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A Lenten Series on Wrestling with Sin

Week 1: Called to Abundant Life

Scripture Passage

John 10:7-11

Focus Statement

No one is perfect. We all live in a broken world and, like sheep, we have gone astray. Thankfully, the story doesn't end there. We were made for something better - the abundant life made possible in Jesus. Jesus, the good shepherd who shows us the path to the abundant life we are called to live.

ME

How does sin, both individual and collective, rob us (as a thief would) of the image of God/abundance/humanity/life itself? So often in our lives, sin and temptation creep up on us just like a snake in a garden and distract us from the abundance in life that Christ has called us to and gifted us with. When have you gotten caught up in seeking something (maybe a pipe dream of some sort, or a car, technology, memorabilia, place to travel to) only to realize that it only took your eyes off the good things you already had, or the good that was already coming?

WE

We have all experienced these kinds of distractions or temptations in our lives. Throughout our faith journey, they will certainly come. Frankly, we will have moments when we give in to temptation. We let things take our focus off Christ. We allow things to cause our faith to waiver or weaken because we put them first. Invite your people to reflect on that too.

GOD

The shepherd metaphor points to God's compassionate, loving relationship with God's flock. The shepherd takes responsibility for each sheep, as in Luke 15:3-7/Matthew 18:12-14, where the Good Shepherd seeks after just one sheep. It points to the danger of living apart from the grace of God, as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide our actions toward abundant life.

Abundance isn't pockets full of money, a garage full of cars, cabinets full of food and a clean bill of health with a life expectancy of 150 years. David Guzik says, "Abundant life isn't an especially long life. It isn't an easy, comfortable life. It is a life of satisfaction and contentment in Jesus." Abundant life is a reaffirmation that no matter what happens, Jesus will be with us, see us through, provide for our needs and give us strength for the journey. It is a promise of Christ's birth, when Isaiah calls him Emmanuel, meaning "God with us." And it is a promise that Christ reaffirms, "And lo, I will be with you always, even until the end of the earth."

Even though life has tests and trials, Christ is with us. Even though we will make mistakes, fall short, give into temptation, sin, and get distracted, Christ promises to never leave us. Grace abounds and is always greater and stronger than our sin. God calls us to live in that assurance, to walk in that abundance, knowing we are never alone, to find strength and joy in knowing that the Lord will fight our battles. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

YOU

How will you receive the gift of God's abundant grace and love today? How might you live into more of the reality of what Christ offers us?

WE

It's good to reinforce the universality of living with sin. We all sin and fall short. We all need to be called back into the fold. What a blessing to know that even though we might stray, Christ, the Good Shepherd, finds us and beckons us to come home.



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Week 2: Facing the Dark to Reach the Light

Scripture Passage

1 John 1:3-10

Focus Statement

To find true healing, we have to face the hard truths. Part of the healing process is realizing that something is broken. This brokenness is the darkness that overshadows our lives. The good news is there's freedom in the light.

ME Share a story of something in your life that was a problem, issue or sin that you struggled with for some time and realize you were living day to day lying to yourself by not acknowledging this problem.

WE So often, we are not truthful with ourselves about the real problems and issues that exist in our lives. These struggles can live with us for years and we do all we can to not actually face them. But what's that one thing that you don't want to face? What's that issue?

GOD

- The book of 1 John was written to combat the idea that once you accepted Jesus, your sin was forgiven and you could do anything you want. It gives us some truth about this faith walk, and through that truth bring us into true relationship with Christ.
- One of the biggest components of a relationship is honesty with others and ourselves. As we wrestle with sin, we won't get anywhere unless we're honest with ourselves, and honest with God. Verse 6 says unless we face and recognize our sin, we lie only to ourselves. Even in that moment, whatever came to your mind, that deep thing you don't want to face – that is God speaking to you.
- Verse 3 says we must face these dark places, so that our joy may be complete. We can never have true and complete joy, until we deal with these dark places. By holding on to dark places, we allow evil to kill our inner peace and destroy our relationship with Christ, keeping us from the abundant life Christ.
- Verse 7 shows us that by facing and stepping out of the darkness into the light, we walk in true fellowship with God and with one another. Together, we walk in that light and hold each other up with true honesty, accountability, and relationship with God and each other.

When we take a hard look at ourselves, face the spiritually dark places and attempt to live differently, we find that all our relationships will change.

YOU

- Self- Self-esteem and self-worth increase because we aren't living a lie.
- Others – Our relationships with others become more true and real.
- God – Our relationship with God strengthens because there is no more hiding. We are walking fully in the light and growing into deeper and deeper relationship with God.





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WE

What one thing can you do today to address and face your sin? Jesus went to a cross, died and rose so that we could walk in the light and know that we are forgiven. Yet that means to admit, even to ourselves, where we fall short (sin). As we go into prayer, name your darkness before God. How will you then walk into the light? What action step do you need to take to “go and sin no more”? Disconnect your internet? Change your eating habits? A phone call you need to make? Pray for your spouse or even yourself instead of carrying the anger? Let go of something that’s had you bound for way too long?



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Week 3: You Are Not Your Sin

Scripture Passage

John 8:1-11

Focus Statement

Sometimes we feel like what we have done is who we are. When we mess up, fall short, do the wrong things, it is not who we are. It is only what we've done. We are the children of a loving and forgiving God.

ME

What were you in high school or even in the neighborhood in which you grew up? ... A nerd, jock, band geek, artist, goth, musical theater kid, "bad" kid, skateboarder? We very easily put ourselves and others into boxes. And we can let those boxes define our entire lives. Years later, we look back and see that is not who we are. Ok, let's be honest, some of us are still nerds and band geeks. But the point is these things do not define us. We are more than that. And there is much more that defines who we are.

WE

The same can happen with our sin or what we've done. We allow that sin to overcome us and define how we live and how we see ourselves. It's all too easy to say, "oh, I'm just..." or "God will never forgive me for ..."

GOD

In John 8 we see a woman defined by her sin, remembered for 2000 years just for her sin, not even given a name. How easily do we do that to ourselves? We remember only what we've done and define ourselves by those things. Jesus gets up out of the dust and looks at each one of us and says, 'go and sin no more.'

The religious leaders and the crowd labelled the woman an adulteress. But when Jesus posed one small question, everyone had to walk away. There is no ranking of sins and we are all forgiven. No matter what you have done, no matter how long ago or how recent, Christ says you are more than this. Christ sees you for who you are and who you can be.

YOU

How has your identity been formed by your sin? What have you taken on because of your sin? What does your self-talk sound like? Following the exact law, the woman should have been stoned that day. The law was clear that death was to be imposed. But here is the good news, Jesus forgives that woman and us. We aren't defined by where we've been or what we've done.

WE

When Jesus tells the woman to go and sin no more, he is freeing her *and* us. We can walk out of this place free and new. As we look forward to this Easter season, we remember that it is because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection that we are born anew. Each day is a new opportunity to start again, to go and sin no more.





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Week 4: There is More

Scripture Passage

Mark 1:35-39, Philippians 3:12-16

Focus Statement

When life gets challenging, we have a choice- to either fall back into the sin that is so enticing and easy for us, or to persevere and trust that when we follow Christ, we will live into even more than we have ever imagined.

ME How have you had to learn how to handle difficult situations in your life? What has been an important way to refocus or an event that has caused you to refocus in your life?

WE When things get challenging in our lives, it's easy for us to slip back into our unhealthy habits. Sin in our lives creates not-so-great coping mechanisms. God's redeeming work allows for those habits to be broken and for us to find our identity in Christ, not in ourselves. We can create new habits to live into who we are in Christ. What habits and patterns do we tend to fall into when life gets difficult for us?

GOD

Mark gives us this beautiful image of Jesus who has to get away from the busyness and demands on him in order to refocus and re-center himself. It is exhausting to be doing so much for others--even for the Son of God. Jesus models for us what is most important about handling the exhaustion, stress and depletion of our emotional resources--not that we fall back into bad habits, but that we take a step back and pray.

Jesus spends a lot of time in deserted places praying--even when people are looking for him. These refueling moments are almost always followed by another period of ministry, works, healings etc. Even Jesus needed to keep himself grounded in his relationship with the Creator.

Paul, in Philippians, encourages us to keep going. We are not somehow immediately "cured" of our sin and life is suddenly perfect for us. It is that we are called to persevere, remembering and living into the fact that Jesus Christ has redeemed us! It is not about what has come before, our past sins and habits we have developed over the years. What matters is who Christ raises us to be and the steps we take to get there.

Wesley deeply believed that God's grace was so much greater than our sin. Through the work of God's sanctifying grace, we can attain total sanctification. It is not an easy process, and we don't get there all at once. Bit by bit, by pressing on, we attain what Christ offers to us. Paul recognized he only gets where he is by the grace of God. Likewise, we only become sanctified through God's grace and with God's presence.

YOU

What healthy habits is God calling you to? In the midst of life's challenges, how do you find time, like Jesus, to center yourself in God? What do you need to change in your own life to be focused on Christ, not on the shame and guilt of your sin? How do you remember that God's grace is even more than your sin? What is the next small step in your pursuit of a godly life?

WE Sin is constantly lulling and wooing us back into the "easiness of sin." Through Christ's grace, we are called to more -- to respond to challenges firmly rooted in who Jesus calls us to be. We need to make time to pray, to meditate, to sit in Christ in order that we learn to trust that God will lead us into a fullness of life. We are called to be even more than we ever dreamed we could be apart from God. May we be rooted in prayer and in trust in the one who has saved us all.



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Week 5: The Gods We Make

Scripture Passage

Exodus 32:1-14

Focus Statement

Sometimes we allow things in our lives to become more important to us than God, distract us from God, and even come between us and God. These are the gods we make.

ME

Tell a story about something that prevents you from fully focusing on God – this can be something in the past or an ongoing struggle (for example, focusing on productivity over worship, wealth, physical appearance, prestige at work, even becoming preoccupied with meeting others' needs/demands).

WE

At times, we all find ourselves being pulled in many directions. We may not feel God's presence and we become focused on the things in our daily lives, things we think will fulfil us and deserves all our attention. This happens to us individually and as communities. Name some of the social sins that your community and the world struggle with – racism, greed, allowing people to live in poverty, etc.

GOD

People are frustrated with Moses for being absent on Mount Sinai for so long. Moses had been their God-appointed leader and his absence felt like God's absence to them. So, they turned to their most prized possessions – golden jewelry -- and created an image of a calf from it. They said this golden calf was the god who had led them out of Egypt. God responded with burning, all-consuming anger. Though we may not like to think of God as angry, God's reaction to the people's idolatry demonstrates how God cares about them. God is not removed or distant, as they might feel; rather, God is in a living relationship with them. God wants them, and also wants us, to be active partners in this relationship.

Moses pleads with God to demonstrate grace and reminds God of the promises made to the Israelites' ancestors that they might be a great people. The text says the Lord "changed his mind". Even though God is not indifferent to our sins, God always remains true to God's promises and character. Even when we go so far as to create other gods for ourselves, God is always faithful to us and calls us back in grace. We too can "change our minds."

Moses mediated between God and the people. We, too, have been sent a mediator, Jesus the Christ, who shows us the character of God in human life. When we stray and find ourselves worshipping gods that seem closer, we can look to Jesus as God's eternal promise to forgive our sins and call us back to Godself.

YOU

Consider what you spend most of your time doing, thinking about and talking about. What is at the center of your life? Sin is anything that draws us away from God. Let us not allow the sin of idol worship to draw us away from God. Rather, let us embrace God's grace that causes us to change our minds and our lives.

WE

Is there something your church has become preoccupied with because it seems closer and more tangible than God? Having a perfect building, sticking to a familiar set of worship music, being a "certain kind" of church? This is a moment to honestly challenge the congregation, with gentleness and grace, to remember that none of those things are God. Challenge them to boldly center God in their lives, even when they do not feel God's presence and even to be a Moses for others – a witness to the character of God, one who prays on behalf of others, and works to bring people closer to God.



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Week 6: Palm Sunday (Passion Sunday)

Scripture Passage	Matthew 21:1-11; Matthew 27:15-23 (Consider using the first reading as an opening or responsive reading.)
Focus Statement	Being part of a crowd can be a powerful experience. The crowds in Jerusalem moved from the joy of Palm Sunday's "Hosannas" to the jeers of Good Friday's "Crucify Him!" How can we get caught up in the crowd, and how can we fix our eyes on Jesus?
ME	Tell a story about a time when you were in a crowd where the mood shifted, and you were suddenly frightened, scared or nervous to be in the group. How did you behave as a part of or apart from that crowd?
WE	Do you behave differently around certain people? Have you said or not said things because of how you believed they would be received by the crowd you found yourself in? Think about groups at school, work, family gatherings, concerts, sporting events and even church.
GOD	<p>Many in the crowd thought Jesus would be a messiah who would overthrow the Roman occupation. At the time, there were zealots and bandits who identified as messiahs and promised to free the Jewish people. How is Jesus different? The "humble king" on a donkey signaled that Jesus wasn't the type of messiah they expected.</p> <p>How did those who welcomed Jesus in Matthew 21 end up calling for his crucifixion in Matthew 27? A change of opinion about Jesus as messiah has clearly taken place. While the two crowds may not have been made up of exactly the same people, a change of opinion about Jesus as messiah has clearly taken place. Between the two texts, Jesus has thrown salespeople out of the temple, repeatedly called the religious elite "hypocrites" for not behaving in line with their beliefs, said that the lowlifes of society will inherit the kingdom of God because of their good hearts, and predicted that the temple – the center of religious life, will be destroyed. The people wanted a messiah who would throw out the Rome occupiers, not challenge their way of life!</p> <p>The crowd in Matthew 27:17 is asked who they would like Pilate to release: Jesus, the son of God, or Barabbas, a military leader of the Jewish resistance to Roman occupation. Would they rather release a criminal, who would use violence to get his way, or an innocent man who challenged the structure of violence and challenged people to live more lovingly? We are called to answer this day and every day: who do you follow? What changes because of that choice? What do we learn about Jesus and the nature of God through this ordeal?</p>
YOU	Who do you follow? What changes because of that choice? Think about how other people influence your decisions and your willingness to truly follow Jesus. How could you model a life of love and grace to your family, coworkers and community? What voices and influences need to increase and which need to decrease in your awareness to make this possible?
WE	Why did the crowd choose to release Barabbas instead of Jesus? Jesus invited people from all walks of life, even those who would have been opposed to each other in society, to eat at the same table and to share in the same ministry of love and justice. How does this reconciliation bring you hope?





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Why do crowds still often move toward choosing violence over peace and dialogue? Challenge your congregation to be the type of crowd that includes all, not seeking self-protection but rather proclaiming justice and peace for all. Describe some concrete steps they can take to achieve this.



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Week 7: Easter

Scripture Passage Matt: 28:1-10; Ephesians 2:4-8

Focus Statement

We make mistakes, do things we regret and regret *not* doing other things. The good news of the Gospel is not only that Jesus died that we might be forgiven, but that he has been raised from the dead! In him, we too are raised from being dead, so that we can have new life, full of hope and promise.

ME Tell about a time when a surprise or change in circumstances led you down a different path than you had planned. Were you afraid to surrender your own plans or expectations? Describe how this change was an unexpected blessing or led to something you may not have otherwise experienced. (For example, having to move unexpectedly or taking a detour and being surprised by a beautiful view.)

WE Sometimes our plans get disrupted. Or we get something we would have never expected. We make mistakes and fall short; we get caught up in “deadly” routines and behaviors - that prevent us from living fully. One great surprise has changed the course of all our lives and enables us to move from self-made plans and expectations into the life God has created. We celebrate that reversal today.

GOD Two women go to the tomb, a place for the dead. A guard of soldiers has been standing watch to make sure none of his disciples could steal his body and claim he was resurrected. These soldiers, policing the tomb, were to make sure Jesus “stayed dead.” No human power could stop God from overcoming death. An angel announces the news and a reversal of positions. The soldiers are so afraid that they become “like dead men.” Jesus lives, and those who would have him dead become deathly afraid!

The angel tells the women, “Do not be afraid.” This is actually *good* news for them. Despite their fear, their joy about Jesus’ resurrection moves them to run and tell the other disciples the good news. When they encounter Jesus, he says “Do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” Fear no longer needs to control us, even if learning to live fearlessly doesn’t come naturally.

The Ephesians text reminds us we are deeply loved by God--loved so much that we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the power of God--that even when we were dead in our trespasses- or the places that we sin, Jesus Christ raises us to new life. Our sin does not define who we are, or who we will be. Instead, we are forgiven and raised to life. We are called to more.

YOU Think about what you expect out of life – where are you feeling stuck and how are you contributing to staying stuck? Imagine the new life that you could have if you weren’t feeling stuck, or how your life could be more abundant than it already is. Where might God be acting to change things in your life? Knowing that Jesus has died so you are no longer chained to your sins, imagine him taking you by the hand and saying “Do not be afraid. Go and do what I have made possible.” Even if you’re still afraid, like the two Marys, take the next step anyway.

WE As we encounter the living Jesus, we are able to move forward, even if we are afraid. We do this not on our own strength but through the resurrection power that comes through Jesus Christ. As living testimonies to God’s redemptive work in Christ, we cannot keep this good news to ourselves. We are called to go out and tell the world that Jesus is risen and that this is good news for all. *Name some concrete ways you can encourage the congregation to share their faith – whether through a mission event, sharing their story with loved ones and colleagues, etc.*

