

Introduction

Nothing is more precious than a life fully lived. To live this way is to live with passion! Jesus wants you to live each moment with vibrancy, walk each day without fear, open your heart to others, and know and accept yourself in a deep, powerful way. How can you do this?

This Lent, roll up your sleeves, open your heart, and walk side by side with Jesus through my maintenance guide. When you work with this guide, you'll be filled with energy, purpose, and happiness. You will find yourself fully engaged in life, ready to leap out of bed each morning filled with determination and delighted with life.

Lent is a wonderful opportunity for us to stand up to all the cynics who sit in the back row of life, rolling their eyes and whispering negativity and nonsense. To them, we say, "in spite of all the chaos, every day is fresh and full of moments to be savored."

I wrote these reflections because I want you to enjoy life. Take your time reading every day, and absorb these pages. Each reflection includes *A Helpful Practice*: an encouragement to help you live with passion, and *A Handy Prayer*: a prayer to connect you to Jesus.

I am honored that you are taking this journey with me. I delight in this precious, present moment. "It's so good to be here."

EDITOR NOTE: *A few days after finishing this lenten booklet, Fr. Joseph Sica died, very unexpectedly, from a heart condition. His spiritual advice to live every moment with passion seems all the more poignant now. All who knew Fr. Joe mourn his passing. We at Twenty-Third Publications look forward to sharing his timeless wisdom and joy with readers for years to come.*

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Cancer-Free

“But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.” » MATTHEW 6:6

Three words turned my world upside down. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “You have cancer,” the doctor said. It was a Helpful Practice. A malignant tumor in my bladder made everything else in my life feel a bit less important. There were fewer worries and more appreciation of things I’d previously missed.

Surgery was a success. Six weeks of immunotherapy stopped the tumor from reoccurring.

Today, I am thrilled to say I am cancer-free. My outlook on life is cancer-free too. Free of the cancer of worrying about the little things. I’ve learned what I need (not much) and who the people are I can count on. Life is too short to let others steal my happiness.

Lent can be your Helpful Practice. It’s a time to make positive changes—reduce stress, clear clutter, deepen your relationships, focus on prayer, and prioritize your actual needs.

Choosing to answer the call instead of ignoring it is the hardest change, but once you do—get ready! Change is a-comin’.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ If you are facing a difficult time, look for reasons to have hope. Spend time with people you love. Pray or meditate. Do something every day that gives you hope.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, life can change in an instant; but knowing you are there to catch me, hold me, or carry me through it all makes a world of difference. Thank you. Amen.*

Time Out!

“The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes.” » LUKE 9:22

“I’ve got your back,” they say. “You can count on me!” But then, just when you need them, they’re a no-show. Promises are broken. Trust is gone. The pain of betrayal runs deep. Loved ones are disloyal. Friends are dishonest.

We often find ourselves disconnecting emotionally from people as we hide behind walls we construct of mistrust. We stay in hiding, protecting our vulnerability. We close people out, allowing fear and anger to prevent us from reconnecting to people who genuinely do care about us. The bottom line: not everyone is out to hurt us.

If you’ve been betrayed, give yourself a time-out to make sense of what happened. Then, when you’re ready, talk it out with the person who hurt you. Share how you feel and ask, “Why did you do this to me?” Then tell them what you need from them in order to move on.

The choice to tear down the walls, rebuild, and repair trust is yours. Your relationship just might come out stronger and better as it grows deeper.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ When trust is lost, it causes pain for everyone involved. While it’s not easy, it is possible to regain trust once you’ve hurt someone. It starts by behaving in a trustworthy way. Forget the cliché “I’ll never do it again” and replace it with consistent and dependable behavior.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, give me the courage and strength to restore a relationship I have damaged because of poor choices. Amen.*

The One and Only You

Jesus answered them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?” » MATTHEW 9:15

The quote grabbed my attention as it popped up on my screen: “Wanting to be someone else is a waste of time.” Comparative shopping. So many people specialize in it. “If only I were smarter.” “If only I were skinnier.” “If only I didn’t make so many mistakes.”

Spending time obsessing over what you aren’t prevents you from seeing your own God-given beauty, dignity, and goodness as a uniquely created person. You weren’t designed to be like everyone else. You were created to be you. Life isn’t one giant popularity or beauty contest to see who’s the prettiest, smartest, or most successful. It’s about being comfortable in your own skin and accepting who you are.

No matter how hard we try to be someone else, we’ll never succeed. Stop hiding from yourself and embrace all that is specifically you—the whole package, complete with abilities and achievements, as well as peculiarities and problems. Love yourself. It’s a basic premise, and it’s not dependent on the job you have or the weight you lose. It’s simply unconditional acceptance of yourself right here and right now!

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Look in the mirror at least once a day and say, “I love you, (your name), just as you are!” It’s an effective reminder to never take for granted the preciousness of who you are.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, help me to remember and celebrate that there is no one else in the whole world just like me. Amen.*

Complaint-Free Zone

The Pharisees and their scribes complained to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” » LUKE 5:30

After four years of not seeing each other, two neighbors met at a wedding. Twenty seconds into the conversation, one launched into a series of complaints—problems with her spouse, trouble with her youngest son, and intimate details of her health.

The complainers. When you see them headed your way, you want to run in the opposite direction. We all know a few people who have developed a habit of moaning and griping. For them, the glass is always half empty and nothing ever goes their way.

Some people can't seem to stop themselves from putting a negative spin on everything. When you're around them, it's frustrating, annoying, and draining. It's time to call them out on their behavior and tell them to stop it. Encourage them to notice how their complaining is pushing people out of their lives. Reinforce this by challenging them to take note of all the good things happening in their lives and all the reasons to be happy and grateful. Remind them to make this a permanent part of their conversation from this day forward.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Instead of sitting at home and whining about how no one calls, do something positive. Get out of the house. Attend a cooking class. Volunteer at a soup kitchen. Go for a run. Connect with a friend and enter into a complaint-free zone.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, nothing gets under my skin more than someone who can't see any good in life and other people. Give me patience with them. Amen.*

Reconnecting

At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days. » MARK 1:12–13

At the end of the day, there's no truer adage than "can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em." Just as our bodies need food and air, our souls need connections with other people. We are at our best when we are in healthy relationships and at our worst when we're not. Without connections, we just are not fully human.

After thirty minutes of listening to a husband and wife talk about their marriage, the therapist got up and gave the wife a big hug. "Your wife needs this every day," he said. The husband replied, "Okay, but I can only bring her in here on Mondays and Thursdays."

I know people who live with regrets after taking another person for granted and missing the opportunities to express and demonstrate affection. Saying "I love you" and following the words with hugs and kisses strengthens a relationship. Otherwise, it will die a slow death.

Lost moments are lost moments, and there's no going back. During Lent, ask yourself: "Have I been taking someone for granted?" Do something about it—a visit, a phone call, a text, a hug, a kiss... connect with them through words and actions.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Pick a day and reconnect with someone you once cared about but let slip away.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, it's my fault I've lost touch with people I care about. Help me to be more attentive to them. Amen.*

Getting Past the Past

“Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

» MATTHEW 16:19

“I never thought they’d do that to me!” I often hear about betrayals: rumors are spread, promotions are handed to someone else, friends turn on friends. When it happens to you, you have a choice: hold on to what has happened and rehearse it over and over in your mind or relinquish it and let it go.

Allowing the hurts of the past to take up permanent residence in your life steals your joy and deprives you of living your best life. It’s only after you decide to stop pushing the replay button that you’re able to sweep out the cobwebs of bitterness, anger, and resentment. After all, you can’t change the past.

When you find yourself being drawn back into the pain and negative experiences, choose to focus on the present—on what is happening right now—and recognize that history is history. To get past your past, you need to accept it as it was and leave it there. Then pay deliberate attention to this moment—a time that’s never been before and is loaded with opportunities and possibilities. All you have to do is seize them.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Tape this quote on your mirror: “Never look back unless you’re planning to go that way.”

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, sometimes I struggle to live in the present. Help me to see it’s the only healthy place for me. Amen.*

Set Free

“If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you.” » MATTHEW 6:14

Harsh words fly and tempers heat up. A friendship, once close, ends with a vow to never speak to each other again. Assets of a parent’s estate are divvied up, and now siblings, feeling cheated, go their separate ways. “I never want to see you again.” Words that would break their parents’ hearts.

Has someone cut you off cold? Are you obsessing over it? While you can’t force a resolution with them, you also can’t let what happened define your life. Reach out to the person estranged from you and make amends for anything you’ve done.

If they refuse to have a conversation with you and want nothing to do with a reconciliation, practice forgiveness. Remember, it’s not for them; it’s for you so you don’t end up a prisoner to the hostility of the other person. Let go of your desire to get even or cause them pain.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Write a letter offering forgiveness to the person who refuses to let go of the grudge. Describe your perception of what led up to the conflict. Express your feelings about it and don’t hold back. Get it all out and then... don’t mail it!

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, when I forgive, a tremendous burden is taken off my shoulders and my heart is freed from all those nasty emotions. Help me to continually practice forgiveness. Amen.*

Cease Fire

“The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation.” » LUKE 11:32

Critical people have an arsenal of weapons they use to get the best of you. They label you: dumb, weak, incompetent, or ugly. As your personal travel agents, they book you on elaborate guilt trips by putting past mistakes on your itinerary. “It’s not the first time you messed up!” they remind you.

No matter how hard you try to avoid them, it seems like they’re everywhere! From bosses to relatives to friends to coworkers... no matter what you say, they always have a way of zooming in on the negative and offering up huge doses of discouragement. “That won’t work.” “What a horrible idea!” “You’re going to look like a fool.”

Your best mode of action: disarm them! Since you can’t stop the verbal bullets from flying, just duck and get out of the way. Let it roll off your back and don’t engage them with return fire. Finish it off with a surprise—smile and walk away. Once you take the fun out of their game, they’ll look elsewhere to play.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Some people voluntarily offer criticism. Often, it’s out of line and in poor taste. Catch them off guard by treating them with kindness. Compliment them. Invite them to dinner. Overwhelm them with encouragement and appreciation.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, when people criticize me, help me hold back my words. I want to defuse the conversation, not add fuel to it. Amen.*

In God's Time

“How much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who love him.” » MATTHEW 7:11

A frog was playing on the rafters of a dairy farm one night and fell into a pail of cream. At first, he panicked. Scrambling for survival, he swam faster and faster. When the farmer arrived the next morning, he found the frog standing on a cake of butter, exhausted but happy to be alive.

When we let our problems overwhelm us, we stop jumping, hopping, and scrambling for survival. It's easy to give up and stop praying. We remember times when we got down on our knees and prayed and felt as if God didn't hear us. Our answer didn't come. We dialed the prayer hotline and it went straight to voicemail.

God does answer our prayers—in his time, not ours. Sometimes God may be saying “No!” because we're simply not ready to receive the answer. We need to grow. We may need to face an unresolved problem, change a bad habit, or stop an unhealthy behavior. Or maybe what we're praying for isn't the best thing for us right now. That person you hope to marry might not make the best spouse. Your dream job... it might be a nightmare. Listen. Give God your undivided attention and watch what happens.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Add this poem to your daily prayers:
Hold no problem back. Nothing large, nothing small.
When Jesus says, “Surrender,” he wants it all.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, I'm simply going to ask you for help and then sit quietly listening for your gentle voice. Amen.*

Thawing Out

“Leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled.”

» MATTHEW 5:24

After returning his wife’s cold shoulder, a husband realized he needed to have her wake him at 5:00 a.m. for an early morning flight to Chicago. Not wanting to be the first to break the silence, he wrote a note: “Please wake me at 5:00 a.m.”

At 9:00 a.m., he awoke and realized he had missed his flight. Furious, he jumped up, ready to confront his wife. There was a note by the bed: “It’s 5:00 a.m.! Wake up!”

There is a difference between the silent treatment and cooling off. Sometimes we need a cooling-off period to give each other room to sort through our feelings and not force a conversation. When we’re ready, we need to apologize for any hurt we’ve caused and acknowledge how much we care, assuring each other that we’ll do our best to not let it happen again. It’s never easy or pleasant, but it’s always worth the time and effort to build a stronger and healthier relationship.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ Put the names of people who have hurt you into a large jar. Fill it with water and place it in the freezer. As long as the names are frozen, you can’t retrieve the papers. If you have frozen people out of your life, you have a decision—keep them on ice or thaw them out with a healing resolution you can both live with.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, don’t let me isolate myself by embracing my pain. Give me wisdom to melt the ice in my relationships. Amen.*

The Higher Road

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

» MATTHEW 5:44

“I don’t love you anymore.” The words cut deeply. “I want a divorce.”

“I’ve had it. Please don’t call me again.” Your friend’s words seem unfair.

“The bulk of the estate has been left to your brother.” After all you’ve done, your prodigal brother reaps the reward.

Hurt. Anger. Disappointment. People talk behind your back. They walk out on you. And as your heart fills with resentment, you entertain revenge fantasies. But Jesus offers another way: “Love them. Bless them.” Seriously? Yes, seriously.

Our behavior as Christians should stand out as detectable and different, even when others aren’t nice to us. Perhaps, *especially* when others aren’t nice to us. We need to choose to love our enemies and decide not to be angry and hateful. We’re not supposed to get even. While we may not think of them as enemies, necessarily, they just might be the outspoken family member, arrogant coworker, or disloyal friends who make us look bad.

Take the higher road. If you see them coming, don’t look the other way. Show courtesy—smile; shake hands; say hello. You’re not minimizing the hurt. You’re facing it and forgiving.

HELPFUL PRACTICE ▶ List the people who have hurt you. Do you permit these people to stay in your life or shut them out? Is there a way toward resolution? If so, act on it.

HANDY PRAYER ▶ *Jesus, you’re not immune to people hurting you, yet you never retaliated but forgave. I want to do the same. Help me. Amen.*