

A stack of antique books with various leather covers and gold-tooled patterns. A white circular graphic is centered over the books, containing the text 'JESUS AT THE CENTER' in large, bold, white capital letters. The words 'AT THE' are smaller and positioned between 'JESUS' and 'CENTER'.

JESUS
AT THE
CENTER

• CHRISTMAS • FREEDOM • PRAYER • THE CHURCH • OF OUR STORY • TRANSFORMATION •

DAILY DEVOTIONAL

Our number one job as followers of Jesus is to abide in Him. Jesus is clear: apart from Him, we can do nothing. I sense a deeper love for the Spirit in our church that is connected to our daily pursuit of God. Just as eating once a week would leave us physically hungry and famished, so too would connecting with God only once a week leave us spiritually malnourished. I love that our church is daily seeking God. Keep it up!

I really believe the picture you have of Jesus will impact your future. If Jesus is too small in your view, you will never give your whole life to Him. Consider this: Jesus called His first disciples to abandon everything and follow Him. This call remains the same today. We will only respond like the disciples did when we see Jesus as worth it—when we see Him for who He is!

The most important thing in your life is to keep Jesus at the center. I hope these devotions continue to be helpful to you as you seek to keep Jesus at the center of your life. As we spend time with *Jesus at the Center of Our Story*, may we be reminded that He is the central part of our story. May He fill you with new life, freedom, power and glory.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'B' followed by a horizontal line and a cursive 'J'.

Bryan Jones, Senior Pastor

DAILY PRAYER AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

"... Our Father in heaven..."

Matthew 6:9b (NLT)

- What do You want to say to me today as my Father?

"... may Your name be kept holy."

Matthew 6:9c (NLT)

- What do You want to reveal to me about Your power today?

"May Your Kingdom come soon."

Matthew 6:10a (NLT)

- Help me make Your priorities my priorities today.

"Give us today the food we need,"

Matthew 6:11 (NLT)

- Is there anything specific You want me to do with my time or the people I'm around today?

"and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us"

Matthew 6:12 (NLT)

- Reveal to me anyone I need to forgive or ask for forgiveness.

"And don't let us yield to temptation..."

Matthew 6:13a (NLT)

- Is there anywhere I'm vulnerable to temptation?

THE SOURCE OF UNITY

Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.
Ephesians 4:1-3 (NLT)

I remember years ago, I was exhausted. Ever been there? I happened to be at the beach, and I remember taking a walk. I wasn't necessarily looking for God to speak in a profound way; I just was walking, praying and trying to focus my mind on Him. I remember looking at the waves, and He said to me, *if you go out there and stand against the waves after a while, your strength will fail, and if you go into the world in your strength, you will fail.* This word might perhaps be one of the most powerful words God has spoken into my life. The point is simple: we need a greater source than ourselves to live out our faith. If you live by your strength, you will eventually fail. Life is too hard, problems are too big, the world is too hostile, and the challenges are too great. But the good news is that you have the ultimate power source, who will strengthen you daily.

Notice the verse above: how do we live a life worthy of our calling? Look at verse 3: *keep yourselves united in the Spirit.* You can do verse 2 without verse 3. You can be humble and gentle. You can't be patient with each other in your own strength. When we are united with the Spirit, when He is our power source, we can face all the problems and stings of the world and not lose our unity. We must remember that true and lasting unity is from above. The world gives the appearance of unity, and sure, people are united on certain issues, but that isn't the picture of biblical unity. Biblical unity means even in the hurts, the annoyances, the disagreements, and differing opinions, we can be unified by a greater source, the Spirit. The world says if you don't agree with me, then it's hate. The Bible says we can disagree with each other and still have unity and love for each other. The world's source of unity isn't strong enough to overcome the differences and disagreements. True unity comes from above. To live a life of unity and love, even in disagreements, we need a greater source, and that greater source is Jesus.

APPLICATION: Stay in step with the Spirit and His power today.

PRAYER: Ask the Spirit if there is anywhere you are operating in your own strength and not the power of the Spirit. Release that to God and trust Him.

JESUS' FINAL REQUEST

"I pray that they will all be one, just as You and I are one—as You are in Me, Father, and I am in You. And may they be in Us so that the world will believe You sent Me. I have given them the glory You gave Me, so they may be one as We are one. I am in them, and You are in Me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that You sent Me and that You love them as much as You love Me."

John 17:21-23 (NLT)

One of Jesus' final requests was for unity. Think about how big of a deal unity is. How you spend your last few hours on this earth reveals what you prioritize. One of the things that is so near and dear to the heart of Jesus is unity. This is what He spent some of His last prayers on! He wanted the church to be one as He was one in the Trinity. Sometimes, it seems that we treat unity as extra credit. We treat it like it's a great thing to strive for in the church, but it's a great thing; it's a necessary thing. God isn't present where there isn't unity.

If you have ever seen a California redwood tree, they are massive. They can grow up to 300 feet tall and 20 feet wide. I once saw a picture of a car driving through a redwood tree. The thing that has shocked me is how shallow their root system is. You would think they have roots that go really deep, but that's not the reality. So how do they support such a huge amount of weight? They can do this because they intertwine their roots with the other nearby redwood trees. Their roots are connected, and they are literally holding each other up. Think about this: a massive, interconnected support system is just a few feet below the ground. Unity is the way they survive. It's the way they grow. Unity is where their power is.

This is a picture of what Jesus prayed for. He prayed that our unity would hold each other up. He prayed that our unity would make us strong. He prayed that the church would be united. Think about it: people drive from all over the world to see these trees. There is something that has captured their attention. Unity will cause the world to take notice of the church. We live in a culture that is divided and fractured. The church must be countercultural. You must be countercultural; therefore, we cannot allow ourselves to become divided from our Christian brothers and sisters.

APPLICATION: Fight for unity today with your church family.

PRAYER: Ask the Spirit to give you a deeper desire for unity. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal if there is any disunity between you and someone else. Thank God for the unity modeled in the Trinity.

CAUSES FOR DIVISION

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

James 3:14-16 (NIV)

If unity is from the Spirit, then division is from the devil. This is one of his main strategies to oppose the work of the Spirit. He has destroyed many churches and people through moral failure, but he destroyed just as many through division. It's a cancer that affects the future and life of the church. James 3 mentions some causes of division that we must be aware of.

One of the first causes of division is envy. Instead of having our eyes on Jesus, we have our eyes on others. The comparison game starts to create a self-pity that can make us envious of other people and what they have. How excited are you for others when they get a promotion, a new car, a new opportunity, or recognition that you don't? The enemy will creep in and get us to become jealous of others, creating a division that keeps the Holy Spirit from moving freely. The other day, I bought something for myself, and a friend called and shared that he bought a bunch of things for himself that day. I was annoyed because I thought his stuff was better. That little flash of jealousy almost caused me to miss my blessings right in front of me.

The second cause of division in the verse above is selfish ambition. I have often said that when others lie, it's a sin; however, when I lie... it's complicated. The point is that my selfish ambition will cause me to do or say some things I wouldn't normally say. Selfish ambition can show up in big and small ways. We will cut someone down or go along with gossip at times to fit into a certain group. Selfish ambition can sometimes cause us to cut corners to get ahead or be dishonest about a particular situation. Have you noticed selfish ambition can also cause us to over-spiritualize our views? We tend to make topics or beliefs that we are most passionate about the most important things, and we can often shame others who don't hold our same convictions on certain subjects.

May God make us more aware of the enemy's plans to divide us. May we operate with spiritual wisdom and maturity to tear down envy and selfish ambition that surface in our own lives and the church. Where there is unity, the Spirit is free to move and have His way!

APPLICATION: Look for the ways envy and selfish ambition bubble up today.

PRAYER: Ask the Spirit to reveal any areas of envy or selfish ambition. Whatever the Spirit reveals, be faithful to respond. Thank Him for the unity He brings.

THE MOST PAINFUL DIVISION

One time Jesus entered a house, and the crowds began to gather again. Soon He and His disciples couldn't even find time to eat. When His family heard what was happening, they tried to take Him away. "He's out of His mind," they said.
Mark 3:20-21 (NLT)

No division or resistance you face is fun, but let's be honest; some pains hurt worse than others. The greatest church hurt I have ever encountered has come from those I'm closest to. Think of how many people have fallen away because of a church hurt. Jesus was no stranger to this. Notice the first sting doesn't come from the outside but from within. Think about it: Jesus' family and friends began to try to stop Him from doing His ministry. Notice what they say, *He's out of His mind*. If the Son of God gets hurt and cut by those closest to Him, rest assured you will face the same bumps and bruises along the way.

Too many people fall away from the church or give up on it when they get hurt, but Jesus didn't. I don't love the church because it's perfect. I love the church because Jesus did. I can't claim to be a follower of His if I don't follow in His footsteps. If you will, Jesus was constantly hurt and betrayed by those in church, but He kept loving and showing up. This might be harsh, but if someone gives up entirely on the church, then they aren't a disciple of Jesus because to be a disciple means I have died to my rights. I'm not advocating staying in a broken or abusive church. Clearly, there are times to leave the church, but church hurts don't give us the right to throw stones and give up on the church entirely.

The truth is, if you have been in the church long enough, you know that some of the greatest joys and some of the greatest wounds come from the church. God has designed it so that we cannot thrive in our faith without others. We need the church; we need to meet so we don't drift away from the faith entirely. To this day, I haven't met anyone who isn't regularly connected to church who isn't on fire for Jesus. Coming to church doesn't mean you will be like Jesus, but not going will guarantee you won't. The reason we cannot give up on the church is Jesus didn't. We must fight for unity, and sometimes we must fight just to show up because of what we've faced, but God will honor our commitment! He is faithful!

APPLICATION: Commit to show up each week to Church.

PRAYER: Ask the Spirit if there is any church hurt you are carrying. Is there anyone in the church who has caused you to pull away from God or to carry a wound that still affects you? Ask the Spirit to reveal someone who has blessed you in the church. Send them a note or text and thank them for their investment in your life.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.
Romans 12:4-5 (ESV)

The Bible has three general types of diversity: racial diversity, generation diversity (different ages), and socioeconomic diversity (income and education). I deeply believe that Christianity is the only force in the entire world that can unite so many different people. Often, we can unintentionally try and get people to conform to our views and preferences. A perfect example of this is music. Think about it: we don't have preaching wars; we have worship wars because we tend to think our style of music is the right music to play. The problem is that diversity causes people to have differences in preferences and opinions, which is what makes the church unique and so vibrant. Love and unity don't try to get everyone to look and speak exactly like we do. There are things we must be united on (who Jesus is, the Word of God, and salvation comes from Jesus). However, there are other things we can have differing opinions on, and this should be celebrated.

It seems more than ever before that our culture has fractured in diversity, where we get all the people who think one way together and like the same things in our circle. This isn't unity; it's conformity. Hear me out: I'm not saying it's bad to have people with similar preferences, backgrounds and ages, but we must fight to stay unified as a **WHOLE CHURCH**. The verse above shows that we are all different, even in our giftings and wirings. This is the beauty of the church. Some are wired to greet and welcome others in such a way that gives them a little touch of heaven; others have an intercessory gift where God uniquely puts things on their heart to pray for. Others have the gift of service and volunteer in different capacities; some have the gift of administration and help organize different events and details for their small group. We shouldn't try to get people to operate exactly like we do in our gifts; we are all wired differently and have different skills and passions.

There are styles and ways we don't always prefer things done in church, but what unites us has to be stronger than what divides us. We must learn to appreciate and thank Jesus for the different ages, races, preferences, backgrounds and thoughts. The church becomes a powerful force when people show up and say this isn't about me. It's about Jesus first, then others. The church shrinks and loses its power when we elevate our wants and needs above everyone else. There is unity in diversity.

APPLICATION: Thank God for the diversity you see today.

PRAYER: Ask the Spirit to reveal if there is anywhere you have put your wants above others. Ask the Spirit to help you see people before yourself.

UNITY CREATES COMPASSION

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Acts 4:32-35 (ESV)

It's hard to create a heart of compassion and care. Sometimes, I confess, I try to push myself to care more deeply, but it doesn't seem to last. Unity is one of the ways to create deeper compassion and care for those in need. I moved out of my home when I was 18. I love my family, but I was hungry to see the world and get out of my own. I have always been close to my family, and they have always helped me in different ways. In the 21 years I have been living on my own, only once have I called my parents and asked them to come help. It was during a season of crippling anxiety, and I just needed my immediate family. I wasn't sleeping, and honestly, I didn't think I would ever come out of the deep pit. I called that morning, and later that afternoon, my mom was flying into Dallas to help me and the kids since I was struggling so much to be present. You know, my mom didn't tell me, *well I'd like to fly it, but this last minute the ticket will be way too expensive, so I will come on the weekend.* Families have a unity and love that causes them to sacrifice time and finances to care for each other.

The point is, where there is unity and care, sacrifices don't seem to cost as much. They seem to come way easier. The church was trying to whip up emotion for the needs they had. Some had financial issues, emotional burdens, health issues and relational issues, and the verse above shows that no one was in need. Churches today are filled with needs that aren't always met, but this first church met all the needs. Do you know what the key ingredient was? Unity, they were of one heart and soul; they were a spiritual family that gladly answered the call of those around them. When our unity and love grow, so will our care and compassion.

APPLICATION: Generosity is a sign of unity.

PRAYER: Ask God to help give you unity and love for the people of God. Ask the Spirit to help you see those around you in the faith and church as spiritual family.

UNITY IN MISSION

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
Matthew 28:18-20 (ESV)

Years back, I played paintball with some guys, and one was a Green Beret. I confess that most of the people on my team had no plan other than to take others and not get shot. I was struck by the guy who was a Green Beret. He was different; he asked us what our plan was, to which a long silence filled the air. Then, after no answer, he took charge. He told us the mission and gave each of us clear assignments. Some were to guard the flag, others to linger by the base, some to scout the opposing enemy, and others to capture the flag. Before he spoke, we were a bunch of individuals out to accomplish our different tasks, but he gave us unity in our mission. He gave us a clear assignment; everyone knew their part to play. Although I couldn't see my entire team, I knew what they were doing, and the sense of collaboration gave me a deep understanding of unity.

Jesus does the same in Matthew 28. He takes the disciples who were all running their individual plays, and He brings us in and gives us a clear unity through mission. He helps us see what we are to be doing. Our mission is to take the love of Jesus deep into enemy territory and, through the Gospel, push back the forces of darkness, invite others into the story of Jesus and allow them to experience the love and unity of His kingdom. I find great joy sometimes on Sunday when I look out at Brookwood and think of the unity in our mission. We each take the hope of Jesus back into our homes, neighborhoods and workplaces. We all have our assignments. You can't do my assignment, and I can't do yours, but together, we have a deep sense of unity and togetherness that our mission is bigger than one person. Instead of trying to change the world, start by changing the world of one person around you. I couldn't be at the base, be a scout, and capture the flag. I had one assignment. God has placed you where you are supposed to be. Don't try to be everywhere at once. Just be faithful to be a light where He has placed you. God saw fit to put you exactly where you are because you are a part of His plan in Matthew 28 to redeem the world. We all are unified in this mission. We all have a part to play.

APPLICATION: Be faithful where God has placed you TODAY!

PRAYER: Ask God to bring someone to mind to whom you can bring encouragement and love today. Pray for someone who doesn't know Jesus and invite them to church!

COMPELLED BY COMPASSION

Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages of that area, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And He healed every kind of disease and illness. When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.
Matthew 9:35-36 (NLT)

Jesus traveled extensively during His ministry. Everywhere He went, He encountered people who needed Him. Some were physically sick, needing to be cleansed from an illness or disease. On a few occasions, He actually raised the dead to life. But there were others who weren't physically sick that still very much needed the intercession of the Savior. They were lost, confused or broken.

Consider Zacchaeus, who, besides being a *wee little man*, had been cheating people in his work as a tax collector. Or consider the rich young ruler who trusted in his wealth instead of God. Or consider the woman at the well in John 4, who was openly living in sin, scorned by those around her. There's a plethora of examples, but they all have one thing in common: Jesus had compassion on them. Whether they ultimately chose to follow Him or not, He had compassion. They were like sheep without a shepherd. And what we know about Jesus is that He is the good shepherd. Consider what He says in John 10:14-16 (NLT):

"I am the Good Shepherd; I know My own sheep, and they know Me, just as My Father knows Me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice My life for the sheep. I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to My voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd."

Jesus is our shepherd—He guides and protects us. If we are truly His sheep, we will listen for and recognize His voice. He has sacrificed Himself for us because of His deep love for us. May we never grow desensitized to the radical love and compassion of our Savior.

APPLICATION: Thank Jesus for who He is and what He has done. Thank Him for the compassion He has shown you in your life. Be specific where you can.

PRAYER: Almighty Father, thank You for Your Son Jesus, who has shown incomparable love and compassion to me. Thank You for Your patience with me. Help me to live out of a place of gratitude, willingly submitting to and surrendering to Your ways. In Jesus' name, amen.

CLOTHED IN COMPASSION

Since God chose you to be the holy people He loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.

Colossians 3:12-14 (NLT)

Sanctification is the lifelong process of becoming more and more like Jesus. It's the goal of every believer. We study the life of Jesus and pattern ours after His. What did Jesus say and do? What should we do if we're living as His representative here and now? We want to live like Jesus, who we know lived with compassion. So, the call is for us to be people of compassion.

Compassion may come more easily for some than others. I, for instance, am not the quickest to exhibit compassion. But after all these years of following Jesus, I've witnessed too much of His goodness toward me to not, in turn, show that to others. So, how does that show up in my life? It's many of the things Paul lists in the above passage. Mercy—not hammering people when they perhaps deserve it. Kindness in the little things. Humility to believe that I'm not better than anyone. Gentleness instead of harshness is particularly difficult for those of us who too often will give ourselves a pass by claiming that we're just *telling it like it is*—patience, which gets tried every day in every way imaginable.

I have to remember to make allowance for other's faults because that's what Christ did for me. A pastor many years ago told me that I wanted everyone to judge me by my intentions, which were for the best, while I judged everyone else unforgivingly by their actions, no matter their intent. He told me I needed to afford others the same grace God has shown me. I didn't like what he was saying at the time, but he was right. If Jesus could ask God to forgive those crucifying Him, surely I can forgive those who might offend me.

More than anything else, I need to love others. Love is more than just a mushy, gushy feeling. True love sacrifices for the sake of others. It requires action, putting our money where our mouth is. Instead of just talking about it, perhaps we need to be about it.

APPLICATION: Who can you show compassion to today? Is there someone that God is immediately bringing to the front of your mind? If not, that's okay! Keep praying that He would show you someone in particular to love well for Him. In the meantime, endeavor to show compassion to everyone you meet, from coworkers to family to strangers.

PRAYER: God, thank You for the incredible compassion You've shown me. Please help me to do likewise as I interact with those around me. In Jesus' name, amen.

COMPASSION IN COMMUNITY

Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:2 (NLT)

I believe one of the greatest traps of the enemy is isolation. Just like predators in the wild will cut their target from the herd, so will our enemy seek to isolate us to make us easier prey. Think about some of the darker times in your life. I'd be willing to bet that no matter what you were going through, on some level you felt alone. If you think back to the creation account found in Genesis 1 and 2, you'll recall that as God makes everything, He pronounces it to be good. Do you know the first thing that is proclaimed to not be good? Think about it for a moment. Your mind might go to Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve break fellowship with God by eating the fruit. But the first thing that's called not good by God is actually found in Genesis 2:18.

It's that man is alone.

God sees Adam by himself and declares that this isn't good. So, He creates Eve. Right from the beginning, we see that being alone isn't good. So, my question for you is, why do you continue to isolate yourself when you go through tough times? We need each other. You need to share what's going on in your life with others so that you might experience the love and compassion of Christ through them. But that road goes both ways, meaning we must cultivate a Christ-centered community where others can come to us and share their burdens.

You've heard it said *many hands make light the load*. It's true when you're carrying something physically heavy. It's also true when you're carrying something emotionally heavy. We need each other. Consider the ancient African proverb: *If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.*

I don't know about you, but I'm far more interested in going the distance than moving at a breakneck speed. We need each other.

APPLICATION: Who in your life is sharing your burdens? Whose burdens are you sharing?

PRAYER: Father, help me to honor You by living in compassionate, Christ-centered community. Please help me to be humble enough to share my burdens. Please help me to be intentional enough to share the burdens of others. Thank You for the gift of community; help me to cultivate it. In Jesus' name, amen.

COMPASSION IN CONNECTION

Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all! **Romans 12:14-16 (NLT)**

Relationships are hard. Even the person that you love most in the world can be trying from time to time. And rest assured, they'd likely say the same about you. But we are called to live compassionately, just as Jesus did. The verses above give us some incredibly practical feedback on how to go about doing that.

First things first—we bless those who persecute us. That means instead of trying to get even, or maybe ahead, we seek to forgive and bless. Jesus speaks in the sermon on the mount about turning the other cheek and going the extra mile (Matthew 5:38-42). This is not an easy thing to do, but it is the compassionate, Christ-like thing. Instead of cursing them, pray that God would bless them. I've found that it's difficult to remain furious with someone if I'm consistently praying that God would shower them with blessing and favor.

Next, we want to connect with where people are. If those around us are rejoicing, let's not grow indignant that they would dare to celebrate when all is not perfect in our own world. Join in their joy! But by the same token, if all is well in your world, but those around you are having a difficult time, don't grow frustrated that they're killing the mood. Weep with those who weep. Yesterday, we spoke about sharing each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2); this is an extension of that.

Finally, we endeavor to live in harmony with all people. Now, we can only control our part of this. Some people are determined to be disagreeable. But in as much as it depends on you, live in peace with them (see Romans 12:18). A helpful part of this is to not be prideful or arrogant; we must remember that we don't know it all. Jesus was the very picture of humility in His interactions (see Philippians 2:3-8).

May we navigate our relationships, even the difficult ones, *especially* the difficult ones, with compassion.

APPLICATION: On a scale of 1-10, how's your relational health? Starting with those closest to you and working out to those you interact with regularly, how healthy are your relationships? Are they marked by the compassion of Christ? What relationships need some work? What obstacles stand in the way?

PRAYER: God, help me to love others the way You have loved me. Help me to love the difficult people in my life, especially those who might consider me an enemy. Help me to live with Your compassion, walking humbly and graciously with all. In Jesus' name, amen.

COMPASSION IN OUR CARE

We know what real love is because Jesus gave up His life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God’s love be in that person? 1 John 3:16-17 (NLT)

We’ve all heard the expression *talk is cheap*. Maybe we’ve even been guilty of some cheap talk ourselves. It’s easy to say something but harder to practically live it out. If we’re going to truly love people compassionately, we can’t just talk about it. Our actions must demonstrate that compassion.

Jesus set a remarkable precedent for us. He didn’t just tell us that He loved us; He demonstrated it through His actions. He came to earth as a human being, lived a perfect life, and then sacrificed that life so that we might be redeemed. If Jesus loved us by giving up His life, how can we claim to love those around us without doing the same?

True love is going to cost you something. It might be your time, effort, energy, resources or any number of different things. But to love someone is to sacrifice for them. In the passage above, John makes it clear that we are to care for others by meeting their needs. If you have a surplus while a brother or sister in Christ has a deficit, how can we claim that we are being compassionate? Consider the challenge of James 2:14-16 (NLT): *What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, “Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well”—but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?*

Our faith and our love for others must motivate us to action. Otherwise, it’s just cheap talk or possibly dead and useless faith (see James 2:17).

APPLICATION: Growing up, you may have heard the acronym JOY: Jesus, Others, You. Is this the order of things in your life? Are you willing to metaphorically lay down your life in the name of Jesus for others? What can you give of yourself that others might be blessed?

PRAYER: Father, help me care for others as You do. Help me to not just say I love others but to really do it. Help me in my selfishness, Lord, so that I might honor You and compassionately care for others. In Jesus’ name, amen.

CALLED TO COMPASSION

So be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do. Ephesians 5:15-17 (NLT)

How angry would it make you feel to be called a fool? On the flip side, how humbling would it be for someone to call you wise? I think we can all agree that we would certainly rather be known as the latter, yet I'm afraid that all of us are foolish in some ways. In the passage above, Paul calls us to be careful about how we live. Sadly, many of us are just haphazardly flailing our way through life without an ounce of intentionality. To be wise, we must make the most of every opportunity we're given. Other translations of Ephesians 5:16 call us to *redeem the time*. The truth is this: our time is our most valuable commodity. Once it's spent, you can't ever get it back or get more. So, we must be cognizant of how we're investing our time.

Paul goes on to say that we must understand what the Lord wants us to do. He contrasts this idea with someone who acts thoughtlessly. If you're on autopilot, just taking life as it comes, then it's possible you're missing what God has in store for you. We're not saved just to go to heaven when we die. If that were the case, God could *beam us up* at the moment we surrender to Christ. We're given a mission to share the Good News.

Take a moment to consider how you spend time with those closest to you. Are your interactions intentional? Are you redeeming the time? Or do your conversations tend to consist of mostly surface-level things? Or things that just won't matter or last in the long run? It might feel more comfortable to keep things light, but at some point, the compassionate thing to do is to have some Gospel-centric conversations.

APPLICATION: How well would you say you're using the God-appointed time you've been given on this earth? Are you being intentional in your relationships? Would you say you have a strong grasp of what the Lord wants you to do? Reflect on these questions and then ask God what He wants you to know as you seek to grow and move forward.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to redeem the time You've given me. In the midst of the evil of this world, help me live with Your wisdom and discernment. Grant me the boldness to stand for You and point others to You. In Jesus' name, amen.

COMPASSION IN COMMUNICATION

Jesus came and told His disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matthew 28:18-20 (NLT)

Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.

This quote is often erroneously attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan order. St. Francis never said this, but whoever did, for some reason, desired to set up an unnecessary dichotomy between speech and action. Of course, your life should reflect the Gospel—the way you treat your family and friends, the way you manage your resources, and the way you intentionally stand apart from culture. But you should also be able to articulate the Gospel with your words.

Imagine your friend who is not a believer comes to you and asks you to share with them what you believe. Let's imagine that they press you further, asking not only what you believe but also why. God's Word is clear that we should always be ready to give the reason for the hope we have in Christ (see 1 Peter 3:15). How confident are you in your ability to engage in a Gospel-centric conversation?

There might be a temptation to give yourself a pass and leave the mission work up to the *professional* Christians. But all of us have a role to play. There are people in your life who will never walk through the doors of Brookwood to hear a pastor share from the stage. Instead of keeping our interactions and relationships at the surface level, let's look for ways to go deeper. Let's steer conversations intentionally toward Christ. Sharing who Jesus is and what He has done is the compassionate thing to do. And it's the call Jesus has placed on our lives.

Consider what Paul says in Romans 10:13-15 (NLT): *For "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." But how can they call on Him to save them unless they believe in Him? And how can they believe in Him if they have never heard about Him? And how can they hear about Him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, "How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!"*

APPLICATION: Ask God who you can compassionately communicate the Gospel with this week. Then go do it!

PRAYER: Father, give me the boldness to speak for You. Give me the words to say that I might love those around me well by sharing who You are and what You've done. In Jesus' name, amen.

THE LOVE OF MONEY

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

1 Timothy 6:6-10 (NIV)

I think there are two dangers when it comes to money. One is the love of money; the other is a hatred of money. We must remember that every good and perfect gift comes from God. A Christian purity culture on sex has great intentions, but in some cases, it causes people to see sex as ugly or worldly, which is a tragedy. Sex is a gift from God, but it requires proper stewardship. When we step outside of God's plan for sex, we create appetites we were never intended to have. However, God is the giver of sex, and He also is the giver of money. We shouldn't hate the resources He has blessed us with. Money God's way can be a great blessing to us but most importantly to others. The danger is when we take money outside of God's plan; it creates an appetite we were never intended to have.

Notice the verse above goes as far as saying that some people have wandered away from the faith because they fell more in love with the resources than the source. Remember, no one wakes up one day and says, *I'm going to quit following Jesus*; they slowly drift away. I shared this before, but I love how C.S. Lewis says it: *Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.*

I often ask a simple but probing question: *God, do I want You more than _____?* I fill in the blank with whatever is on my mind; sometimes, it's my home, job, or hobby, and when I can't quickly answer, I know I need to ask God to help me desire Him more. Be careful, though, when praying that prayer; sometimes God will answer with things we don't like or do things we don't want. Just remember He is always good and has the best plans for His kids. Money will come and go, but your soul will live on forever; invest in what matters most today. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

APPLICATION: The more you look at Jesus daily, the more He will transform your heart.

PRAYER: Spend a moment asking yourself if God is the top priority in your life. With the Spirit, answer the question: *God, do I want You more than _____?* Whatever He reveals, ask Him to help you long for Him more than anything in this world. Thank God for His faithfulness.

JUST DO IT

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal."
Matthew 6:19-20 (NIV)

Arguably, one of the most recognizable logos in the world today is the Nike Swoosh logo. It was introduced about 50 years ago when a graphic design student was approached about creating a logo. Wait for it... the price they paid for the logo was \$35. In 2020, the company was reported as having 37.4 billion dollars in revenue. Talk about a return on investment! I share this because it seems like the world's motto is *Just Do It*, but we've created a motto in Christianity where we say, *Don't Do It*. I think the intentions are good, but most people don't want a relationship where the goal is not to do certain things. We have created a subculture where we talk more about what *not to do* with money than what *to do* with it.

The main point of the verse above is encouraging us to *just do it* when it comes to our resources. The main point isn't just a defensive posture telling you to stay away from the resources and stuff of this world. It tells you to invest in the better thing. Stewardship is about living as though you believe everything you have is God's, and you are entrusted to it for a season. If I watch someone's house, I live in it for a short season, but then it goes back to them. Most of us are prone to live as though we hold onto our stuff forever. You don't. Matthew is saying, living with eternity in mind. Sure, buy things on this earth, but store and treasure things that last for eternity. We think a Nike logo was one of the greatest returns on investments ever. The Bible says it doesn't compare to those who invest in eternity. Biblical generosity always lives with eternity in mind. In the same way you plan a financial future, have you ever slowed down and asked God *how are You calling me to be generous with my resources?* It's the best financial investment you can make.

APPLICATION: Take a step in living out generosity today by giving.

PRAYER: Ask God to help you be generous like He is generous. Ask the Spirit to show you where you're storing up treasures. Ask what He is calling you to give today and take the step. Don't put off tomorrow what God has told you in the Spirit today.

WHERE IS YOUR TRUST?

Those who trust in their riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.
Proverbs 11:28 (NIV)

Money is a good resource, but it is a terrible master. We often think that we would thrive if we had more money and resources. Interestingly, Proverbs says the *righteous will thrive*. Why? The righteous trust God to provide and take care of us. Most of my concerns around money are that deep down, I don't always believe God will provide. Have you ever noticed what it says on money? *In God we trust*. But isn't it so easy to trust money over God sometimes?

The other day, my son said that when he gets older, he is going to buy a Lamborghini and all the stuff he wants. He asked me why I don't have a Lamborghini, and I laughed, but what struck me is how innate it is to put our trust in money even at an early age. It's like the default setting is to think that once you can have this or buy this, then life really starts. Of course, our desires aren't quite like my son's for an exotic car, but I've noticed in my life I have started saying: *If I just had a little bit more, I could take care of this issue or buy this thing that would help us*. Contentment is hard in the culture we live in. Perhaps the most unsavory secret of all is that sometimes I wonder if God will truly provide. Now, I don't say this out loud, but my worry and concern show that sometimes I want more money because I'm not sure I can trust God. So, what many of us have isn't a money issue; instead, it's a trust issue.

My kids have never been worried about what they will eat. Unfortunately, they often complain about what they are eating! I have never once had them get worried or stressed about what the future holds. So, when fear comes in, when the enemy tries to attack about trusting God, just remember and draw on His past faithfulness. His track record in your life shows that He's good, and He's got this. Take the stress and turn it into rest. Draw on the past provision of your heavenly Father and let confidence grow in you. You can trust God, not only with your finances but your entire life. Rest in the fact that He wants more for you than you want for yourself, spiritually speaking, and He will provide.

APPLICATION: Look up to God today for your help!

PRAYER: Ask the Spirit to help you walk with Him and trust Him alone. Ask Him if money or worldly comforts have become a security for you. Ask Him to help you trust Him alone.

CONTENTMENT

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.

Philippians 4:10-13 (NIV)

Most of the time, when we hear the verse, *I can do all things through Christ*, we think about doing great things, accomplishing impossible feats, or breaking through obstacles to claim victory. In a way, that is part of the verse; however, notice Paul says he has learned to lose and still be content. I know that won't sell many shirts or be used in pre-game speeches, but life is far from perfect. There are times when you hit a home run, and there are times when you strike out, metaphorically speaking. All of us know what it is to be in both places. Paul is saying that he has learned the secret of contentment, and it's not a mindset; it's a person, and His name is Jesus.

Are you content with your finances? Paul has said that he's learned to be on top and be on the bottom of life and still not lose hope. Contentment is what keeps us steady. If we aren't content when we are on top, we become prideful or greedy. It's funny how often we will say, *just one more dollar, one more meeting, one more award*. If we aren't content when we are at the bottom of life, it can move us to self-pity or comparison. We start to feel sorry for ourselves; all we notice is what others have. Contentment does one key thing: it gets your eyes off your circumstances and onto Christ. Without your eyes on Jesus, you will never be content in your circumstances. This is why Paul says, *I can do all things*. He's saying he can win the lottery, file for bankruptcy, be successful or fail, be loved or hated, be well fed or hungry, and his joy isn't robbed. He is saying that while most people think about safely securing their money, he has learned to secure his joy because he is so focused on Jesus. This is a challenging verse when we see it. What is your greatest source of joy right now? If it's anything other than Jesus, then Paul is inviting you to the secret of contentment.

APPLICATION: Fix your eyes on Jesus today, and contentment will follow

PRAYER: Ask the Spirit to help you abound in Jesus during the mountain tops and the valley lows. Ask if there is anything in your life that is causing you to be prideful or greedy. Ask the Spirit to reveal any area of comparison or self-pity. Give those to God and ask for contentment in your circumstances.

HOW DO YOU KNOW?

Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless. Ecclesiastes 5:10 (NIV)

Everyone talks about the love of money being a bad thing. But how do you know if you love money? You know, in almost 20 years of pastoring, I have heard people walk into my office and share a lot of things. There is almost nothing I haven't heard. Surprisingly, though, I have never heard anyone walk in and say they are greedy. It's almost as if, in a greedy culture, it is so easy for this to go under the radar; after all, there is always someone around us who is way greedier. Here's what I find interesting: greed has nothing to do with your bank account. It's a disposition; it's an attitude. So, how do you know if you struggle with greed? The verse above makes it clear. Those who are greedy never feel like they have enough. They are never satisfied with their income.

This is a challenging verse for me; by this definition, at times, I am greedy. There have been seasons where I just stare at my bank account, wanting more. Sometimes, I see someone get something new, and self-pity creeps in, and frustration with my income starts to surface. By this definition, I wonder how many people would say *yes, I love money, yes, I'm greedy*. This sin seems to go under the radar for whatever reason, but far more struggle with it than would admit. Life is short, but our appetite for the world seems unending. Don't get caught up thinking life is found in the treasures of this world. You were made for another world, so nothing in this world can satisfy you. Money is a good thing; it isn't evil, but a love for money will start to consume our thoughts and drive our future more than Jesus. One of the ways to combat greed is thankfulness. Most of the time, we are more aware of what we don't have than what we do. Spend time thinking God for the gifts, and your love for Him will outgrow your love for money. God is always faithful, and you can trust Him with your future. Financial goals are good, but goals without the Spirit can quickly turn into greed. Remember that every good and perfect gift comes from above. It's all His, so don't love the blessings more than the Blesser!

APPLICATION: Whenever you think about money, thank God that He is the One who provides. Keep your eyes on Him.

PRAYER: Ask God to help you appreciate money but not love it. Ask the Spirit to help you become grateful for what He has blessed you with.

THE POWER OF GENEROSITY

The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.
Proverbs 22:9 (NIV)

Giving resources isn't the goal. You can give out of obligation and duty, but Jesus doesn't want that. I have said before that you can give and not love, but you can't love and not give. The goal is generosity that flows from a loving heart. We're reminded in 1 John 4:19 (NIV) that *we love because He first loved us*. This is the same with generosity. We give because He first gave to us. This keeps our hearts and souls in a healthy place. If you struggle with giving, start giving; over time, you will move to a spirit of generosity. For years, I reluctantly gave, which I still would say is better than not giving. People sometimes use waiting to give until they feel like it as an excuse; however, the problem is that feelings can't trump our faithfulness. Jesus didn't feel like going to the cross, but He was faithful.

There should be a point in our discipleship where we move from giving out of obligation to giving in the overflow of the Spirit. The key to this is drawing near to Christ. You can read the Bible and have your heart completely disconnected. You can go to church and be disconnected, and you can give and be disconnected entirely. I would never say don't read the Bible, don't show up to church, or only give if you don't feel it, but I would say ask the Spirit to provide you with a passion for those things. Ask Him to make you hungry for His kingdom. Ask Him for a spirit of generosity that drives you to live for Him. There are days you will feel it, and there are days you won't, but keep pressing in, and the Spirit will faithfully transform you. Your job is to show up and be fully present. When that happens, God will fulfill the work He started in you.

As the verse mentions above, God's impact on you will impact others. Notice that it says that *they share their food with the poor*. One of the signs of generosity is that it spills over to other people. You realize you have been blessed to bless others. You have been loved to love others. You have been served to serve others. This is the spirit of generosity, and this is the goal. For Jesus, generosity was as natural as breathing; it was just a way of life. This is how we are called to live. Getting there may take some time, but that's okay; just be faithful each day.

APPLICATION: Choose to be faithful, even when you don't feel it, and God will turn that into generosity.

PRAYER: Ask the Holy Spirit to make you more others-aware than self-aware. When Jesus walked into a room, He saw people and their needs. Ask the Spirit to help you do the same.

LEGACY GIVING

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me."

Matthew 19:21 (NIV)

I recently spoke at a camp and saw a monument of some of the key givers who had made this camp a reality. That weekend, I spoke to over a hundred kids who said yes to Jesus, and what struck me was how many kids in the space have said yes to Jesus over the years. A thin place is where heaven and earth meet, where God's presence shows up in a unique way. That camp was a thin place that weekend, where God moved in a mighty way. The truth is most people give the camp directors, speaker or band most of the credit for how God moved, but this thought struck me all weekend: this wouldn't have been possible without some legacy givers. Many of the givers have already passed on and are with Jesus, but their investment still lives on. I could only use my gift because they gave of their gifts first.

While the passage above is directed to the rich young ruler and speaks about his love for money, the principle Jesus gives is for everyone. Your resources have a chance to outlive you. We talk a lot about depreciating assets in our culture; the best investment, Jesus says, is into the church, into His kingdom. The people who gave still impact people's lives because of their generosity. The church will outlive every one of us. Jesus says that He will build His church, and the gates of hell won't stand. This is the key: any church that is Jesus' church will live on long after a building fades. The lives that are touched, the people who are served, and the freedom that is found all come from Jesus, but it's possible because people decided to be legacy givers. People chose to invest in something that would outlast them and impact the generations to come. It's not selfish to try and get the best bang for your buck. Jesus wants you to steward your resources well, but Jesus is clear: people need to stop thinking short-sighted and think of eternal investments. He reminds us there is a better way to give. He invites us to be legacy givers.

APPLICATION: You can't outgive a generous God. Store up your treasures in heaven.

PRAYER: Spend some time thanking God for the people who have given sacrificially to the church where you accepted Christ. Thank Him for the legacy givers that have marked your life. Ask Him to help you see generosity as a way to impact the world for Christ.

GOD'S GOODNESS

Shout with joy to the LORD, all the earth! Worship the LORD with gladness. Come before Him, singing with joy. Acknowledge that the LORD is God! He made us, and we are His. We are His people, the sheep of His pasture. Enter His gates with thanksgiving; go into His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him and praise His name. For the LORD is good. His unfailing love continues forever, and His faithfulness continues to each generation. Psalm 100 (NLT)

Do you understand how good God really is?

Don't rush past the question, thinking, of course I do, without really thinking about it. You may sing about the goodness of God in a worship service, but how do we even define His goodness? It's really twofold: He is good in both His character and His actions. God is incapable of evil—He is fundamentally incorruptible just in who He is. We can also see a rich history of His goodness in action as we examine the Scriptures.

But His goodness isn't limited to the stories we see in the Bible. You've experienced His goodness in your own life. Consider James 1:17 (NLT): *Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow.*

Everything good you have in your life is because of God, whether you realize it or not. Whether you acknowledge it or not. He is good, blessing us in ways we often overlook or take for granted. And because He is so good in both His nature and His actions, we should worship Him.

Look again at Psalm 100. We're to shout with joy and worship with gladness. Be honest—does that describe your worship? It's so easy to worship in a perfunctory, obligatory manner. But this is the King of all kings and Lord of all lords. He is our Creator, and He is worthy of our worship. And that worship goes far beyond just singing a few songs on a Sunday morning. Worship is the posture of your heart towards God in every facet of your life.

APPLICATION: If God is really good, we should take our concerns, questions and needs directly to Him. Let us be persistent in our pursuit of the Father. Stop and consider how you have personally witnessed His goodness in your life. Tell Him thank you. Then persist in prayer, petitioning the Prince of Peace to intercede in whatever situation you're going through.

PRAYER: Father, You are good. Please help me never to forget this. May my worship be evident in every part of my life. Be magnified and lifted up in my life. Help me in my struggles and help my faith in You to grow. In Jesus' name, amen.

PRAY AT ALL TIMES

Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere. Ephesians 6:18 (NLT)

How consistent are you in your prayer life? There's no one else around to impress, so be honest. Would you say that prayer is a priority for you or more of an afterthought? Too often, we only turn to prayer when the chips are down as more of a last resort. But God wants us to communicate with Him all the time.

You may fall into the trap of believing what you're experiencing isn't important enough to bother God with. You're never a bother to your heavenly Father! He loves you and thinks about you more each day than you can possibly imagine (see Psalm 139:17-18). What you might consider too mundane or trivial to take to God is important to Him because you are important to Him.

You might also just be too busy. Between work and family and social obligations, you're just feeling overwhelmed. How could you possibly carve out a set time to dedicate to just praying? First, we often have more time that we could optimize than we'd care to admit. Case in point, the average American spends four and a half hours each day on their phone. So perhaps we scroll a little less and pray a little more?

But we also don't have to only pray when we can shut the rest of the world out and retreat to our prayer closet. We can pray at all times. When you're heading to work—pray. When you're cooking dinner or tending to the garden—pray. As you spend time with a family member—pray for them. While you wait for your oil to get changed or for the line at the grocery store to dwindle—pray. There's a ton of time we can redeem or redirect to make prayer an ongoing rhythm in our day.

APPLICATION: Take stock of your daily schedule. When can you carve out some specific time with no distractions to pray? In addition, what are some times you can repurpose to include prayer? While getting ready in the morning? Morning commute? Lunch break? Ask God to help you find time to prioritize prayer.

PRAYER: Father, help me to prioritize my communication with You. You long to hear from me, and I need to hear from You. Please help me to redeem the time. In Jesus' name, amen.

BEYOND YOUR IMAGINATION

Now all glory to God, who is able, through His mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.

Ephesians 3:20 (NLT)

Do you place a limit on what God can do?

You might not say it out loud. You might not even consciously be aware that you are imposing this limit on God. But do your actions demonstrate that you don't truly think God can move in miraculous, powerful, supernatural ways?

God is omnipotent. It's a fancy word, but if you look it up the definition is quite clear: *Having unlimited power; able to do anything*. Do you believe that is true? Maybe for someone else who is a better Christian. Maybe for the church staff. But is God really able to do anything... for you? The wonderful answer is yes. He is able to accomplish more than you can even begin to imagine in your life.

What I think often prevents us from seeing these wondrous and miraculous things happen in our lives is our own unbelief. We feel unworthy or shameful about our past (or maybe even our present), so we don't think it can happen. And in a way, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. But God has a rich history of moving in the lives of broken people.

Noah was a drunk. Abraham, a liar. Jacob, a cheater. Moses was a murderer. David, an adulterer. Jonah out and out ran away from God. Thomas was a doubter. Paul actively worked to destroy the early church and called himself the chief among all sinners (see 1 Timothy 1:15). These are the very heroes of our faith. And the Bible is full of so many more who were imperfect yet saw God work in powerful ways in and through them. Consider Hebrews 11, which is known as the Faith Hall of Fame. These and so many others placed their faith in the One who could *accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think*.

What do you long to see God do in and through your life? What's standing in the way?

APPLICATION: What are you asking God for? Are your prayers timid and small or bold and grandiose? His ability is infinite, it's our belief and faith that are often small. List the bold things you'd like to see God accomplish for His glory. Pray about them daily and give Him the glory when He comes through!

PRAYER: God, I believe; help me in my unbelief. Remind me of Your faithfulness not just in Your Word but also in my life. Glorify Yourself through working so powerfully in my life that there is no other explanation except Your divine intervention. In Jesus' name, amen.

BEFORE WE ASK

"When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask Him!"
Matthew 6:7-8 (NLT)

When one of my children comes to me to ask for something, it makes my heart so glad. They're oftentimes quite stubborn and independent... I have no idea where they got that from. They'll try and fail and try and fail and try and fail and then get frustrated. But when they finally come and say, *Daddy, can you please help me with this?* I am overcome with joy. I like to think that I am a good father, and I love to meet my children's needs.

How much better of a Father is God? Infinitely! Before we even ask, He knows exactly what we need. He knows even better than we do. He longs for us to simply come to Him and ask. And yet, we're often stubborn and independent in our thinking. How silly of us to deprive ourselves of the grace of our good Father.

Unfortunately, when we finally come to God to ask for His intervention, we may feel like we have to jump through some kind of religious hoops. Jesus makes reference in the above passages to people who thought their prayers would be answered simply by saying the right things in the right way over and over again. Prayer isn't some kind of incantation that, when said properly, unlocks the power of God. This is an erroneous, man-made religious hoop to jump through. God bids us to simply come to Him.

Consider the words of the famous hymn *Just As I Am*:

*Just as I am, thou wilt receive.
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve:
Because Thy promise, I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

It's old English, I'll grant you (this hymn was first penned in 1835), but the message is an apt one. We need only come to God, just as we are, and He will meet us in that moment.

APPLICATION: What's preventing you from coming to God? He already knows exactly what you need, even better than you do. Consider what obstacles stand in your way, and then ask the Father to help you overcome them.

PRAYER: God, help me to come to You simply, humbly and expectantly. You love to meet my needs—help me to believe that. Grow my faith in Your sovereignty and goodness. Grant me the wisdom and discernment to tear down any obstacle that would prevent me from coming to You, just as I am. In Jesus' name, amen.

YOUR VALUE

"That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to Him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, He will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith? So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and He will give you everything you need. So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today."

Matthew 6:25-34 (NLT)

You matter to God. Of course, you expect to hear something like that in church or a devotional. But do you believe it?

In the passage above, we see the words of Jesus in His longest-recorded public sermon. He refers to birds and flowers. These seemingly insignificant things are richly cared for by the Father. Jesus speaks further about birds in Matthew 10:29-30 (NLT), where He says: *"What is the price of two sparrows—one copper coin? But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows."*

God sees, knows, loves and cares for the sparrows. He sees, knows, loves and cares for the lilies of the field. And He sees, knows, loves and cares for you because you are made in His very image (Genesis 1:27) and are therefore infinitely more valuable to Him than a bird or flower.

APPLICATION: Commit to reading that portion of the Sermon on the Mount for the next several days. Ask God to make it clear to you how much He loves and cherishes you. Consider listening to the classic hymn *His Eye Is On the Sparrow*.

PRAYER: God, help me to know in the depths of my soul how much You value me. Then help me to operate out of that place of love and acceptance. Grow my faith and love for You. In Jesus' name, amen.

POWER OF PRAYER

... *The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops.*
James 5:16b-18 (NLT)

Do you ever think about meeting some of the heroes of our faith one day? When we're all with Jesus in eternity, it's fascinating to imagine what it will be like to meet Moses, David or Paul. I think we tend to place these heroes of the faith upon pedestals as if there was something supernatural about them specifically. The only supernatural thing about them was the power of God working in and through them. That same power is available to us!

James gives Elijah as his specific example. He was an ordinary human being, the same as you and me. And yet, when he prayed earnestly, God answered his prayers. Not because Elijah was special or different than any other human being but because he was wholly surrendered to God.

Now, you may look at the passage above and disqualify yourself because you don't feel very righteous. But we are not made righteous by our own efforts. Thank God! Jesus Christ, the perfect, sinless, spotless Lamb of God, imparts His righteousness onto us. When we are fully surrendered and submitted to His will, we stand in the eyes of the Father, righteous and redeemed. That means we can boldly ask God to move in miraculous ways! Yet I'm reminded of what James said just one chapter previously: *You have not because you ask not* (James 4:2).

How might God move if we only asked Him? Don't rely on the pastors, elders, missionaries and other *professional* Christians to pray boldly—do so yourself! Consider the words of Peter in 1 Peter 2:9 (NLT): *But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for He called you out of the darkness into His wonderful light.*

APPLICATION: Don't let doubt or shame prevent you from praying boldly! A few days ago (Day 3), we discussed God being able to do more than we could possibly imagine. Revisit some of your prayers from that day and add to them. Ask God to give you more faith to pray boldly. Then do it!

PRAYER: God, be glorified in my life. Please help me not to shrink back in shame or live in fear of failure. Help me to unashamedly pursue Your miraculous and divine power in my life. Move in power, God—that You might receive glory and that many would be drawn to You. In Jesus' name, amen.

HE HEARS US

I waited patiently for the LORD to help me, and He turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along. He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see what He has done and be amazed. They will put their trust in the LORD. Oh, the joys of those who trust the LORD, who have no confidence in the proud or in those who worship idols. O LORD my God, You have performed many wonders for us. Your plans for us are too numerous to list. You have no equal. If I tried to recite all Your wonderful deeds, I would never come to the end of them.

Psalm 40:1-5 (NLT)

Growing up in the nineties, I loved country music. To this day, I can perfectly recite the lyrics of dozens of songs. Perhaps no artist in that day loomed quite as large as Garth Brooks. One of his more famous songs was titled *Unanswered Prayers*. In the song, he thanks God for not answering his prayers when he was a young man, as he can see with the clarity that comes with time and maturity that what he asked for was not what was ultimately best.

With all due respect to Garth, I've always had an issue with the theological accuracy of the song. I don't believe God leaves our prayers unanswered. Sometimes, the answer is just *no* or *wait*. We must do as David says in Psalm 40:1—wait patiently for the Lord.

But the good news is that sometimes God answers our prayers with a resounding *yes!* He meets us in a moment and rescues us. When God intercedes on our behalf, how can we not praise Him? Once we trust Him that first time, we begin to understand the joys of trusting Him more and more. And even if for a season in this life there are struggles, we know that ultimately God will set all things right. He will establish His eternal Kingdom in its fullness. What a glorious day that will be!

APPLICATION: How have you seen God move in your life? David is correct in Psalm 40:5 that He has done many wonders. In truth, we probably can't list them all. But let's try. It's a helpful exercise to name your blessings regularly. Write in a journal or note on your phone how you've seen A) God answer your prayers and B) how He's blessed you.

PRAYER: God, thank You for always hearing me. Thank You for every blessing You have bestowed upon me—help me to grow an attitude of gratitude each day. Thank You for rescuing and saving me. May Your glory shine forth in my life. In Jesus' name, amen.

NEW LIFE, NEW CREATION

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NLT)

When you begin a relationship with Jesus, He changes everything. Jesus speaks of salvation as a passing from death to life (John 5:24). Paul tells us in the verse above that our old life is gone, and a new one has begun. Praise God!

Now, you may not always feel like a new person. You may, at times, feel the pull of your old life—a draw toward your previous proclivities. When we begin a relationship with Jesus, it doesn't mean that we'll no longer experience temptation. You may have, in fact, felt an increase in temptation—of course, the enemy is going to oppose you the more you seek to follow Jesus.

The good news is that you are no longer enslaved to sin. Romans 6 speaks repeatedly about our slavery to sin and the freedom we have as new creations in Christ. See what Paul says in Romans 6:20-22 (NLT): *When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the obligation to do right. And what was the result? You are now ashamed of the things you used to do, things that end in eternal doom. But now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life.*

You have been set free. You're not the same person with some Jesus sprinkled on top. He fundamentally changes who you are. This should impact every part of your life—your relationships, your finances, your job, how you make decisions, etc.

APPLICATION: Consider who you were before you met Jesus. How has He changed you? Where can you see His fingerprints in your life? Where is He continuing to change you by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2)? Ask God to continue to work in you to make you more like His Son Jesus.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for the new life found in Your Son Jesus. Thank You for setting me free from slavery to sin. May Your Spirit remind me daily that I have passed from death to life, and may that life be given in honor of You. In Jesus' name, amen.

NEW LIFE, NEW HEART

"Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put My Spirit in you so that you will follow My decrees and be careful to obey My regulations."

Ezekiel 36:25-27 (NLT)

Listen to your heart. If you've ever received this advice, I'm sure it came from a well-meaning individual. There have been endless songs written about listening to your heart, and it's common advice in a lot of rom-coms and TV shows. It's pithy and memorable and encourages us to look within. There's just one problem—your heart makes a terrible guide.

Listen to what Jeremiah says about the heart of man in Jeremiah 17:9 (NLT): *"The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?"*

Does that sound like the best guide as you consider what path to take?

The good news is that when we begin a relationship with Christ, that stony, stubborn heart is replaced. God promises us that our hearts will become tender and responsive as we walk with Him. We speak of inviting Jesus into our hearts, but in truth, He is replacing our old hearts with a new one. He is sending the Holy Spirit to indwell His people. And it's the Holy Spirit that leads us daily as we seek to follow God's Word and honor Him as Lord of our life.

Don't follow your heart. Follow God. If you do, He will transform your heart and mind and desires to align with His own. We live in a world that prioritizes comfort and happiness. The prevailing wisdom of the day is that to follow your heart will lead you to that happiness. We can debate whether that's true or not, but the truth is happiness shouldn't be what we're aiming at. Holiness is. And we won't find holiness in our hearts. That can only come from God giving us a heart transplant.

APPLICATION: Where do you turn when faced with crisis or big decisions? Inward or upward? Whatever you're wrestling with right now, take a moment to stop and acknowledge the Lordship of Christ. Ask Him to guide you.

PRAYER: God, You have placed a new heart within me. Thank You for Your gracious gift. Help me live my life in line with Your Word, pursuing holiness over my happiness. Guide my path. In Jesus' name, amen.

NEW LIFE, NEW PATH

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to His cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another.

Galatians 5:24-26 (NLT)

All of us are being led by either our sinful nature or the Spirit of God.

When you follow your sinful nature, the results are quite clear. You can see what Paul lists in the verses that precede what we're examining today (Galatians 5:19-21). Allow me to summarize. Self-indulgence. Broken relationships. Being driven by unregulated emotions. Selfishness. These things do not honor God.

When the Spirit of God indwells us and guides us, we begin to see His fruit (Galatians 5:22-23). There's a distinct difference in our lives when we're surrendered to Him. Look at your own life, and I'm sure you can see it. Who you were is not who you are. This is because God is helping you to walk a new path.

Paul says this a few chapters earlier in Galatians 2:20 (NLT): *My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*

Let us follow the leading of the Spirit in every area of our lives, not just the convenient ones. Let us honor Jesus as our Lord every day, not just on Sundays. Let us live in the fullness of the life that He has granted us, not attempting to keep one foot in the world and one foot in the Kingdom. Let us be wholly committed to the new path He has set us upon.

APPLICATION: Where are you feeling tempted? Where are your old ways rearing their ugly heads? What desires do you need put to death that you may walk fully in the ways of God? Confess to Him where you are struggling. Ask His Spirit to strengthen you.

PRAYER: Father, my life is no longer my own. You have purchased it with the lifeblood of Your Son Jesus. Please help me to live in a manner worthy of my calling. Help me to continuously put to death anything within me that would lead me away from You and the path You have set me upon. Bless me, that I might advance Your Kingdom. In Jesus' name, amen.

NEW LIFE, NEW MERCIES

The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is His faithfulness; His mercies begin afresh each morning.

Lamentations 3:22-23 (NLT)

These two verses mean quite a lot to me. I first heard them many years ago when I was a student at camp. Each year, the counselors would stand up and share some parting verses with us on the final morning of camp. I don't think I even knew that Lamentations was a book of the Bible at that point. But these two verses have stuck with me all these years.

The Lord is faithful, and His love is unending. This can be difficult to fully grasp because the truth is I'm an unfaithful person whose love is conditional. The fact that God is unwavering in not only who He is but in His love for me—mind-blowing.

Additionally—*His mercies never cease!* Mercy is one of those church words that we sing a lot, but maybe don't think about the definition of very often. Grace is receiving something you don't deserve. Mercy is not receiving what you do deserve. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). That's what we deserve. But God's mercies never cease. He is a good, gentle, kind, patient Father.

Then verse 23 drops the best news: *His mercies begin afresh each morning.* Every single day is a chance to start over with King Jesus. If and when you stumble and fall, know that He is merciful. Know that each day is a fresh start for you in His eyes.

Consider this quote from the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon: *God's mercy is so great that you may sooner drain the sea of its water, or deprive the sun of its light, or make space too narrow, than diminish the great mercy of God.*

APPLICATION: Take a moment to thank God for second chances. For fresh mercy each day. Confess to Him anything currently creating separation in your relationship with Him.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for the blessing of every day is a chance to start over. Your mercy is such a wonderful gift. Grow within me a zeal and drive to remain faithful to You in all things. In the name of Jesus, I make this prayer, amen.

NEW LIFE, NEW FOCUS

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all His glory.

Colossians 3:1-4 (NLT)

Where is your focus?

You may be thinking that it's difficult to answer that question. You have so much going on that your focus is here one minute and there the next. But let's be honest with ourselves for one moment. Whatever dominates our thoughts is our focus. What's at the forefront of your mind will ultimately drive your words and actions.

So, what's on your mind? Is there something that you go to sleep thinking about? Then, wake back up the next morning and pick right back up where you left off, thinking about it some more. It could be bills, work, your family—any number of different things. My guess is that for most of us, it's the things of this life that dominate our thoughts. And it makes sense—what we can see, touch and interact with is right there.

But God is calling us to set our sights on the realities of Heaven. Since we have new life in Him, our focus should shift from the things of this world to the realities of the next. And while culture encourages us to grab, climb and accumulate, we can't take any of that with us. I've heard it said that the only thing we can take with us to Heaven is other people. Are we living in light of eternity? Do we have an urgency to share the Good News with those around us, that they too might pass from death to life?

APPLICATION: Take stock of your thoughts. What is dominating them? Have you trusted God enough to take that situation to Him? As you do, ask Him to help you to focus on the realities of Heaven. Invite the Spirit to guide you toward those in your life who need to hear the Good News.

PRAYER: Father, help me to focus on what matters most. Remind me that my true life is in You, not the trappings of this world. Transform me by the renewing of my mind. In Jesus' name, amen.

NEW LIFE, NEW PERSPECTIVE

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean He no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For Your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

Romans 8:35-37 (NLT)

Have you ever been through a particularly rough season? A time when it seemed like nothing was going your way? Perhaps strife and difficulty at home, work and seemingly everywhere in between. Those that you counted on most let you down. Your big break turned out to be a big bust. Maybe you experienced a lack in both your wants and needs being fulfilled. Possibly out and out persecution.

It's easy in a season like that to lose perspective. To begin to think that God can't really love you because if He did, He surely wouldn't allow you to experience such things. One of the most common questions is why God allows bad things to happen to good people. The truth is that there are a variety of reasons why we go through the hardships that we do, but no matter the reason, one thing is universally true. God loves you—nothing can stop that. Just because you go through difficult times doesn't mean He has abandoned you.

You are loved by God. Don't zoom past that statement or take it for granted. You are loved by the God who made all things, and still, He values you more highly than anything else in creation. Consider the words of James in James 1:18 (NLT): *He chose to give birth to us by giving us His true word. And we, out of all of creation, became His prized possession.*

You are cherished. Prized. Treasured. When your circumstances are overwhelming, remember that overwhelming victory is yours through Christ, who loves you.

APPLICATION: Take five minutes to be completely still. Don't do anything else—no distractions at all, not even worship music. Ask God to reveal His love for you. Then, sit and be still, listening to hear the voice of God. While you may not hear Him audibly, I believe that when we draw close to God, He draws close to us.

PRAYER: God, help me to remember that You and Your love for me are greater than my circumstances. Help me to remember that I am Your loved child, even when things around me seem to be falling apart. In Jesus' name, amen.

NEW LIFE, RENEWED LIFE

Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me. Do not banish me from Your presence, and don't take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and make me willing to obey You.

Psalm 51:10-12 (NLT)

King David is likely one of the most famous people in the entirety of Scripture. Even people with zero biblical knowledge will allude to David and Goliath. And while defeating Goliath is undoubtedly his most well-known exploit, a close second is far less glamorous. He commits adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers who is away at war. She becomes pregnant, and when his coverup attempts are thwarted, he has her husband killed. Not the greatest series of events for David.

It's in the aftermath of being confronted by God through a prophet that David pens Psalm 51. The entire psalm is powerful, but these few verses are particularly poignant. David is asking God to renew him. He asks God to help him be loyal and willing to obey God. He humbles himself by admitting he has not been where he needs to be and asking God to help him return to that place.

David was described as a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). He was a tremendous leader and king. And yet he fell. He sinned. He needed to humble himself and repent. The same may be true for you. You love God, and you know that you've passed from death to life, but then you fall. You sin. And the temptation is to do exactly what David did—cover it up and hide. But God sees and knows all. Let us humble ourselves and repent rather than run from the One who can heal. Remember—repentance isn't something that you do once when you become a Christ follower. Repentance is a rhythm, something that we should practice regularly.

APPLICATION: In what area do you need to repent? What do you need to confess? Take time to do that now with God. Ask God to renew a loyal spirit within you that you would willingly submit to and surrender to His way. Consider sharing your struggle and sin with a trusted confidant who can pray for you.

PRAYER: God, You know my hidden sin. May Your Holy Spirit convict me and lead me to repentance. Create in me a loyal spirit. Make me willing to obey You. Thank You for loving me despite my struggles, stumbles and sins. In Jesus' name, amen.

FAITHFULNESS IN WORK

"If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities."

Luke 16:10 (NLT)

I sometimes find myself in a season of discouragement regarding my work and contribution to the Kingdom of God. It happens when I focus on my accomplishments (or what I perceive to be a lack of accomplishments). My accomplishments. You can probably see the problem. The truth is, God has done incredible things in and through my life, miraculous things I don't deserve to be any part of. But I struggle when I focus on what I think I should have accomplished rather than leaning into the sovereignty and goodness of God's plan for my life and purpose. It usually takes the form of thinking one of my creative projects or pastoral endeavors should have been more successful or gained more attention. I don't love admitting that, but it's unlikely I'm alone. Have you ever been discouraged by an unhealthy discontent with your work or personal progress?

Today's verse says, *...if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities.* The obvious interpretation of that verse is its warning against dishonesty with others, but long before that ever happens, we are first dishonest with ourselves. The struggle I described above comes from believing lies the enemy says about who I am and my significance. But there are also dishonest beliefs I tell myself: *I should be at the next level, or I should have more of an impact.* Those kinds of thoughts usually lead us to question God with self-focused statements like *God, when will it be my turn? Or God, why won't you let me...?* We all want God to trust us with the corner office but get disgruntled when He starts us in the mailroom.

And there's the test our verse warns us not to fail. If I am unfaithful in the little things, God will not entrust me with greater responsibilities. I used the word *test* intentionally, but we will remain discouraged if that's what we focus on. Your current position isn't just a test. It's a training ground and a mercy. We always strive for responsibilities and positions we're not truly ready for and would fail at if given the opportunity. We think we're ready long before we are. But God cultivates us spiritually, emotionally and even physically for the greater things He's prepared us to do. The point isn't the test itself but what we're supposed to learn for the test as we grow closer to God. If we want to be entrusted with the next level of responsibility, we must be motivated by what God is trying to reveal to us at this level.

APPLICATION: When discouraged by your work or current role, focus on what God reveals about Himself and your relationship with Him.

PRAYER: Ask God to reveal where you are being dishonest with yourself or others in your work. Confess any selfish ambitions you discover in your heart and ask Him to show you what He's trying to teach you in this season. Tell God you want to be drawn closer to Him as you learn so you can serve Him better.

THE BLESSING OF WORK

"And a servant who knows what the master wants, but isn't prepared and doesn't carry out those instructions, will be severely punished. But someone who does not know, and then does something wrong, will be punished only lightly. When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required."

Luke 12:47-48 (NLT)

When I heard God's call on my life, I ran from that responsibility. For over a decade, I knew what the Master wanted me to do, but I did nothing to prepare for that calling or move in that direction. After a dozen years of wandering, my desire to be in the world led to severe and long-lasting consequences. How we approach the work God has entrusted us with has a stark impact on both our earthly lives and eternity.

These verses can feel fatalistic when taken out of context, but they are part of a larger teaching where Jesus warns the disciples to prepare for His return (Luke 12:35-48). The overall theme of the passage is that there's limited time for us to fulfill the work God has called us to do, and we don't know when that moment of stewardship will come to an abrupt end. And though unpopular in some Christian circles, there is a clear caution that there will be levels of reward for those who prepare for His coming and levels of punishment for those who reject the Master.

Earlier in the teaching (Luke 12:42-46), Jesus says, *"A faithful, sensible servant is one to whom the Master can give the responsibility of managing His other household servants and feeding them."* If the Master returns and the servant has done well, he is rewarded and given greater responsibilities. But if the servant beats his workers and parties and enjoys the pleasures of the world, the Master *"will cut the servant in pieces and banish him with the unfaithful."*

God takes the responsibility He's given us as His children seriously, and we should do the same. To those who are given much, much is required (Luke 12:48). We represent the Master in everything we do, how we conduct business, how we treat others, how we interact with our enemies, and how we manage our finances. Everything we do is a testimony to unbelievers about our Father's integrity. Are we showing them a true picture of His holiness and goodness? It's easy to focus on the negative aspects of this passage and fear punishment, but there is a blessing in working for God.

When we develop His compassion for the broken and the lost, we will be driven to work well for the Master before His return. When we see the hungry and hurting through His eyes, we will move mountains to make a difference. This warning is about turning away from our selfish desires because there's limited time before the Lord returns. There's limited time to share God's message of hope with the lost. That reality should fill us with a desire to be prepared and work for an eternal outcome.

THE BLESSING OF WORK CONTINUED

APPLICATION: There is limited time before the Lord returns, so prepare and work for eternal results.

PRAYER: Ask God to reveal His compassion and love for the broken in your heart. Ask Him to give you an urgency in your spirit for the work He's called you to do before Christ's return and a conviction to resist the temptations and selfishness of this world.

THE REWARD OF WORK

Good comes to those who lend money generously and conduct their business fairly.
Psalm 112:5 (NLT)

One of the brothers from my men's group shared this story from his life experience and allowed me to share it with you . . .

A man was holding a *Please Help* sign at a corner. For months, I dropped in a few bucks. One day, heading home for lunch, I noticed a man getting onto a brand-new Harley Sportster as I passed under the overpass where the man typically stood. It was the very same man I had been helping. I was furious! Not long after, I passed another sign, *Money for Food*. I had no cash to give. I looked at my packed lunch, shrugged my shoulders, and handed it to the man. He hesitantly took it as I pulled through the intersection. I looked over my shoulder just in time to see him toss it into the street and walk away.

After that, I quit helping non-profit organizations and let the offering plate float right by me Sunday after Sunday. Constantly, I made unfair decisions towards others. Rationalizing my situation, I unfairly overcharged a man who hired me to do some contract work for him. Even with the extra money, I had debts being called due. I was about to lose everything.

About that time, a friend of mine told me there was a man in our church who heard about my situation and wanted to help. Later, I walked into a room to meet the man who wanted to help me, and I stood face-to-face with the man I had taken advantage of months earlier. I turned to walk away, but he placed an iron grip on my shoulder. I could not stop the tears from coming. This man pulled me closer to him with the warmest smile I had ever seen. It was obvious he recognized me.

He said *I'm going to lend you the money you need; in exchange, you will let me mentor you on how to be a godly businessman*. Still embarrassed, I asked him why he would do this. He glanced toward the other side of the large room. He asked, *Do you see that man beneath that cowboy hat over there? Many years ago, he stood where I am standing now. His grip was stronger than mine.*

The ability to work is a reward in itself. An even greater reward is the opportunity to share some of what we receive to help others. Add the fulfillment of having worked with integrity and done the best with what God has given me, and I experience a triple reward that money can't buy.

THE REWARD OF WORK CONTINUED

APPLICATION: Though you may have experienced the pain of being treated unfairly, resist the temptation to pass that unfairness to others. Ask God to show you how He has rewarded you and where you need to reward others or make things right with them.

PRAYER: Lord, we ask You to show us the reward You have given us in or through our work. Give us strength to be fair in a world that prospers from unfairness. Give us the wisdom to lend by Your Spirit's direction, recognizing the times You have cared for us even when we may not have conducted our business fairly.

GROWING THROUGH WORK

Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop.

2 Corinthians 9:6 (NLT)

We usually associate the word seed with botany (the study of plants). However, a seed can be an idea, a word or even an action. For example, using words with a co-worker to plant the idea that Jesus is a good Father can produce a powerful result. For years, I thought that planting the seed was the only work necessary until the time of reaping and that God would do the rest as if the work of planting and reaping was all that was needed. What about the time between sowing and reaping, between planting and harvesting?

In the midst of sowing and reaping is the work of cultivating. Sow, cultivate, harvest. There is some work here; at a minimum, it includes searching out and choosing where/with whom to plant. Cultivating just one seed can feel daunting, yet getting over the fear of the scope of work needed to cultivate what you sow is transformative. Remember, the Father in Heaven does not leave you alone in the field to cultivate all the seeds you have sown. The Father is with you.

Part of our growth in Christ is in the very act of cultivating many seeds of His love that have been planted in others. Praying for them, being physically present for them, and watching for opportunities to express compassion. This can even cost resources. If the Father asks you to plant the seeds, He will often provide opportunities to cultivate those people with expressions of God's love. When we work in the field between planting and harvesting, we grow as we depend on God to grow what He's started in others. Remember, David had some experience in the field before facing Goliath. He did not go down to deal with his enemy without faith and knowing how to use his sling.

Planting many seeds over time can evolve into steadily harvesting many plants when it is time to harvest. Math is not my favorite subject; however, I can understand the simplicity of planting many seeds, cultivating them through their unique growth, and harvesting those plants can become exponential. Now, that is consistently bountiful!

APPLICATION: Let us cultivate our seeds, work with those we share ideas with and give words of encouragement. Sow seeds in those Christ has set in your path with confidence.

PRAYER: Father in heaven, please give me the wisdom and knowledge to cultivate in a way that yields a bountiful harvest. Give me wisdom and knowledge to sow, cultivate and harvest in a way Your Kingdom would be glorified. Give me the faith to know I can work with many seeds because Your yoke is easy, and Your burden is light.

WORK UNTO GOD

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything you do. Try to please them all the time, not just when they are watching you. Serve them sincerely because of your reverent fear of the Lord. Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. Remember that the Lord will give you an inheritance as your reward, and that the Master you are serving is Christ.

Colossians 3:22-24 (NLT)

I recently had the opportunity to work at a job unrelated to my experience or education. Due to my lack of knowledge in this field, I often called my boss to ask questions concerning how to carry out my work responsibilities. If something came up where I was unsure of the next step, then I would call the boss to ask how he would handle that situation. There would have been problems if I had said, *I've got this*, while ignoring the direction of my boss. I wanted to fulfill the boss' wishes, but I couldn't do so without continually consulting him.

Working as though I'm working for the Lord involves continually consulting my heavenly Father and depending on Him for guidance because He knows the best way to carry out the work to achieve His purposes. That also means I'll do my best to carry out the wishes of my earthly boss unless it conflicts with the wishes of my heavenly Boss.

Recognizing who is in charge is key to finding meaning in my work. Whether I work for myself or someone else, I can realize a greater purpose to my work when I have the perspective that I'm really working for my Lord Jesus Christ.

If I do my work for the Lord, I'll be motivated to serve the One who loves me so much that He died for me.

If I work for the Lord, I won't be tempted to work differently when the boss isn't present because my Lord is always with me.

If the Lord is my boss, I'll sincerely do my best to please Him because He's the most powerful being in the universe.

If I'm working for the Lord, I'll be eager to work willingly and faithfully regardless of my pay because I'll be trusting Jesus to provide an eternal reward more than just focusing on earthly pay.

If I work for the Lord in everything I do, anybody should be glad to have me on their team because I'll do my best to serve willingly, faithfully and with high integrity. What employer doesn't want to hire someone like that?

APPLICATION: Consider your current volunteer or paid working roles. Note three ways your thoughts and performance might be different if you viewed yourself as working for the Lord rather than for people.

PRAYER: Ask God to put thoughts in your mind today of how He wants you to work. Ask Him what He wants you to do today.

RESPONSIBILITY TO WORK

Yet we hear that some of you are living idle lives, refusing to work and meddling in other people's business. We command such people and urge them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and work to earn their own living. As for the rest of you, dear brothers and sisters, never get tired of doing good.

2 Thessalonians 3:11-13 (NLT)

What's your motivation for working, whether volunteer or paid?

I recently watched a documentary about 12 boys and their soccer coach who were trapped in a cave in Thailand when the summer rains came early and flooded the cave. This particular documentary included the perspective of the rescued boys and their young coach. During the 18 days of their confinement, there were hundreds of people from all over the world working to bring the boys out of the cave. During one of the rescue efforts, a Thai Navy Seal lost his life trying to scuba dive through the flooded cave to find the boys. After their rescue, several of the boys spoke of the impact of knowing that hundreds of people were involved in their rescue and that a Navy Seal died in the process. Paraphrasing their words, they said they felt a responsibility to live good, productive lives, carrying out whatever purpose they were on this earth to fulfill because someone died trying to save them.

We have a motivation and responsibility to work and carry out the purpose God put us on this earth to fulfill. God sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross to take the punishment for our sins so that we could be forgiven and be in a right relationship with our heavenly Father. Jesus died to put us in right standing with God, just as if we'd never sinned. He did this simply because He loves us. As I let that sink in, I can't help but feel the calling to serve my God in some way out of gratitude for what He's done for me. I can work to show my gratitude.

In addition to working out of gratitude to God, I can work to help carry the load for those around me. If I'm a follower of Jesus, I live as part of the family of God and the body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:26 (NLT) tells us that *if one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it*. We have a motivation to serve and work because it uplifts the rest of the body of Christ; it helps those around us.

Our way of serving or working also gives us a sense of purpose and the privilege of contributing to the cause of the Kingdom of God. As a part of the body of Christ, your role and my role are significant. When I realize my responsibility to the body and remember that Christ died for me, my motivation to continue doing good is rejuvenated.

APPLICATION: Ask God to remind you what He has done for you. How does that make you feel?

PRAYER: Father, thank You for dying for me. Show me how and what You want me to do to serve You today. I depend on Your strength to carry out Your will.

WORK AS A CALLING

Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Ephesians 4:1 (NLT)

When I was a teen, I remember a young man coming up to the front of the church and telling the pastor he had been called into the ministry. Whew—I sure was glad that God was not calling me. Being a pastor or missionary was the last thing I was interested in.

But I noticed in the first chapter of this letter to the Ephesians the Apostle Paul was speaking to the entire church, the *faithful followers of Christ Jesus* (vs. 1) and that all faithful followers are chosen or called to become holy and without fault in His eyes. (vs. 4) We are called to be like Christ. What? I thought I was off the hook, but now I find out that all of us have been *called by God*. But what if I'm not called to be a pastor or missionary? What if I'm in a regular job or career? Paul goes on to tell the church, *And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus...* (Colossians 3:17 NLT).

For centuries, the church thought like I did as a teen. There were priests or pastors who did *holy* work, and the rest of us did lesser, second-class work. But Martin Luther famously said *God milks the cows through the hands of the milkmaid*. Luther told us that whatever honest job we have, however average it may seem, is a sacred or holy calling.

A woman once asked me to pray for her to find a job with a godly Christian company because she was tired of all the ungodly, secular people at work. I told her that maybe God had her there to be a *representative of the Lord Jesus*. I asked her, *why would I pray for God to take you out of the mission field?* It is hard to be salt and light in a dark world if all the salt runs back into the saltshaker. Whether your job is changing diapers, being a student or working in an office, you have a sacred calling.

APPLICATION: Ask the Lord for ways you can be a representative of Christ at work or school.

PRAYER: Lord, please open my eyes to see my work as You see it. Help me be a faithful, positive, joy-filled employee or student who honors You.

LOVE FOR ALL PEOPLE

There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you.
Galatians 3:28-29 (NLT)

Jesus, in the story of the Good Samaritan, was showing us that our neighbor really is everyone around us. It's those who are like us, those who aren't, and those who are our enemies. In the last few years, it seems like people have been segregated more and more by our politics, the color of our skin, and our preferences. Jesus has called us to love in such a way that we tear down the divisions that so often separate. Jesus told His disciples *the world will know you are Mine by the way we love* (see John 13:35). We forget this. The way of Jesus means we love those who are different than us and those who wrong us. This is challenging and hard to live out each day. On the cross, Jesus showed love for all people by saying *Father, forgive them*. We cannot be selective in who we show our love to.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians, rabbis prayed and said each morning, *God, thank You that I'm not a Gentile. Thank You that I'm not a slave. Thank You that I'm not a female*. Galatians completely dismantles the thinking of that day and rewrites the script, saying that we are all one and are called to love everyone because everyone is made in the image of God. Paul shows us that we are to love those who are different from us. Those who don't think like us. Those who don't act like us. Those who wrong us. I truly believe people can muster up the strength to love others for a season, but a love for all people over a long period of time is only possible when God has transformed us from the inside out. Only the Spirit of God can create a love like this!

The key to loving others well begins with loving God. We don't try harder; we surrender more and more to the love of God. The more the love of God moves inside my heart, the more it will move outside me to those around me. We live in a culture where we get to pick a lot of things. Most of us decide where to eat, who we want to marry, where to live, how to spend our time, and so on, but we don't get to pick who we love. Jesus has made it clear that everyone around is your neighbor. God has called you to love everyone always.

APPLICATION: The love of God is not selective. You are called to love everyone you come into contact with.

PRAYER: Ask the Spirit to show you who you are prejudiced toward. Ask the Spirit if there is anyone who is your enemy. Ask the Spirit to help you love those around you!

LOVE THROUGH HUMILITY

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.
Philippians 2:3-4 (NLT)

A mentor once told me if we spent less time trying to be interesting and became interested in others, we would change the world around us. Think of the people you are drawn to, the people who embody the life of Christ so well; most of them are interested in other people. They are free to love others and serve. Jerry Frye, who was in our church for years and recently went to be with Jesus, told the story of how one day God told him that he's free to love. Jerry was such a huge draw to me when I first got to Brookwood. He loved me and my family so well. He didn't try to impress me or my family; he loved and served my family, and he became interested. I can honestly say that in those short few months, he profoundly impacted my life. He never preached a sermon to me, wrote a book I read, or did anything by the world's standards that seemed outrageous, but he marked my life with his love through service.

Did you ever slow down to think about the most interesting man in the world—Jesus—was more interested in those around Him? He washed the feet of the disciples; He served those in need and allowed Himself to constantly be interrupted. There truly has never been anyone in human history like Jesus. No one in human history could ever rival His power. We are told that all authority on heaven and earth was given to Him. Yet, there has never been anyone with His power who has been that kind and loving. Most people become corrupted by power, but Jesus used His position to serve and love. Humility really is self-forgetfulness. It's where we become free from ourselves to love and see others. If all we see are our needs, problems and interests, then we can't see those around us. God has set us free from sin and also from ourselves. Like Jesus, we empty ourselves of our rights and humbly serve and love those around us. It isn't complicated, but it isn't always easy. May God give us eyes to see the needs of those around us and the humility to serve and care for those in need.

APPLICATION: Today, spend more time being interested in other than trying to be interesting

PRAYER: Think about how much time you spend focusing on yourself. Ask the Spirit to set you free to love others through the emptying of yourself. Ask the Spirit to help you put the needs of others above yourself. Thank Jesus for doing that with us!

LOVE THAT LASTS

For in Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.
Colossians 1:16-17 (NIV)

The other day, I was so excited because I got a new phone, but then I began to think about how many new phones I've had in my life. I started to think about the fragility of our lives. Simply put, things and relationships don't always last. Think about the things you once found dear that are tucked away in some closet. I once heard treasures defined as junk waiting to happen. For most of us, some relationships or friendships have faded through the years. But there is something that lasts, and that's anything done in the name of Jesus.

Jesus tells His disciples that anything they do in His name will outlast them. I love the verse above that He holds all things together. This text gives us two encouragements. First, it shows us we don't have to fear the future. People who are afraid can't truly love others. We use the phrase *fight or flight* to describe how we usually respond when we're afraid. The problem is neither one truly embodies the love of Jesus. Only people who have peace can genuinely love those around them and serve those in need. If we live in constant fear, we will resort to fighting culture or just fleeing from culture. Jesus didn't do either of those things He loved and served. The only way to do this is to understand that God is in control. Nothing surprises Him; rest in the promise that He holds all things together.

Second, this verse shows us that Jesus' Kingdom is unshakable. Think about how many businesses have come and gone. Things that I thought would be around, like Blockbuster, future generations won't even know what it was. Empires like the Roman Empire have crumbled over time, but Jesus' Kingdom is unshakeable. He will never fall off His throne. He will never get knocked off His throne. This gives you great confidence that everything you do for Jesus, and in His name, is a great investment. The only secure thing in a constantly shaking world is Jesus. Let that create a boldness to live for Him today. His love and His Kingdom last!

APPLICATION: Don't fight or flee from culture today. Love those around you.

PRAYER: Ask the Spirit to help you be bold and truthful but ALWAYS loving. We can use truth as a sword to fight others or a scalpel to bring healing. Ask the Spirit to help you love like He does!

LOVED PASSED DOWN

Great is the LORD! He is most worthy of praise! No one can measure His greatness. Let each generation tell its children of Your mighty acts; let them proclaim Your power.
Psalm 145:3-4 (NLT)

Every parent has certain things they pass down. The unsavory secret is that some are intentional, and others are unintentional. My dad has given me a love for home projects, family trips and for a spiritual place known as Costco. There are things I do and say because they were intentionally passed down, and some are unintentional. Most of us are a product of our upbringing. That can be good news or bad news, depending on your situation growing up. Even in the bad things, you have a heavenly Father who can set you free and heal any wounds.

The verse above reminds us that part of our legacy is to pass on the love of Jesus Christ to the next generation. In 2008, the men's Olympic relay team was disqualified because they failed to pass the baton properly to the next person. Think about it: it doesn't matter how fast you run. If you don't pass the baton on to your teammate, you can't win. God wants us to know it doesn't matter how fast you run in this life; it doesn't matter how much we accomplish. If we don't pass on the love of Jesus to the next generation, then we have failed.

Only God can transform people, but we must tell future generations about Jesus. We have to proclaim and tell about His power in our lives. If you are a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or even a small group leader, you must be intentional about telling what Jesus has done in us. The world is discipling our kids, and the church has to do a better job because it feels like we are losing. Psalm 145 gives us the key: talk about Jesus every second you can. Talk about what He's done in and through you. People don't need just to hear sermons or intellectual ideas or do Bible studies; they need to hear how God has marked your life. When they hear and see this, they will begin to take note. It will form in them a passion for Jesus that might not be fully realized until years down the road. The seeds of the Gospel might not spring into fruition at that exact moment but don't give up. Keep being faithful. I'm a product of people sowing and telling me of the power of Jesus. God is faithful when we speak up for Him!

APPLICATION: Tell those around you today how God has transformed your life.

PRAYER: Spend time praying for future generations. Pray by name for those who are in your life. Pray that our discipleship and raising of kids would be greater than the world. Pray for Jesus to have His way in future generations!

LOVE THAT LISTENS

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, James 1:19 (NIV)

There was a lady I knew in Chicago who seemed always to be reaching people for Jesus. People were drawn to her, and God used her in undeniable ways. She wasn't a preacher, and she wasn't necessarily a strong leader. I remember asking her what her secret was. How did she have such an impact? Her answer surprised me; she said she listened people into the kingdom. She had an incredible gift of sitting and really seeing you. She was a magnet for people because she loved people well through listening.

Think about it: sometimes, when we pray aloud, we are so worried about what we will pray that we fail to listen to the prayers of those around us. We aren't really hearing what's going on with people because we are too focused on ourselves. Jesus was the greatest leader the world has ever seen, but He was also a great listener! How do I know that? He was asked hundreds of questions, and then He would turn around and ask them a question because He was listening to what they were really saying. He was seeing what was in their heart through their words.

The verse above is rich because, in that culture, the most powerful person was permitted to speak the most. Your position actually determined how many words you could use with others. Jesus was the most powerful person to ever walk the planet, and yet He listened. He takes the verse and flips it on its head. We are to use whatever authority or position to serve others. It's easy to dismiss ourselves from making an impact because we think we are too small, too hidden or not gifted like others, but you can listen people into the kingdom. As you listen, the Holy Spirit will be faithful to give a verse, thought, or spirit of empathy that can impact someone today. May God give you spiritual ears today!

APPLICATION: Listen to what's in people's hearts from the words that come from their mouths today.

PRAYER: Ask the Spirit to help you truly be free to listen to others. Ask what He wants to say to you right now.

A LOVE FOR THOSE YOU DON'T LIKE

"If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that."

Matthew 5:46-47 (NLT)

Remember that phrase: *I don't have you like you, but I have to love you?* I actually think it's a rich theological concept, but it's very difficult for me to live out. Look at the verse above. It talks about kindness and greeting others. The truth is, if I don't like you, I don't often show kindness at all. In fact, I feel some people have used the phrase, *I don't have to like you, but I have to love you*, as a badge to actually be harsh and rude to others. Jesus was fully God and fully human, so let that sink in for a moment. When someone does something to us, we think there is no way we can respond with kindness or love. How could we be kind and not harsh to those who annoy us, those who are foolish, or those who hurt us? Taking it a step further, most of us think it's easy for Jesus to do because He is God. True, but He was also human; He has felt the sting of betrayal. He's been around people who are foolish and, dare I say, probably even around an annoying person or two. Yet, He never sinned, and He loved people.

The truth is Jesus was very harsh towards the religious people and evil people, but even that came from a place of love. I don't often love or like those who evil. Sure, I call out their sin, and I stand up with truth, but I don't follow it up with love or kindness like Jesus does. The love that Jesus calls us to and models is a different kind of love. So much of what we call love today has stipulations and conditions, and Jesus says if that's what you do, then you are no different than the world and not following in the ways of Jesus. Honestly, who in your life is annoying you? Who, when you see them coming, do you tear down in your mind? Who has wronged you that you have made out to be an evil person? We don't have to trust everyone; that is earned, but we are called to be loving and kind while also standing up for the truth. If we fold on telling the truth, that isn't love, but if we tell the truth and follow it up with judgment and bitterness, then we are no different than the world. Live like Jesus.

APPLICATION: To live like Jesus means to love like Him!

PRAYER: Spend time asking the Spirit to give you a supernatural love. Who has God put in your path that you can love today? Ask if there is anyone whom the Holy Spirit is calling you to love today that you have been rude, bitter or mad at.

LOVE IN ACTION!

"But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him."
Luke 10:33-34 (NIV)

Love isn't a sentiment, a feeling; it's an action. Perhaps, that's why stereotypically guys, or those who have been deeply hurt, struggle with the notion of love. Love has been reduced to a sentiment. Love is not a sentiment. It's an action. Said another way, love causes you to move. If I say I love someone or something, and I never invest in that thing, I don't love that person or thing; I love the idea of it. Love will cause us to move our feet, spend time and money, wake up early, or stay late. One of the problems with love as a feeling is we don't always feel like loving, do we? Love is honestly quite inconvenient. One of the reasons the divorce rate is so high is because we reduced the covenant of marriage into a feeling. Our culture has changed the vows *death do us part* to *feelings do us part*. Once I no longer feel it, I'm done. This is a cheap form of love. I'm going to say something that may shock you. Jesus didn't always feel like loving you and me. How could that be? On the cross, I don't think He felt like dying. He begged His heavenly Father for another way, but Jesus' love moved Him to action. I'm tired of the cheap version of love the world operates in. I long for a love in me, in you, in the church that loves even when it's hard.

The verse above says the man took pity but notice what he did after that. It's not enough to feel something if you don't do anything about it. This man's love cost him comfort, money, time, and not to mention this man was an enemy. Samaritans and Jews couldn't stand each other, and yet love drove him to action. If you love your family, does it show in your actions? If you love the church, do you serve or give? If you love those in your community, do you help meet their needs? One of the signs of spiritual maturity is that you stop making your feelings a compass for love, and the Bible becomes one. Jesus was moved to action. Let the Spirit speak to you and fill you up, but also be faithful even when you don't feel it. This is a love that only comes from above!

APPLICATION: Love is an action, not a feeling.

PRAYER: Ask the Spirit to reveal how you can practically love those around you. What are ways you can show your spouse, kids, neighbors and church that you love them? Ask God to guide you, then be faithful to act on those things!

OPEN INVITATION

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with Me."

Revelation 3:20 (NIV)

This verse reminds us that Jesus invites us into a personal relationship. Yes, He's the Creator of all things and holds the universe in His hands, but He's also near enough to knock at our door. He's close. He's willing and interested in spending time with us, like friends who share a meal. Jesus knows who you are. He knows everything about you. No matter what you've said or done, Jesus continues to pursue you and offers you an open invitation to intimacy.

Jesus also says *if anyone hears My voice*. There are all kinds of things that keep us from hearing God's voice: Fear of what He might say, doubt that He even speaks, the busyness and pace of life. God has come near, but we'll only hear the knock and know His voice when we pause to listen. May we silence some of the noise in our lives in order to discern the still, small voice of the one who seeks our attention.

The other interesting thing about this passage is that while Jesus knocks, it's our choice whether or not to open the door. He doesn't shout. He doesn't kick down the door. He simply knocks and invites us to say yes and allow Him in. Of all the things Jesus could be doing, He stands at the doorway of your life and simply says *I'm here, let Me in*. He values you enough to let you decide. Jesus said yes to you. Will you say yes to Him?

APPLICATION: What's stirring in your heart today? Bring your cares and burdens to Him and allow Him to love you as you are.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, I say yes to Your invitation. I open the door for You to come in. Thank You for Your interest in me and Your desire to spend time with me as a friend. Forgive me for the way I reach to other things to fill places that only You can fill. I pray You'll break down obstacles and walls that stand in the way of a deeper relationship with You. Help me feel Your closeness today. Because of who You are, amen.

PRIORITIZE GRACE

We are all infected and impure with sin. When we display our righteous deeds, they are nothing but filthy rags. Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall, and our sins sweep us away like the wind. **Isaiah 64:6 (NLT)**

He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. The LORD is like a father to his children tender and compassionate to those who fear Him. For He knows how weak we are; He remembers we are only dust. **Psalms 103:12-14 (NLT)**

These passages remind us of the amazing, never-ending grace of God.

But don't miss the dark and difficult parts of these passages. We sin, and God sees it. Sin can be understood or articulated in several ways: to miss the mark, to fall short, or to violate our design. In Jewish law, a person who was unclean was an outcast, unacceptable and unworthy, unable to go to the house (temple or meeting place) of the Lord. Isaiah reminds us that our impurity causes us to wither and fall like leaves, that our sin sweeps us away like the wind.

We need a rescue. His name is Jesus.

As far as the east is from the west is much greater than saying as far as the north is from the south. If you travel north on a globe, you begin to travel south as soon as you go over the North Pole. But if you travel east, you will continue east forever. Given the true shape of the earth, east and west never meet - and this is how far God has removed our sins from us!

David Guzik

As we remember our sins, may we always remember that God's grace is more.

APPLICATION: As you walk with God today, come to Him as you are. Approach Him with humility and honesty about when and how you've fallen short. Then, write the word *grace* on a notecard. Post this somewhere you'll see often to help you remember God's amazing, never-ending grace.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, my search for life apart from You has left me dry and exhausted. I need more of You. I've wandered away and now turn my eyes and heart back to You. Your grace is enough, and I long to experience that more. I give You permission to break down any obstacles that are in the way. Let's do this together. Amen.

PATIENT INVITATION

But you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord isn't really being slow about His promise, as some people think. No, He is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.
2 Peter 3:8-9 (NLT)

It sure can be difficult to wait. As infants, we waited for our mother's milk (often with screaming!). We waited (usually impatiently) for the school year to end, then were forced to wait for summer vacation. We eagerly waited to get our driver's license. We often say things like *I can't wait for this to be over, or I can't wait for that to happen, or how can it be taking so long?* The waiting never stops!

Peter offers a different perspective. He invites us to lean into the patience of God, who exists outside time and space. God has a deep desire that no one would perish (die apart from Him). God simply moves at a different pace.

Love has its speed. It's a spiritual speed. It's a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we're accustomed. It goes on in the depth of our life, whether we notice it or not, at three miles an hour. It's the speed we walk and therefore the speed the love of God walks.

Kosuke Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*.

May God's heart and vision for the world be ever on our minds. May we remain faithful and patient while God's Spirit slowly, yet beautifully, works in people's hearts far beyond what we can ask, think or imagine.

APPLICATION: As you journey today, concentrate on surrendering the timing of things to Jesus. Allow your story to unfold in God's way, in God's time. When you feel the pressure to get ahead or experience the feeling of being behind, release those thoughts and worries to God. Ask Him to help you patiently wait while He works things out.

PRAYER: Lord, I thank You for loving the world so much that You patiently wait for many more to be saved. While we wait, I ask that You continue working in my heart. Change me in ways only You can, and fill me with Your love for the people I see today. For the glory of the Kingdom. Amen.

COMPELLING CALL

So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making His appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!"

2 Corinthians 5:20 (NLT)

Everyone is invited. Everyone.

Paul reminded the church at Corinth that we, God's people, are the primary way God works in this world. God makes His appeal *through us*. He does this in at least two primary ways. First, He reveals who He is by transforming our lives (how we think, what we value, and the nature of our hearts). Secondly, He uses us as His mouthpiece. Our lives and our words are His public announcement!

The Bible word for church is *Ekklesia*, which simply means *the called out ones*. The church is not a building or a program. It's not an event or a religion. The church is a group of people who've been called out to tell the world that Jesus has come and that new life is available to everyone. God desires that we would become people who bring love and hope to a lost and dying world.

Britannica defines an ambassador as *the highest-ranking person who represents his or her own government while living in another country*. That's us! As followers of Christ, we are representatives of God. We have been entrusted with sharing the greatest news ever. Paul went so far as to plead for people to come back to God.

Most people feel inadequate to tell others about Jesus. Yet God calls us His ambassadors. May we be like the servant who followed Jesus' command *to go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame* (Luke 14:21b NLT).

APPLICATION: Be present with people today. Resist feeling rushed to get to the next thing. Ask God to give you wisdom and discernment in how to help people feel like they matter.

PRAYER: Thank You, Father, for the people You've brought into my life who have helped me grow in my relationship with You (pause for a moment and thank God for individuals by name). I pray You'd cultivate in me such a heart for others that I couldn't wait to share who You are and what You've done. I want to be a faithful ambassador for You and ask You to give me the opportunity and words to help others come back to You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

SACRIFICIAL JOY

Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered Himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God.

Ephesians 5:2 (NLT)

Today's passage reminds us that Jesus died willingly for us. No one had to talk Him into it. He wasn't coerced or forced. He was compelled by love. He sacrificed it all for you and me. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, it was *for the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God* (Hebrews 12:2b NIV). Everything He did was fueled by love for the joy of our salvation. God calls us to live a life filled with this kind of love.

Living with this kind of love can be difficult in light of some of the wounds and trauma we've experienced in our relationships. It's easy to love those who are lovable, but quite another thing to love our enemies or those who've hurt us. But what if loving others, especially those who've hurt us, would move things in the right direction? What if God's love is big enough to overcome any bitterness or unforgiveness we feel? *What if love really does win?*

The reality is that at one time, we, too, were enemies of God (see Romans 5:6-11). Yet that didn't stop Him from loving us. For sacrificing His life for us. And this sacrifice is the most beautiful fragrance of all. For us, then, having a beautiful fragrance is, in essence, *the transformation of our love for Christ into a meaningful expression for those in need around us.*

APPLICATION: Sometime today, stop and take a deep breath. Allow your heart and mind to settle. When you feel a sense of calm, read slowly over today's Scripture. Let it sink into your heart. Pause and allow yourself to feel God's delight in you.

PRAYER: Thank You, Lord, for the example of Christ who loved me enough to die for me. Thank You for the pleasing aroma of Christ's life, death and resurrection. Help me spread Your fragrance wherever I go. I ask You to work in me in such a way that my thoughts, my behavior and the attitude of my heart would be pleasing to You and evident to all the people I come in contact with today. *For the hope of the world, amen.*

RESPONSE

Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world.
James 4:8 (NLT)

Have you ever felt far away from God? He's closer than you think.

In a world that seeks to pull us away from God, we need now, more than ever, the reminder that loving the things of this world will inevitably draw us away from God. Scripture instructs us *Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you* (1 John 2:15 NLT).

Thankfully, because of the complete and finished work of Christ, there's nothing you've done, and nothing you will do that prevents you from drawing close to God. His call to come close is both an invitation and a promise. Even when we forget about God, He never forgets about us. Even when our loyalty is divided, He remains faithful and available.

As we journey throughout the day, let's be mindful of God's presence. *Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world* (1 John 4:4 NASB). Remembering and trusting that God is near can strengthen our loyalty and devotion to Him. And as we surrender and invite Him in, as we come close to Him, we'll soon find no better place to be.

APPLICATION: Be honest. What are you most attached to? What preoccupies your mind the most? When you're not focusing on God, where does your mind wander? Identify whatever pulls you away from God and ask God's Spirit to help you detach from it. A habit. A harmful thought you just can't let go of—an unhealthy desire. Invite God into those places and ask Him to overpower your attachment to those things.

PRAYER: Dear God, in a world filled with things that pull me away from You, I pray You'd give me strength and courage to come close to You with undivided loyalty. May Your Spirit overcome my desires for the things of this world and anything that pulls me away from You. I surrender fully to You and ask You to fill my heart with Your life and love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

HEAVENLY ANTICIPATION

And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb." And he added, "These are true words that come from God."
Revelation 19:9 (NLT)

It's time to party! Well... not yet. But it's coming.

Today's Scripture was written to people facing severe persecution. They were ridiculed, marginalized and many of them put to death. While their particular suffering and hardship can be difficult for us to imagine, we all experience the longing for things to be set right. Our hearts ache for justice, truth and love to fill the earth. Simply put, our address is Eden, and we are all homesick.

Thankfully, suffering, grief and loss are not the end of the story. Since the fall of Adam and Eve, God promised over and over that one day, a Savior would come to save His people (that's a good summary of the entire Old Testament!). In comes Jesus. He is the Bread of Life who fills us now and is also the focus of the wedding feast that awaits us. In Jewish culture, there was no celebration greater than that of a wedding banquet. But it's not just any wedding. It's the wedding feast of the Lamb, the One who suffered and died so we could have life. This banquet will be the celebration of the final and full union of Christ with His bride, the church.

To the Scripture writers, hope is the absolute expectation of coming good based on the character of God.
John Mark Comer

May you be filled with great anticipation that Jesus is coming back to finish what He started. May hope pull you forward and become an anchor for your soul. Whatever you've been through and whatever you're experiencing now... *hang on*. The best is yet to come.

APPLICATION: Focus on the word *hope* today. Imagine the cares of this world melting away as you think about experiencing more and more of God's love. Read Revelation 21:1-5 and allow your heart to be filled with heavenly anticipation.

PRAYER: Thank You, Father, for making and keeping all Your promises. You are faithful and true, and I depend on You with everything that's in me. I can't wait for the day You make all things new. I pray You'll fill me with hope so I can have the strength to do the things You've asked me to do until You return. *Because of Your Son, who is coming soon. Amen.*



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