

Links Players International Bible Study Series

THE LINKS PLAYERS COMMITMENT
Study 4 Kindle compassion for
the poor and needy

Linking golfers around the world in Christ

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The First Tee

WHAT IS A LINKS PLAYER?

A **LINKS PLAYER**, FIRST AND FOREMOST, IS A PERSON WHO HAS SAID YES TO JESUS CHRIST'S OFFER OF ETERNAL SALVATION. Usually this person is a golfer, but to follow the mission of a Links Player, you might be only a golf fan, or have little to do with golf at all. The mission of a Links Player has nothing to do with golf, really. But it has everything to do with life.

Of course, there is a lot more than the simple word "yes" to making a decision to give your life to Christ. In fact, it is a decision that must be coupled with a commitment.

Jesus told His disciples to consider the cost of following Him. This was only fair of Him, for He also made it clear that suffering would be part of the lot in a Jesus follower's life. Suffering, the Bible tells us, is the most significant way that God blesses us, for in trials we learn, we grow, and we are brought into fellowship with Jesus Himself.

If you have never made a decision to follow Jesus and enter into fellowship (relationship) with Him, this study will still have value for you. It will help you consider the cost of making such an important decision and commitment. If at any time during this study you decide you are ready to move into fellowship with Jesus Christ, we invite you to turn to page 19 and follow the simple guide to giving your life to Him.

For Links Players, the commitment to follow Christ means that they are willing to accept the mission of a Links Player. There's no magic formula to following Christ; we must live the whole of our lives for Him everyday. But the five points of the Links Players mission are designed specifically to help you remember what was most important to Christ and to encourage you to give top priority to those same five points in your own life.

Here they are:

L **LOVE GOD AND OTHERS.** Jesus confirmed that the two greatest commandments were these: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and Love your neighbor as yourself.

I **INTEGRATE CHRIST'S REIGN AND INTEGRITY INTO ALL OF LIFE.** You can't have "just a little bit of Jesus." For this reason, Links Players find ways to walk like Jesus in all areas of life.

N **NETWORK FRIENDS TOGETHER IN CHRIST.** Links Players understand that fellowship with other believers has great value in our walk as God's people.

K **KINDLE COMPASSION FOR THE POOR AND NEEDY.** Jesus and His most prolific teacher, the apostle Paul, placed great emphasis on compassion for those in need. Links Players seek to incorporate this teaching into their own ministries.

S **SHARE CHRIST.** The walk with Christ is not a private stroll on a secluded path. We walk in the open, shining as a light that leads others to this wondrous life we have found.

In the eight-week study you are about to begin, we will look closely at the Bible's principles with regard to the first point of the Links Player's mission: Love God and others.

So Abram went, as the Lord told him... He took...all the possessions they had accumulated, and the people he had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan. —Genesis 12:4-5

LESSON 1 THE BASIS OF BLESSING

IN ALL ASPECTS OF LIFE, SOME LESSONS ARE MORE ENJOYABLE THAN OTHERS. Enjoyment varies from person to person, of course, but we all have learned some things with ease and joy, and other things we have learned—well, the hard way.

TOUGH STUFF

What is one of the hardest lessons you have had to learn in life? How did you learn it?

Golf is no different. While some players can stand on the range all afternoon, powdering drivers and honing their irons, others much prefer to learn and practice the short game and putting. Both are necessary to be a great player, but even great players have their preferences.

As we move to the fourth aspect of becoming a Links Player—Kindling Compassion for the Poor and Needy—it is very likely that right away some will say to themselves, "I'm not sure this is a lesson I want to learn." For one thing, "the poor and needy," without really trying, can be a politically charged group. Aren't those the folks who sap the hearts of people on *that* side of the political fence? But more personally, compassion for the poor and needy can suggest a tug at our own pocketbooks—which can feel an awful lot like meddling!

With these difficulties before us, we would do well to begin answering a couple of critical questions in this first lesson: What does the Bible say about the need for compassion? And how can I be sure what applies to me?

BEFORE WE TALK ABOUT THE POOR AND NEEDY, LET'S TALK ABOUT THE TRULY BLESSED. We'll begin with Abram.

In the first book of the Bible, Genesis—after their sin chased Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and after sin caused God to judge the world with a great flood—God begins to fulfill His promises.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Take several thoughtful minutes to list the many things God has done for you in your life.

God had promised to Adam and Eve that although they had sinned, He would raise up "a seed" who would defeat Satan and restore right relationship between man and God. As Genesis unfolds, so does the beginning of God's plan: He will raise up this seed, this Savior, through a human line of progeny He will call His chosen people. These people must begin with one man, and that man is Abram, a nomad of the Middle East.

We cannot fully know why it was Abram that God chose for this role, but part of the reason must have been that Abram was so unlikely. His selection and the outworking of God's promise through Abram would be miraculous, in that Abram was an aging fatherless man and his wife Sarai was an aging barren woman. The odds of their having a child were right up there with the odds of making consecutive holes-in-one. In other words, forget it.

But it was before all those details of His promise that God first initiated contact with Abram. The story begins in Genesis 12, after Abram's father had died in a wilderness settlement called Haran. God spoke to Abram and told him to go into Canaan with his family. God was going to give this land to Abram.

Then God said: "I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing...all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3).

Simply, God was telling Abram that he was *blessed to be a blessing*. He—and God's people after him—would not have one without the other.

BROADEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Read Romans 11:13-32 to get a sense of how the Gentiles have been "grafted in" and to see how kindness and forgiveness are so important in God's plan.

THE NEW TESTAMENT TELLS US THAT THOSE WHO ARE IN CHRIST HAVE BEEN "GRAFTED IN" TO THIS LINE OF GOD'S PEOPLE. Both aspects of being blessed by God and blessing others because of God's blessing to us have been passed on to us.

The basis of our blessing others—and our willingness to do so—begins with our open eyes toward the blessings

that God has given us:

- By His grace, we are saved. In His grace, we offer salvation to others.
- By His mercy, we are forgiven. With His mercy resident in us, we forgive others.
- By His provision, we receive our daily bread. According to the example of His provision and the abundance we receive, we give to those who have need.

Compassion is not another good idea; it is God's idea. We bless because we are blessed. And we do so in every way we can.

ABRAM'S HISTORY IS ONLY THE BEGINNING OF THE BIBLE'S INSTRUCTION ON COMPASSION. In the lessons to come, we will explore men and women of Scripture who taught, caught, and wrought compassion. At times, it will seem as if their examples or instruction are overwhelming. *How can we possibly do all that God is asking?*

The disciples asked Jesus a similar question after He encountered a rich young man. This young leader came to Jesus and asked how he could gain eternal life. Jesus told him he must keep the commandments. When the young man responded that he done so, Jesus told him, "If you want to be perfect (complete), go, sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me" (Matthew 19:21).

The young man decided this was too much for him and "he went away grieving, because he had many possessions."

Jesus then told his disciples these well-known words: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

His disciples were astonished by this and asked how it was possible for anyone to be saved. Jesus replied, "With men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

As we proceed through the lessons of this study, you may find yourself challenged beyond your *modus operandi*. You may question your own ability to step out in new or uncomfortable ways of thinking and acting. That's all right. God knows the size of the challenges He gives us, but He makes it possible for us to meet them as Abram did, readily and completely.

GAME ON! Many players spend far too much energy in their pre-shot swings. By the time a round is done, they have taken several hundred swings. Work toward limiting your practice swings and maximizing those that count.

"Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem because he always ate at the king's table. He was lame in both feet." —2 Samuel 9:13

LESSON 2 SEEKING OUT THOSE WHO NEED HELP

IF YOU HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE OF GROWING UP AROUND A GOLF COURSE, YOU PROBABLY DISCOVERED ONE OF THE GREAT JOYS OF LEARNING THE GAME YOUNG: THERE ARE ALMOST ALWAYS ADULTS ON THE LOOKOUT FOR THE "RISING STARS"—AND THESE ADULTS ARE WILLING TO GIVE A WHOLE BUNCH OF TIME AND WISDOM TO THE YOUNG PLAYERS. Of course, volunteers are common in many walks of life, but it is nice to know that in golf too, plenty of people look beyond themselves to help others.

ON THE RIGHT FOOT

Who were some of those who helped you when you first took up golf? How about in other endeavors—who gladly helped you?

The personal value of selfless giving runs deep through Scripture. It was, of course, the chief characteristic of Jesus. Day after day, He reached out to those in need. And most often, He did this for those that everyone else was rejecting. Eventually, He went to the cross for us—those who would have been rejected by God because of our sin.

Yes, Jesus was the ultimate servant. But because of His reputation, needy people often sought out Jesus. In one celebrated case, a group of friends punched a hole in the roof of a jam-packed house so they could lower their crippled friend to Jesus.

Needy people today rarely hunt down others like this. Often they are completely incapable of doing so. They are bedridden or addicted or without transportation. People like this will only be served by those who seek them out where they are and help them with true sacrifice. We have two good examples of this kind of attentive compassion in the Old Testament, and in this lesson we will draw truths from these stories.

THE FIRST OF THESE STORIES COMPRISES THE BOOK OF RUTH, AN ACCOUNT CONTAINED IN THE BIBLE PARTLY BECAUSE IT TRACES THE LINEAGE OF KING DAVID, REACHING ONWARD TO JESUS CHRIST.

Ruth was a woman of Moab, a nation apart from Israel. In Old Testament terms, then, she was *not* one of God's "chosen people." But her mother-in-law, Naomi, had been born a Jew. When Ruth's husband died, she found herself alone in the world, except for her sister-in-law (also widowed) and Naomi. Ruth was left to make a key choice: with whom would she go? would she return with her sister-in-law to her own people, or would she follow the mourning Naomi to Bethlehem, Naomi's hometown?

FINE EXAMPLES

What is the most compassionate act you have ever witnessed? Looking back, what did it require of the giver?

Because she was young, Ruth received Naomi's blessing to go back to the Moabites and find another husband. But Ruth remained faithful to Naomi, and choosing to go with her to an unknown land, said, "Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God."

As you might expect, God took notice of Ruth's faithful act. Although the two women were poor living on their own, God provided a remarkable ending to Ruth's story through a man who had learned attentive compassion. This man, Boaz, owned the field to which Ruth came to glean from the leftovers of the harvest (a common practice among the poor of her time). When Boaz noticed Ruth, he inquired about her and her home. When he discovered that she was the loyal young woman who had accompanied Naomi back to Israel, he instructed his men treat her with excessive kindness—protecting her and providing for her.

If you know the end of the story, you know that through a set of cultural circumstances and proceedings, Boaz went on to marry Ruth, and they became the great-grandparents of David, God's honored king.

But it was without thought of such a possibility that Boaz first lavished favor on Ruth. Rather, he did so by seeing the need of one that others did not—a foreigner and an impoverished woman. Despite the "strikes" already against her, Boaz noticed something more significant: one who had placed herself in the hands of "the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge" (Ruth 2:12). And anyone who was under God's protection was worthy of Boaz's protection, too. From that kind of thinking, Boaz knew to offer compassion to this woman.

THUS, NOT SURPRISINGLY PERHAPS, IT IS FROM RUTH AND BOAZ'S GREAT-GRANDSON DAVID THAT WE DRAW OUR SECOND EXAMPLE OF ONE WHO SEEKS OUT THE MOST NEEDY.

If you have completed the Links Players study *Network Friends in Christ*, you are aware of the deep friendship between David and Jonathan, the son of David's spiteful predecessor, Saul. These two men had stood by one another through murderous challenges. But on the day that Saul was killed in battle, so was Jonathan. On the same day, David lost both his great enemy and his great friend.

David's coming to the throne, however, was not easy, as was typical of the dealings of his day, when a throne passed from one family to another. Men of the old house rose up against men of the new, and death bought David's throne. In the tussle, the nurse of Jonathan's son Mephibosheth fled with the boy to escape his being victimized. But as they fled, Mephibosheth fell and became crippled.

Some time later, when David's throne was established and guarded by battle against outside enemies, he had time to reflect on his role. In his reflections, he remembered his dear friend Jonathan. And David asked, "Is there anyone remaining from Saul's family I can show kindness to because of Jonathan?" (2 Samuel 9:1).

Simply put, kings did not do this. But here was David, full of compassion for anyone who might be alive. David was seeking out a man or woman he could bless because of the blessing God had given to him in Jonathan.

That one, of course, was Mephibosheth. When David was told of the man, he summoned him to his court. Fearing the worst, Mephibosheth fell in obeisance before David. With abject humility, he asked the king, "What is your servant that you take interest in a dead dog like me?" But David did not seize the strength of his position. Rather, he gave Mephibosheth three great rewards: the lands of his grandfather Saul, the servants of his grandfather Saul, and the privilege to eat at David's table from that day forward.

A PRAYER FOR COURAGE

Heavenly Father, Looking for those who need help is way outside my comfort zone. I will need much courage in doing something like this—courage only You can give. Lord, load me up with courage starting today. Amen.

WE WILL ALWAYS HAVE THE OPTION IN LIFE OF HELPING IN PLACES THAT HAVE A REPUTATION FOR HELPING—RESCUE MISSIONS AND HALFWAY HOUSES AND CORNERS FREQUENTED BY PANHANDLERS. And we should not ignore these kinds of outreaches. But above and beyond them—perhaps even before them—we must learn to have the eyes that find those who are needy and the intent that sets us to looking.

GAME ON! On the greens, the best putting strokes are confident putting strokes. Even if you can't be certain of the break, choose a line you think is right and commit to that line with a confident stroke. You'll be sure to get the ball to the hole, and it will often go in.

"You cannot fast as you do today, hoping to make your voice heard on high."

—Isaiah 58:4

LESSON 3 THE RIGHT KIND OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

SURELY, NEARLY ALL OF US WHO PLAY GOLF HAVE THIS IN COMMON: GOOD IS GOOD ENOUGH. We know without asking that if we turned our golf swing over to a top-notch professional and said, "Do whatever it takes," it would take a gigantic lot.

Hours of lessons, weeks of practice, years of repetition. Such is the price of best.

It is a price far too steep for most of us. So rather than best, we plod on at good. We get to the practice range now and then, emptying our medium bucket in various directions. Then we make a stop at the putting green to "get a feel." Once in a while we ask for help, though more normally from a friend than from a pro. We don't shoot our best score as often as we'd like, but does that really matter? We are, after all, better than a lot of players. And we are, after all, still smiling at ourselves.

Though this may sound like a criticism of our priorities, it really isn't. Not yet anyway. For 99.9 percent of those who play golf, it will never be nothing more than a game. To spend all your energy on perfecting your swing would make very little sense set against all the other arenas that make up your life.

The criticism comes when we wonder aloud if this picture of the way we approach golf aligns with the reality of how we approach our commitment to Christ. This is a wondering that comes from Scripture, and it has much to do with the quantity and the quality of mercy in our characters.

AFTER THE CLOSURE OF KING DAVID'S REIGN IN JERUSALEM, THE HEARTS OF GOD'S PEOPLE WENT HOT AND COLD AS QUICKLY AS A DAY AND A NIGHT ON AN UNPROTECTED MOUNTAIN PEAK. David's son Solomon, though wise in so many ways, gave his heart away to the women of many nations, and the door was thrown open for the generations to follow. Some kings served God faithfully, often remarkably; but most rulers in Solomon's wake were idol worshipers who turned their backs on God.

In those days, God established a line of men who would speak His truth in the face of great opposition—even from the kings who were supposed to be carrying out that truth. These men were called prophets, and to say their job was not an enviable one is an understatement. Rejection was the least of their worries. Yet nearly all of them did as they were told. And rewarding their obedience, God stood with them.

One of these prophets was a man named Isaiah. The words God gave to Isaiah offered great hope in many ways. It is in Isaiah's prophecies, for instance, that we find the promise of the coming Savior—"He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). Though we read here too that "He was pierced because of our transgressions, crushed because of our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5). Surely, God gave Isaiah uncommon insight.

For this reason, we must be careful not to pick and choose which parts of the prophecy we wish to enjoy and which we wish to ignore. All of it was given to the prophet "as he was carried along by the Holy Spirit" (1 Peter 1:21, NIV).

MULTI-TASKING

Often when we think of prophets, our minds go to the end-time predictions that are frequently associated with them. But in Scripture, you will find that the prophets primarily pointed out the present errors of the people, then conveyed what God's judgment would be if they did not turn to Him.

WITH THIS IN MIND, WE ARE DEEPLY CHALLENGED BY GOD'S DESIRE FOR JUSTICE AND MERCY AMONG HIS PEOPLE, AS REVEALED THROUGH THE PROPHET IN ISAIAH 58. In this chapter, God drew a clear distinction between good and best.

God began by saying of His people, "They ask Me for righteous judgments; they delight in the nearness of God" (Isaiah 58:2). They are saying the right words and expressing the right sentiments. In fact, they went on to plead for His attentions on the basis of their fasting—a discipline we certainly would not dismiss as ignoble!

But God decried the people for acting two-faced: "Look, you do as you please on the day of your fast, and oppress all your workers. You fast with contention and strife to strike viciously with your fist" (53:3-4). God's people had grown quite adept at covering their shortcomings with their "goodness." God was not fooled.

While His people had their routines in order, and while their routines were quite obvious to one another, God saw that they were only that—simple routines. Bowed heads? Sackcloth and ashes? These were signs of something, but in God's eyes they were not signs of sincerity. In doing good, His people were falling far short of the best.

What was the best? What was the "true fast" in God's eyes? That is where God was headed next, and it came in the form much like a list:

- break the chains of wickedness
- set the oppressed free
- tear off every yoke
- share your bread with the hungry
- bring the poor and homeless into your house
- clothe the naked when you see him
- do not ignore your own (troubled) flesh and blood

That is a list loaded with mercy and justice. And well it should be, for it is keeping with the plainest instruction God may ever have delivered through a prophet: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, NIV).

SUCH ACTIONS MIGHT REQUIRE A WHOLE NEW MINDSET ON OUR PARTS. If we are not accustomed to meeting the basic needs of some of society's neediest people, we will have to ask God first to change our minds about these people. Not all are lazy. Not all can control their circumstances. Not all are getting "what they deserve."

Then we will need to ask Him to open our eyes to such people. Too often we have scheduled our lives so that we do not cross their paths, and when we do, we have trained ourselves to look the other way. God's Word does not give us these options. He wants us looking at these people and then at ourselves, uncovering how we might help them.

And therein lies the great excitement. Perhaps you have always prided yourself on your ingenuity or problem-solving skills. You'll still get to employ those. But now you will do so with whole new challenges.

GAME ON! Windy days will force you to adjust your swing many times a round and often get you swinging off balance. As soon as you can after such a round, get to the range on a relatively windless day and restore that smooth rhythm and swing plane.

"Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." —Matthew 5:42

LESSON 4 EVEN OUR ENEMIES

ARE YOU A GOLFER? Then you have swing thoughts.

Every time you stand up to the ball, a set of ideas and phrasings and mental pictures starts running through your mind. (If they don't—well, that's a whole other matter!) These many impulses are called swing thoughts and they can literally dictate the physical act of taking a swing at a golf ball.

REVEALING SECRETS

So, are you willing to tell? What are your regular swing thoughts?

That's why your swing thoughts had better be good. And that's why the more consistent your swing thoughts are, the better chance you have of building a repeating swing, the kind of motion that produces consistency—which for golfers can be as important as purity.

Many teachers place enough stock in swing thoughts that they encourage their students to write them down. Look at them through the day to set them in your brain. Look at them during the round to remind you where you need to be when you start hitting it wayward. Over and over, return to these swing thoughts, and the odds are good that your "swing actions" will follow with successful results.

FOR JEWS THROUGH TIME AND FOR THOSE WHO MAINTAIN ORTHODOXY TODAY, THERE IS A SIMILAR APPROACH TO LIFE. Plant one thought in your mind and that thought will dictate your actions. And that one thought begins like this: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, NIV). It is a prayer, actually, and in Hebrew it is called the *Shema*. When prayed in full, it stretches through verse 9 of Deuteronomy 6, picks up again in Deuteronomy 11:13-21, and concludes with Numbers 15:37-41. That's a bit more than we would want for a golf swing, but for life it is probably just right.

And yet along came this rabbi named Jesus from Nazareth, and He was ready to KISS (you know—Keep It Simple, Stupid). He reduced the broad Jewish law to a nutshell, and it went like this: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). A Messianic *Shema*, if you will. Simple and lofty all at once.

WORTH KNOWING

The Psalmist declared, "I have treasured Your word in my heart so that I may not sin against You." How much value would there be to learning the key words of Jesus for yourself?

Yet in that simplicity and in that loftiness, danger lurks. When the law of God is simple, we get to thinking we can attain it—when the Bible is repeatedly clear that we cannot. And then, when we think we have attained it, we can appeal to the law's loftiness and suggest we are better than the rest. This was the fault of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who were always trying to catch Jesus with riddles and dichotomies.

Such was the case when a legal expert approached Jesus as the story is told in Luke 10. His first question was a good one and sounded innocent enough: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus, knowing this man thought highly of himself an expert, allowed the man to answer the question himself. His answer was perfect: *love God completely, love your neighbor as yourself*. Jesus commended the man for his response. Then came the trap. "OK, then," said the man, "who is my neighbor?"

The Jews had many laws about whom they were to associate with and whom they were to avoid. Surely, this compassionate Jesus wouldn't dare to state out loud that the Jews should show love and mercy to lepers or half-breeds or those who did not wash before they ate. To help one who is unclean would be to make one's self unclean; love for one's neighbor could not extend that far.

If this is what the expert was thinking, he was right. Jesus did not state outright that Jews should do such a thing. Instead, telling one of the most famous of all parables, He completely turned the tables:

Jesus took up the question and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and fled, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down that road. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way, a Levite, when he arrived at the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan on his journey came up to him, and when he saw [the man], he had compassion. He went over to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him. When I come back I'll reimburse you for whatever extra you spend' " (Luke 10:30-35).

No, Jesus did not declare that Jews must help Samaritans, but He told a very pointed story, one in which a compassionate Samaritan put two "busy" Jews to shame in the way that he acted out the *Shema*. Still, Jesus made sure that His point was not lost. He asked the questioner, "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" Now the man who had come to put Jesus to the test fell under the examiner's light himself. He knew there was only one answer: "The one who showed mercy to him." And then, to verify that the law is not solely words, Jesus said, "Go and do the same."

BEFORE WE CLOSE TODAY, IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU ARE AWARE OF THE FULL CONTEXT OF THIS PARABLE. The Samaritans were those half-breeds to which we earlier referred. They were held in contempt by the Jews of the day, who would go miles out of their way to travel around the Samaritan region.

Yet Jesus chose a Samaritan as the protagonist in His story. He did so to hone the definition of neighbor right down to this: everyone. That's right. Every man and every woman, when we dispense the mercy of God, becomes our neighbor—even our enemies. Will they all receive the love we have to give graciously? Almost certainly not. In fact, we may be cheated in return. But much of God's *real* law is one-sided. We loan without expecting a return, we settle differences that are not our fault, we go an extra mile for those who may not "deserve" the first one.

A LAST TURN

Look at 1 John 4:19: "We love because He first loved us." How does this apply to our conclusion today?

That may sound unfair. But let's whittle this down. Let's hone our own thinking now. Roman crosses were not fair. The love God has given us has always been one-sided. When we finally give mercy without qualification, we are only doing what has been done for us all along. There's nothing wrong with being compelled toward compassion.

GAME ON! While perfect practice may make perfect, don't always practice from perfect lies. Many players give themselves excellent lies for every shot on the range, then don't know what to do when they encounter a troublesome lie on the course.

"Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance."

—Matthew 3:8

LESSON 5 REWARDED SERVICE

CONSIDER ONE OF YOUR FAVORITE GOLF COURSES. Now answer this question: If you could skip one hole each time you played, which hole would it be?

Sounds better than a mulligan, doesn't it? Half the time you hit a second ball on that hole, you make a mess of it anyway. Why not hop in the cart, put your soft spikes to the floor, and zip right past that brute? No, this is not heaven, but it might be a taste!

While you have probably never thought of playing a golf course this way—and you wouldn't dare try it even now—a lot of folks actually do read the Bible like this. They just skirt past the parts they don't like. They ignore the stuff that confronts them and dismiss the stuff that confuses them. It's so much easier to "deal with it" that way.

Another reason people gloss over particular passages of Scripture is because the passages do fit their "theology"—that is, single passages do not fit their thinking about the broader sweep of Scripture's truths. For instance, standing firmly on the truth that we are saved in Christ "by grace through faith and not from works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9), we may be left to wonder why so much of the New Testament is loaded with instructions about how we should live. And when those passages include talk about reward and punishment "according to what we have done" (Matthew 16:27, Romans 2:6, Revelation 22:12), the questions grow even greater.

BUT THE BIBLE IS NOT A BOOK OF CONTRADICTIONS, AS SOME CRITICS SUGGEST—NOT WHEN YOU READ THE WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE AND DISCOVER HOW ITS MAJOR THEMES FOLD TOGETHER. Such is the case with God's grace and our works. They are intimately intertwined, but it is grace that comes first. God's grace produces godly works:

FACING CHALLENGES

Besides the suggestion that the Bible is full of contradictions, what other challenges have you heard to the Christian faith? How do you respond to these?

What should we say then? Should we continue to sin in order that grace may multiply? Absolutely not! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ...For we know that our old self was crucified with Him (Christ) in order that sin's dominion over the body may be abolished, so that we may no longer be enslaved to sin, since a person who has died is freed from sin's claims. (Romans 6:1-2,6-7)

For our boast is this: the testimony of our conscience that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with God-given sincerity and purity, not by fleshly wisdom but by God's grace. (2 Corinthians 2:12)

The result of grace is not only eternal salvation, but also the renewing of our lives. We do not have to choose sin, because we have been freed from its controlling grip. More than that, our God-honoring actions are evidence that grace has seized us in this way. Grace—and its activating partner, faith—are the revealed in us by how we act. Our acts do not save us, but they certainly show us as God's people (or not!).

With this full understanding of the proper relationship between grace and works, we approach one of Jesus' most extensive and most disturbing parables in a fresh light. This parable is found in Matthew 25:31-40:

"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His

glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you took care of Me; I was in prison and you visited Me.'

"Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You something to drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or without clothes and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and visit You?'

"And the King will answer them, 'I assure you: Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me.' Then He will also say to those on the left, 'Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels! For I was hungry and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger and you didn't take Me in; I was naked and you didn't clothe Me, sick and in prison and you didn't take care of Me.'

"Then they too will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or without clothes, or sick, or in prison, and not help You?'

"Then He will answer them, 'I assure you: Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for Me either.'

"And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

A NEW COMFORT ZONE

One of the changes in our lives when we follow Christ is that we become more accepting of conviction. Read John 16:5-11 to get a grasp on this important work of the Holy Spirit.

WHILE A PARABLE AS STRONG AS THIS MAY REQUIRE PREPARATION IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND ITS PLACE IN THE SWEEP OF SCRIPTURE, IT REQUIRES ALMOST NO ANALYSIS. In fact, it is one of the clearest of Jesus' parables. It requires personal reflection. For we cannot read this parable without placing ourselves right in the thick of it and asking ourselves the strongest of questions:

- Am I one who feeds the hungry, gives water to the thirsty, takes in strangers, clothes the naked, and cares for those who are sick or in prison? Do I care for 'the least of the these brothers' of Christ? Am I, in the final analysis, a sheep under the One Great Shepherd?
- Or am I one who ignores the hungry, turns his back on the thirsty, rejects strangers, leaves the naked to freeze, and forgets those who are sick or in prison? Do I leave the care for 'the least of these brothers' of Christ to someone else? Am I, in the final analysis, a goat not really reflecting God's grace in any noticeable way?

No, these are not easy questions to ask ourselves, for even if we fall in the first group, we can always see ourselves giving more. And maybe that is the point. Jesus was not satisfied with His life until He had completed the work that the Father had given Him to do. If we are willing to ask ourselves the tough questions, we are—in faith—saying to our Father, "Bring it on! I know You have more for me to do in Your amazing kingdom!"

GAME ON! Every seasoned golfer knows the importance of the mental game. Here's a little adage that will help you keep your mind geared up and in check all at once: Expect a good shot, accept a bad one.

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward...the poor and needy in your land. —Deuteronomy 15:11

LESSON 6 TRUE RELIGION

RELIGIOUSLY. That is the adverb we use to describe the way in which a person approaches a particular endeavor. By it, we mean that the person displays fervency and dedication in the way that a monk or a nun might as they carry out the disciplines of serving God in a highly focused setting.

Of course, there are golfers who play "religiously." Like PGA Champions Tour ironman Dana Quigley, they play virtually every day. They practice with a mind to maintaining their strengths and improving their weaknesses. They are the ones found swinging in the air behind their desk at work. They are those who TiVo the Golf Channel. They play golf, watch golf, read about golf, talk about golf, think about golf, dream about golf.

SIGNS OF SICKNESS?

What are some of the telltale marks of people who make golf—or another endeavor— their top priority?

But here is the question you must have nerve to ask one of these religious golfers: *Why? Why do you play golf the way that you do?*

Actually, the nerve is necessary not so much to ask the question as to field the responses. Some will respond angrily, hardly believing that they are dared with such a question. Others will shake their heads, not having to say, *You'll never understand.* Another group will return the challenge, saying, "You will never know until you try it for yourself." The truth is, each of these responses arises from the same line of thinking: *Isn't it self-evident? I play for the playing's sake. Who needs a greater purpose?*

For one, Jesus needed a greater purpose. Jesus was a rabbi—a Jewish teacher—among rabbis, an expert in the law among experts in the law. He told the most religious people of His time, "Don't assume that I came to destroy the Law and the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill."

Jesus appreciated religious devotion. But not for religious devotion's sake.

THE GREAT "BINDING" (THE OBLIGATION) IN JESUS' TEACHING WAS THAT RELIGION AND DEVOTION BOTH MUST HAVE PURPOSE FAR BEYOND THEMSELVES. Righteousness is done for a reason. That reason is never to build up a man or a woman in the eyes of others. Righteousness is done to glorify God, to build *Him* up in the eyes of others.

That is why "the Jesus religion" reeks of compassion and mercy. When we offer to others the same mercy and compassion—the same forgiveness and restoration—that have been offered to us in Christ, we extend His hand to them. Our religion has purpose: to shine before men that they may see our good deeds and *praise our Father in heaven* (Matthew 5:16).

'THE JESUS RELIGION'

This is the expression we use here to suggest the way most highly commended by Christ: loving God fully and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

To this end, we will explore today two passages from the letters to Christ's followers. In these passages, we will see the challenge of offering a "true religion" to the needy around us. The first of these passages opens the 13th chapter of Hebrews:

Let brotherly love continue. Don't neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it. Remember the prisoners, as though you were in prison with them, and the mistreated, as though you yourselves were suffering bodily.

Further down in the chapter, the writer of Hebrews compared the practiced sacrifices of the Jewish tabernacle to the active sacrifices of true religion:

Don't neglect to do good and to share, for God is pleased with such sacrifices.

Clearly, one of the standards of "the Jesus religion" is that it is to be performed in every place and toward everyone. How different this is from the historically persistent mindset that religion is defined as those things practiced in the church building by those who choose to go there—that thinking persists right into our time! The sacrifices of true religion bless others to advance the glory of God. Satan, our enemy, would have us believe that only what is done *directly* to God counts, but again and again God's Word shows us that because He is "above all and through all and in all," our *indirect* actions, dispensed to others, honor Him.

The second passage that leads us to serving others according to "the Jesus religion," is found in the first chapter of the New Testament's next letter, James:

Pure and undefiled religion is this: look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

This passage is important for two reasons. First, it solidifies the compelling teaching of Christ that we must always have in mind those who are the most pained and needy among us—depicted here as orphans and widows. Second, it reminds us that there is a difference between the way the world acts and the way we are to act. We do not want to let the world's way of doing things (with pride and self-focus) to creep back into our lives.

THE SCOPE OF BIBLICAL SURVEY ON THE MATTER OF SERVING THE POOR AND NEEDY IS RATHER CONCLUSIVE. It is our task. In fact, in many parts of the world—even the increasingly diverse metropolises of the West—it is the unique task of Christian men and women. Other faiths have not been so traditionally focused on benevolence. Our actions, when they follow Christ's teaching, will set us apart.

The fourth aspect of the Links Players Mission sees this truth. As followers of Christ, we have two messages to offer, hand in hand:

1 Christ loves you now. We preach this not with our lips so much as with our eyes and our feet and our hands. We see a need, we go to the need, and we meet the need. Yes, there are times when this is most effectively done by sending money to support those who are working in special or distant places. But we are each called to reach out to those who pass before us, be they old friends, bare acquaintances, or even seeming enemies.

2 Christ will always love you. Here we bring the spoken message of the Good News of Christ—that He died for the forgiveness of our sins and that He offers us eternal life if we trust Him. While we can offer a warm blanket or a cold drink of water in Christ's name, only Christ can promise salvation. But He has chosen us to carry this message to all people.

GET TO KNOW THE NEEDS

To gain ideas from some who are doing exciting work among the poor and needy, we suggest you visit www.kidsacrossamerica.org, www.jfci.org, and www.worldvision.org.

GAME ON! It can be easy to press yourself when you find you are the shortest hitter in your group. Instead, relish the chance to hit your approach first and put pressure on your opponent where it really counts.

This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out His commands.

—1 John 5:2, NIV

LESSON 7 ROADBLOCKS TO SERVICE

NO DOUBT, ALL OF US HAVE OUR PERSONAL LEVELS OF TOLERANCE WHEN IT COMES TO CERTAIN BEHAVIOR. **But on the whole, golfers are rather forgiving. We have to be, for we are so prone to mistakes.**

Some of these mistakes are too big to mention. Surely you know those who would never breach the golf etiquette that says you do not say the word *shank* (is it even OK to write it?). The Bible says there are mistakes like this in life as well:

Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. (Ephesians 5:11-12, NIV)

But there is a big difference between the errors of faithless sin and the mistake of faithful effort. Often, we will avoid doing what is right for fear of making mistakes or because we have a "good excuse." Other times, we cannot serve others because our own need is so overwhelming. To close our study on kindling compassion for the poor and needy, let's take a look today at three key roadblocks to service and what we might do about them.

WHEN WE MAKE MISTAKES

The reformer Martin Luther once made a shocking statement: "Be a sinner and sin boldly!" The translations of Luther's German actually vary slightly, but the gist and the context were this: Be forthright with your sin; it can never be as strong as the grace of God.

BACKWARDS LOGIC

How does owning up to our sin—rather than hiding it—allow us to be free in Christ's grace?

Many followers of Christ, once they have first trusted Him, slip into a sort of lifeless faith, doing little of real impact for fear of doing much of real sin. Luther, and those who have followed up his teaching (which was based strongly on Romans 5:20-21), simply laid it on the line: All your sins are real, because you are a real sinner. While this seems like a drastic acknowledgement, it too is in keeping with Paul's own assessment of himself: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15).

The fear of making mistakes, which is a fear of obedience as much as anything else, keeps us from doing some of the very best work God designed us to do. A common worry that people have about giving to those in need is that they will give to the wrong person—one who uses the money for alcohol or some other drug, for instance.

But our greater mistake may be in judging another's possible motives at all. Jesus said plainly: "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (Matthew 5:42). Notice that He did *not* say: "Before you give anything to anyone, ask a bunch of probing questions, run a background check, and make them come back tomorrow to test their resolve."

By simply following Jesus' teaching, will you make a mistake someday? You bet! Probably more than once, you will give money to someone who is lying to you or someone who uses the money for ignoble purposes. But that is a matter for the Lord, just as your obedience is a matter for the Lord. In the end, it is a far greater mistake to hesitate in our obedience to God than to be generous toward someone who does not appreciate it or who is only taking advantage of us. And when we recognize that difference, we will be free from the fear that keeps us from doing what God asks.

WHEN WE FORM EXCUSES

Another way around simple obedience is to invoke our reason. We can come up with many bright excuses for not doing things as God asks us to do them. But Scripture is clear: God's way of thinking is not like ours. Having our heads on "straight" may actually be the worst way to have them!

No one should deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks he is wise in this age, he must become foolish so that he can become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God, since it is written: **He catches the wise in their craftiness**—and again, **The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise**, that they are futile. (1 Corinthians 3:18-20)

The Bible offers a terrible example of a man who decided his reason was smarter than God's. Whereas King Saul knew God's instruction for the offering of sacrifice, when Saul had waited "long enough" for the arrival of a priest, he took it upon himself to make the sacrifice. The sacrifice was not a bad thing; but operating outside of God's will was the last straw between Saul and God. That very day, God rejected Saul as king. (You can read this account in 1 Samuel 13.)

COMING CLEAN

What are excuses you have heard yourself making to get out of following God's Word?

When you find yourself making excuses for not helping the needy as God shows them to you—"But this is the last five dollars in my wallet," "I've got to get to that appointment on time," "The poor will always be around, so I can help them any time"—beware! These excuses can indicate

that you are not in agreement with God's Word. That is never a place you want to find yourself.

WHEN YOU NEED COMPASSION

Finally, on a different note, you may find times when you are in great need yourself. Whether by lack of wisdom, chosen sin, physical or mental illness, a string of "luckless" circumstances, or even the sins of others toward you, you are desperate. Your finances may be tapped, you may be unable to work for a time, or you may simply need comfort against an overwhelming loss. Any of these needs can incapacitate you from being a servant. You find yourself reduced to being served.

When this happens, there are still several godly things you can and should do:

- **If your troubles are the result of sin, confess your sins and move away from them in full, true repentance.** You need to restore yourself to God and to those against whom you have sinned.
- **Be patient in affliction and faithful in prayer** (Romans 12:12). Your troubles are not the fault of those who may be helping you, so bear up with as much strength as you have. This you do by keeping the Father your constant companion through prayer. Don't be afraid to tell Him everything you feel and everything you fear.
- **Be thankful to God for those He brings to your aid.** These people are His gift to you. Be sure to remember His provision.
- **Be cheerful and grateful toward those who help you.** While you may have little material to give, your smile and your sincere thanks will go a long way toward returning the favor of love.

REMEMBER JESUS' PARABLE OF THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS. Those who had not helped the poor and needy tried to beg off by asking when they had ever seen Jesus in need. Jesus didn't let them off the hook. We must always be prepared to do what God has called us to do, and to do it without equivocation.

GAME ON! If you find it hard to keep your focus throughout the round, try playing the course in three six-hole "mini-courses." If you don't meet the par you've set for yourself on the first six holes, you get a couple more chances to start fresh.

"Therefore, get your minds ready for action, being self-disciplined..." —1 Peter 1:13

LESSON 8 REVIEW AND ADVANCE

FOR SEVEN LESSONS NOW, WE HAVE CONSIDERED THE FOURTH ASPECT OF BEING A LINKS PLAYER IN DEPTH. Now let's spend a day reviewing what we have studied and consider how we might enact this principle in our lives. James wrote, "But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves...the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer who acts—this person will be blessed in what he does." (James 1:22,25). So let's make it our goal today to move from study to practice.

In review, answer the following questions:

1. What is the fourth aspect of being a Links Player?

2. Overall, how have these lessons changed your perspective on the responsibility of the follower of Christ in offering compassion and service to the poor and needy?

3. From lesson 1, what is the biblical foundation of our giving?

4. What are some ideas you have had—perhaps based on your observance of others—for seeking out those who need help?

5. How do we know from Isaiah 58 (lesson 3) that good is not always good enough?

6. What are some of the challenges in loving our enemies? How are we able to do this anyway?

7. How do we balance the New Testament teaching of salvation by grace with the many instructions toward righteousness?

8. What is the difference between religious activity and what James called "true religion"?

9. Which roadblock to service will you most need to have removed in your life if you are to reach out as God would have you do?

Take a few moments now to ask God to help you in this area, so that the roadblock may be overcome.

IF YOU ARE DOING THIS STUDY AS PART OF A GROUP, YOUR GROUP SHOULD TAKE SOME TIME TO TALK ABOUT THE THOUGHTS YOU HAVE RECORDED FOR KINDLING COMPASSION FOR THE POOR AND NEEDY.¹ There are three critical advantages to doing this. You may recognize the first two from the business world. First, your good ideas may generate good ideas for others. Second, others may have resources that can help you with your own idea. But the third reason to present your ideas to others is the most important—so they can affirm and pray for you as you go forward with implementing your plan.

Sometimes it is difficult to know what to pray for others. Beyond healing in a time of sickness or relief in a time of trouble, our tongues are often tied when it comes to prayer. Having a list of each other's commitments to kindling compassion for the poor and needy should help you as you talk to God. Ask God to encourage your friends, even as He encourages you.

Don't forget the follow-up here, either. In the days to come, call your friends and ask them about how they are progressing. Even with prayer, our best plans don't always go smoothly. Reaching out to others in new, sometimes uncomfortable ways can really stretch us. That's when it is good to have a supportive friend call to listen to your story and pray with you again.

AS WE CLOSE THIS STUDY, LET'S DO SO AS CHANGED PEOPLE. Christ's saving work in our life has made us new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). But it can take a while to get used to this "new skin." Each day your life is going to be tainted by sin, whether you seek it out or you step in it without seeing it coming. But we are a people freed by Christ, and we do not need to dwell on our failures. We need to stand on the truth of His forgiveness, confessing our sins to Him and moving on in His grace (see 1 John 1:9).

Today let's make a fresh commitment to reaching out to those who are most in need around us and to offer them the compassion of Christ.

¹Large groups may need to break up into smaller groups of 3-5 in order to best accomplish the exchange of ideas and prayer for one another. If, on the other hand, you are not in a group, write out your commitment and hand it to a friend who will call you in the next few days to ask how you are progressing and to pray for you.

FOR GROUP LEADERS USING THIS STUDY

IT CAN BE DAUNTING TO BE CALLED ON TO TEACH THE WORD OF GOD. Indeed, many potential leaders have told us that while they are capable of and eager to bring a group together, or to act as host, teaching is an entirely different level, one for which they do not consider themselves prepared.

QUESTION

Why are you being called upon to lead a Bible study group? In what way do you feel best prepared?

Other don't feel so much weight when it comes to teaching. They know their Bibles well, or they're naturals when speaking to a crowd.

It is, then, the precise goal of the structure of these Links Players Bible studies to provide a fully operational Bible study for those teachers who need much assistance and yet a format that leaves room for experienced leaders to bring their own learning to the table.

In each lesson, you will find five features:

- **THE OPENING SCRIPTURE VERSE.** You might encourage members of the group to memorize the verse each week. This may depend on the interest of your group, but even the newest in Christ need to begin committing the Word of God to memory, as it will hold them to righteousness when times of decision come in their lives.
- **THE NARRATIVE LESSON.** This lesson uses golf analogies to tie into Scriptural truths. Many non-golfers read our daily devotional, so the analogies are not necessary, nor are they normally meaningful only if you deeply understand golf. In some cases, you may wish to go to your Bible to provide more context for the Scriptures as they are presented in each lesson.
- **THE QUESTION BOXES.** These boxes may help individuals in your study reflect more personally on the lesson, but the questions can also open honest, rich discussion in your group setting. As you progress with your group, you'll acquire a sense of whether they are interested in open discussion, or whether they would simply desire to be taught in a straightforward style.
- **FOR FURTHER STUDY.** This final box always give the group something to beyond the boundaries of the brief study. They may do this before they come each week, or they may do the further study after you gather and discuss the main topic.
- **GAME ON!** These golf tips are provided to build a bridge for those who play the game. It might help your group get to know each other better if they work on these tips together when they head to the golf course.

Finally, the set of lessons concludes with a Review and Advance lesson. While you may emphasize life application of the study each time you meet, this lesson is intended to bring personal application to the forefront, so that each member of the group can assess their own position before God and move forward in their relationship with Him.

However you choose to use these studies, be it verbatim or as a loose guide, we pray that your group will be enriched and motivated by the studies. Should you have any questions or suggestions for us as we develop more of these studies, please give us a call at Links Players, 1-800-90-LINKS.

BECOMING A LINKS PLAYER

THE GOLF COURSE IS A PRETTY STRANGE PLACE TO GO LOOKING FOR GOD. The truth is, though, that God is infinite and able to meet us where we are. So people have met God through Jesus Christ in just about every imaginable venue, from the finest country clubs to the most despicable of the world's prisons. What matters is the readiness of your heart. When you're desperate for God, it is usually because everything else in the world has left you wanting something more. If you find yourself in that state today, God has quite an offer for you, made through His Son Jesus Christ with these simple words: "Follow Me."

In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in Him, and He saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in Him; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation." —Isaiah 25:9

When He said these words to His various people when He lived on earth, their responses varied. Some made excuses. Some considered what was involved and found it to be too much for them. But His disciples, those who chose to follow Him, set aside all they had tried before and followed. Was it easy? Often not. Was it what they expected? Once in a while. But was it what they desired? In their heart of hearts, yes. And the same holds true for the men and women in our time who have said, "Yes, I will follow."

If you have completed this study and reviewed the five points of the Links Player's personal mission as outlined on page 1, you have a good sense of what is involved in following Christ. You can't know everything, but you have enough information to "consider the cost," as Jesus said. If you now find yourself ready to commit to following Christ, here's what you do:

FIRST, if possible, make your commitment in the presence of someone who has already done so. This is not necessary, but from the moment of your surrender, you will have a partner in the faith, a person who can encourage and support you.

SECOND, begin to pray. This is a holy act, but it requires no special words or patterns. The Bible tells us that Jesus intercedes for us, carrying our prayers to the Father in heaven.

THIRD, give your sinful life to God. Tell Him that you are sorry for what you have done in the past, but that you know He can free you from the eternal consequences of that past.

FOURTH, tell God that you are thankful for the death of His Son, whose shed blood cleanses your sin.

FINALLY, let God know that you are ready for a new life, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to do things you have never done before, replacing sinful habits with righteous ones. Ask Him to guide you step-by-step, particularly in the next few days as you tell others about this important decision and commitment you have made.

Now that you have made this commitment to follow Christ, you are a Links Player. That's it.

But remember, too, that you are just a seedling. God has it in mind for you to grow. You can do this through important acts of faith, such as baptism and implementing your spiritual gifts. You will also want to form the habits of Bible reading, memorization and prayer, to learn more about God and to develop your communicative relationship with Him. If you're not sure how to go about all of this, your group leader can help answer your questions and point you to others who can help as well. Don't go it alone! God's plan includes rich fellowship among His people, for "as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).

