

THE **ME** I'M  
DESIGNED  
TO **BE**



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Northway Church

**THE ME  
I'M DESIGNED  
TO BE**

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To my Northway Church family.



*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,  
forbearance, kindness, goodness,  
faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*

Galatians 5:22-23



# Table of Contents

<a href="#"><u>The Me I'm Designed to Be.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>3</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter 1: Life on the Vine.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>7</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter 2: I Love You.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>23</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter 3: The Battle for Joy.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>41</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter 4: Peace With You.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>57</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter 5: Patience is a Virtue.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>73</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter 6: Good to the Bone.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>89</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter 7: Just Believe.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>103</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter 8: A Gentle Word.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>121</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter 9: Taming the Monster Within.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>137</u></a>







# THE ME I'M DESIGNED TO BE

In the 1993 hit movie *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Robin Williams plays the role of Daniel Hillard, a recently divorced actor who disguises himself as a female housekeeper in order to spend time with his children. He also maintains a menial job as a low-level employee in a television studio, working for a manager whose demands of Williams typically involve putting away boxes of film reels.

In one particular scene, Williams strikes up a conversation with the owner of the television studio, Mr. Lundy (played by actor Robert Prosy). The manager walks by and notices Williams talking instead of working. He orders Williams to get back to work on stacking film reels. Williams then turns to Mr. Lundy and says, "Ever wish you could freeze frame a moment in your day and look at it and say, 'this is not my life'?"

I love that line. Sometimes, I've looked at my own life and had that same thought. Typically, my less-than-ideal freeze-frame moment is due to my own words or actions.

This is not me.

This is not who I am.

That isn't what I meant to say.

That isn't how I want to act.

That's not the me I was designed to be.

I'm sure you've had times when you've felt the same way. You look back on moments in your day, wishing you could rewind and redo. Or erase altogether. You lie awake at night and think, "Why

did I make that decision? Why did I react that way toward him? Why did I say those words to her? Why did I do those things?"

That's not the me I was designed to be.

If you follow Christ, the previous line is absolutely true. Whenever you and I think, speak, or behave contrary to the Word of God, we operate in a manner foreign to our new nature.

Notice the emphasis on this truth in the following verses:

*For sin shall **no longer** be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.* (Romans 6:14, emphasis added)

*So you are **no longer** a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.* (Galatians 4:7, emphasis added)

*Consequently, you are **no longer** foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.* (Ephesians 2:19, emphasis added)

Or consider these verses from I Corinthians. Paul contrasts who the Corinthian Christians were before and after they heard and accepted the gospel message:

*Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you **were**. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.* (I Corinthians 6:9-11, emphasis added).

Numerous other verses and passages teach this same principle. To use another metaphor of Paul, we have become new creations in Christ; the old has gone; the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

However, it's not easy. It's not as simple as saying, "I've been washed and sanctified; now I will go and live like the new creation I've become." Our natural desires will often cause us to think, speak, and act in ways contrary to our status in Christ. Like a train

jumping the tracks, we live outside of our design, which typically leads us to become bogged down in a muddy ditch.

This study emphasizes *living as* the new creations we have become.

As we will discover in this series, our character cannot change through our own efforts. Only by relying on the Holy Spirit and his work can actual change occur. A primary way this happens is through daily interaction with the Scriptures. The writer of Hebrews frames it this way:

*For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* (Hebrews 4:12)

As we interact with God's word, it changes us. The Bible speaks to our marriage relationship, parenting, work, friendships, and every other area of our lives. As God grows and changes our character, the very pattern of our life changes as well.

Each week we will focus on a different character trait (this will be explained in the first chapter). The message on that Sunday will center on the topic for the week. Included in each chapter are devotions for every day. These devotions will center around the sermon from the previous Sunday. You will read the chapter, the devotions, and then meet with your Home Team at some point during the week to discuss the topic.

Thank you for embarking on this journey. I look forward to seeing what the Lord does in our church family as we travel this road together.

Your Pastor,

Kevin





## CHAPTER 1

### LIFE ON THE VINE

One of my favorite fall activities is apple picking. I love driving to an orchard in the North Georgia mountains on a crisp, cool Saturday in October. Typically, there are plenty of outdoor activities for the family to enjoy after we fill a few baskets with apples plucked right from the trees.

On these family outings, I carefully avoid stepping on apples that have fallen from the trees. The same apples that once were sweet, delicious, and healthy—after falling on the ground—become black, soft, rotten, and smelly. After these apples detach from the branch, they no longer receive the nourishment the tree provides.

Notice the metaphor Jesus used about the importance of staying close to him:

*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.* (John 15:5)

Once the branch detaches from the vine, the fruit goes bad. It is the same in our spiritual lives. Apart from Jesus, our works, words, and thoughts become black, rotten, and smelly.

However, in Jesus, our works, words, and thoughts are sweet, delicious, and healthy.

If you're reading this book, I would venture to say that you desire to bear good fruit, not bad. To speak words of life. To act in ways you do not regret. To have the right perspective on your circumstances. To possess the kind of character that is kind, compassionate, selfless.

For all of the above to become reality, all we have to do is remain in Jesus. Stay attached to the vine, and *you will bear much good fruit.*

Easy, right?

*Hmmm.* Maybe sometimes. On occasion. Certainly not *ALL* of the time. We have moments in which we somehow detach from the Vine and live in our own natural power. When we do, life becomes black, rotten, and smelly.

How can we become better at remaining *in Jesus*? That is the question we want to answer in this study. How can we live according to God's design? How can we flee sin, selfishness, and the trivial pursuits of life? What can we do to look back on decisions with fewer regrets? How can we steward our time well and look forward to the day we will hear, "*Well done, good and faithful servant!*" (Matthew 25:21).

With this as our goal, this study will focus on a few verses in the New Testament book of Galatians. This book was originally a letter Paul wrote to a body of believers in Galatia. In it, Paul contrasted living by the flesh with living by the Spirit. Notice the descriptions of each in the following verses:

*The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:19-23)*

Notice the contrast in ways of living: One follows the flesh. Our natural desires and the character traits we have from birth. These traits are—at the core—rebellious and self-centered. You do not have to teach an infant how to be selfish. He cries when he is hungry. She fusses when she is sleepy. A two-year-old will hit and bite to get what he wants.

We are all born with this self-centered nature. As we mature, we learn how to control our natural desires, mostly. We come to understand the consequences of certain actions, and we know we want to avoid those consequences. So, we act and speak in ways

that keep us from getting spanked, placed on restriction, in detention, or arrested for breaking the law.

We even become adept at flattery, congeniality, graciousness, and other ways of appearing selfless, hoping to gain approval and ultimately get what we want. Even though we manage to sanitize our actions and words, we are still living by the flesh.

However, we receive a new nature when we become followers of Christ. We become new creations. When we repent of our sin and receive Jesus, the Holy Spirit takes residence in our bodies. We are given the power to live in the way God designed: not according to our self-centered, self-destructive nature, but in the freedom of living in God's ways.

Every day, often multiple times a day, you get to choose. Will you follow the desires of your flesh or the leading of the Holy Spirit? Will you live like the world or according to God's design?

As we unpack the character traits produced by the Spirit, I pray that we will gain more than just head knowledge but also a desire to submit to the Lord. As you go through these devotions this week, pray for the Lord to give you a will that bends to his.



## Day 1: Looks Good, But...

**Passage** | Galatians 5:19-25

*The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

*22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*

Have you ever noticed that sometimes things just are not what they seem? A television commercial can make a product look fantastic, but once you purchase said item, the real thing is not what you thought. Or a brochure portrays a vacation spot as paradise, except you arrive and discover that reality is much different than what was advertised.

Sadly, this can be the case with Christians as well. Many claim to be followers of Christ, but their fruit does not match this profession of faith. We can look around us and find those who say, "I am a Christian," but nothing in their character demonstrates a commitment to or a reliance upon him.

This character battle takes place within each of our lives. Each follower of Christ must choose between living according to the flesh or the Spirit. In Galatians 5, Paul compares these choices: living by the flesh, which produces one kind of fruit, or living by the Spirit, which produces a radically different type of fruit.

This choice is not a one-time decision. Each day, each hour, sometimes each *minute*, we face the option of our flesh or the Spirit.

Are you choosing to walk in step with the Spirit? Close this time with prayer, asking God to show you how to do that today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 2: The Case of the Missing Chap Stick

### Passage | I Thessalonians 1:4-7

*For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. 6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. 7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.*

Years ago, I picked up the habit of using Chap Stick. I cannot remember exactly when I acquired this addiction, but now I cannot leave the house without a tube of this wonderful, lip-saving invention. I probably should kick the habit; however, I do not seem to have the willpower. If only someone would create a "Nicorette Gum" for Chap Stick users, I might finally be free from this addiction. But, at \$2.99 a tube, I think I'll just stay hooked.

Years ago—when my two oldest children were very young—my tubes of Chap Stick suddenly began disappearing. It became very frustrating each morning as I would go through a desperate, futile search before finally leaving the house without my security blanket. I would then have to experience all the Chap Stick withdrawal symptoms until I could find a CVS or Walgreens and get my fix. I would purchase several tubes, and life would be better. For a while, at least. Then, mysteriously, the tubes would again begin their disappearing act.

One evening, I went into my then three-year-old son's room, opened his nightstand drawer, and there were my missing tubes of Chap Stick! The little thief had grabbed the tubes after I set them on the bathroom counter and hid them in his room. I asked Katie about this, and she said, "Oh, yeah. He walks around all day long 'using' one of those tubes of Chap Stick, just like you." She explained that his custom was to *lick* the Chap Stick rather than

apply it to his lips. Thus, I did not attempt to reclaim the stolen items.

Just as my son had picked up this habit simply by being around me, we develop the habits of Christ by spending time in his presence. As Paul wrote in the passage above to the Thessalonian church, we become "imitators" of the Lord through the power of the Holy Spirit. The more we are around Christ, the more our character resembles his character.

Close this time with prayer, asking God to help you imitate Christ today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 3: Got It, But Don't Use It

**Passage** | Romans 8:9-11

*You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. 10 But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. 11 And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.*

Dr. Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ tells the story of a famous oil field called Yates Pool. During the Great Depression, this field was a sheep ranch owned by a Mr. Yates. Mr. Yates couldn't make enough from his ranching operation to pay the principal and interest on the mortgage. He was in danger of losing his ranch. With little money for clothes or food, his family (like many others) had to live on government subsidies.

Day after day, as he grazed his sheep over those rolling West Texas hills, he was undoubtedly greatly troubled about how he would pay his bills. Then, a seismographic crew from an oil company came into the area and told him there might be oil on his land. They asked permission to drill a wildcat well, and he signed a lease contract. At 1,115 feet, they struck a huge oil reserve. The first well came in at 80,000 barrels a day. Many subsequent wells were more than twice as large. Thirty years after the discovery, a government test of one of the wells showed it still had the potential flow of 125,000 barrels of oil a day.

And Mr. Yates owned it all. The day he purchased the land, he had received the oil and mineral rights. Yet, he'd been living on government subsidy. A multimillionaire living in poverty. The problem? He didn't know the oil was there even though he owned it.

Many Christians live in spiritual poverty. They are entitled to the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit but are unaware of their birthright. In the passage above, Paul pointed out that those who are 'in Christ' have the life-giving power of the Spirit, whether they choose to use it or not. They have a reserve of peace to use during difficult times. There is a deep well of love that can be used to love the unlovable. These and other spiritual resources are all available in Christ.

Are you tapping into this power in your own life? Close this time with prayer, asking God to show you how to rely on the Holy Spirit today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 4: It's Only Natural

### Passage | Colossians 3:5-10

*Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. 7 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. 8 But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. 9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*

One of the arguments used in our society to justify certain behaviors is: "This is the way I was made. It is only natural for me to act in this manner." Most often, this reasoning is used in the discussion of certain sexual behaviors. *How can these actions be wrong, the argument goes, if they are so natural?*

As the father of four children, I have learned a lesson or two about what is "natural." It is *natural* to go to the bathroom in one's pants. Training a person to use the toilet takes a lot of work. Only after much instruction and work does one's sense of what is *natural* change.

It is not *natural* to brush one's teeth. For some strange reason, children are born with an ingrained aversion to brushing. Every night, we have to remind — and sometimes *force* — our children to brush their teeth.

And don't get me started on baths, cleaning one's room, eating vegetables, or sharing toys with siblings. Just because something is *natural* does not mean it is necessarily *good*.

In the passage above, Paul writes about putting to death these aspects of our "natural" self that conflict with our new nature.

Through relying on the Holy Spirit, we "train" ourselves to discover a new natural in our lives.

Are you putting to death those things in the list above? Close this time with prayer, asking God to "train" you in this new nature.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## Day 5: I Forgot!

### Passage | 2 Peter 1:3-9

*His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*

*5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.*

Years ago, I had the opportunity to volunteer for a conference aimed at helping young adults live out their faith in the marketplace. One of the speakers for this event was Victoria Jackson, a former cast member of *Saturday Night Live*, who told her story of sharing Christ with her fellow actors. Part of my assignment was to meet Ms. Jackson and her husband at the airport, escort them to the conference venue, and help them settle in the green room.

As we entered the green room, I noticed a "no entry" sign on the wall beside the door. This room was designated for VIPs only, and conference attendees were not allowed to enter this room. I paused, concerned that someone would ask me to leave this room if I continued walking in.

But then I remembered: In my volunteer position, I had permission to enter this room and help my assigned VIP in any way she needed. I had momentarily forgotten that the pass hanging around my neck gave me all the required rights to enter this room.

In the passage above, Peter writes that ineffective and unproductive Christ-followers have failed to remember their power. They have forgotten that, through Christ, their sins are forgiven and that "his divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life..."

Do you ever need to remember what you have in Christ? Close this time with prayer, asking God to help you remember all you possess as a child of the King!

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 6: How Then Shall We Live?

### Passage | Ephesians 4:17-24

*So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. 19 Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed. 20 That, however, is not the way of life you learned 21 when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul reminds those Christians of their former way of life. These Ephesians were Gentiles and lived as their fellow Gentiles lived: "in the futility of their thinking." However, the gospel dramatically changed their lives. Therefore, they were to shed the old, ugly clothes of their former lives and put on the new, clean garments representing their new life in Christ.

Just as we put on fresh clothes daily (most of the time), we must constantly put on the gospel each morning. We are to clothe ourselves with the mind of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. We do this through reading God's word, meditating on the passage, and praying that the Lord will give us the strength to apply those truths to our lives.

Close this time with prayer, asking God to allow you to put on the clothes of righteousness today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 7: Don't Grieve the Holy Spirit

**Passage** | Ephesians 4:25-32

*Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 26 "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold. 28 Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.*

*29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

Do you see what grieves the Holy Spirit? Harsh, critical words. Bitterness. Anger. Slander. Stealing. Unforgiveness.

These attitudes and actions stem from our flesh, not the Holy Spirit. They are in conflict with a Holy God and grieve the Spirit.

Close this time with prayer, asking God to help you live in a way that reflects a reliance upon the Holy Spirit living inside you.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## CHAPTER 2

# I LOVE YOU

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*  
(Galatians 5:22-23)

The modern American collective view of love is definitely skewed. I blame the whole thing on Peter Cetera. Okay, first of all, that name may be entirely unfamiliar to you, especially if you are a millennial or Gen Z-er.

Secondly, I'm being slightly facetious. It's not entirely his fault. Just mostly, and here is why:

In the 1970's and early 1980's, Mr. Cetera sang lead vocals with the band *Chicago*. In 1985, he left the group and produced several solo albums over the next decade. Many of his songs became number one hits, and the lyrics of these songs reflect our culture's very common view on love.

Consider, for example, these lyrics from the song, *You're the Inspiration*:

*You're the meaning in my life*

*You're the inspiration*

*You bring feeling to my life*

*You're the inspiration*

Or these lines from the song, *Next Time I Fall In Love*, a duet performed with Amy Grant:

*Tonight, I was thinking that you might*

*Be the one who breathes life*

*Into this heart of mine*

The kind of love described in these—and virtually all other modern love songs—is fueled exclusively by our feelings. An honest song lyric would go something like this: *I don't love you as much as I love me, and right now I love the way you make me feel. As long as you continue to make me feel good, then I'll continue to say I love you.*

Yeah, I don't see that becoming a top-forty hit.

The kind of love expressed in these songs (as well as romance novels and every Rom-Com movie) is not the same word Paul used for love in Galatians 5. Paul had no intention of writing lyrics that could be used in a slow dance at a high school prom. The word for *love* in this verse is a radical departure from a romantic, feelings-fueled love.

Before we examine Paul's use of the word "love" in this context, it may be helpful to do a quick study of the Greek language. In Greek (the language of the New Testament), there are four main words we translate as love.

The first is:

**Eros.** This word is used to describe a romantic, physical desire for another person. We get our English word "erotic" from this Greek word, although the Greek word does not always carry a sexual connotation. *Eros* love can very much be a good, healthy love. The Bible praises a romantic relationship between a guy and a girl. It is a blessing from the Lord to fall in love and enjoy *eros* love with another.

However, *eros* is not used anywhere in the New Testament. It is commonly found in other ancient Greek literature, but the writers of the New Testament never had the occasion to use this particular word for love.

The second Greek word for love is:

**Storge.** This word indicates a family or fraternal love and is rarely used in the New Testament. Paul used a combination of *storge* and *phileo* in Romans 12:10, commanding us to love fellow believers as family. "*Philos-storge* (brotherly love) one another with

a *philadelphia* (brotherly love.)” I know, it’s a strangely worded sentence.

*Storge* is a type of family love that exists regardless of one’s feelings. An example might be, “I know Cousin Larry is crazy, but I still *storge* him, you know, because he’s family.”

*Storge* can also be used to describe a patriotic love, especially when the leader of a nation is not one’s first choice. It is honoring Caesar even when Caesar is a bad guy.

The third word for love is:

**Phileo.** This word is used to describe an intimate, affectionate love. When Lazarus became extremely ill, his sisters sent word to Jesus: “Lord, the one you *phileo* is sick” (John 11:3). Jesus and Lazarus were very close, something clearly seen in the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

*Phileo* can also be used to describe a great enjoyment of something. Jesus said of the Pharisees, “They *phileo* to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others (Matthew 6:5).

*Phileo* is a strong, intimate love. It is used to describe the love of God the Father for God the Son. It is a love you have for your children, parents, and closest friends.

However, *phileo* is not the word Paul used in Galatians 5. Neither is *eros* or *storge*. The word Paul chose to use for love is:

**Agape.** This word is used to describe the highest and noblest form of love. It is a love that can only be known *by the actions it prompts*. The ultimate demonstration of this love is seen in the cross. Paul described the love of God in this way:

*But God demonstrates his own **agape** for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)*

In his Galatian list of character traits produced by the Spirit, the first one Paul listed is *agape*. The love produced within us by the Spirit is an action-oriented love. It is so much more than a physical passion, a family obligation, or an intimate feeling. It is a



love that calls us to action regardless of our desires or the worthiness of those receiving our love.

This week, we are going to see how the Spirit produces this character trait in our lives. I hope you really *phileo* these devotions on *agape*!

## Day 8: Show Me the Love

**Passage** | Matthew 22:34-40

*Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”*

*37 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

Agape love is at the very heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ and to be led by the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught this principle in Matthew 22. In this scene, a group of religious leaders known as the Sadducees attempted to stump Jesus with a question about the resurrection. Their ruse, not unexpectedly, failed. The answer of Jesus shut the mouths of these religious leaders.

On the heels of that verbal exchange, another group, the Pharisees, tried their hand at trapping Jesus. “Which commandment is most important?” they asked, hoping his answer would create an opportunity to criticize Jesus. If he said the most important commandment was to not steal, then they could attack him for elevating that law above coveting. If he said it was coveting, they could attack him for minimizing the law about murder.

The reply of Jesus went beyond their expectations and (just as with the Sadducees) shut the mouths of the Pharisees. Jesus redirected the conversation. The most important commandment revolves around our relationship with God, not a checklist of do’s and don’ts. The greatest command is found in loving God with every fiber of our being. When we are consumed with that kind of love for God, we naturally love those around us as well. According

to Jesus, all the other commands fall into place when we practice these two most important ones.

How are you demonstrating love, both toward God and others? Close this time with prayer, asking God to help you live out these commands.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 9: Be Like Jesus

### Passage | Philippians 2:1-4

*Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

If anyone had the right to look out for his own interests, it certainly was Jesus Christ. He is perfect in every way. His glory outshines the sun. There is no one and nothing greater in all of the universe.

And yet perfect, powerful, glory-deserving Jesus set aside his rights. He humbled himself and took on human flesh. He allowed his captors to put him to death in the most brutal, tortuous way known to man. He did all of this because he “did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage” (Philippians 2:6).

Paul used the example of Jesus to remind us of our calling: to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit; to value others above ourselves; to consider the needs of others above our own.

Living this way is impossible in our own power. We cannot muster enough love from within ourselves to accomplish this. Only through the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives are we able to follow the example of Jesus.

Close this time with prayer, asking God to help you show this kind of love to others today.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 10: Love Is a Verb

### Passage | Romans 12:9-13

*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

Most in our culture will define love as a feeling. Music, movies, television, and novels all portray love in terms of fireworks and a stomach full of butterflies.

The Biblical definition of love, however, is much more than a passionate feeling or a deep emotion. The Bible defines love in terms of action.

Notice the number of action verbs in the passage above: *cling, be devoted, honor, be patient, never lack zeal, be joyful, patient, share*. Notice what is not on the list: *doodle his name in your notebook; daydream about her during biology; talk incessantly about him to your friends; make her a mix CD (I'm seriously dating myself)*. The guy who is in love with a girl will do anything for her. His actions naturally follow his feelings. A girl who is head over heels for the guy *feels* like doing nice things for him.

But let's face it: who *feels* like honoring others' needs above our own? Who *feels* like sharing with others when we haven't even met our own needs? Those acts of love cannot be based upon our emotions.

That then begs the question: what, then, is our source of love for those kinds of actions? Galatians 5:22 makes it clear: it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. It is a product of drawing on him as our resource. This kind of love can only come through a daily reliance upon his power in our lives.

Close this time with prayer, asking God to help you rely on the Holy Spirit in everything you do today.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 11: Now It Gets Really Hard

### Passage | Romans 12:14-21

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*

*17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary:*

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*

*21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

In Galatians 5, Paul contrasts the acts of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit. In his list of "fleshly" actions, he includes: hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, and factions. Naturally, we hate those who hate us. We fight with those who have attacked us. We form factions with our friends to better protect us from our enemies. These are normal human responses to adversarial relationships.

In Christ, however, we are called to a different, radical pattern of living. A love for our enemies that calls us to action: bless those who persecute; do not repay evil for evil; do not take revenge; feed your enemy.

These are impossible to do in our own power. Our instinct is to curse, hurt, and get revenge on those who have attacked us. However, as the Holy Spirit produces *agape* love in our lives, we are able to live out the calling in the verses above.



Close this time with prayer, focusing specially on those who have hurt you. Pray for them and pray for ways you can best demonstrate Christ to them.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 12: Are You Serious, Jesus?

**Passage:** Matthew 5:43-48

*You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Matthew 5-7 contains a sermon Jesus preached early in his ministry. In these chapters we read revolutionary principles on how to live. Jesus redefined the moral standards accepted by the religious leaders of his day:

*You have heard it said, “Do not commit murder.” But I tell you that anyone who harbors anger toward his brother will be subject to judgment.*

*You have heard it said, “Do not commit adultery.” But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

*You have heard it said, “Do not break your oath.” But I tell you, let your yes’s be yes’s and your no’s be no’s.*

In all of these radical teachings, Jesus made it clear that doing the right things for the wrong reasons was not what God desired. According to Jesus, God desires our heart to be right and our obedience to flow out of that.

In the example above, Jesus discussed how to deal with our enemies. In a straight-forward manner, Jesus confronts our default way of relating to others: Love friends; hate enemies. This is the pattern found around the world: Atheists, Communists, Muslims,

Criminals, and Tax Collectors - they all know how to love friends and hate enemies.

But as followers of Christ, we have a different pattern to follow: Love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

What?

It goes against the grain of everything within us. How can we be expected to love our enemies and pray for those who have hurt us? The only way to accomplish this is through a reliance upon the Holy Spirit and the fruit he produces. Only then can we love as Jesus loves.

Close this time with prayer, asking God to help you show love today to someone who has been unkind to you.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 13: Binding Love and Faithfulness

**Passage:** Proverbs 3:1-4

*My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, 2 for they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity. 3 Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. 4 Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.*

The book of Proverbs was written by King Solomon, the third king over the nation of Israel and a man of tremendous wisdom. Proverbs is a book of advice to his son. In this passage, Solomon exhorts his son to cling tightly to love and faithfulness. He imagines him binding these qualities around his neck and writing them on the tablet of his heart. He wanted his son to allow these characteristics to play an important role in his actions, words, and decision-making processes.

Solomon's great wisdom is for us as well. The result of pursuing both love and faithfulness allows us to gain favor both with God and man. Binding these virtues around our necks will produce a life that is admired by others and blessed by God.

We cannot produce the kind of power it takes to exhibit these qualities in our lives; however, we can choose to live by the power of the Holy Spirit, who *is* able to produce these qualities.

What can you do to bind love and faithfulness to your life? Close this time with prayer, asking God to give you the ability today to live by these words of wisdom.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 14: Real Love

### Passage | I Corinthians 13:4-8

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails.*

The above passage is often read in wedding ceremonies. It is easy in the early stages of a relationship to believe that romantic feelings of love will always be strong. However—as any seasoned couple can attest—passion and feelings will invariably ebb and flow like the ocean tides. True love is not based upon how a person makes us feel, but upon a commitment. Notice how Paul defined love in terms of action rather than feelings. Love is... *kind, not self-seeking, not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs*. Paul did not define love with words like fireworks, rainbows, and happily ever afters. Those are all wonderful, but not the foundation of a true love relationship.

If you are married, think about how you deal with your spouse:

- Are you patient in your responses?
- Do you speak kind words?
- Are you envious of her/him getting to do something you do not get to do?
- Do you look out for your spouse, or are you looking out for yourself?
- Are you angered easily by your spouse?
- Do you keep mental records of those times your spouse has wronged you?
- Are you protective of your spouse's interests and reputation in front of others?

The only way we are able to exhibit this kind of love is through allowing Christ to love through us. That is what living by the Spirit is all about!

Close this time with prayer. If you are married, spend time asking God to help you show this kind of love to your spouse.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**





## CHAPTER 3

# THE BATTLE FOR JOY

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)*

I remember well the conversation with my college buddy. This was more than a decade after we graduated. At this point, he was living in another city. He called just to catch up. Or maybe I called him. I can't remember exactly, but I do remember this part of our conversation. His words stuck to the roof of my brain and have remained there ever since.

“It was last Saturday afternoon, I think. It may have been Sunday, but I'm pretty sure it was Saturday. The kids were napping, and I decided to give our garden some badly needed attention. The weeds were overtaking the strawberries we'd planted a few weeks back.

As I pulled those pesky weeds out of the dirt, I glanced up at the back of my house. My wife and three kids were somewhere inside. I love my wife, unquestionably. I love and absolutely adore my three kids. Except, I don't know, every day is starting to feel like Groundhog Day. I go to work. I come home. We eat dinner, then I help the kids finish their homework. I read the youngest a story, and we get them all settled into bed. The Mrs. and I watch a show, or maybe just part of a show before we both fall asleep. The alarm goes off the next morning, and I basically live that exact same day over again. Wash. Rinse. Repeat.”

Then I heard a defeated sigh that led into his next words. “I thought, ‘Is this really my life?’ I don't know why, but I'm just not happy.”



I wonder if you can identify with the sentiments of my friend. Perhaps your story is similar. It's not that anything is wrong with your life, per se, except that there is just a lack of something. A *je ne sais quoi* is missing. It's not that you're particularly *unhappy*, but you're not all that *happy*, either.

Or, perhaps, you really are unhappy. You know exactly what your life is missing: happiness and joy. Our culture is currently facing the worst emotional recession I've witnessed in my lifetime. Anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses are running rampant through our society. Future generations face a future lacking *joy*.

Yet, for followers of Christ, this emotional trait is being produced within us by the Holy Spirit. As we lean into the Spirit, joy becomes part of our character. While followers of Christ possess these qualities in varying degrees, every one of us possesses ALL the fruit of the Spirit. Therefore, a Christian with zero joy is logically impossible. Joy is a natural byproduct of a relationship with Christ.

On this topic, the question of happiness versus joy is normally raised. On a practical level, I'm not sure there is a tangible difference in the human experience. In our daily lives, these two emotions tend to be closely connected. I don't think I've ever had someone tell me, "I'm incredibly unhappy right now, but I have tremendous joy."

From an academic and Biblical perspective, however, there is a difference between these two seemingly similar emotions. Happiness is primarily dictated by our circumstances. Joy is an internal character trait which exists regardless of our situation. Happiness is an emotion experienced by what happens *to* and *around* us. Joy is a state-of-being produced *within* us.

In this portion of our study, we will examine the following two principles about joy:

- Joy can exist even in the most difficult trials of life. We will see this truth in several of the verses assigned in the devotions this week. Paul, Peter, and other individuals all

experienced joy during times of tremendous persecution and pain.

- Joy takes active work, not passive hope. Joy is a muscle to be trained. We do not just sit around and hope to be joyful. We work on allowing the Holy Spirit to develop this quality in our lives.

This week, the study and devotions will focus on how to do the work of remaining in the Spirit to develop the fruit of joy in our lives.

## Day 15: Happy Jesus

**Passage** | Luke 10:1-2,17-21

*After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. 2 He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.*

*17 The seventy-two returned with joy and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.”*

*18 He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. 19 I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. 20 However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”*

*21 At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.*

Have you ever thought about what made Jesus smile? What made him really laugh? A good joke? A funny story? Seeing Peter accidentally stumble and fall as they walked along the road?

While we do not find recorded any specific references to Jesus smiling or laughing, this account comes close. Verse 21 indicates that Jesus was “full of joy.” The word for joy in this text is more than a passive feeling. It describes an outburst of happiness and excitement. It is the same word Mary uses in Luke 1:47 after learning she will give birth to the Savior of the world.

So, what made Jesus happy? From this passage we see that Jesus became really happy when his followers “got it.” The seventy-two he sent out did what Jesus asked, saw the power of the name of

Jesus, and their faith in him grew tremendously. When Jesus saw this happen, his soul became filled with joy.

I believe this same reality exists now. When believers are obedient; when we see and experience the power of Jesus; when our faith in him grows, Jesus is filled with joy. Jesus smiles at us when we “get it.”

Close this time with prayer, asking Jesus to help you experience his power in your life today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 16: M&M's v. Veggies

**Passage** | Hebrews 11:24-28

*By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. 25 He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. 28 By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.*

I remember well using M&M's when we potty-trained our children. This method proved very effective in teaching them to do what did not come naturally: use the toilet instead of simply "going" when the urge hit. The candy-coated chocolate reward for exhibiting self-control seemed to work for our toddlers.

However, there then had to be another retraining of their brains. They enjoyed these treats so much that — in their minds — there was no reason to eat anything but sweets. Why bother with vegetables, fruits, or grains when the magic of ice-cream, cakes, and candies (including the aforementioned M&M's) taste so much better?

It became very difficult to explain to our young children the "why" behind not allowing sugary treats as a replacement for other foods. Eating only sweets would deprive them of the proteins and nutrients needed. Later, once the sugar high wore off, they would crash and feel awful.

Sin has this same effect on us spiritually. In the passage above, the writer of Hebrews uses the example of Moses, who gave up the "fleeting pleasures" of sin to pursue a deep, meaningful connection

with God. He gave up that which brought temporary pleasure for that which truly filled his soul.

That is what Biblical joy is all about. Temporary happiness is exactly that: temporary and fleeting. But through the Holy Spirit, God has given us real, lasting joy.

Are you experiencing that kind of joy today? Close this time with prayer, asking God to fill you with his joy today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 17: Joy in the Midst of Pain

**Passage** | 2 Corinthians 4:7-12

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. 12 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.*

Years ago, I had a melanoma removed from my nose. While the removal of the cancer caused only minimal discomfort, the ensuing plastic surgery and recovery was quite the ordeal. I was confined to a chair in my bedroom for over a week. I remember it was a beautiful fall week in October, and all I could do was look out the window. I became extremely depressed, due in part to the side effect of the pain pills.

Several days into this ordeal, a friend from our church came by to visit. I unloaded my woes on him. I complained vigorously about my situation. He gently but firmly reminded me of how much the Lord had blessed me. My wife loved me and cared for me. My children were healthy and happy. My church family was praying for me. And the Lord knew my pain and would use this for my ultimate good.

Even though I had trouble admitting it, he was exactly right. My pity party was not only unhelpful, but unjustified. The Lord had me in the palm of his hand. There was a joy I'd missed due to my focus on my less-than-ideal situation.

In the passage above, Paul points out that even in his trying circumstances, he was *full of life* because of the power of Christ

within him. Although hard pressed on every side, Paul possessed an internal joy. His external trials did not control his internal emotions.

Is that true in your life today? Does the joy of Christ exude from you even when you are “hard pressed from every side?” Close this time with prayer, asking God to help you see beyond your circumstances today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## Day 18: The Geek Squad

### Passage | Psalm 73:21-26

*When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, 22 I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.*

*23 Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.*

*24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

Do you remember the “Geek Squad” advertisements? In these ads, this electronics company admitted that their employees were not necessarily the coolest people around. They aren’t the ones you would necessarily invite to your party. These are not the people you choose first for your softball team. They aren’t the guys to call when you need help moving a sofa.

However, if you have a problem with your computer, call them. While you don’t call the “geeks” to hang out, watch football, or grab dinner, you definitely call them when you need tech support.

How often do we treat God the same way? If everything in life is running fine, we are not interested in hanging out that much with God. Then, the moment something goes wrong and needs “fixing,” we are very interested in having God come over.

In the passage above, the writer proclaims that God is more than just his problem solver, but he is the strength of his heart and his portion forever. His joy and meaning in life are not found in the things God gives to him, but in God himself.

Are you able to say that today? Close this time with prayer, praying this Psalm to the Lord.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 19: The Pursuit of Happiness

**Passage** | Habakkuk 3:17-19

*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. 19 The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.*

In the year 2000, there were 50 books published on the topic of “happiness.” In 2008, there were over 4,000 books published on the same subject. A quick search on *amazon.com* today of titles with the word “happiness” will produce over 100,000 results. Included in this search are titles such as: *Mind-Hacking Happiness*, *The Art of Happiness*, *The 3-Minute Happiness Journal*, and *The How of Happiness*.

With all these resources available to us, we should be the happiest people in the history of the world!

Yet so many in our culture seem to be anything but happy. We live in a society that is apathetic at best and depressed at worst. While we have more *stuff* than ever before, happiness has somehow managed to elude us.

The writer of Habakkuk proclaimed that his true source of happiness and joy wasn’t found in his circumstances, but in God himself. *Though the fig tree does not bud, no grapes, no olives, no sheep, no cattle...yet I will rejoice in the Lord. He is my strength.*

This is incredibly difficult to do when circumstances are less than ideal. Let’s be honest: who wants to praise God when life has gone sideways? When the fig tree hasn’t budded, how can we still find joy?

One way is through consistently praising God, in the good times and bad. Is life going well for you right now? Then spend time

thanking God for what he has given to you *and* praising him for who he is. Is your life full of problems? Spend time praying for God to change your situation, but then also praising him for who he is. Regardless of our situation, God remains the same.

Close this time with prayer, rejoicing in our unchanging God.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 20: You Want to Go Back Home?

### Passage | I Peter 1:8-9

*Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

Years ago, we decided to surprise our two oldest children with a trip to the Polar Express in Bryson City, North Carolina. We told them simply to get into the car and that we were going to drive around and see if we could find something fun to do. At five and six years old, they trusted us completely.

For a while.

We were about an hour's drive into our journey when they announced, "We are tired of being in the car. We are ready to go home. Can't we just turn around and go back to Macon? We want to watch television. We want to play with our toys."

Once we pulled into Bryson City and showed them the train and Polar Express Village, they ceased their whining. Only when they were able to see the truly fun destination did they cease longing for a routine day at home.

C. S. Lewis once wrote:

*"We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea."*

Let us not become so enamored with the so-called "joy" of worldly trinkets that we miss the greatest joy of all.

Close this time with prayer, asking God to increase your desire for the better joy of knowing him.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 21: Fighting for Joy

**Passage** | I Thessalonians 5:16-18

*Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

Years ago, I came across the idea of *practicing thankfulness* in my life. I've discovered that a lack of joy often comes from a skewed perspective on my circumstances. When I focus on what I do not have or situations in which I feel like I'm owed something, joy will leak out of my life.

However, when I practice thankfulness, joy will seem to fill my heart and soul. When I focus on all that I have been given and spend time thanking the Lord for those things, my outlook on life changes.

I believe this is why Paul, in the verses above, strongly commanded believers to *give thanks in all circumstances*. He even makes the point that practicing thankfulness is God's will for our lives. When we are thankful, we are living according to God's plan for our lives.

Consider today how you can practice being thankful for all that the Lord has given to you. Close this time with prayer, focusing especially on God's goodness in your life.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## CHAPTER 4

# PEACE WITH YOU

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, **peace**, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*  
(Galatians 5:22-23)

I am writing these words exactly five days after October 7, 2023, the day Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel. As Israelis were wrapping up the seven-day-long Jewish festival of Booths on Saturday, a full-fledged surprise attack was waged from the air, sea and ground by hordes of Hamas militants. Thousands of missiles fired from Gaza streaked through the sky and struck indiscriminate targets in Israel. Simultaneously, hundreds of armed fighters charged into cities, taking Israeli soldiers off guard and gunning down citizens. A music festival became a shooting gallery for the terrorists who arrived in vans and began mowing down partygoers. Nearly 300 were killed and many others taken hostage.

The Hamas attack was launched on the 50th anniversary of the 1973 Yom Kippur War that pitted Israel against Egypt and Syria. As of this writing, nearly 2,000 Israeli citizens and soldiers have died. Twenty-two American citizens died in the attack, and an undetermined number have been taken hostage.

Within hours of the attacks, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared war on Hamas. Israeli officials rightly compared the attacks to the events of September 11, 2001.

Israeli forces quickly launched a counterattack on strategic sites in the Gaza Strip, seeking to cripple the Hamas forces. Governmental leaders, the United Nations, and the Pope have all called for an end to the hostilities. Various political leaders have proclaimed the need for peace in this region. So far, however, few have offered viable solutions.



Is peace really possible? Is there a way peace can actually be achieved in the Middle East?

Furthermore, is long-term peace among nations achievable?

Is peace within our own nation a possibility?

What about peace in our own lives?

Notice the words Jesus spoke to his disciples on the night he was betrayed and arrested:

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.* (John 14:27)

Jesus spoke of peace just hours before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion on a Roman cross. The following day, he would be sentenced to die by Pilate and executed on a Roman cross. Leading up to these events, Jesus promised his followers peace, but not a peace as the world gives. In other words, Jesus promised a peace that is different from a worldly peace.

What, exactly, is this worldly peace? What kind of peace does the world give us?

Two words come to mind: *temporary* and *situational*.

Worldly peace is, first, *temporary*. I visited Israel in 2019 during a time of peace. I witnessed no attacks on the streets or bombs falling from the sky. I saw Muslims and Jews and Christians living peaceably among one another. However, it was temporary. Last Saturday, this peace ended.

The Roman Empire proudly proclaimed a peace among the nations they conquered. One of the highest values in Roman culture was an orderly society. They became adept at keeping peace. That is, until they no longer could. Peace lasted only until war broke out.

Secondly, the peace of the world is *situational*. The way to achieve peace is to change circumstances. Defeat and subdue one's enemy, and you'll have peace. If you are unable to change your circumstances, then escape them. Leave your job. Leave your

home. Change your mental state. Take a pill. Take a drink. If you can either change your actual or perceived situation, then perhaps you can achieve a temporary peace.

The peace Jesus gives is different. Two words come to mind: *eternal* and *positional*.

First, the peace Jesus gives is *eternal*. We are born at war. At birth, our sinful nature has already declared war on God. Our heart's desire is to be our own god; therefore, we fight against God and his truth. It is only when we wave the white flag of surrender that we can achieve peace. Paul described the acquisition of this eternal peace in this manner: "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1).

Secondly, the peace Jesus gives is a *positional* peace. It is a peace achieved through a relationship and exists regardless of our circumstances. The prophet Isaiah framed it this way: "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you" (Isaiah 26:3). This relationship with God through Jesus gives us the position of kinship, a reality that will not ever change.

This week we will see how trusting in the Spirit leads us to becoming people who both know peace and offer peace to others.

## Day 22: Peace, Part 1

**Passage** | John 20:19-20

*On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.*

They huddled together, behind locked doors, confused and scared. Three days earlier, their hopes and dreams came to an abrupt and shocking halt. They’d left their careers and their families to follow Jesus. Now, however, Jesus was *dead*.

They’d devoted their lives to him. They’d hung their hats on the hope that he would overthrow the Romans and take his rightful place of leadership in Jerusalem. All their eggs were in that basket, and now all the eggs and even the basket were gone.

As these eleven men gathered on this Sunday night, there were numerous questions and no answers. What now? Should they continue their little movement without their leader? Should they quit, disperse, and go back to their careers? Were their lives now in danger as well? Adding to their confusion were the scattered reports that the body of Jesus was now missing, and some were claiming to have seen him alive. What were they supposed to do with this news?

Amid their heated, rambling discussion, another suddenly appeared in the room. The chatter stopped, and the room became silent. Then, they heard the familiar voice of their leader say, “Peace be with you.” In that moment, their fears, confusion, and disagreements subsided. When Jesus entered the room, so did peace. No matter what else they faced, the presence of Jesus gave them peace.

Do you have that kind of peace today? Close this time with prayer, asking God to bring you peace during whatever you face.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 23: Peace, Part 2

**Passage** | John 20:21-23

*Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”*

The Apostles were huddled together that Sunday evening. The door to the house was securely locked. Fear gripped their hearts. Would they, like Jesus, become the target of the Jewish leaders? Would they later be placed on a Roman cross as well? Should they get out of town as quickly as possible?

Suddenly, Jesus appeared among their confused, anxious group. The resurrected Jesus, who died on Friday, now stood before them. *Peace*, he told them. In other words, “Calm down. I’m here. I’ve got you.”

He then appointed these men to go and carry on his mission, again giving them the assurance, “Peace be with you!” This time, they would know peace because they would go in the power of the Holy Spirit.

According to church tradition, every one of these men (with the possible exception of John) were martyred for their faith in Christ. They all died simply for claiming to be his followers. The peace Jesus brought was not a change in their circumstances, but an assurance that he was with them whatever they faced.

The same is true for us. Whatever trials and difficulties we face, we still have peace through the presence of Jesus in our lives. Close this time with prayer, thanking Jesus for the peace he brings.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 24: Fighting the Weeds

**Passage** | Philippians 4:8-9

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

I have sections of my yard that are full of weeds. No matter how many times I pull the weeds, they come back in virtually the same place. Other areas of my yard never seem to have weeds. The difference? Where the grass is growing well, there are no weeds. Where the grass has trouble growing, the weeds seem to take over. Instead of pulling weeds (I've finally learned), the more effective solution is to fertilize the grass. Where the grass is strong, the weeds have a hard time taking root.

The passage above is one of my favorites in the New Testament. It is easy to let anxiety fill our lives and consume us. Worry wears us down emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Most of us know this truth, and yet it is difficult to simply pull worry out of our lives. Every time we try, worry seems to grow back in the same spot.

This verse instructs us in how to battle worry. We cannot, in our own strength, rid worry from our lives. However, by substituting prayer for worry, our faith grows. We believe more fully that God is in control. Our circumstances no longer determine our emotions. As our faith grows, worry is unable to take root, and God's peace guards our hearts and minds.

Are you struggling with worry today? Close this time with prayer, releasing those struggles to God.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## Day 25: Peace With God

### Passage | Romans 5:1

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

In his book, *Peace With God*, Billy Graham describes the great quest of every person on the planet:

*All humanity is seeking the answer to the confusion, the moral sickness, the spiritual emptiness that oppresses the world. All mankind is crying out for guidance, for comfort, for peace.*

There are countless paths traveled in trying to find this peace. Some believe it will be achieved through a relationship. *Find the right person, they think, and this emptiness will be filled.*

Others seek to fill the void through good works. They dedicate themselves to a cause. *If they can make a difference in this world, they believe, then this peace will fill their lives.*

Others attempt to find this peace through achievements. Work hard, climb the corporate ladder, write a best-selling book, become famous. A big pot of peace will be found at the end of that proverbial rainbow.

Some travel down the path of substance abuse. Peace can be achieved through a drink or a drug, even if just for a little while.

All of these paths will ultimately fail. At the end of the day, there is only one way to true peace: through Jesus Christ. Paul highlights this truth in the verse above. It is through faith in Jesus Christ that we have peace with God.

Close this time with prayer, thanking God for the peace he gives through Christ.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 26: Wisdom From Heaven

### Passage | James 3:17-18

*But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*

All of us can look back on various decisions we've made and—with the advantage of hindsight—realize that we probably didn't choose wisely. Either we simply didn't know better, or we didn't spend time analyzing the situation, or we foolishly allowed our passions to overrule our moral compass. Whatever the reason, we are able to look back now and see the lack of wisdom in those decisions.

Do you ever wish that you could always know and make the right decision? Fortunately, if you are a follower of Christ, the New Testament book of James promises that God grants wisdom to us when we ask for it. In the passage above, James paints a picture of this wisdom that comes from God. According to verse 17, the wisdom is first, *pure*, and secondly, *peace-loving*.

Even in the decisions we make that are difficult, controversial, or confrontational, the end goal must be for peace to exist in our lives and the lives of those around us. Decisions that cause hurt, controversy, and dissension do not come out of God's wisdom, but our own selfish ambition.

What kind of wisdom are you displaying today? Close this time with prayer, asking God to give you his wisdom for every word you will speak and decision you will make today.

### Notes and Prayer Requests:

## Day 27: Forgiving Others

**Passage** | Colossians 3:12-14

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

Notice the description of who you are in the first sentence of the passage above.

- You are chosen. Dwell on that for a moment. God picked you, not because of something you did, but because of his Sovereign will. You certainly did nothing to be chosen, yet God chose you.
- You are holy. You may not always *feel* holy, but in Christ that is exactly what and who you are. You are completely cleansed and forever forgiven of every sin. You are set apart. You are God's chosen, holy vessel.
- You are dearly loved. Intimately loved. Amazingly, passionately, sacrificially loved. God's love does not change because of your actions. His feelings toward you are not swayed by anything that happens. You are a chosen, holy, dearly loved child of the Great King.

In light of all this, put on clothes of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Live in these virtuous garments. Let them drape all over you so that these attitudes ooze from your pores. Let your speech be gracious and kind. May your actions be soaked in these gospel traits.

Moreover, as you allow these virtues to fill your heart and mind, you will become far more willing to forgive, just as the Lord has forgiven you. Every wrong you've committed against the Lord has been completely wiped off your record. Do that same thing for someone else today.

Close this time with prayer, asking the Lord to give you the grace and strength you need to forgive those who have wronged you.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 28: The Peace of Christ

### Passage | Colossians 3:15-17

*15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

Colossians is such a rich, wonderful, and extremely practical New Testament book. Paul begins this letter with incredibly profound theological truths yet does not remain in the ivory tower for long. He quickly pivots and explains how these truths have practical application to our lives.

I absolutely love this section in the book of Colossians. In the passage above, Paul reminds the Colossian Christians that they are part of one body. Therefore, they should forgive one another and “let the peace of Christ rule in [their] hearts.” Paul understood that a gathering of Christ-followers should be marked by peace among the members. This doesn’t mean that the members always agree on everything; however, it does mean that there is an ultimate seeking of peace, even when there is strife.

Paul adds other instructions to this list. Be thankful. Let the gospel dwell richly in your lives. Teach and correct one another. Encourage one another through worshipping together. Do everything as unto the Lord and with gratitude in your hearts.

Who would not want to be part of a group like this? In just three verses, Paul paints a beautiful picture of an incredibly attractive church; one that serves as a wonderful refuge from a strife-filled, peace-lacking world.

Close this time with prayer, praying specifically for Northway Church to exhibit the qualities Paul listed in the passage above.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## CHAPTER 5

# PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, **patience**, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)*

I just finished watching an incredibly disappointing National League Division Series between the Atlanta Braves and the Philadelphia Phillies. If you're an MLB fan, you know precisely why the 2023 season was especially disheartening for Braves fans. Having the best record in the regular season and losing in the playoffs' first round was terribly disconcerting. Alas, I find myself saying the oft-repeated phrase of longtime supporters of the Braves: *There's always next year.*

Admittedly, I will sporadically watch the Braves play during the regular season. It isn't easy to devote three hours in front of the television, several nights a week, from April through September. There are too many other obligations in life.

However, I enjoy the playoffs, even though that meant only four games (*sigh*) this particular year. With numerous pitching changes and seemingly longer and longer commercial breaks, it's still a significant time commitment.

Except, I've discovered the trick to watching the playoffs:

1. Record the game.
2. Hide your phone so you won't receive any texts or notifications regarding the aforementioned game.
3. Start watching the game an hour after it starts and fast forward through commercials.

This is a highly efficient method for viewing most sporting events.



I'm old enough to remember when this time-saving strategy was impossible. The Braves, for example, started their games at 7:35. There was no recording the game or pausing in the middle of an inning to grab a bowl of ice cream. Watching the entire game meant turning on the television at 7:35 and watching it through the end (with no pitch clock or runner on second base during extra innings). I remember many nights of listening to Pete van Wieren and Skip Caray late into the evening.

I'm also old enough to remember when Saturday mornings were my absolute favorite time slot of the week. That was the only time I was able to watch cartoons. I'd park in front of the television all morning. Hold all my calls and put the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door. I've got meetings all morning with Bugs, Foghorn, and a coyote who is really stressed about catching this fast bird.

Times have changed, haven't they?

Cartoons are on 24/7. Other shows can be accessed at any time of the day. You don't even have to bother going out to rent a DVD to watch a movie. The remote allows you to stream instantly.

We live in a culture of now. Immediate. On demand. You ask for it, you've got it, and you've got it quickly.

It's no wonder that patience is a lost art. Waiting has become anathema to us. Why wait when you can have it right now?

Two Greek words are translated as "patience" in the New Testament. *Hupomonē* means "a remaining under," as when one bears a heavy load. Although the King James Version most often translates this Greek word as "patience," more modern English translations use "perseverance" or "endurance" to convey the true meaning of this word. For example, James tells believers to:

*"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces (hupomone) perseverance." (James 1:2-3)*

Similarly, Paul encourages believers to continue in their faithfulness because:

*"To those who by (hupomone) persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life."*  
(Romans 2:7)

However, this is not the word used in Galatians 5:22. The second Greek word used for patience is *makrothumia*. It is a compound formed by *makros* ("long") and *thumos* ("passion" or "temper").

"Patience" in Galatians 5:22 literally means "long temper" in the sense of "the ability to hold one's temper for a long time." The KJV translates it as "long-suffering." Other English translations use the word "forbearance."

This is the word Paul used in his second letter to Timothy:

*"You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, (makrothumia) patience, love, endurance."* (2 Timothy 3:10)

The opposite of patience is irritation, agitation, and vengefulness. Impatient people take matters into their own hands and refuse to wait on the Lord.

A patient person is slow to anger as he trusts in God to provide comfort and punish wrongdoing. When we are patient, we leave room for God to work in our hearts, in our circumstances, and our relationships. We lay down our plans and trust in God's. We let God be God.

Since it is a fruit of the Spirit, we can only possess *makrothumia* through the power and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This week, we will focus on this fruit and how it becomes part of our character.

## Day 29: The Great Comeback

**Passage** | Psalm 27:14

*Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.*

Years ago, I went to the Georgia Dome with friends to watch the Atlanta Falcons host the San Francisco 49ers. There were around a dozen of us who caravanned in several different cars.

At the beginning of the fourth quarter, the Falcons were behind 24-7. It was another typical Falcons performance that day, the only bright spot being the defensive play of Deion Sanders, the young superstar of the team. The crowd in the stadium began to thin as disappointed fans started slowly making their way toward the exits.

A discussion began within our group. "Let's go," someone said. "I'm ready to get some decent food," another suggested. "Falcons stink," someone grumbled. "Let's beat the traffic out of here."

Half the group decided to leave, and the other half chose to stay for just a little while longer. Within the first couple minutes of the fourth quarter, Deion Sanders had an interception that set up a score for the Falcons offense. 24-14. Then the Falcons kicked off, and the 49ers fumbled the return. Another touchdown by the offense. 24-21. The 49ers offense began their drive, but then Deion intercepted a pass. This set up a field goal by the Falcons with just a few minutes remaining. 24-24. The Falcon's defense stopped the next offensive series, forcing the 49ers to punt. The Falcons then marched down the field and kicked another field goal. Falcons won, 27-24.

And half of our group missed this amazing comeback win. *Just before the game turned good*, they bailed.

How often do we do the same thing with God? Our patience runs out, the situation looks bleak, we are behind by 17 points at the beginning of the fourth quarter, so we no longer want to wait on the Lord. Perhaps we are quitting just before it gets good?

Are you having trouble waiting on the Lord? Close this time with prayer, asking God to give you the patience you need.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 30: David Delivering Pizza

### Passage | I Samuel 17:17-19

*Now Jesse said to his son David, "Take this ephah of roasted grain and these ten loaves of bread for your brothers and hurry to their camp. 18 Take along these ten cheeses to the commander of their unit. See how your brothers are and bring back some assurance from them. 19 They are with Saul and all the men of Israel in the Valley of Elah, fighting against the Philistines."*

I read an article recently about the incredible growth of fast-food restaurants in the United States. In 1960, McDonald's operated 200 restaurants. In 2023, they had over 40,000 locations around the world. In 2023, there were more than 200,000 fast-food restaurants in America, and on any given day, one in four Americans will eat at least one meal at a fast-food restaurant.

We live in a culture that demands speed and efficiency. We want our food quickly. We also want our weight loss to be instant. We start the movie with the click of a remote. We text and expect (and most often receive) an immediate reply. There is a long list of ways we have become accustomed to having our wants and needs met expeditiously.

However, things in life are not always instantly given to us. Especially those things that matter.

The passage above is about David, the second king of Israel. In the previous chapter, Samuel anointed him to be the next king after Saul. Once the ceremony was complete, David returned to his job of tending sheep. In the next scene, his father ordered him to take bread and cheese to his older brothers, who were in the army on the front lines, shaking in their boots because of a giant Philistine man named Goliath.

David obeyed his father and did this menial task. I'm sure he was tempted to tell his father, "Hey, Dad, I was just anointed king,

remember? I'm not delivering pizzas to my brothers. They ought to be serving me!"

But David understood that his position was not immediate and that he needed to be obedient and humble in the waiting. In fact, it would be years before David would realize Samuel's anointing on him as a boy.

We have become obsessed with instant. We often forget that in our patient obedience, the Lord can do his best work in our lives.

Does God have you waiting for something now? Are you finding it difficult to obediently wait for him? Close this time with prayer, asking God to give you patience in the waiting.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 31: A Full Wastebasket

### Passage | I Timothy 1:12-17

*I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. 13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. 14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

*15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. 17 Now to the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

On Monday afternoons, the trash can in my office is full. On Monday mornings, I generally devote my time to studying and writing the message for the following Sunday. I often begin with a legal pad and make all kinds of notes. I will look at a passage, read a commentary, sketch out a possible outline, jot out a few illustrations, make references to other passages, and then... tear out a page and throw it in the trash. Then scratch out another idea, change the outline, start a new page, throw away another page, perhaps another, jot out a few more notes, and eventually begin typing on my computer.

If someone came into my office, pulled out the crumpled-up sheets of paper, and began to read those discarded sheets of paper, they might think something like, "You call yourself a pastor? These messages do not even make sense. What were you thinking here? What was this illustration all about? This won't work at all!"

The person would be right, except that all the "failures" ultimately lead me to the place of what God wants me to say. The false starts and failed sermons are often my starting point for the final product.

The same thing happens in the lives of individuals. In the passage above, Paul writes about his own "false start." He confesses to his failures, even being a blasphemer of God! Had God given up on him, Paul would have been hopeless.

And yet... Paul "was shown mercy so that in [him], the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life."

Have you ever thought about how patient God is with us? Close this time with prayer, thanking God that He has not given up on you.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## Day 32: Throw It Out!

### Passage | Luke 13:6-9

*Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. 7 So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?"*

*8 "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"*

Have you ever noticed how much we live in a throw-away society? Years ago, our television quit working (shortly after the warranty expired). We called a repair man. He informed us that we could repair the television for a cost that was only slightly less than it would cost to get a new one. "What?" I asked. "You mean we just need to throw this one away and get a new television?"

"Yep," he replied. "These days, they are made to be throw-aways."

In the parable above, Jesus emphasizes God's refusal to treat us as throw-aways.

Author and speaker Eugene Peterson says, "Internationally and historically, killing is the predominant method of choice to make the world a better place. It is the easiest, quickest, and most efficient way by far to clear the ground for someone or something with more promise. [This parable] interrupts our noisy, aggressive problem-solving mission. In a quiet voice, the parable says, 'Hold on, not so fast. Wait a minute. Give me some more time. Let me [work] on this tree.'"

Aren't you thankful that God is patient with us, working on us to make us into the kind of fruit-producing men and women he wants us to become? Close this time with prayer, thanking God for his incredible patience.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 33: But Why?

### Passage | Psalm 103:8-14

*The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. 9 He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; 10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. 11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. 13 As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; 14 for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.*

All my children went through the "why" stage, generally around three years old. You may have had experience with this before. Every statement to a child in this stage is followed by the question, "Why?"

"Where are you going, Daddy?"

"To work."

"Why?"

"To make money."

"Why?"

"So, we can have a house, and I can buy food."

"Why?"

"Because you seem to be grumpy when you don't eat."

"Why?"

"Because you are like your dad."

After a while, it really gets old. I can lose my patience quickly with the incessant 'why's.'

But there are two thoughts that keep me from blowing my top. First, I remember being small and asking the "why" question a lot. I guess my children get it honestly.

Secondly, I remember just how patient God has been with me. In the Psalm above, King David reminds us that God is slow to anger and abounding in love. Just as a father has compassion (and patience) with his children, so God has compassion (and patience) with his children.

Is there someone who needs your patience today? Close this time with prayer, asking God to give you the grace to show that person the same compassion He has shown to you.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 34: My Boots

**Passage** | James 1:2-4

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

Years ago, I read a story about a kindergarten teacher who noticed one of her students struggling with his boots. He asked her for help, and she could see why. Even with her pulling and him pushing, the little boots still didn't want to go on. By the time they got the second boot on, she had worked up a sweat. She almost cried when the little boy said, "Teacher, they're on the wrong feet." She looked, and sure enough, they were. It wasn't any easier pulling the boots off than it was putting them on. She managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on, this time on the right feet. He then announced, "These aren't my boots." She bit her tongue rather than get right in his face and scream, "Why didn't you say so?"

Once again, she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting boots off his little feet. No sooner had they gotten the boots off when he said, "They're my brother's boots. My mom made me wear them."

Now she didn't know if she should laugh or cry, but she mustered up what grace and courage she had left to wrestle the boots on his feet again.

Helping him into his coat, she asked, "Now, where are your mittens?"

He replied, "I stuffed them in the toes of my boots."

We all face trials in our lives. According to James, these trials produce perseverance, which leads to maturity.

Are you facing some trials in your life right now? Close this time with prayer, asking God to give you patience and to mature your faith in the midst of these difficulties.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 35: Patient Waiting

**Passage** | Romans 8:22-25

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

There are two different kinds of waiting. One is best described as the wait at a restaurant when the individual is very hungry, the hostess has informed them that it's a 30-minute wait, and after 45 minutes they still have not been seated at a table. It's a frustrated, impatient waiting.

The second kind of waiting is best described as the wait of a groom at the alter while the groomsmen and bridesmaids process into their various pre-assigned positions. It is an exciting, anticipatory, patient waiting, looking forward to the appearing of his bride.

This is the kind of wait Paul describes in the passage above. Even though there is groaning in the waiting, it is a hopeful wait. An excited wait. An eager wait for the Lord to return and to be with him forever.

Close this time with prayer and ask the Lord to give you an excited, patient wait for him.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## CHAPTER 6

# GOOD TO THE BONE

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)*

One of my favorite books is *The Help*, the 2009 novel written by Kathryn Stockett. The movie based on this book stars Viola Davis as Aibileen Clark, an African American domestic worker employed by Elizabeth Leefolt (played by actress Ahna O'Reilly). Elizabeth emotionally neglects her two-year-old daughter, Mae Mobley; however, Aibileen adores and nurtures the girl as if she were her own. Several times in the movie, Aibileen places Mae Mobley in her lap and has her repeat this phrase: “You is smart; you is kind; you is important.”

They are sweet, tender moments between Aibileen and Mae Mobley. This housekeeper is doing more than just telling the young girl to behave herself; she goes to the root of her character. *You don't just act this way; this is who you are in your soul.*

The next two traits in the “Fruit of the Spirit” list—kindness and goodness—are essentially two sides of the same coin. What is the difference? The word for kindness is passive, while the word for goodness is active. Kindness refers more to a disposition, while goodness refers to the outward display of that character.

The Greek word for “kindness” is *chrestotes*. It means “excellence in character” or “goodness.” Paul encouraged the Christians in Colossae with these words:

*“As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness (chrestotes)...”*  
(Colossians 3:12)



It is the kindness (*chrestotes*) of God that leads to his grace and mercy (Titus 3:4). Paul instructed the Romans to consider this kindness (*chrestotes*) of God in his dealings with them (Romans 11:22).

Kindness is the garment we put on. It's a character trait which pervades our nature. Interestingly, it was the same word the Greeks would use to describe a good wine: one that was mellow and not harsh.

The Greek word translated “goodness,” *agathosune*, is defined as “uprightness of heart and life.” Paul writes to the Romans that they “are full of *agathosune*” (Romans 15:14). Paul prays for the Thessalonians, that God’s power would increase their desire for *agathosune* (2 Thessalonians 1:11). *Agathosune* leads us to actions for the benefit of others, not goodness simply for the sake of being virtuous. It results in a life characterized by deeds motivated by righteousness. It’s a moral characteristic of a Spirit-filled person.

This is not a trait we can develop on our own. In our own power, we can offer a cheap imitation of goodness. Those without the Spirit can often seem to be “good people.” However—just as with the other characteristics in this list—only through the Holy Spirit can true goodness be developed in our lives.

As we go through this week’s devotions, we will use these two terms, kindness and goodness, to describe the same fruit: words, actions, and a demeanor that can be very powerful in changing the world around us.

## Day 36: Living in the Light

**Passage** | Ephesians 5:8-10

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light 9 (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) 10 and find out what pleases the Lord.*

In this section of his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul reminds these believers of their former spiritual states. Before Christ, their status was lost, blind, and wandering around in the dark. They *could not* and *did not* choose what was good, right, or true. They lived as children of the darkness.

This is true for anyone who is outside of Christ. A non-Christian may appear to be moral, nice, and friendly, but that individual is in darkness. Only through accepting Christ do we receive true light. Only through the Holy Spirit entering our lives can we truly choose that which is good, right, and true.

However, as Paul reminds us, we don't always live that way. Instead of choosing the good, we revert to our dark, pre-light days. We reject the light. We choose to believe a lie rather than the truth.

Pause today and spend some time praying for the Lord to keep you walking securely in the light. Ask the Lord to show you how to choose that which is good. Plead with the Lord to give you the desire for righteousness. Pray for your mind to be protected from lies and focused on the truth as you walk in the light of Christ.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 37: Good Words

**Passage** | Proverbs 25:15

*Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.*

Kindness and goodness are traits that are often seen as weak. Sometimes Christians mistakenly believe that displaying these characteristics means allowing others to walk all over us. Or being wimps in our dealings with others.

And yet, according to the book of Proverbs and the wisdom of the great King Solomon, kindness and goodness have incredible power: *A gentle tongue can break a bone.* What in the world does that mean?

Years ago, I had an issue with my health insurance company. They refused to pay for a test which they'd previously agreed to pay. "The person who told you that information was wrong," one customer service representative stated. "I'm sorry, there is nothing I can do to help," said another. Second and third calls to the company explaining my costly dilemma resulted in similar responses. I was finally transferred to a manager. I was boiling hot and ready to explode. As I listened to the annoying elevator music, I had a surprising thought come to mind.

The manager answered the phone, and I began by stating, "I have an issue that I'm having trouble getting resolved, and I was told that you were the person who could help me." With great kindness I relayed my story to her, then held my breath, expecting the same response I'd received several times before. "You know," she replied, "if you were told to go ahead with that test, then we should pay for it. Let me make this change in the system, and we will get that processed for you."

That's what I wanted all along! I could have yelled and screamed and probably have gotten nowhere. Goodness has the

power to turn away anger, change the mind of person, break a bone, or even fix a problem with an insurance company!

Are you demonstrating goodness toward others? Close this time with prayer, asking God to guide your speech and actions today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 38: The Power of Goodness

**Passage** | Colossians 4:2-6

*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. 3 And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. 4 Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. 5 Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. 6 Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

At the end of Paul's letter to the Colossian church, he "shotguns" the believers with several final instructions. While he did not take the time to flesh out these thoughts, he wanted to highlight these truths for the Colossian Christians. The beautiful, deep theology in the earlier part of this letter has very practical implications for how we live. Paul outlines several of these in the passage above.

Chief among these instructions is careful living among those outside the church. "Be wise," Paul wrote. "Make the most of opportunities." "Let your conversations be full of grace." In other words, act and speak with intentionality around those who do not follow Christ. Their perception of God and Christianity is often based on how they see Christians behaving and speaking. Kind words and acts of goodness have the power to change the entire trajectory of a person's life.

Is there someone in your life today who needs to hear words full of grace? Close this time with prayer, asking God to give you the words to speak and the ability to act wisely today.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 39: Modest Needs

**Passage** | 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

*And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. 5 And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. 6 So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 7 But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.*

*Modest Needs* is a charity devoted to helping people in a temporary financial crisis. The average recipient lives just above the poverty line and does not qualify for government assistance. The mission of *Modest Needs* is to help prevent a small crisis from becoming a full-blown catastrophe.

Interestingly, *Modest Needs* began with the generosity of a college professor at Middle Tennessee State University. Dr. Keith Taylor, on his meager salary of \$33,000 per year, created a website aimed at helping others with moderate financial needs. He would send small checks to people in response to their emails asking for assistance. One lady needed help to purchase glasses for her son. Another man needed \$65 for his auto insurance. Out of his limited funds, Dr. Taylor did what he could to provide for others.

In the passage above, Paul writes about the church in Macedonia (the Philippian church) giving to assist other Christ followers not out of their wealth, but out of their poverty. The Philippians were not wealthy, but they wanted to assist Paul. They

did not wait until they became rich to become charitable. They gave even when they had little to offer. Paul used them as an example to the Corinthian church; that they should be willing to do the same acts of kindness to others.

Is there some act of kindness you need to do today? Perhaps God will use that act to snowball into similar actions by others. Close this time with prayer, asking God to lead you in his will today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 40: Goodness as a Weapon

### Passage | I Peter 3:13-18

*Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? 14 But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” 15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16 keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. 17 For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. 18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.*

Peter wrote his first letter to Christians scattered throughout Asia. He almost certainly penned the letter while in Rome (note the reference in 5:13 to Babylon, symbolic of the capital city of the Roman Empire). Peter’s letter was written to encourage Christians who were suffering for their faith; something Peter himself likely experienced first-hand while living in Rome. Ancient writers tell us that Peter died under the Empire-wide persecution of Nero, who blamed Christians for setting fire to the city of Rome. These writers also tell us that Peter died in 64AD by crucifixion, although he requested to be crucified upside down, insisting that he wasn’t worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord.

In the face of incredible suffering, Peter encouraged Christians to use the weapon of “goodness” against their enemies. According to Peter, there are several ways this is a powerful weapon:

1 — *You are less likely to be harmed if you do good* (v13). Sometimes our suffering is a result of our own sin or callousness toward the needs of others. Doing good will often elicit a similar response from others, even those who are not followers of Christ.



2 — *If you do good and still suffer, you are blessed* (v14). Our suffering while doing good allows us to identify with the sufferings of Jesus. God uses these difficulties to grow us closer to him and to make us more like Christ.

3 — *If you do good and suffer, you may win others to the Lord* (v15,16). Peter encourages Christians to be always prepared with an answer for the hope we have. The implication here is that when we suffer for doing good, others will ask us how we can still have hope in the face of persecution. The answer: Because we know that God is with us and that our suffering has purpose.

Goodness is a powerful weapon. Who does God want you to show goodness to today? Close this time with prayer, asking God to change someone's life through your actions today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 41: Goodness in Action

**Passage** | Matthew 25:37-40

*“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’*

*40 “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’*

There is nothing anyone can do to earn salvation. The Bible is clear that eternal life comes through grace, not works. Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus:

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).*

And yet, someone who has been truly changed by the gospel will have the desire to help others. James, the brother of Jesus, criticized a so-called “faith” that wasn’t willing to assist those in need:

*Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:15-17).*

According to Jesus, those who are his followers will demonstrate the fruit of a changed life by showing acts of goodness. The teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25 makes this clear. Whenever we show goodness to those in need, we are being kind to Jesus. More importantly, we are demonstrating true conversion: a life that has been dramatically impacted by the grace of God.

Close this time with prayer, asking God how today you can display the fruit of kindness to someone in need.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 42: Desire for Goodness

**Passage** | 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

*With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. 12 We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Just prior to the above two verses, Paul referenced the coming of Christ and the Lord's judgment upon the world. *Find comfort in this truth*, Paul wrote. *God will pay back those who have persecuted you. You may be suffering now, but you will be given absolute joy when Christ returns.*

Paul then continued this thought by writing these words to the Thessalonians: *we pray for you, that God may make you worthy of his calling.* What does that phrase mean? Are we somehow supposed to work in a way that we become worthy of being with Christ on judgment day?

Notice the careful, precise wording of Paul: it is God who does this work in us. Salvation is, as Paul wrote to the Romans, a righteousness that is *by faith* from first to last. From the moment we receive Christ as Lord to the moment we see him face to face, we live by faith.

Moreover, the Lord brings "to fruition your every desire for goodness." The Lord doesn't just require us to do good but, as well, creates within us a desire for goodness. We not only feel as if we *ought* to do good, we genuinely *want* to do good, and this is all due to the power of God working within us.

Spend some time thanking the Lord for his work in your life, as well as asking for him to grow your desire for goodness.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## CHAPTER 7

# JUST BELIEVE

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, **faithfulness**, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)*

**F***aith* is a word thrown around haphazardly in our culture. *You just have to believe, and it will happen.*

*Think positively.*

*Envision the future you want, and it will become reality.*

Consider the promise to Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner), the main character in the 1989 hit movie, *Field of Dreams*. The voice of “Shoeless” Joe Jackson’s ghost coaxes Ray to build a baseball field on his farm in Iowa. “Build it, and they will come,” is the promise. Believe, and it will happen.

In the 2004 movie, *The Polar Express*, a young boy loses his belief in Santa Claus. A train trip from his home in Michigan to the North Pole renews his faith and allows him to once again hear the ringing of the bell. Even when he becomes an adult, the bell still rings for him, as it does for all who truly believe.

Even George Michael famously relied on his faith to help him navigate a difficult breakup and hope of a future, special someone. What gave him the strength to cut ties with the one who had thrown his heart on the floor and to wait for a better relationship? “I gotta have faith, faith, faith...”

However, all these examples of faith are more appropriately described as *hopes*. I *hope* they will come. I *hope* I do not outgrow the Christmas magic. I *hope* I’ll meet someone better.

Faith as described in the Bible is different from hope. Hope is based upon our desires. Faith is based upon the character and word

of God. Biblical faith is best defined by the writer of Hebrews, who tells us that faith is “*confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is a firm belief in what we cannot scientifically prove, yet we know to be true.

The Christian journey begins with faith. Romans tells us that “*it is with your heart that you believe and are justified*” (Romans 10:10). We read in Ephesians these words: “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves*” (Ephesians 2:8). Paul and Silas told the Philippian jailer, “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved* (Acts 16:31).

Our journey with Jesus begins with a step of faith. We believe the words in the verses above. We trust in the work of Christ to forgive our sin. We, through faith, take hold of the promise of salvation. We enter God’s family not through religious rituals or good deeds, but through belief.

However, this leads us to question how faith, or faithfulness, is a fruit of the Spirit? While we know faith is essential for salvation, why is it a necessary character trait in our Christian journey?

To answer that question, we return to Hebrews 11. The writer of this book gives an overview of the Old Testament and the role their faith played in following God.

*By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. (v 4)*

*By faith Noah... built an ark to save his family. (v 7)*

*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went. (v 8)*

Abel believed the word of God and brought the best of his livestock as a sacrifice to the Lord. Like his brother Cain, he could have kept the best for himself. He could have worried that the Lord would not provide for his needs and held back that which God commanded. But he believed. He trusted in the promise of God. And he was commended for it.

Noah believed enough to build a massive boat. Without the benefit of a weather app, the Farmer’s Almanac, or ever witnessing

rain fall from the sky (Genesis 2:5-6), Noah, in faith, acted on the word of the Lord. And he and his family were saved from the flood.

Abraham believed the Lord enough to leave his home and just start walking, even though God did not give him the details of his final destination. Abraham trusted in the Lord, and this act of faith led to him becoming the father of the Jewish people.

Faith is both a requirement for salvation and a fruit of the Spirit we receive upon that salvation. We must have at least a mustard seed of faith for conversion, and yet this is a trait the Lord continues to grow within us throughout our Christian journey.

This week, we will focus on passages about our faith and how, through the Spirit's work in our lives, we can more fully trust in the Lord.



## Day 43: Faith and Actions

**Passage** | James 2:20-24

*You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21 Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. 24 You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.*

Throughout the Bible we see a tension between the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. While we trust that the Lord is in control of all, we must never, ever hold God’s promises up in a way that removes us from our responsibility in acting.

Notice how James elaborates on this truth in the passage above. Abraham believed, and yet his belief required action. Abraham didn’t simply sit idly by, twirling his thumbs and saying, “If it’s the Lord’s will, it will be.” His trust in God required him to put feet to his faith.

Or consider the tension we see in Acts 27. Paul is on a ship headed to Italy. They run into a life-threatening storm. Paul tells the men to keep up their courage, for God spoke to him and told him that not a single life would be lost in the storm (v 22-25). Paul believed it would happen just as the Lord had told him.

However, in the next paragraph, we read of some sailors trying to escape from the ship on one of the lifeboats. Paul turns to the Roman soldiers sailing with him and says, “You’d better do something about this situation. If these rascals escape, then you guys will not be saved” (v 31).

So, which is it, Paul? Will everyone be saved, as you so firmly declared? Or is it necessary for the Roman soldiers to stop the sailors to prevent loss of lives?

Yes. Both are true.

It can be challenging to hold these two truths in tension with one another. Logically, we have trouble wrapping our brains around the idea that God is fully in control of the plans of men, and we have complete responsibility for our actions. However, they are both equally true. We are called to be faithful, even though the plans of the Lord cannot and will not fail.

Close this time with prayer, thanking the Lord for his sovereign plans and asking for the courage to follow him in your actions today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 44: The Pain of Falling

### Passage | Matthew 14:22-31

*Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. 23 After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, 24 and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.*

*25 Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.*

*27 But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”*

*28 “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”*

*29 “Come,” he said.*

*Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”*

*31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”*

Several years ago, a friend (or should I say, “former friend”) convinced me to attempt snowboarding. At that point in my life, I’d become fairly adept at skiing. I could ski most days without falling. I had acquired the necessary skills to navigate the slopes without taking a tumble.

All that was about to change.

Snowboarding, I discovered, was much more of a challenge. I spent most of the day on the bunny slope. Five-year-old kids were

snowboarding past me, laughing as they went. I tried to hop up, catch one of them and give him a piece of my mind, only to fall again. It was a miserable day.

In the passage above, Peter is called by Jesus to do something that is out of his skill set. Peter could operate a boat and catch fish, but he certainly could not walk on water. To do so took a tremendous amount of *faith*. Even though Peter fell, at least he got out of the boat and gave it a shot.

Is there something God is calling you to do that scares you to death? Are you scared you might fall, that you might fail? Close this time with prayer, asking God to give you the faith to follow his call.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 45: Help Me, Lord!

### Passage | Mark 9:17-24

*A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 18 Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”*

*19 “You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”*

*20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.*

*21 Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”*

*“From childhood,” he answered. 22 “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”*

*23 “If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”*

*24 Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”*

This account of the demon-possessed boy is one I treasure. Not because of the suffering of this son or his father, but because of the dialogue between the man and Jesus. This father is obviously distraught over his son’s condition. Undoubtedly, he’s tried numerous other possible solutions to cure this debilitating illness. In desperation, he reaches out to the disciples of Jesus, but they are unable to help. The boy’s condition doesn’t improve.

Then Jesus comes along. This father once again makes an appeal on behalf of his son. Yet, by this point, he's discouraged. Nothing else has worked. No one has been able to help. But, Jesus, *if you can*, I sure would appreciate your help.

The reply of Jesus focuses on that phrase, "If you can." Jesus wants to know if the man really believes in him or not. "Do you *really* believe? Do you think I *actually have* the power to heal your son, or are you just grasping for straws in hopes that something might work?"

The father's response? "I do believe. I do have faith. But I'm lacking. Help me overcome my unbelief!"

I can feel the tension in this man's heart. I have been there so many times before in my own life. I believe. I trust. And yet, there are doubts. I wonder if God is listening, concerned, or willing to change my situation. In one moment, I'm fully confident that the Lord has my best interest in mind. In the next, I'm trying to handle the situation in my own power.

This is why I love the prayer spoken by this man. Jesus, help my doubts. Today, help me overcome just a few of them. And a few more tomorrow. Chip away at my unbelief. Grow my faith more and more each day.

Close this time with prayer, asking Jesus to do the same in your life.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 46: Two Ways to Amaze Jesus

### Passage | Luke 7:1-10

*When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. 2 There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. 3 The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. 4 When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, 5 because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." 6 So Jesus went with them.*

*He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. 7 That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. 8 For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."*

*9 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." 10 Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.*

This passage contains the account of Jesus healing a Roman centurion's servant. This high-ranking Roman official had endeared himself to the Jewish leaders. While they typically hated the Romans, they loved this man. He was kind and generous. He personally funded the construction of their synagogue. So, when this official's beloved servant became ill, the Jewish leaders went on his behalf to Jesus to ask for help.

However, the Centurion sent word to Jesus: “*Don’t come. I know that you can help me even without being here. Why? Because you have authority. And I’m a commander. I understand how authority works. I say go, and a soldier goes. I say come; a soldier comes. That’s authority. And, in the spiritual realm, Jesus, you have authority. So, just say the word, and it will happen. My servant will be healed.*”

Notice the reaction of Jesus to these words: *he was amazed*. The second person of the Trinity was amazed at the faith of this centurion. I can’t imagine that Jesus is amazed by much. He is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the one who was, and is, and is to come. What can you and I do to impress the one who knows and understands all?

Well, apparently, showing great faith. That amazes Jesus.

However, there was a second time Jesus was amazed. This instance occurred in his hometown of Nazareth. Jesus spoke in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and the gathered crowd was amazed at his teachings. But then, someone pointed out that it was just Jesus; this one who had grown up around them. His mother and brothers lived among them. He wasn’t anyone special; in their minds, he was just hometown Jesus.

The response of Jesus to their reaction? *He was amazed at their lack of faith* (Mark 6:6). He did no miracles among them because they lacked faith.

Evidently, there are two ways to really amaze Jesus, and both involve our faith. Which way will you amaze Jesus today?

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## Day 47: Bold Faith

### Passage | Mark 2:1-5

*A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. 2 They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. 3 Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. 4 Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”*

This story of Jesus healing the paralyzed man frustrates me. Not because of anything Jesus did or did not do, but because Mark left a big question unanswered: who fixed the damaged roof? Surely, at some point in these events, the owner of the house admonished these men who tore a hole in his roof. I’m sure he demanded payment. Or for these friends of the paralyzed man to fix the roof, which surely would’ve been a laborious task. Maybe the owner threatened these men with calling the authorities and having them arrested for vandalism. I really wish Mark had taken the time to write down just a few more details about the events of that day.

But that wasn’t the point of the story. These friends had faith that Jesus could help their friend. However, they had to do something bold to get this friend to Jesus. Their faith required a big risk. If Jesus couldn’t or wouldn’t help their friend, then they were on the hook for a new roof, and their friend’s physical condition would’ve been unchanged.

Yet, they knew that this risk wouldn’t go unrewarded. Their faith required them to do something bold, but the payoff was huge.

The same is true with our faith. Often, it requires great risk. We share Christ with a friend, knowing we risk losing the friendship. But the reward far outweighs the risk. We tithe, even though our financial situation is tight. But we trust that the Lord will more than provide for our needs. We serve in the church, even though our schedules are packed. But we trust that since the Lord has called us to serve, he will more than provide margin in our schedules. The rewards are always worth the risk.

What ways are you showing a bold faith? Close this time with prayer, asking the Lord to grow that kind of faith in you today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 48: The “Therefore” of Your Faith

**Passage** | Hebrews 12:1-3

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. 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. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

Whenever you see the word, “therefore,” in the Bible, you must back up and read the preceding passage. *Therefore* is most often used as a call to action. The author will explain some truth or theological concept, and then write, “Therefore, in light of all this, here is what you should do.”

The writer of Hebrews does exactly that in the passage above. The “therefore” in verse 1 follows chapter 11, the “Hall of Fame of Faith” portion of Hebrews. This chapter features the heroes of the Old Testament and their displays of faith. The writer of Hebrews lists nearly two dozen individuals and summarizes the various accounts of their faith in action.

When we turn to chapter 12, the writer paints a picture of an Olympic stadium. Those faithful who went before us are now the spectators in the stands, cheering us on as we run the Christian life. *Therefore*, we run the race with perseverance, throwing off anything that hinders us in chasing hard after Jesus. This not only includes the sin that will easily trip us, but anything that keeps us from running toward that prize.

How are you doing in running the race of faith? Close this time with prayer, asking the Lord to show you ways you can throw off anything that hinders you in chasing after him.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 49: The Christian's New Clothes

### Passage | 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

*For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. 2 Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, 3 because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. 4 For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 5 Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*

*6 Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. 7 For we live by faith, not by sight. 8 We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

Whenever you experience sickness, pain, or any kind of emotional or physical hurt, it is a reminder that you are not in your forever body. Currently, we are wearing an old set of clothes. They are frayed, tattered, and a little smelly. Moreover, this temporary outfit gets worse with time. Every day, it becomes a little more threadbare. There is an expiration date on these clothes, a point in which they will no longer serve any purpose.

That is why we have tough days. It is why we groan. It is the reason we also have a slight discontentment hovering under the surface of life. It is why we are never fully and finally satisfied.

Paul explains the “why” in the passage above. It’s because there is a longing for our future clothes. We instinctively know there is something better, but we haven’t achieved that better yet. We groan for what is true life. And, one day, that which is real life will swallow up our mortal bodies.

Until then, we live by faith (v 7). Close this time with prayer, thanking God for the future life you will receive.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**





## CHAPTER 8

### A GENTLE WORD

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **gentleness** and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)*

**J**ust six months into his second term as the twenty-fifth President of the United States, William McKinley was shot on September 6, 1901 at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. Although heavily guarded by both secret service agents and military personnel, an anarchist named Leon Czolgosz managed to conceal a .32 caliber revolver in a handkerchief and enter the Temple of Music located on the fairgrounds. Hundreds of men and women waited in this large reception hall to see the popular president. At 4:07 PM, Czolgosz approached McKinley to shake hands and shot him twice in the abdomen. On September 14, 1901, President McKinley died from gangrene, which occurred as a result of his wounds.

Less than two weeks before the death of the President, United States Vice President Theodore Roosevelt outlined his ideal foreign policy in a speech at the Minnesota State Fair. “Speak softly, and carry a big stick,” became the theme of his diplomacy as President. He practiced carefully mediated negotiations backed by the power of a strong military. He sent the “Great White Fleet,” a squadron of sixteen naval battleships, on a world tour as a show of the military power of the United States. This demonstration of power allowed him to speak calmly and softly, but with tremendous influence, as he entered diplomatic negotiations with other nations.

The Greek word for gentleness is best defined as “power under control.” Imagine a commanding steed with a bridle in its mouth. The strong muscles and tremendous speed are put into action at the appropriate time and in the right way. Or a massive fleet of



naval ships able to overpower virtually any enemy, but not firing a single shot unless it is absolutely necessary.

The Greek word used for gentleness in Galatians is *prautes*. This word is used 11 times in the New Testament, and only by Paul, James, and Peter. The New International Version of the Bible translates the word as gentleness, gently, humility, and meekness.

Matthew used a form of this same Greek word, *praus*, to describe those who will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). As well, Matthew described Jesus as gentle (*praus*) when he rode on a donkey while entering the city of Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Peter used this word to describe the way women should adorn themselves: not with flashy jewelry or fine clothes, but with the beauty of a gentle (*praus*) and quiet spirit (1 Peter 3:4).

To really understand this character trait, we must examine the ancient Greeks' view of the word *praus*. In English, when we describe someone as meek or gentle, we often picture a wallflower, a wimp, or someone who is a doormat. It is not a quality we normally desire for ourselves or one we admire in others. We want our leaders to be bold, confident, and assertive, but not meek. We vote for, promote, and elevate those who are brave and dare to take a stand, not the person who shrinks away from a fight.

However, that is not the same image someone in the ancient Greek-speaking world had when they heard the word, *praus*. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, described *praus* as a virtue because it is the means between two outermost errors. The first extreme is recklessness. These are the individuals who are always looking for a fight. They jump before they think. They act without assessing the situation. They speak before thinking. They (at times) may appear courageous; however, they are actually just foolish.

The other extreme is cowardice. Those individuals hate confrontation and will do anything to avoid it. When there is conflict, they run the other way. They will not take any risk for fear of failure. They remain quiet in every situation, worried they will appear silly or stupid if they offer their opinion.

Meekness is the balance of these two opposite extremes. Gentleness lands in the middle of these two poles. *Praus* is a steady courage. A wise confidence. According to Aristotle, it is the person “who is angry on the right occasions and with the right people and at the right moment and for the right length of time.”

In his commentary on the book of Matthew, William Barclay writes:

*“If we ask what the right time and the wrong time are, we may say as a general rule for life that it is never right to be angry for any insult or injury done to ourselves; that is something that no Christian must ever resent; but that it is often right to be angry at injuries done to other people. Selfish anger is always a sin; selfless anger can be one of the great moral dynamics of the world.”*

In Greek culture, the term *praus* came to describe those in the upper classes of society. They were measured in their words and actions. They were not reckless, wild, or publicly drunk. They were confident in their business dealings, stern when necessary, but not given to outbursts of anger. These respected citizens of a community were known as *praus*-men. Gentlemen.

You and I are designed by God to be gentle in our dealings with others. This week we will focus on this particular fruit of the Spirit and allowing the Lord to develop this trait in our lives.

## Day 50: An Unlikely Strength

**Passage** | Matthew 26:50-54

*Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. 51 With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.*

*52 "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. 53 Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"*

Gentleness is often thought of as being weak, timid, or doormat-ish. Some are not even sure that gentleness is a quality they desire. Who wants to get walked all over by the world? Who wants to be a wimp, getting used and abused by everyone?

The Biblical word for gentleness, however, is anything but weakness. The best example in the Bible of *power under control* is found in Jesus Christ. As God, he had tremendous power. As a man, he chose to restrain this power in order to achieve the purposes his Heavenly Father had for him.

This aspect of Jesus is clearly seen in today's passage. The companion of Jesus (identified as Peter in another account) was ready to fight, but Jesus restrained him. "Don't you know that I can call on God and he will at once send an army of angels?" asked Jesus. A Roman legion typically had 6,000 men. Had Jesus so desired, he could have called on 72,000 angels to immediately swoop down and slaughter those who came to arrest Jesus. Peter's willingness to fight with his dinky sword was completely unnecessary; like using a slingshot when you have dozens of F-16s at your disposal.

Jesus gave here the ultimate example of power under control. He could have called upon an army of angels, but he didn't. He would have been completely justified in doing so, but he did not. Why? Because he understood the end game. Jesus knew his calling.

Gentleness is seeing the bigger picture and knowing how to refrain from using the power we have in our words and actions. Is that character trait evident in your own life? Close this time with prayer, asking God to grow this quality in your life.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 51: Be Gentle, Even with Politicians

### Passage | Titus 3:1-2

*Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, 2 to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.*

While on vacation years ago, Katie and I went with our children to an outdoor festival. Suddenly, it began to rain. We rushed to the front porch of a store seeking cover. A crowd of people gathered under the overhang to avoid the rain. I glanced over at the person next to me (we were literally touching shoulders), and I instantly recognized him. He was a former state governor whose less-than-honorable decisions years before had made national headlines. He was now running for another office and was at this festival attempting to garner votes.

While waiting out the rain, we struck up a conversation. At some point, he asked me what I did, and I told him I was a pastor. We talked for a few more minutes, then the rain let up, and we went our separate ways.

Little did I know that a reporter had overheard our conversation. He approached me as we walked past the vendors' booths, asking specifically for my thoughts regarding this political candidate's past moral choices. He wanted to know what a pastor thought about this man's decisions. I simply refused to comment and told him I was not a registered voter in this district. The reporter wasn't happy but eventually moved on to interview other festival-goers.

While Christians need to be adamant that character is an important issue, we should be careful in how we critique others. In the passage above, Paul instructed Titus regarding our speech about those in authority. While politicians are often an easy target, we need to be careful with our words. Christians can proclaim what

is right and true while still showing respect and gentleness. *Even* toward politicians.

Close this time with prayer, asking God to give you gentle words today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 52: Beta-Christians

### Passage | Galatians 6:1-2

*Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. 2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*

Years ago, I received an advanced copy of a book by John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*. The publishing company printed this “beta” edition to get feedback from early readers. There were numerous imperfections in the book. As I read through it, I would occasionally have the thought, “I can’t believe how many typos are in this book.” However, I would then remind myself that this was an early edition and not the final publication. Errors were to be expected. Rather than having a judgmental attitude toward the publishing company, I needed to show lots of grace.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we approached other Christ-followers in the same manner? If we saw others as “Beta-Christians,” and as those in need of our grace?

In the passage above, Paul instructed us to regard those who have sinned with a strong sense of grace. We are to restore them gently. Instead of blasting them for their sin, we should offer to them the same grace we would desire. We need to remind ourselves that we are all still beta-versions of who God has ultimately designed us to be. The final publication will be released upon the return of Jesus.

Are there some Beta-Christians in your life who need your gentle restoration today? Close this time with prayer, asking God to give you the right attitude and right words to say.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## Day 53: Inheriting the Earth

**Passage** | Matthew 5:5

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

In 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt elaborated on his “Speak softly, and carry a big stick” philosophy with these words:

*“If a man continually blusters, a big stick will not save him from trouble; and neither will speaking softly avail, if in back of the softness there does not lie strength and power.”*

When Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,” he was not speaking of politics, armies, or foreign policy, but some principles are the same. Meekness is not a quality of weakness, as is so often pictured. The meek Christian does not need to brag and shout or bully. Christians who scream at protests and tear down those who disagree with them are forgetting these words of Jesus. We speak truth, but we do so with a quiet confidence.

How are we able to have this confidence? Whether we are contesting a point, responding to another’s criticism, or simply discussing the hope we have in Christ, we do so knowing that within us lies the power of God. You have the Holy Spirit residing within you, the biggest stick of all.

Are you relying today on his power? As you close this time with prayer, ask God to give you the right words to say and the confidence that comes from him.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 54: Dealing with “Those” People

**Passage** | 2 Timothy 2:23-26

*Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. 24 And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. 25 Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, 26 and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.*

I hate dealing with “those” people. They just do not get it. Their arguments are completely illogical. The agendas they promote are foolish, wrong, and hurtful. My natural desire is to blast them along with their inane plans and programs.

However, I must be careful to exercise caution. Notice the instructions of Paul in the passage above. These words were among his last. From his prison cell in Rome, he dictated this letter to Timothy, his son in the faith. Paul knew he was in his final days. In this letter he informs Timothy that he is “being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for [his] departure. [He has] fought the good fight, [he has] finished the race, [he has] kept the faith” (4:6-7).

Any individual sharing their last words will be careful to impart what is of the greatest importance. Paul certainly does that in 2 Timothy. The letter is filled with theologically rich concepts coupled with practical application. The advice given above certainly fits that description. Paul reminds Timothy that those outside of Christ are trapped by the devil. They are subject to the desires of the flesh and the ways of this world. We should not be surprised when lost people act like lost people.

This theological truth leads to the practical application of how we deal with individuals opposed to the gospel: *Opponents must be*

*gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.* Certainly, we never shy away from speaking truth; however, we do so with respect for others, recognizing they are individuals created in the image of God and those for whom Jesus died.

Close this time with prayer, asking the Lord to help you deal wisely and gently with those who are lost.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 55: Being Who You Are

### Passage | Ephesians 4:1-6

*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Paul was a fierce protector and promotor of unity within the body of Christ. This topic was continually on his mind. Throughout his thirteen letters we have in the New Testament, we see this theme bubbling to the surface time and time again. Paul criticized a church for divisions within their ranks (I Corinthians 1), he pleaded with two women in Philippi to reconcile (Philippians 4:2), and he praised the Colossian church for the love they had for “all the saints” (Colossians 1:4).

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, he again highlighted the importance of unity for a congregation of Christ-followers. One of the ways this unity is achieved is through careful, thoughtful interactions with one another. We are to be completely humble and gentle, patient, and bear with one another in love. When followers of Christ behave in this manner, the divisions which occur are normally necessary divisions. Rather than being caused by hurt egos or differing opinions, the arguments are centered on theological, core issues critical to the health of the church.

Gentleness in our approach to one another is not just a good idea; it is vital in our mission as a church. Close this time with prayer, asking the Lord to give you a gentle spirit in your dealing with others.

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 56: Small Part, Great Power

**Passage** | James 3:2-6

*We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. 3 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 4 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. 5 Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*

Do you want your words to hurt or heal? The Bible consistently lays out the two options we have on how we use our words. There is incredible power in the spoken word, to either cause great damage or to bring life. The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing (Proverbs 12:18).

The third chapter of James paints a couple of pictures to illustrate the extraordinary force of tongue. One painting features a large ship, with a specific focus on the rudder. This massive sailing structure is controlled by a relatively small piece of wood.

Another shows a campfire setting. In the foreground is a pair of hands holding two rocks, obviously striking them together to make a spark for the fire. In the background, an entire forest is ablaze. A tiny flash, left uncontrolled, leads to tremendous damage.

Although it is a small part of the body, the power and influence of the tongue is unmatched.

Therefore, James encourages his readers to be careful in how we use our tongues. *Be slow to speak, slow to become angry* (1:19).

*Those who consider themselves religious but do not keep a tight reign on their tongues deceive themselves (1:26). Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect (3:2). Do not swear — not by heaven or earth or anything else (5:12).*

There is great power in your speech. Consider today how you can speak words of life to those around you. Close this time with prayer, asking the Lord to control your tongue today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## CHAPTER 9

# TAMING THE MONSTER WITHIN

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.* (Galatians 5:22-23)

In 1886, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote a short novel entitled *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The story centers on Dr. Jekyll, a London doctor and member of high society who feels he is constantly battling the evil desires within his nature. He becomes increasingly frustrated over his inability to repress his more heinous urges. No matter how much effort he puts into doing good, this other side of his personality remains. This reality eventually leads him to conclude:

*With every day, and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and the intellectual, I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth, by whose partial discovery I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two.*

Being a medical doctor, he concocts a serum which enables him to separate this evil side of his persona from his more noble self. Thus, Mr. Hyde is born. While Dr. Jekyll is a friendly, kind-hearted, socially conscious member of society, Mr. Hyde is the picture of pure evil. One character in the novel describes him in this way:

*Mr. Hyde was pale and dwarfish, he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation... all these were points against him, but not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing, and fear with which Mr. Utterson regarded him...if ever I read Satan's signature upon a face, it is that of your new friend.*



In this work, Robert Louis Stevenson vividly described the theological concept known as “The Depravity of Man.” The Bible tells us that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The Psalmist writes, “all have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Psalm 14:3). We all have a Mr. Hyde within us. It is the universal indictment against mankind. Left to our own devices, we instinctively drift toward evil.

However, in Christ, the power of Mr. Hyde is loosed. We are no longer slaves to sin (Romans 6:6). We are free in Christ (Galatians 5:1). Yet, we can choose to either walk in the Spirit or to live by the flesh.

Walking in the Spirit means exercising self-control. This final fruit is one evidence of God’s working in our lives. The ability to control one’s thoughts, words, and actions comes from a true work of the Holy Spirit.

The Greek word for self-control is *egkrateia*. It is used three times in the New Testament. The King James Version of the Bible translates this word as *temperance*. It is the ability to control one’s desires and to say ‘no’ to our urges of the flesh. Paul used this word in his letter to the Galatians regarding a characteristic the Holy Spirit produces in our lives (Galatians 5:23). Peter used it to describe a quality we should seek to add to our lives (I Peter 1:6).

In a trial that would ultimately lead him to appear before the Caesar himself, Paul used the opportunity to share the gospel with a powerful Roman official named Felix. Luke tells us that:

*Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. 25 As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control (egkrateia) and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, “That’s enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.” (Acts 24:24-25)*

At the end of this account, Paul returned to prison, and sometime later Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus. In the passage

above, Felix had the opportunity to embrace the gospel; however, he delayed that decision for another day. As far as we know, a *more convenient time* never came. Felix missed his chance and died without Christ.

The Greek word *akrates* is used to describe those without self-control. This is the word used by Paul in his description of the behavior of those in the last days:

*People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control (akrates), brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.*  
(2 Timothy 3:2-4)

Interestingly, this same word, *akrates*, was used by the Greeks to describe elderly individuals no longer able to voluntarily control their bodily functions: *Incontinent*.

For believers, self-control is the gatekeeper, protecting us from the destructive consequences of sin. This week, we will focus on letting the Spirit grow this critical trait in our lives.

## Day 57: Just Say No?

**Passage** | Romans 7:14-20

*We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. 15 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. 16 And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. 17 As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. 18 For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*

Our last Fruit of the Spirit is the most enigmatic of them all. Self-control is a slippery, curious trait. We often find ourselves doing the *exact opposite* of what we set out to do. We swear off sweets until the dinner host offers a slice of irresistible chocolate cake. We promise to give up a bad habit, but a super stressful day leads us right back to our old ways. We finally walk away from that toxic dating relationship, until a lonely evening mysteriously causes our fingers to type out a text message. There are countless scenarios in which we put our minds to something yet find ourselves falling back into the same self-destructive patterns of behavior.

I'm old enough to remember the *Just Say No* campaign designed to combat the drug epidemic among teenagers in the United States. With the help of then first lady Nancy Reagan, this campaign blanketed the country with curriculum, advertisements, and celebrity endorsements. The strategy was simple: teach young people the dangers of drugs and how to respond. If offered something to drink, take, or smoke, they were to "just say no."

The only problem: it didn't work. Years later studies revealed that the program had virtually no impact on drug use among

younger Americans. In 2001, the U.S. Surgeon General concluded that “no” isn’t something we do with our minds or our mouths, but our hearts. They discovered what Christians have known for the last two thousand years: sin is inevitable without a heart change.

In the passage above, Paul described his own battle with self-control and sin. Even when he knew something was wrong, hurtful, or undesirable, he found himself succumbing anyway. Why? Because sin is not defeated with the mind or the mouth, but the heart. As we rely on the Holy Spirit to change us from deep within, only then are we able to “Just Say No.”

Are you struggling with some sin or sins today? Close this time with prayer, asking God to grow this characteristic of self-control within you.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 58: That's Not What I Imagined!

### Passage | Galatians 6:7-9

*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. 8 Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. 9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*

Quite ironically (the irony due to the revelations regarding his own sinful choices), Ravi Zacharias, in his book, *Can Man Live Without God?*, wrote about the incredible deception of sin. In the book, he quotes a story by Malcolm Muggeridge, the English journalist who was a self-declared agnostic before he became a follower of Christ. While working in India, he left his residence one evening to go to a nearby river for a swim. Just before he entered the water, he spotted across the river an Indian woman bathing. Temptation immediately grabbed his heart. He had been known as a womanizer for years of his life, but since his conversion to Christianity had been faithful to his wife, Katherine.

However, in this moment, his passions battled his commitment to marital fidelity. He suddenly found himself swimming quickly across the water and toward this bathing beauty. As he swam with all his might, he imagined the pleasures that awaited him on the other side of the river. Just a few feet away from the woman, he emerged from the water. Now, though, all his passions quickly dissipated.

“She was old and hideous...and her skin was wrinkled and, worst of all, she was a leper....This creature grinned at me, showing a toothless mask.” The experience left Muggeridge trembling and muttering under his breath, “What a dirty, lecherous woman!” But then the rude shock of it dawned upon him—it was not the woman who was lecherous; it was his own heart.

That story is a picture of the reality of sin. Its silhouette looks beautiful, tempting, alluring. However, the reality is a much different picture.

This is the truth highlighted in the passage above. Sin always leads to destruction. Is there some sin tempting you today? Close this time with prayer, asking God to give you the self-control needed to resist.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 59: Kill or Manage?

**Passage** | Romans 6:11-14

*In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. 13 Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. 14 For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.*

The English word *mortification* has a couple of different meanings. One is to feel embarrassment or shame. A mother might be mortified at the uncivilized behavior of her son at a public event.

The other meaning is to completely subdue or put to death. We get our words *mortician* and *mortuary* from the same Latin word for mortify.

Biblically, the mortification of sin is the desire to completely rid a sin or sins from our lives. There is always the temptation to *manage*, rather than *kill*, sin in our lives. We often want to keep it alive by giving it just a little food and water. Not enough for it to grow and overwhelm our lives, but just enough to enjoy it on occasion.

However, sin doesn't work like that. Attempts to simply manage sin will eventually fail. As James reminds us, "sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (James 1:15).

In the passage above, Paul reminds us to count ourselves dead to sin. To completely kill it. To not offer any part of our body as an instrument of wickedness.

Is there a sin in your life you are trying to manage? Close this time with prayer, asking God to give you the self-control needed to put that sin completely to death.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**



## Day 60: The Diners Club Card

**Passage** | I Corinthians 9:24-27

*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26 Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. 27 No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*

If you were to conduct a poll and ask people which twentieth century invention had the most impact on their daily lives, you would likely receive answers such as the cell phone, the personal computer, or the television. Not many people would stop and think of the little plastic rectangle that fits easily in their wallet, but this thing we call a credit card has exerted tremendous influence over our daily lives.

The first general-purpose charge card was the *Diners Club* card, introduced in 1950. Businessman Frank McNamara forgot his wallet while dining out at a New York City restaurant. Luckily, his wife came to bail him out and pay the tab. But little did he know that dinner would become an important part of credit card history.

A year later, he returned to Major's Cabin Grill. When the bill arrived, McNamara paid with a small cardboard card. The event was hailed as the First Supper, paving the way for the world's first multipurpose charge card. In 1958, the American Express Card was born. Bank of America issued a credit card in 1970. Mastercard was introduced in 1979. Today, virtually every wallet contains one or more of these plastic payment tools.

While they serve as a great convenience, there is a dark side to instant credit. Often the temptation is to get what we cannot afford

now, paying much more in the long run. Without self-control, the use of a credit card can be dangerous.

In the passage above, Paul described self-control as the ability to deny wants now in order to get something greater later. Like an athlete in training, self-control is exercising discipline in the short run to receive great, future rewards.

Is this a character trait you possess? Close this time with prayer, asking God to grow this quality in you today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 61: The Ancient MTV World

### Passage | Thessalonians 4:3-8

*It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, 5 not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; 6 and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. 7 For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. 8 Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.*

Have you ever felt like you've tried and tried to live in a holy manner, but continually fail? Verses and passages such as the one above can become quite discouraging. When we read sentences such as "God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life," we can sometimes feel like we will never measure up. Sure, we've heard the holy calling; however, it's like a mirage in the desert. It's just over the next hill. Except, we arrive and discover that it's actually just over the hill beyond that one. It feels like it's always barely out of reach. We can't quite get there.

Here is one thing we need to remember: It is only by God's grace that we can live up to that calling. We cannot become a Christian on our own, and we cannot grow on our own — *for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose* (Philippians 2:13).

Growth in Christ-like characteristics—including self-control—happens through a reliance upon the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. Sure, there are certain boundaries and protections we should put around us. An alcoholic doesn't need to have a fully stocked bar in his home. It's good to have software programs on your phone or computer to block inappropriate websites. However, at the end of

day, this quality comes not from self-discipline, but from a closer walk with the Lord.

Close this time with prayer, asking God to grow this quality of self-control in your own life.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 62: Is It Me or God?

**Passage** | 2 Peter 1:5-8

*For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The opening chapter of Peter's second letter is interesting. Some might call it confusing. He begins by assuring Christians that God's "divine power has given us everything we need for a Godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (v 3). So, how are you and I able to live a Godly life? Through the Lord's divine power. Clearly, in Christ, we have everything we need to live in this way.

However, just a few verses later, Peter adds the words in the passage above. Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control (v 5,6).

So, which is it? Do I rely upon his divine power, or do I make every effort?

Yes.

Here again is that tension we see throughout the Bible. It is God who works in us, and yet we are responsible for behavior. God grows the characteristic of self-control, yet we are expected to put forth effort in learning how to control our thoughts, words, and actions. Both are true and both are necessary for us to grow in Christlikeness.

Close this time with prayer, asking the Lord to show you ways you need to demonstrate self-control in your life today.

### **Notes and Prayer Requests:**

## Day 63: What Grace Does in Us

**Passage** | Titus 2:11-14

*For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. 12 It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*

For the last nine weeks we have examined what is commonly called, “The Fruit of the Spirit.” These are nine qualities God wants to infuse into our lives to make us men and women of deep, Christ-like character.

Every week we have emphasized the fact that this transformation happens through allowing the Holy Spirit to change us. As Paul reminds us in the passage above, it is the grace of God that “teaches us to say ‘no’ to ungodliness and worldly passions.” While we may, in our own power, be able to change our behavior, it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that our hearts, souls, and the depths of our character are changed.

Close this time with prayer, asking God to continue to show you his grace and to make you more and more like his son, Jesus Christ!

**Notes and Prayer Requests:**







