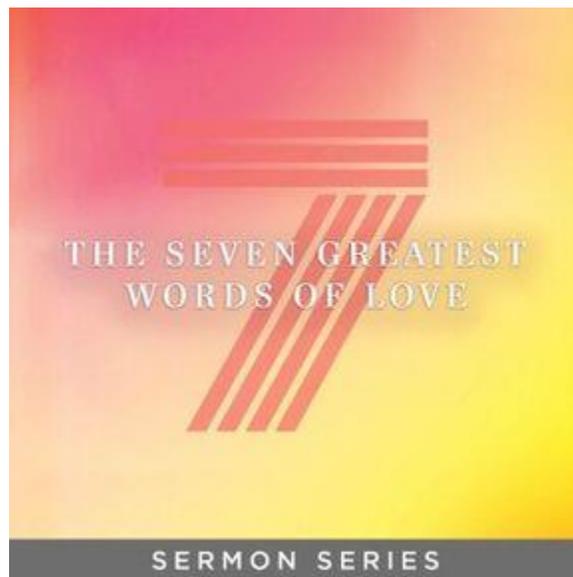


THE SEVEN GREATEST WORDS OF LOVE

Part 1: THE WORD OF FORGIVENESS
Luke 23:27-37

Written by Pastor Steve Norman
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Words of Encouragement Days 171-176



THE SEVEN GREATEST WORDS OF LOVE

Jesus walked this earth teaching about God's LOVE. But do you know what that kind of love really means? Discover anew the meaning behind the last seven words Jesus spoke during his final hours on the cross. These powerful words of Jesus, full meaning and amazing blessing, are His message to us before His resurrection — words of forgiveness, assurance, love, trust, and so much more.

This Week's Memory Verse:

**“Let the wicked forsake his way
and the evil man his thoughts.
Let him turn to the Lord,
and he will have mercy on him,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.”
Isaiah 55:7**

MEETING WITH GOD – Day 171

[For the next 21 days, the focus of our devotionals will be to enable you to take a pause from your busy schedule and routine to reconnect with God through prayer. As you read through this plan, may this spiritual journey strengthen and fill you with God's presence, and renew, refresh, and restore you in the purpose God has for your life.]

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will." Romans 12:1-2

RENEWED STRENGTH: RENEW YOUR MIND

IN our reading today, the Apostle Paul highlights how to experience renewed strength. He writes that our bodies are to be living sacrifices, and our minds and thoughts should not be influenced by the ways of the world, but instead need to be renewed. Our minds are bombarded every day with information from various media, and much of the information disturbs our spiritual growth. We need to filter out the unnecessary and unhealthy information because it can influence our thoughts, conversations, behaviors, and habits. Unchecked, it will eventually change our character and defile the inward man, conforming us to this world, and if that happens, we can then be overcome by the darkness of this world.

If you enter a dark room to find something, the first thing you will do is reach for a light. The same is true in our lives. In order to chase out the darkness brought on by our thoughts, we need to bring a light that brightens our mind wherever its rays reach.

The light of God's Word enlightens us and helps to transform our minds from unwanted thoughts, exchanging them instead

for godly thoughts, and thoughts that fall in line with God's thoughts, ultimately bring our minds closer toward the Lord (Heb. 4:12). The renewing of our mind leads us to know what is the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God. (Rom. 12:2).

Billy Graham, one of the most noted preachers and evangelists of our time, committed his life to Christ at an evangelical meeting in 1934. Later, while at Bible college, Billy was asked to preach. He preached for eight minutes, an experience which led him to sense he was being called by God to preach the gospel. Billy's mind was now renewed toward God's plan for his life. Several years later in 1936, while taking one of many nighttime walks around a golf course, Billy got down on his knees at the edge of one of the greens, prostrated himself before the Lord and prayed, "O God, if you want me to serve You, I will." From that night on, Billy's life purpose was set. He became a mighty man of God who carried the gospel of his Savior, Jesus Christ, to many nations. This is what becomes possible when a child of God does not conform to the world but allows God to renew his/her mind. (Source: Billy Graham Biography, www.inspirationalchristians.org)

TODAY'S PRAYER

Lord, So many thoughts pass through my mind each day. I need a filter to keep my mind on You and Your ways. I need to renew my mind daily so I can know what Your good, pleasing and perfect will is for me. Thank You for giving me Your Word as a "How To" manual of thoughts that are good and pleasing to You. Help me to spend time each day this week reading it so that I can understand Your ways and so I am not conformed to the ways of the world, but instead use what I learn so that my mind is transformed and renewed to become acceptable to You and to follow Your will. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Love the way Jesus loves!

Pastor Steve

MEETING WITH GOD – Day 172

[For 21 days, our focus is to enable you to take a pause from your busy schedule and routines to reconnect with God through prayer. As you read today, may this spiritual journey strengthen and fill you with God's presence, and renew, refresh, and restore you in the purpose God has for your life.]

“And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.” Romans 12:1-2 (NLT)

RENEWED STRENGTH: LIVING SET APART

CHRISTIANITY is the most prevalent religion in the United States. In fact, if answering a question in a poll, most who answer "Christian" are happy to call themselves Christian. Many, however, miss the fact that reflecting Christ means living differently from the world in which we live. Adopting the ways of the world as our everyday pattern of living is easy, but living a life according to God's way? Now that can be a real challenge to us all.

So just what does it mean to live as a Christian and reflect Christ? Romans 12:2 tells us that we should live a life that is acceptable and pleasing to God. As Christians, we are often more focused on what we should *not* do than what we are called *to* do. We memorize the "thou shalt nots" of the Bible, when it is more often the "thou shalt" or the "do this" parts of the Bible that tell us just how to live out our relationship with God. At the top of the list, we should remember the calling and the responsibility that comes from being a child of God. We are called to be set apart for God to use. We are called to be different from those who don't know God or who aren't

living in a relationship with Him. We are to help others become free from a life of sin and move into a relationship with Christ. We are to proclaim the freedom of God. And we are to be the example of Christ's love and to reveal God's power through our lives.

When we try to follow the pattern of this world, however, our "making a difference" stops and we really make no difference at all. The Bible clearly warns us not to live according to the world but to be "transformed by the renewal of our minds". How do we renew our minds? We do it by following the Word of God. When we renew our mind, our will comes into agreement with the will of our Father. We will no longer see through our eyes, but through God's eyes, and we will no longer live by sight but by faith and faith comes by hearing the Word of God. By being renewed in our mind, we will naturally want to do the will of our Father in everything. That means we will be in the process of being transformed into the image of God, the very thing God desires for us to do.

Self Check: During these days of prayer, take a moment to answer these questions. How am I doing at "living a set apart life" from the world? Am I living after the pattern of this world or God's Word? How am I doing at renewing my mind? Do I renew it every day? Am I doing what I am called to do? If so, you can be certain you are making a difference!

TODAY'S PRAYER

Lord, Thank You for Your call in my life. You said I am called to make a difference and not to be conformed to this world. As a Christ follower, help me to understand that I am called into a greater commitment to You, I am to be transformed in my mind to see things the way You see them. Help me to reflect Christ's love to this world and give me the ability to set out and make a difference in my family and to the community around me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Love the way Jesus loves!

Pastor Steve

MEETING WITH GOD – Day 173

[For 21 days, our focus is to enable you to take a pause from your busy schedule and routines to reconnect with God through prayer. As you read today, may this spiritual journey strengthen and fill you with God's presence, and renew, refresh, and restore you in the purpose God has for your life.]

"For your Maker is your husband--the Lord Almighty is His name--the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; He is called the God of all the earth. . . 'Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet My unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor My covenant of peace be removed,' says the Lord, who has compassion on you. 'O afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted, I will build you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires. I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones. All your sons will be taught by the Lord, and great will be your children's peace. In righteousness you will be established. . .'" Isaiah 54:5, 10-14a

RENEWED STRENGTH: REBUILDING YOUR FOUNDATIONS

IN Isaiah 54:11, we read a promise from God that He will rebuild with precious stones the city that is lashed by storms. Life may bring many storms our way, and it can often feel unsettling. We may even feel we are without comfort during these storms. When we make a commitment to follow Jesus, however, we allow God to start a process in us whereby He can rebuild what was taken from us during those storms.

Rebuilding. It is a process. If you have ever watched a garden be laid in a patch of land formerly occupied by sod or large well-established weeds and shrubs, you know it is a laborious task. And the process is not easy. When spring comes, much hard work has to be done and one may toil each day to lay foundations and ready the garden soil, foundations which are necessary in order for everything to

grow properly without being washed away during the coming rainstorms. In much the same way, the foundations laid in our lives are necessary and must be laid properly and firmly in order for God to begin to make needed changes in us. If we were to take an easy path and just make everything look good on the surface without the proper foundations, then eventually our foundations would sink. They would crumble beneath the weight of the storm. Instead, we need to allow "the master builder" to break up our shaky foundations and rebuild our lives. This may mean giving up things we once held as important. It may mean we need to acknowledge where we have been going wrong (the sin in our lives) and ask forgiveness from God.

II Corinthians 5:17 describes how that rebuilding process begins. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." God begins the rebuilding process in us by making us new, and to become new, God does not simply rebuild us with the same old stones. He rebuilds us with precious stones so that we are much improved and can shine for Him.

TODAY'S PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, that when storms have lashed out at me, You are my comforter and can rebuild what the storms worked so hard to tear down. I pray that however hard the process of rebuilding my foundation may be, I remain open to letting You rebuild me as You see fit. Thank You for making me a new creation and for rebuilding me with strong, precious stones so that I can shine for You. Give me strength to follow Your lead as You continue Your work in me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Love the way Jesus loves!

Pastor Steve

MEETING WITH GOD – Day 174

[For 21 days, our focus is to enable you to take a pause from your busy schedule and routines to reconnect with God through prayer. As you read today, may this spiritual journey strengthen and fill you with God's presence, and renew, refresh, and restore you in the purpose God has for your life.]

"I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. . . . The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work. Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.
Nehemiah 2:12-13; 16-18

REBUILDING STRENGTH: REBUILD YOUR WALL

OUR reading today takes place during the days when Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians, the city wall laid in ruins, some of the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon, and only farmers were left in the once glorious city. Nehemiah, the writer of this passage, was a Jewish man who served in the privileged position as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia. During a visit from his brother and others from his home country of Judah, Nehemiah learned that the people in Jerusalem were in trouble and the walls of Jerusalem were destroyed. This led him to weep and mourn for many days, fasting and praying to God while he confessed his sins and the sins of his people and asked for the Lord's mercy.

After this season of seeking God, God enabled Nehemiah to find favor from the king (Nehemiah 2:8), who allowed him to return and rebuild Jerusalem's walls. He then called upon the Jewish people to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and explained to them how God's hand was on this work. However, the work was not without challenge and those who hated the idea of the work soon came to mock and jeer the work, issuing challenges and

threats and spreading words of discouragement among those working to rebuild the walls. Because they turned to the Lord in prayer for wisdom, when the enemies mocked Nehemiah and the builders of the wall, they were not intimidated and the work continued. Instead of stopping the work, they placed families to guard their work, and Nehemiah encouraged the people not to be afraid of the enemies. Together they finished rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in a record 52 days because God's hand was upon their work.

Points of Reflection:

1. Nehemiah earned the king's credibility. As a child of God, it is important to have credibility with people in authority over us, i.e. parents, teachers, supervisors, and pastors.
2. Nehemiah fasted and prayed to God and asked for God's mercy prior to taking action. In order to rebuild, we need to spend time preparing ourselves in the presence of God.
3. Nehemiah's testimony was not only about rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem but also rebuilding the lives of people.
4. Nehemiah did not claim glory for himself but always gave God the credit for his successes.
5. When Nehemiah faced opposition from his enemies, he did not give up his trust in God. We may decide it is time to rebuild something in our lives such as our relationship with God or our family/friends. When we do, we need to remember that the enemy will use various means to try to stop the rebuilding process. In order to keep rebuilding, we need to remain focused on God and not give up.

TODAY'S PRAYER

Lord, Thank You for times of rebuilding and for Your plan to rebuild areas of my life that need it. I ask You to help me to begin the process by being faithful and humble before You. Give me the plan You have for rebuilding, and grant me Your favor and the resources to do it. Then, Lord, give me the courage and strength to rebuild the things that You want rebuilt in my life, and help me to stay focused with my eyes fixed upon You until the rebuilding process is complete. As I do so, may this time of rebuilding be met with Your success and for Your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

MEETING WITH GOD – Day 175

[For 21 days, our focus is to enable you to take a pause from your busy schedule and routines to reconnect with God through prayer. As you read today, may this spiritual journey strengthen and fill you with God's presence, and renew, refresh, and restore you in the purpose God has for your life.]

“Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see. Through their faith, the people in days of old earned a good reputation. By faith we understand that the entire universe was formed at God’s command, that what we now see did not come from anything that can be seen. It was by faith that Abel brought a more acceptable offering to God than Cain did. Abel’s offering gave evidence that he was a righteous man, and God showed His approval of his gifts. Although Abel is long dead, he still speaks to us by his example of faith. It was by faith that Enoch was taken up to heaven without dying—‘he disappeared, because God took him.’ For before he was taken up, he was known as a person who pleased God. And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to Him must believe that God exists and that He rewards those who sincerely seek Him.”
Hebrews 11:1-6

REBUILD STRENGTH: REBUILD YOUR FAITH

THERE are so many times in our life when we believe that our faith will take care of itself. We forget the fact that faith is something that needs to be built up in our everyday life. Sometimes, without even realizing it, we may neglect faith's prominent and central place in our Christian life. But the truth is, our faith in God is one of our most valuable assets, and we need to take care of it. Therefore, it is of vital importance that we take a pause now and then from our busy lives to self-examine our faith life. We need to check to see if it has somehow become misplaced due to the circumstances of our life, for faith that we need to have in God can easily become sidelined and replaced by our work, friends, family, and money. When we rely on these things more than our faith in God, our faith becomes

shifted from God onto someone or something else. Sometimes we may even lose our faith due to the unexpected circumstances in our lives, or we may simply carry on with our religious duties thinking that we are still walking with God without realizing where we've placed our faith.

During my married life, my wife and I have had to remind ourselves many times that our faith in Jesus Christ is the central point of our relationship. If I start to have faith in my wife more than Jesus, I can begin to depend completely upon her for my strength and expect things from her that she might not be able to meet. But when I put my complete faith in the God who has called us to be together for a higher purpose, one which is greater than our own individual lives, we build each other up, and support and help one other in all of life - the joyful times as well as those that challenge our faith - encouraging one another to keep the faith (Hebrews 11:6) and spurring one another on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24).

SELF CHECK: How is your faith today? On what or whom have you placed your faith? During these days of prayer, take some time to reflect, refocus yourself, and make an honest assessment of your faith. Honestly admit where you are at and talk to the Lord about any issues of faith that need strengthening. The Lord is prepared to rebuild your faith!

TODAY'S PRAYER

Lord, Thank You for Your blessing of faith. At times my faith is strong. Thank You for those times. At times my faith may waiver. During those times, I pray that You will rebuild my faith life. Even at times when I don't see or experience the good things that You have in store for me, strengthen my faith so that I have a faith in You that is unshaken by my circumstances. If I have misplaced my faith, I place it back in Jesus, and ask You to help me to follow Him closely for the rest of my life. May this prayer become my daily reality. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Love the way Jesus loves!

Pastor Steve

MEETING WITH GOD – Day 176

[For 21 days, our focus is to enable you to take a pause from your busy schedule and routines to reconnect with God through prayer. As you read today, may this spiritual journey strengthen and fill you with God's presence, and renew, refresh, and restore you in the purpose God has for your life.]

“But now I [Nehemiah] said to them [the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.], ‘You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!’ Then I told them about how the gracious hand of God had been on me, and about my conversation with the king.”

“They replied at once, ‘Yes, let’s rebuild the wall!’ So they began the good work. . . .”

“So on the twenty-fifth of Elul [October 2] the wall was finished—just fifty-two days after we had begun. When our enemies and the surrounding nations heard about it, they were frightened and humiliated. They realized this work had been done with the help of our God.” Neh. 2:17-18; 6:15-16

REBUILD STRENGTH: LESSONS ON REBUILDING FROM NEHEMIAH

ONE of the greatest stories of re-building is found in the Bible in the book of Nehemiah. The principles contained within this amazing story can be applied to any area of our lives – whether it is rebuilding our personality, rebuilding a broken relationship, or rebuilding an institution. Let's look briefly at them:

Cause – In order to rebuild, we first need to identify a cause. Nehemiah was burdened by the fact that his fellow Jews in Jerusalem were living in deep distress and constant fear because their city wall had been broken down (Nehemiah 1:30).
Cry & Confess – Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted, prayed, and waited on the Lord for forty days. He confessed the sins of Israel. We need to take up our cause to God with the same intensity, not with a casual approach (Nehemiah 1:4-11).

Courage & Consent – God gave Nehemiah, a humble refugee, the courage to make his request to King Artaxerxes, the most powerful man in the world (Nehemiah 2:1-11). The result was a go-ahead with Z+ category security for the 1300 km journey to build Jerusalem's wall – from the very king who had earlier ordered that Jerusalem must not be re-built (Ezra 4:21)!

Capacitate & Cheer – At Jerusalem, Nehemiah put-together a team from scratch – encouraging, empowering, and working alongside them (Nehemiah 3). Most of the time, we cannot rebuild on our own. We will need the church or an elder or a brother or sister in Christ to encourage us and guide us during the process.

Commit & Charge – Nehemiah's team worked with all their heart, laboring from dawn to dusk. God expects us to work hard and be on guard for we will confront tremendous opposition. Nehemiah and his team faced everything from ridicule and taunts, to threats, physical attacks, internal dissensions, false rumors, and enemies conniving to kill them. God gives us His supernatural strength at such testing times (Nehemiah 4 & 5).

Covenant – After witnessing the mighty hand of God enabling Nehemiah's team to fortify Jerusalem in just 52 days, the people took an oath that they would walk according to God's law (Nehemiah 9:38, 10:29). Once our task is accomplished, it is most important that, with a thankful heart, we walk in a deeper and more committed relationship with Him. We must also tell people of our Lord's goodness and how He can rebuild their lives, too.

TODAY'S PRAYER

Heavenly Father, Thank You for giving me opportunities to rebuild areas of my life. Help me as I work to rebuild my I earnestly seek Your guidance and plan for my life. Please use me like You used Nehemiah. You are the potter, I am the clay – mold me and make me, I pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Love the way Jesus loves!

Pastor Steve