was a warning to them—and to us. Jesus would later say it was easier for a camel to fit through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. What He's talking about is our propensity to get fat, dumb, and happy about how well we've done and to forget it was purely God's grace that brought us this far—and it's only by His grace that we'll ever get home.

As a country, we've been a dominant global power for nearly a century—but we seem to have forgotten the secret of our success as we have forgotten God who created us and saved us. What we find is the more we try to remove Him—and the values He holds as important—the more likely we are to become fat, dumb, and happy—which ultimately will lead to our fall.

WHEN WE FORGET THE LORD—JUDGMENT COMES (Deuteronomy 8:19, 20)

Obedience to God is the key. Sadly, Israel would do just that—it would take several hundred years of judges and kings, but eventually God would allow Assyria (the Northern Kingdom) and Babylon (the Southern Kingdom) to be used to judge God's people—the way God's people had been used to judge the Canaanites.

Israel's prosperity undercut their remembrance of the Lord and duped them into thinking the reason for their success was their ability. We see the same thing in our nation today. Compromise leads us down a path of deception and ultimate bondage. Our liberties and freedoms, justified by areas of fleshly compromises, open the way into moral license and ultimate licentiousness.

Many Christians have prostituted themselves by choosing to live by preference rather than by conviction—reflecting the values of the world rather than the values of the Kingdom. We've remained silent to the sexual decay of our time. We've allowed life in the womb to be sacrificed on the altars of profit and convenience. We've often embraced our success in terms of personal accomplishment rather than a gift to be used by God. Perhaps the best thing we can do is repent—seek the Lord—and beg for Him to heal our land.

RESPOND:

- Do we remember God's faithfulness—or do we take it for granted?
- To what values will we pledge our allegiance?
- What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?
- What next steps do you need to take?
- Who do you need to tell?
- How can the group help?

Week Four – July 23

I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE—TO BE A GOOD CITIZEN

READ: Romans 13:1-7

Be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as you come to study.

PRAY: "What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?"

OPENING QUESTION: How have you followed the Spirit's lead this past week?

OVERVIEW: Being a citizen of the Kingdom doesn't mean we detach from the world in which we live—on the contrary, we're called to live to the highest ideals of the Kingdom while residing in the world and being a good citizen of our country. In today's scripture passage, the Apostle Paul admonishes us to be subject to governing authorities—and Jesus opens the door giving to us a beginning glimpse into what it means to live in two worlds.

These are challenging times for America. The nation that has served as the light of liberty for the world seems to be weakening down to her very foundations. Many Americans are openly expressing great concerns about our nation's future for the generations to come.

Thomas Jefferson, America's third President, said, "God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure...?" Today, we have the same concerns. We likewise face concerns that the Church of Jesus Christ is failing to fulfill her responsibility in the public and political arena in our great nation. To lift our nation back to the level of decency and morality designed by our forefathers, we as Christians must become the "salt" and "light" Christ commissioned us to be in our personal Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and world—which doesn't mean detaching ourselves from the world around us, but rather by engaging it. Not just as witnesses, but also as citizens. We're to vote—serve—support our government—and even pay taxes. After all, Jesus instructed the crowd, "...Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

Unfortunately, some have misconstrued this to mean Christians have no place in Caesar's public arena. That is far from the reality of what Jesus was saying. It's clear He's commissioned us to give of our time, our efforts, and our influence to the things of God—but also to the actions required for creating a godly government. If the process of government is ordained by God, then each and every follower of Christ has a responsibility to be a good citizen and be involved in the election of godly people to public office.

In Romans chapter 13, the Apostle Paul writes to Jesus followers in ancient Rome—giving them solid advice about how to live as citizens of the Kingdom inside of an Empire.

Let's consider the following as we look at, consider, and get in touch with what it means to pledge our allegiance to being good citizens:

BE A GOOD CITIZEN (Romans 13:1a)

Paul is writing to an illegal, minority sect in the pagan Roman Empire. Except for the few members of Caesar's household who followed Jesus, most of the Jesus followers in Rome were slaves who had no rights. Paul's appealing for them to live under the authority of a pagan government. We're reminded that no matter how oppressive we believe a government may be, it's important for those who follow Jesus to be willing to live under their authority. It doesn't mean we need to agree with all they do or the actions they take. It does, however, mean we need to be willing to live under its rule of law.

To be a good citizen not only means living under authority—but also engaging the process of electing those who govern us. Politics in America involves citizens engaging in the electoral process to determine our representative government. When we embrace the "political processes" that bring about change for the betterment of our fellowman, we're being the "salt and light" Jesus called us to be.

GOD HAS ALLOWED AND ESTABLISHED GOVERNMENTS IN PLACE (Romans 13:1b)

Paul makes it clear the authorities placed over us have been established by God. Government is God's idea. It has a purpose—to establish rule and law and order. Consequently, the politicians establish a government which, through its branches and policies, sets the rules by which our society operates. In a real way, our government controls our manner of living by using taxation, laws, and ordinances as means of control. Without the government, chaos would reign—and when we leave it to those who do not live under the authority of Jesus or without checks and balances, chaos still reigns. When government is ruled by those do good, law and order prevails as God gives them power to bring judgment upon those who practice evil.

REBELLING AGAINST GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY IS REBELLION AGAINST GOD (Romans 13:2)

This doesn't mean we can't and shouldn't express our opinions. There are times when it is a Kingdom value to rebel against the ruling authority. History tells us the German Church largely missed an opportunity to stand up to German dictator Adolf Hitler in the run up to World War II. Martin Niemöller was a German pastor during that time who failed to cry out against the atrocities of Hitler. He later became a victim of a Nazi Concentration camp. He issued a warning we must heed today about Christian responsibility to engage in government. He stated:

"In Germany, they first came for the Jews, but I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew: then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. And then they came for me...and by that time there was no one left to speak up."

HOW WE RESPOND TO GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY HAS CONSEQUENCES (Romans 13:3-5)

We should have no fear of sound and fair government. In verse 4, Paul speaks concerning the people in the government God establishes, "For He is God's minister to you for good." Who is He? He is the servant of God who gives righteous leadership in government.

Solomon wisely tells us: "With good men in authority, the people rejoice but with the wicked in power they groan" (Proverbs 29:2). One must, however, exercise caution and be discerning in exercising their right of civil disobedience. Exercising such rights can have consequences—the total of which the government has the authority to exercise.

ENGAGE IN THE PROCESS OF SELECTING AND SUPPORTING THE GOVERNMENT

(Romans 13:6, 7)

Paul and Jesus encourage us to pay our taxes. Paul explains it so that those who govern us can give their attention to governing in our culture. Good government is God's plan, and His desire is that godly men and women represent us. But godly men and women can't get assume leadership unless they're elected.

Some have the mistaken idea God's people have no place in political activity—but that's contrary to the biblical narrative:

- God told Abraham he would be the father of a great nation of people. This is politics at its beginning.
- Joseph was raised by God to become second in command of the most powerful nation of his time; he was the Vice President of Egypt!
- Moses was the "Lawgiver." Most of the laws of Moses are still on the legal books of our day.
- Daniel, by his influence changed a King and his kingdom.
- Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Prophets spoke against the politics of their day and called their nation back to God.
- David was King of Israel—the leader of his nation.

Simply put: you can't separate politics from the Word of God or the people of God—and no earthly government will ever be pleasing to God unless Christians are part of it.

RESPOND:

- Do you think we understand the importance of being a good Christian citizen?
- What does that mean to you? How can we honor Jesus as a good citizen?
- What first steps need to be taken?
- What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?
- What next steps do you need to take?
- Who do you need to tell?
- How can the group help?

Week Five – July 30

I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE—TO BE HIS WITNESS

READ: Matthew 5:13-16

Be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as you come to study.

PRAY: “What do you want to teach me/us in these moments?”

OPENING QUESTION: How have you followed the Spirit’s lead this past week?

OVERVIEW: Every follower of Jesus is called to be a witness. Among Jesus’ last words to His disciples were: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit falls upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem—and Judea—and Samaria—and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In fact, the question isn’t whether we’re a witness or not—but rather what kind of witness we will be? Will we be self-serving? Or selfless? Will we reflect the world? Or will we reflect Jesus? Will we be salty providing the purity and preservative salt brings? Will we be a dim beacon of hope to the world? Or will we shine the power of grace brightly?

In the Sermon on the Mount, we stated that the Beatitudes are the elements of the Christian life. But this next section deals with the Christians’ influence. A Christian who is merciful or is meek, or is a peacemaker, or who is pure in heart will have a tremendous influence in the lives of those who haven’t given their heart to God.

These words from Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount are well-known and could easily be skipped over—to be salt means to participate in the silent work of influence—and to be light means to participate in the manifestation of Jesus, the Light of the World, in people’s lives.

Let’s consider the following as we look at, consider, and get in touch with what it means to pledge our allegiance to being God’s witnesses:

TO BE A WITNESS IS TO BE A CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE (Matthew 5:13)

Jesus speaks here about the silent witness of the Christian believer. It’s the influence you have over other people’s lives to season and preserve them for eternal life. Christ is saying let your influence season people’s life for the Kingdom. Salt changes things. As salt, we can flavor a whole community, a whole neighborhood, a whole workplace. The whole issue of salt is the seasoning, the influence you might say. It’s been said, “Salt is no good if it never leaves the saltshaker, it is only a decoration to the kitchen table.”

We deny the salt function when we fail to mingle with people who are lost; we deny the function of the salt when we fail to be kind, merciful, a peacemaker. To deny the salt function is to deny the principles of the kingdom of God. We are not to draw away from society—we are not of the world, but we live in the world. And if we as salt don't rub against those who have no flavor—those who are perishing—who will? People need to see how our faith is a seasoning to our life in order to begin asking questions like: "Why are you like this?"

TO BE A WITNESS IS SHOW A CHRISTLIKE TESTIMONY (Matthew 5:14-16)

We know Jesus is the true Light, and our witness reflects that light. The question is what does it mean that Jesus is the Light? "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that light but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which gives light to every man coming into the world" (John 1:6-9). "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). It's imperative that we reflect the light of Jesus.

Light is visible—it's seen when it works openly. When we openly share our faith with others, when we share about God, people see the light of our witness. People need to see Jesus in our lives; we need to share with them the true source of light. Remember, we're just reflectors of the light. Actually, we're more like mirrors who reflect the light—but to reflect the light, we need to position our mirrors to the light. And we do this by studying God's word, by praying, and by thinking. And as we position ourselves each day to Christ, the light will shine automatically. People will see the glory of God!

We should ask ourselves: ARE PEOPLE ABLE TO TASTE OUR CHRIST-LIKE INFLUENCE IN SOCIAL SITUATIONS? ARE THEY ABLE TO SEE OUR TESTIMONY? The time has come for us to be the salt of the earth. The time has come for us to be the light of the world. To shine with the glory of God His character. When people see in us the character of God, then His message will spread like wildfire.

RESPOND:

- As you think about your life, are people able to taste your Christ-like influence in social situations?
- As you think about your life, are people able to see the light of Christ shining in and through you?
- What needs to happen for this to be the case?
- What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?
- What next steps do you need to take?
- Who do you need to tell?
- How can the group help?