



LENTEN DISCIPLESHIP INITIATIVE

A Healthy
Community of Love:
Traits & Practices

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INTRODUCTION

“WRITE, READ, SING, MOURN,
KEEP SILENCE, PRAY, AND BEAR
HARDSHIPS... ETERNAL LIFE IS
WORTH ALL THESE AND GREATER
BATTLES. PEACE WILL COME ON
A DAY WHICH IS KNOWN TO THE
LORD, AND THEN THERE SHALL
BE NO DAY OR NIGHT AS AT
PRESENT BUT PERPETUAL LIGHT,
INFINITE BRIGHTNESS, LASTING
PEACE, AND SAFE REPOSE. THEN
YOU WILL NOT SAY: “WHO SHALL
DELIVER ME FROM THE BODY
OF THIS DEATH?” NOR WILL YOU
CRY: “WOE IS ME, BECAUSE MY
SOJOURN IS PROLONGED.”
FOR THEN DEATH WILL BE
BANISHED, AND THERE WILL
BE HEALTH UNFAILING. THERE
WILL BE NO ANXIETY THEN, BUT
BLESSED JOY AND SWEET, NOBLE
COMPANIONSHIP.”

~ THOMAS À KEMPIS,
THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

During the season of Lent, we will be reflecting on the traits and practices that enable and sustain healthy Christian communities. The goal of these reflections—which follow the sermons during Lent—is to help us grow into greater health as a church body. We know that churches are to be known for love, per Jesus’s teaching in John 13:34–35, but sometimes that’s not the case. The perennial problem of sin weighs us down and impacts us personally or corporately. A key distinction, however, in thinking about healthy churches and unhealthy churches is this: healthy churches deal with sin in godly ways whereas unhealthy churches deal with sin in fleshly ways. As we engage this material, we are asking: how can we deal with and fight against sin in a godly way? Healthy community is not natural; it is supernatural. Churches often settle for worldliness when we are called to something other-worldly. May we not rest or be content with worldly ways of living but may we, by the power of the Spirit, walk toward health together.

The lessons in this booklet are preceded by two sermons that make two foundational points. First, we are loved by God. This reality is at the heart of our faith, and it is the foundation of our relation to one another and something we cannot forget or ignore. Second, we are all sinners who affirm the log-in-our-own-eye mentality that Jesus encourages in Matthew 7. This mentality promotes genuine humility which is a central ingredient to any community of love. We are the unworthy who have been embraced by the God of the universe through the amazing gift of his son.

Moving from those foundational realities, the lessons in this booklet deal with matters of reconciliation, forgiveness, bearing one another’s burdens, pleasing others and not ourselves, and taming the tongue. Each lesson calls us toward health and in some way opposes the impact of sin. As we reflect on these matters together, as beloved children of God, may the Lord help us to be honest with ourselves and with one another and to be practical and intentional in our application of these lessons. Until Jesus returns, we will never arrive at complete health, but by the power of the Spirit we can grow and mature. We can become more and more like Jesus. And we walk on

this path toward greater health with tremendous hope, with the promise that he who began a good work in us will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6). So let's lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and run with endurance the race that is set before us, all the while fixing our eyes on Jesus (Heb. 12:1–2)—to the glory of God!

~ *By Mark Booker*

Lent is the period of forty days (Sundays are excluded) leading up to Easter. Historically, this was a period of preparation for those planning to be baptized at Easter. It later became a time of penitence and self-examination for all Christians. The word Lent actually means “springtime” and much like the new life that comes after a cold winter, Lent is rooted in repentance and conversion, the putting off of the old self and the putting on of the new. This is not simply a one-time event, but a continuous action, a constant turning away from sin and a reorientation to God. All of this is aimed at the renewal of our spiritual lives.

The forty days of Lent symbolize the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. By observing Lent, we follow Jesus into the wilderness, resist temptation, pray, and proceed “on the way” to Jerusalem and to the cross of Good Friday. Throughout Lent, we focus on our present wilderness while keeping an eye toward the resurrection.

Throughout the history of the church, many Christians have used the forty days of Lent to restore vibrancy, life, passion, and vision in their walks with God, primarily through a renewed focus on various spiritual disciplines, including prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

THE CHURCH CALENDAR

Following the Christian calendar from Advent (the four Sundays before Christmas) to Eastertide and the Feast of Pentecost (seven Sundays after Easter) is by no means commanded by Christ, nor is it necessary for salvation or holiness. That said, it can be a healthy aid for us all to remember that the primary context of our lives, as children of God, is the work of God in Christ. In particular, the season of Lent reminds us that repentance and introspection are necessary in following Jesus.ⁱ

WHY Lent?

SMALL GROUP Guidelines

ASH WEDNESDAY

The first Wednesday of Lent (this year, March 2) is called this because of the custom that prevailed in the early church of sprinkling ashes on the heads of penitents as an expression of humiliation and sorrow for sin on the first day of Lent.ⁱⁱ

FASTING DURING LENT

Jesus fasted and so did his disciples. He did not command his followers to fast, but Jesus did assume that they would (Mark 2:20) and offered specific directions for it (Matt. 6:16–18). Fasting is voluntary, should not become an empty ritual (Jer. 14:11–12), and is paired with confession (1 Sam. 7:6) and prayer (Acts 14:23).ⁱⁱⁱ

BASIC GUIDELINES FOR GROUP MEETINGS

- Learn one another's names... and learn about one another's lives.
- Submit to Scripture (properly interpreted!) as our final word.
- You will likely not have enough time to get through all the questions. Group facilitators may need to focus on just some questions, and skip around.
- Commit to confidentiality to encourage transparency.
- Be quick to listen, patient in disagreement, and tender to one another.
- Aim to be fully present, aware of your own emotions, and seeking to bless.
- Head knowledge is important, but the transformation of your own heart is key.
- Cultivate group dynamics so that all share—try not to dominate the conversation.
- Reveal your true needs, and commit to pray in your meetings and during the week.

RECOMMENDED SMALL GROUP SCHEDULE

5–10 MIN. Each week, have 1–2 people in the group share something about themselves. Where did you grow up? What is your school background? What about your work and career? Do you want to share anything about your family or family background? What is your favorite food or restaurant? Do you have a hobby?

Open Discussion Time with Prayer

5 MIN. What stood out to you in this Sunday's sermon? Do you have any lingering questions?

35 MIN. Go through the small group discussion questions.

10 MIN. Share and track weekly prayer requests. Pray!

ⁱ Adapted from Webber, R. (1994). *The services of the Christian year* (Vol. 5, pp. 230–231)

ⁱⁱ Webber, 230–231.

ⁱⁱⁱ Webber, 230–231.

WEEK One

“IF YOU ARE IN CHURCH, IN THE MIDDLE OF A SERVICE OF WORSHIP, AND YOU SUDDENLY REMEMBER THAT YOUR BROTHER HAS A GRIEVANCE AGAINST YOU, LEAVE CHURCH AT ONCE AND PUT IT RIGHT. DO NOT WAIT TILL THE SERVICE HAS ENDED. SEEK OUT YOUR BROTHER AND ASK HIS FORGIVENESS. FIRST GO, THEN COME. FIRST GO AND BE RECONCILED TO YOUR BROTHER, THEN COME AND OFFER YOUR WORSHIP TO GOD.”

~ JOHN STOTT

THE PRIORITY OF RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS

~ By Michael Balboni

Matthew 5:21–24

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

BACKGROUND

As part of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), Jesus called his disciples to go beyond the Pharisees’ thin and external sense of righteousness, by understanding and seeking the deeper intent of God’s commands. As sovereign over Torah, Jesus explains that the law of the kingdom must be internalized within the heart and beyond mere external behavior in order to experience personal righteousness and true community health. As the first of six contrasts, Jesus compares a surface-level interpretation of the law versus its deeper kingdom meaning that creates the kingdom community.

Because humanity is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27), murder is wrong (Gen. 9:6). Unique within the creation, humans are endowed with God’s image as his representatives on earth. The link between the image of God and murder teaches us that murdering a human has as its true intent the desire to kill God. Jesus’ teaching against murder (Ex. 20:13 and 21:12) shows that the deeper intent of the command does not only refer to killing the body, but includes unrighteous anger and violent words. With unrighteous anger and words, we not only break the command of murder, but we reveal an underlying hatred toward God himself (James 3:9–10).

EXTERNAL FORM VS. INWARD REALITY

The larger teaching in Chapter Six requires for right relationships to move away from emphasizing outward religious forms (“you have

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heard that it was said” in verses 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43) toward Jesus’ teaching which focuses on internal heart realities (verses 22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). Ironically, the Pharisees created many laws and yet “relaxed” the commandments (Matt. 5:19), because their focus was on achievable, external behavior. Jesus rejected this approach, requiring his people to apply the commandment not only to behavior, but to the heart, to emotions, to motivations, and to what might be whispered beneath one’s breath.

1. What kind of community characteristics are created if its emphasis falls on external behavior? Describe any experiences that you have personally gone through within a faith community focused more on externals versus the heart.
2. What kind of community characteristics are created if the church follows Jesus’ teaching to emphasize the internal heart? How does this emphasis on the heart impact our community ethos and interpersonal community relationships? Explain why a focus on the heart leads to a number of other community dynamics.
3. Take a few moments as a small group to pray for the Spirit’s help within your LDI group to live more authentically into a focus on the heart within our relationships as a community. After praying, consider writing down a few ideals to reach for within the dynamics of your LDI group during Lent. Group leaders may want to return back to these ideals in the weeks ahead in order to inspire more honest and deeper discussion as you aim for transformation of the heart.

MURDER VS. UNRIGHTEOUS ANGER

Jesus teaches in verses 22–23 that the deeper intent of God’s command against murder is connected to anger. If murder is the outward action, Jesus indicates that related actions that transgress God’s commandment include anger and angry words. It is sobering to consider how we have all murdered in our hearts other Christians the same way Cain murdered his brother (Gen. 4).

J.I. Packer defined anger as: “A state of disturbing and energizing passion in which strong negative emotion is triggered by a perception

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of wrong done to oneself or others or both.” Scripture teaches that there is sinless anger and unrighteous anger. God has anger in his holiness against sin (Ps. 7:11; Col. 3:6), which is also expressed by Jesus at hard hearts (Mark 3:5). Paul says, “Be angry and sin not” (Eph. 4:26). Unrighteous anger can extend from jealousy (Gen. 4:5), pride (Jonah 4:1), or being told the truth (2 Chron. 16:10). While it is often stirred by the sinful actions of others, unrighteous anger can be one’s own false response to another’s sin, sometimes characterized by a judgmental spirit (Matt. 7:1), other times it can be our own unwillingness to extend mercy or forgiveness.

1. Discuss together any ways you might determine if your anger is righteous or unrighteous. Focus especially on the Christian community since Jesus is focused on “your brother.” When is anger toward another Christian justified and when does it lead to sin? If possible, try to share examples that have happened personally.

2. Anger can dominate us (Prov. 15:18) but it can also come under control (“be slow to anger”) and can be “put away” (James 1:19-20; Prov. 16:32). Share together practical ways you’ve experienced anger in the Christian community, and how God helped you discover internal freedom from or control over anger.

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WORSHIPPING GOD VS. UNRECONCILED CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Jesus gives an example (verses 23–24) of a person worshipping by making a voluntary temple sacrifice to God, but then remembers that he has a brother who “has something against” him. Jesus’ example shifts from the person who feels anger (verses 21–22), toward a disciple who has caused another to be angry. Jesus does not say if the other person’s anger is legitimately founded but only that there is another brother offended.

1. Why does Jesus put priority (first) on reconciling with another Christian rather than following through with making sacrifice to God?

2. If you are aware that you have caused anger to another Christian, yet you have concluded that his or her anger is unfounded, are you free from any further obligation? Consider Romans 12:18-21. In your experience what are the necessary virtues and practices that make reconciliation more likely?

3. Jesus stresses the importance of acting quickly. What happens in Christian community when members fail to deal with offenses with immediacy? See Hebrews 12:14–15. Both parties are commanded to “go” to the other in order to settle the matter either from the perspective of knowing you have offended another (Matt. 5:23–24) or when you believe the other has sinned against you (Matt. 18:15–17).

4. Given that much hurt can take place in churches around leadership, what are the dynamics of reconciliation if dealing with Christian leaders who have offended you? How are these situations particularly challenging?

NEXT STEPS FOR THIS WEEK

DEALING WITH ANGER

Most Christians at least occasionally feel anger toward other Christians and speak angry words that they eventually regret. Jesus makes clear in verse 22 that it is dangerous for the angry person to not deal with their anger. Festering anger makes each of us liable to judgement. In light of this, review your Christian relationships in regard to anger.

- Prayerfully consider if you are angry with someone.
- Write down what happened and why anger has remained with you. Who exactly are you angry with? An individual? Group? The entire church?
- In God’s love, have you extended forgiveness (Matt. 18:21–22) so that the sun does not go down upon your anger (Eph. 4:26)?
- If you know of someone who feels offended by you, ask the Holy Spirit for clarity and strength to seek reconciliation.
- **Attend our virtual All-Church Prayer** (*Saturday, March 12; 8:30–9:30 am*) where we will deal with this topic together. Register under “Events” on the church website: www.parkstreet.org/events.

Notes |

“TAKE AWAY FROM OUR
HEARTS, O LORD, ALL
SUSPICION, ANGER,
WRATH, CONTENTION, AND
WHATEVER MAY INJURE
CHARITY AND LESSEN
BROTHERLY LOVE. HAVE
MERCY, O LORD, HAVE
MERCY ON THOSE WHO ASK
YOUR MERCY, GIVE GRACE
TO THOSE WHO NEED IT,
AND MAKE US SUCH THAT
WE MAY BE WORTHY TO
ENJOY YOUR FAVOR AND
GAIN ETERNAL LIFE.”

~ **THOMAS À KEMPIS,**
THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

| Notes

WEEK Two

“WE ALL AGREE THAT
FORGIVENESS IS
A BEAUTIFUL IDEA
UNTIL WE HAVE TO
PRACTICE IT.”
~ C.S. LEWIS

“HE WHO HAS
NOT FORGIVEN
AN ENEMY HAS
NEVER YET
TASTED ONE OF
THE SUBLIME
ENJOYMENTS
OF LIFE.”
~ C.S. LEWIS


THE FORGIVEN FORGIVE

~ By Chris May

Before we delve into our lesson, let's take a moment to ponder these quotations from C.S. Lewis. Perhaps they seem like opposites to you, but I would invite you to consider them as a paradox. In a paradox we have to hold two seemingly opposing truths in our hands without letting either one of them squirm out. The Bible is not without paradoxes, so though they may make us feel uncomfortable, we need not fear them. A paradox invites us into the mystery of life in the Kingdom of God. A paradox adds muscle to our faith. A paradox deepens our worship of a God we can never fully understand but can still fully trust and love.

- What are your thoughts about the paradox of forgiveness, which can be both excruciatingly painful and exceedingly joyful and freeing?

BACKGROUND

 Our passage this week comes from the Gospel of Matthew. There is much scholarly research to support the early church tradition that believed the gospel was written in the 60s or 70s AD by Matthew the tax collector, whom Jesus called to leave his mistrusted and shady profession to come follow him. As we consider our LDI theme of growing healthy relationships in the church, it can encourage us that Matthew was also very concerned about life in the church. In fact, he is the only gospel writer to use the word “church,” *ekklesia*. The two references are below. Notice that the first involves the church's relation to Christ and the second the way church members should relate to one other in the matter of church discipline.

Matthew 16:18: *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

Matthew 18:17: *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

Many scholars believe that Matthew wrote especially for Jews though this is not universally agreed. To support this theory, it seems clear

that Matthew has structured his gospel around five major discourses, which would correspond to the Pentateuch of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It is also clear that one of Matthew's major themes is to present the church as the new Israel and Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah of the nation of Israel, and of the whole world. Matthew has certainly not forgotten the Gentiles in his gospel. He is the only one to begin his narrative with the Gentile magi who traveled from the east to worship the king of the Jews (Matthew 2:1–12) and end his gospel with what we have come to call the Great Commission, (Matthew 28:18–20) in which Jesus instructs his followers to go into all the nations to make disciples by baptizing and teaching. It is comforting to note that even in this challenging and far-reaching command, Jesus reminds us that we do not fulfill it alone. “And remember I am with you always even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

Other major themes to be found in Matthew are:

- Strengthening new Christians in the midst of suffering persecution.
- Warning them against laxity and falling away from the faith.
- Urging them to use their persecution as an opportunity for evangelism.
- Stressing that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament law and messianic prophecy.

THE TEXT

Our text is found in the third of the five major discourses mentioned above, whose verses and themes are, in New Testament scholar Robert Gundry's view, divided in the following way:^{iv}

- 5:1–7:29 The Sermon on the Mount
 - 9:35–11:1 The commission and instruction of the twelve
 - 13:1–52 Parables
 - 18:1–35 Humility and forgiveness among Jesus's disciples
 - 23:1–25:46 Denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees and the Olivet Discourse
1. Please read Matthew 18:21–35 twice through, trying to make one of those times out loud. Take a moment to picture Jesus speaking this parable to an audience that probably would have included men, women and children of several generations and ethnicities. Perhaps even a Roman soldier or traveling foreign merchant might have paused in their duties to listen.
 2. Record your first impressions of the text.

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3. Consider the brief dialogue between Peter and Jesus in verses 21 and 22. What do you think Peter's attitude is when he asks his question?
4. Do you think Jesus is bursting Peter's bubble by his response? Why or why not?
5. The parable itself begins with the Greek expression *dia touto*, "therefore." It's a good principle of Bible study that whenever we see "therefore" we should ask, "What is it there for?" and look back to the preceding verses. In what ways might Jesus' parable be a longer answer to Peter's question in verse 21?
6. Though our English translations do not include it, in the Greek the parable begins "...the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a human king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves." What might Jesus have wanted his listeners to understand by clarifying what kind of king he was talking about?
7. Note that Jesus uses the term "fellow servant" four times in this parable. Repetition is often chosen as a means of emphasizing a point. What do you think is the point of Jesus using the word "fellow servant" four times? (Note that in Greek "fellow servant" *sunedoulos*, literally "with a servant," is one word.)
8. What similarities and differences do you notice between the way that the king treated his servant and the way the servant treated his fellow servant?

A talent was worth more than fifteen years of a laborer's wages and a denarius was a laborer's usual daily wage. Craig S. Keener points out in *The Gospel of Matthew; A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*: "Further, the real worth of the debt in this story may be greater still: 10,000 being the largest single number Greek could express and the talent being the largest unit of currency. Jesus is making the parable particularly graphic."^v

9. What reaction do you think Jesus is desiring from his audience when he makes the debt of the first servant so astoundingly great, so absolutely impossible to repay?

10. The language of monetary debt in this parable may bring to mind Jesus giving his disciples his prayer when they asked him how to pray. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). R. T. France writes in his commentary on Matthew:

The parable assumes that disciples are, by definition, forgiven people. It makes unmistakably clear that the initiative is with God: it is because he has first forgiven that we can be expected, and indeed enabled, to forgive. But the forgiveness we have already received may be forfeited by our failure to forgive in our turn. It was freely given, but it must not be presumed on. There is thus in this parable a fascinating blend of the motive of fear of punishment (vv. 34-35) with a more fundamental motive of gratitude and imitation of the grace of God.^{vi}

11. What are your thoughts on this quotation? What are your emotional responses?

12. As we move into a heart consideration of forgiveness, please ponder a couple of more thoughts from R.T. France's commentary. Again, please record your thoughts and emotions.

Jesus' use of "I say to you" in verse 22 serves the same function as in The Sermon on the Mount in 5:21 when Jesus gives his "radical new standard over against the prudential conclusions of conventional wisdom and the righteousness of the 'scribes and Pharisees.'^{vii} The escalation from 7 to 77 reflects the boast of Lamech in Genesis 4:24: 'If Cain is avenged sevenfold [see Gen. 4:13] surely Lamech is avenged seventy-seven fold.' (The reminiscence of Cain gives added point to the concept of forgiving a brother.) The disciple must be as extravagant and forgiving as Lamech was in taking vengeance.^{viii} In other words, there is no limit, and no place for keeping a tally of forgivenesses already used up. Peter's question was misconceived; If one is still counting, however 'generously,' one is not forgiving."^{ix} (*Emphasis mine*)

13. Using only the parable we have just studied and the Lord's Prayer, write a definition of forgiveness. Include in your definition an explanation of why forgiveness is required of us.

PART
Two

TAKING THE TEXT TO HEART

Perhaps before we consider what forgiveness is, it might be helpful to consider what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation/reunion/restoration, nor does it require it. (Authors who write about forgiveness often use these words interchangeably. Moving forward in this lesson I will use the word restoration.)

Why? Essentially because forgiveness involves only one person, you, and restoration involves you and the one who has sinned against you. We are called to forgive whether or not the one who has sinned against us has repented, but we are not required to remain in a close relationship with that person. Sometimes the distinction between forgiveness and restoration has not been clearly delineated by the church. I believe that making this distinction can go a long way to helping believers truly forgive without the fear of having to be reunited with someone who will continue to wound and wrong them.

In *The Art of Forgiving*, Lewis Smedes describes what forgiveness is not:

Forgiving someone who did us wrong does not mean that we tolerate the wrong he did.

Forgiving does not mean that we want to forget what happened.

Forgiving does not mean that we excuse the person who did it.

Forgiving does not mean that we take the edge off the evil of what was done to us.

Forgiving does not mean that we surrender our right to justice.

Forgiving does not mean that we invite someone who hurt us once to hurt us again.^x

1. Pick one or two of these principles and write down your responses, including both your thoughts and emotions.
2. If you have time, continue to reflect on these principles throughout the week. Perhaps you might want to set up a time to talk about them with one of your fellow LDI members.

We've reflected on what forgiveness is not, so what is forgiveness? In the hope that the above principles might have already helped you consider what forgiveness is, I offer a few practical principles for *practicing* forgiveness. As you consider them, bear in mind that **practice is not a one-time event**. If you want to learn to play an instrument, you practice it regularly and you'll have ups and downs in that practice. But if your goal is to have a beautiful time playing the flute or the piano or the marimba, you keep that goal in mind and don't give up practicing. Maybe you can consider forgiveness in the same way.

In forgiving we seek to:

Resist revenge. We stamp “paid in full” on the debt that the other person has incurred upon him or herself because of their sin toward us.

Resist rumination on vengeful thoughts or get-even strategies about our enemy.

Practice blessing. When the enemy comes to our mind, we entrust them to Jesus and briefly ask him to bless them. Then we make a grace-filled effort to return to the activities of our day.

Practice remembering the huge debt of ours that Jesus stamped “paid in full” when he died on the cross. Allow this to lead to praise and lightness and freedom and joy.

Many writers on forgiveness stress that it is a process. This is good for us to remember so that we won't beat ourselves up when emotions flare even after we thought we had forgiven. We can bring all our thoughts and feelings to our Lord Jesus who completely understands them. Praying the Psalms, especially the so-called enemy Psalms can be so helpful as we seek to forgive. Again and again, we see the writers asking God to take care of their enemies, sometimes giving very particular instructions on what they would like God to do, but in the end entrusting the process to their LORD and not acting on their vengeful thoughts themselves. For example, many of the enemy Psalms are attributed to David and we can see that they were helpful to his soul because though he had several opportunities to murder his enemy King Saul, who was trying to kill him, he never took advantage of any of them.

Our parable has reminded us of the foundational principle we can and must return to again and again as we seek to forgive others: we have been forgiven much by our God. No debt owed to us, no matter how enormous, can compare to the debt we owe Jesus. Yet rather than ask us to repay our debt to him, Jesus pays it himself by becoming sin for our sakes on the cross. The sins done against us, no matter how horrendous, are sins that Jesus has already borne on the cross, just as he has borne our sins against others. May we learn to rejoice in that fact and hold it close to us, even as we endure the true pain and injustice that can be caused to us by others. When we are betrayed by those whom we trusted, may we be comforted by the fact that Jesus felt even greater pain as he endured the cross. We can remember that Jesus was betrayed and abandoned not only by the world he had made but also by his closest friends. And he bore pain we will never have to experience: separation from his beloved Father as he became sin for our sakes.

3. Consider the two quotations from C.S. Lewis that began our lesson, as well as all you may have learned in this lesson. Return to the definition you wrote of forgiveness. Is there anything you would like to add to it? Why or why not?

NEXT STEPS FOR THIS WEEK

Perhaps there is someone you need to forgive this week. Maybe there is someone you have needed to forgive for a long time. Or perhaps you need to rethink your definition of forgiveness and appropriate the fact that it does not have to include restoration. You might want to talk over this “**Taking the Text to Heart**” section with a trusted friend as well as in your LDI group.

Forgiving our debtors is the only thing that Jesus asks of us in his prayer, so we know it's crucially important, not because it is a work necessary for our salvation but because if we don't practice forgiveness, perhaps we have missed the whole point of the Christian life. But remember that we never have to practice forgiveness alone; we have Christian brothers and sisters and we have the Master Forgiver, our Lord Jesus Christ, to be with us on this journey.

- **Attend our virtual All-Church Prayer (Friday March 18; 7:30–8:45 pm)**, where we will deal with this topic together. Register under “Events” on church website: www.parkstreet.org/events.

^{iv} Robert Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 191–193.

^v Keener, Craig S. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 458.

^{vi} France, R.T. *The Gospel of Matthew: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 703.

^{vii} Luz, U. *The Final Judgment (Matt 25:31–46): An Exercise in ‘History of Influence’ Exegesis*, in D.R. Bauer & M. A. Powell (eds), *Treasures*, 271–310.

^{viii} Luz, U. 704–705.

^{ix} Luz, U. 705.

^x Smedes, Lewis. *The Art of Forgiving*.

| Notes

“THE PATIENT MAN GOES
THROUGH A GREAT AND
SALUTARY PURGATORY WHEN
HE GRIEVES MORE OVER THE
MALICE OF ONE WHO HARMS
HIM THAN FOR HIS OWN INJURY;
WHEN HE PRAYS READILY FOR
HIS ENEMIES AND FORGIVES
OFFENSES FROM HIS HEART;
WHEN HE DOES NOT HESITATE TO
ASK PARDON OF OTHERS; WHEN
HE IS MORE EASILY MOVED TO
PITY THAN TO ANGER; WHEN HE
DOES FREQUENT VIOLENCE TO
HIMSELF AND TRIES TO BRING
THE BODY INTO COMPLETE
SUBJECTION TO THE SPIRIT.”

~ **THOMAS À KEMPIS,**
THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

WEEK Three

A BURDEN IS THE
OPPOSITE OF A
BIRTHDAY PRESENT;
YOU KNOW WHAT'S
INSIDE AND YOU'D
RATHER NOT
UNWRAP IT.
- ANONYMOUS

BEARING EACH OTHER'S BURDENS

~ By Chris May

BACKGROUND

Our lesson this week takes us to Paul's letter to the Galatian church, likely his first extant letter, dating anywhere from 48 to mid-50s AD. Every one of Paul's letters has a pastoral purpose; parchment was scarce and delivery was fraught with danger, so Paul does not engage in inapplicable theologizing. Therefore, to better understand our verses' focus, let's briefly note the alarming problems that Paul was addressing when he wrote this letter:

- Some are questioning the authenticity of Paul's apostleship and therefore his message.
- Those who question Paul's authority are also calling the Galatian church, many of whom are Gentiles, to practice the Mosaic law, especially circumcision, but also holy days and food restrictions, in order to assure that they have received salvation.
- This call of the so-called "Judaizers" could lead to the Galatian church's abandonment of the gospel/good news that Paul has championed among them: that salvation is by grace through faith and not correlated with any sense of prior worthiness on the basis of the Mosaic law or any other system of worth or value.
- The nature and purpose of Christian freedom is being challenged by Paul's opponents. Paul has been enlightened by Christ to see that being a slave to the law leads to death but being a slave to Jesus leads to abundant life. He is determined that the Galatian church he founded stay grounded in this truth.

PART One

THE TEXT AND RELATED SCRIPTURES

Alaelone (spelled phonetically) is one of my favorite Greek words because it sounds like "all alone" but it means "one another." It is always plural and always has the sense of mutuality. Interestingly, it is used six times in the verses you have just read. I believe this is no accident on Paul's part. Here are the occurrences close together so you can see more clearly the point Paul is making.

Galatians 5:13: *For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve **one another**.*

Galatians 5:15: *But if you bite and devour **one another**, watch out that you are not consumed by **one another**.*

Galatians 5:26: *Let us not become conceited, provoking **one another**, envying **one another**.*

Galatians 6:2: *Bear **one another's** burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*

1. What are your thoughts about Paul's use of "one another" in these verses?

The word for burden, *baros*, is used only six times in the New Testament and five of those times are by Paul. Here are the other five occurrences:

Matthew 20:12: *...saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have **borne** the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'*

Acts 15:28: *For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater **burden** than these requirements:*

2 Corinthians 4:17: *For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal **weight** of glory beyond all comparison,*

1 Thessalonians 2:6: *Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made **demands** as apostles of Christ.*

Revelations 2:24: *But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other **burden**.*

2. You may wonder why Matthew 11:30 which contain Jesus' beloved words, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" is not included. It is because Jesus uses another word for burden here, *forteeon* (spelled phonetically). *Baros* and *forteeon* both have the connotation of something heavy and cumbersome, something that a person would not be eager to carry. Could it be that Paul is giving us a little word play in 2 Corinthians 7:4 when he compares our light and momentary *afflictions* to our *weight/burden* of glory? Could Paul be calling attention to how our burden of glory puts our afflictions into perspective? What do you think?
3. How do these verses enhance your understanding of Paul's use of *baros* in Galatians 6:2?

A little excursus: Jesus refers to burdens three times: in Matthew 11:30, Matthew 23:4 and Luke 11:46. He always uses the word, *forteon*. Interestingly, *forteon* is the word Paul uses in Galatians 6:5 when he refers to bearing our own **load** three verses after exhorting them to bear each other's **burdens**. Next time you're tempted to worry, spend the time more fruitfully pondering the different responsibilities of bearing one another's burdens and carrying our own loads. How might doing one help us do the other? *Note: We will be considering Jesus' comforting words in Matthew 11:28–30 later in this lesson.*

4. Taking into account all you have read so far, what would your definition of “burden” be?

Now let's consider our key verse:

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. Literally in Greek it is:

One another, bear the burdens and thus you (plural) will fulfill the law of Christ.

5. You notice that Paul has placed "one another" at the front of his sentence even though it's not the subject of the sentence. When this happens in a Greek sentence construction it often means that the author wants you to particularly notice what has been thrown forward. Why do you think Paul has done this with “one another”?
6. Reread Galatians 5:14. In what way do you think bearing one another's burdens fulfills the law of Christ?
7. Remembering the quotation at the beginning of this lesson and your own definition of “burden,” in what ways might it be hard to bear one another's burdens?
8. Now reread Galatians 5:16–26. How might Paul's description of the battle between the Holy Spirit and our sinful nature, which Paul calls the flesh, help us overcome some of the difficulties in burden bearing?

PART Two

TAKING THE TEXT TO HEART

1. What is your natural response to bearing a fellow believer's burden? Some possibilities might be: withdrawing, feeling overwhelmed, advice giving, over sympathizing, feeling the need to fix, overtalking and under-listening, etc.
2. Would you like to ask the Holy Spirit to replace your natural response with a supernatural one and if so, what do you think that supernatural response might look like?

Consider Matthew 11:28–30 here given in *The Message* translation:

Matthew 11:28: *Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest.*

Matthew 11:29: *Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you.*

Matthew 11:30: *Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.*

3. What comforts you about these words of Jesus?

4. How do you think these verses relate to bearing one another's burdens?

I believe it would be nearly impossible to bear one another's burdens unless we are also casting our cares on Christ as Peter exhorts us to do in 1 Peter 5:7:

casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

The verb “cast” *epiripto*, is a strong one. It means “to throw forcefully.” Think of a pitcher throwing a baseball to a catcher to strike the batter out. *Epiripto* (if you want to remember the Greek word, just think “Let ‘er rip!”) is only used twice in the New Testament, here and in Luke 19:35, which occurs during Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday:

*And they brought it to Jesus, and **throwing** their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.*

The cloak was often a poor person's most valuable possession. It provided a place for storage, warmth, and even served as a bedroll at night. Therefore, when people are casting their cloaks on Jesus’ donkey, and in front of the donkey (along with palm branches), they are casting something they consider to be very valuable, and they are casting with no assurance they will get their cloak back.

5. Why do you think Peter would compare casting cares to casting cloaks?

6. At first glance cares don't seem very valuable, do they? We want to get rid of them; we'd like to never see them come back. But let's think again. Do we sometimes feel we need to take care of our cares ourselves because who else will? Could it be they are more valuable than we might at first have thought?

7. What is your relationship to your own cares?

8. What would it look like to cast your cares, including the burdens from fellow Christians, forcefully to Jesus, to allow him to hold them for you?
9. Can you picture yourself doing this? Do you think this would help you bear the burdens of one another more empathetically and less stressfully?

NEXT STEPS FOR THIS WEEK

This week, practice casting your burdens onto Jesus. If you're by yourself you can even use your whole body to cast those burdens onto Jesus, since many studies have shown that when we involve our whole bodies in something it is much easier for us to learn it.

May you feel lighter as you practice 1 Peter 5:7 and may your love grow as you practice Galatians 6:2 and may this lightness and love cause our Park Street community and its neighbors to flourish! Please, Lord Jesus.

As we conclude this lesson, I want to share with you some words of Martin Luther from his *Commentary on Galatians* that I hope will be encouraging as you continue to walk in the Holy Spirit and not in your sinful nature, and as part of this process to bear one another's burdens faithfully.

"Christ alone can supply us with perfect righteousness. Therefore we must always believe and always hope in Christ. "Whosoever believeth shall not be ashamed" (Rom. 9:33).

Do not despair if you feel the flesh battling against the Spirit or if you cannot make it behave. For you to follow the guidance of the Spirit in all things without interference on the part of the flesh is impossible. You are doing all you can if you resist the flesh and do not fulfill its demands.

When I was a monk I thought I was lost forever whenever I felt an evil emotion, carnal lust, wrath, hatred, or envy. I tried to quiet my conscience in many ways, but it did not work, because lust would always come back and give me no rest. I told myself: "You have permitted this and that sin, envy, impatience, and the like. Your joining this holy order has been in vain, and all your good works are good for nothing." If at that time I had understood this passage, "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh," I could have spared myself many a day of self-torment. I would have said to myself: "Martin, you will never be without sin, for you have flesh. Despair not, but resist the flesh." ^{xi}

- Attend our virtual All-Church Prayer, Saturday, March 26 (8:30–9:30 am), where we will deal with this topic together. Register under "Events" on church website: www.parkstreet.org/events.

^{xi} Luther, Martin. *Commentary on Galatians*. (Beloved Publishing, 2014), 178.

| Notes

“LOVE IS AN EXCELLENT THING, A
VERY GREAT BLESSING, INDEED.
IT MAKES EVERY DIFFICULTY
EASY, AND BEARS ALL WRONGS
WITH EQUANIMITY. FOR IT BEARS
A BURDEN WITHOUT BEING
WEIGHTED AND RENDERS SWEET
ALL THAT IS BITTER. THE NOBLE
LOVE OF JESUS SPURS TO GREAT
DEEDS AND EXCITES LONGING
FOR THAT WHICH IS MORE
PERFECT. LOVE TENDS UPWARD;
IT WILL NOT BE HELD DOWN BY
ANYTHING LOW.”

~ **THOMAS À KEMPIS**,
THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

WEEK
Four

“MANY IS THE PERSON I
HAVE SEEN FALL INTO SIN BY
SPEAKING, BUT SCARCELY
EVER HAVE I SEEN ANYONE
DO SO BY STAYING SILENT.”

~ ST. AMBROSE OF MILAN,
DE OFFICIIS

PLEASING OUR NEIGHBORS, NOT OURSELVES

~ By Randall Wetzig

Romans 15:1–7

¹*We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.* ²*Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.* ³*For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”* ⁴*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.* ⁵*May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus,* ⁶*that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ⁷*Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”*

BACKGROUND

Paul’s letter to the Romans was written some 25–30 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, to the church in Rome which seems to have been composed of both Jews and Gentiles. Though there are many topics covered in the letter, one unifying theme is the gospel of God, which is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). Paul goes on to say that the gospel reveals God’s righteousness and that, in the words of the prophet Habakkuk, “the righteous shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17 quoting Hab. 2:4). In our passage, Romans 15:1–7, we see part of what it means for God’s people to live in faithful righteousness, mirroring the righteousness of God as seen in Jesus Christ.

Immediately before this passage, Paul speaks to some very practical problems that the Roman Christians faced. Some of them thought it was better to worship on Saturday, and others on Sunday. Some felt that eating meat designated as “unclean” in the Hebrew law was sinful, while others felt that it was just fine. Many of these disagreements were likely along ethnic, social, and political lines. Paul encourages them to, when on their own, do what they believe God has instructed them to do (14:6–9; 22–23). However, in Chapter 14 and in our passage for this week, he also instructs believers not to cause each other to stumble (14:13–15), and that we who see ourselves as strong should “bear with the failings of the weak and not... please ourselves” (15:1).

CONVERSATION

Holding these two commands (to stick to the instruction we believe God has given us, but also to “please [our] neighbor for his good, to build him up” (15:2)) at the same time, is hard! It is well worth our time discussing how God calls us to practice these things in our real, everyday lives.

1. Verses 5 & 6 say that living in harmony is necessary for us to glorify God “with one voice.” Do you think this is true? If so, why is this the case?
2. Briefly, what are some current general areas of disharmony that you feel with your brothers and sisters at Park Street Church?

In verses 5-6, Paul prays that God’s endurance and encouragement would give his readers the ability to “live in such harmony.” He says that this way of living is “in accord” with Jesus himself. Paul suggests that Jesus’ life and death were an example of Christ not pleasing himself. The Scriptures and Jesus’ example are to give us instruction and encouragement in how to please each other, for the others’ good, instead of pleasing ourselves (15:4).

3. How did Jesus demonstrate the tension of holding to God’s instruction while also bearing with (pleasing) and welcoming us (15:3,7)?
4. How might church leaders facilitate harmony between the weak and the strong in a congregation? In what ways might church leaders facilitate disharmony? How do leaders create a church ethos that leads to “pleasing ourselves” versus “pleasing our neighbors”?
5. Paul’s prayer in verses 5 & 6 suggest that God’s own endurance and encouragement are necessary for us to live this way. Why might these things be connected? Have you seen this to be true?
6. Is there a specific relationship or relational dynamic in your life that you could commit to praying for each day this week? Perhaps someone that you find yourself consistently wanting to fight against?

NEXT STEPS FOR THIS WEEK

It is very easy for us to make assumptions about the thoughts and motivations of others. It is often very hard for us to listen to others without just thinking about how we will respond and correct them. Paul instructs us to “welcome one another

as Christ has welcomed [us]” (15:7). One way to welcome others is to truly listen to them, to try to understand them instead of trying to make ourselves understood.

- Is there a person that you know has an opinion that differs from yours, that you could try to listen to this week? What would it look like to truly listen to them? To please and bear with them?
- Paul’s instruction to welcome others may certainly be taken literally! After all, in the previous chapter he is talking about eating together. How does this group practice welcoming each other? Is there anything in this group that makes it difficult for all to be heard?

Attend our All-Church Prayer (*Friday, April 1, 7:30–8:45 pm*), where we will deal with this topic together. Register at www.parkstreet.org/events.

| Notes

“A MAN IS RAISED UP FROM THE EARTH BY TWO WINGS—SIMPLICITY AND PURITY. THERE MUST BE SIMPLICITY IN HIS INTENTION AND PURITY IN HIS DESIRES. SIMPLICITY LEADS TO GOD, PURITY EMBRACES AND ENJOYS HIM.... IF YOUR HEART IS FREE FROM ILL-ORDERED AFFECTION, NO GOOD DEED WILL BE DIFFICULT FOR YOU. IF YOU AIM AT AND SEEK AFTER NOTHING BUT THE PLEASURE OF GOD AND THE WELFARE OF YOUR NEIGHBOR, YOU WILL ENJOY FREEDOM WITHIN.

~ **THOMAS À KEMPIS**,
THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

WEEK Five

“THE INTERIOR MAN PUTS THE CARE OF HIMSELF BEFORE ALL OTHER CONCERNS, AND HE WHO ATTENDS TO HIMSELF CAREFULLY DOES NOT FIND IT HARD TO HOLD HIS TONGUE ABOUT OTHERS. YOU WILL NEVER BE DEVOUT OF HEART UNLESS YOU ARE THUS SILENT ABOUT THE AFFAIRS OF OTHERS AND PAY PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO YOURSELF. IF YOU ATTEND WHOLLY TO GOD AND YOURSELF, YOU WILL BE LITTLE DISTURBED BY WHAT YOU SEE ABOUT YOU.”

~ THOMAS À KEMPIS,
THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

TAMING THE TONGUE

~ By Randall Wetzig

Ephesians 4:25–5:2

²⁵“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. ¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ²And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

BACKGROUND

The church in Ephesus was in a tumultuous place. We know from Acts 19 that the Artemis-worshipping Ephesians at one point rallied to remove the Christians from their midst because the gospel that Paul had preached there was a threat to their Artemis idol-based commerce. In the book of Ephesians, Paul urges his readers to pray, and writes out a prayer for them, asking that they would know the depth of Christ’s love for them (Eph. 3:14–21). Paul reminds them that as ruler and re-newer of the universe, Jesus is working to reconcile everything (Eph. 1:9–10; 20–23). The reconciliation and unification that Jesus is working on begins with his church and, in very practical terms in Ephesians Chapters 4–6, Paul explains how Christians should live out that reconciliation and unification. Gentiles and Jews have been brought into union with Jesus, and so into union with each other (Eph. 2:10–22). It is Jesus’ lordship and reconciling and unifying work that Paul suggests should be the foundation for hope for the Ephesians, even as they live in a hostile world. But Paul reminds them that they are not simply victims: Chapters 4–6 call disciples of Jesus to examine themselves and consider what

needs to change as they begin to live now in Jesus' kingdom.

In our passage this week, Paul focuses on how our union with Jesus and with each other should change the way that we speak with each other and about each other. The Bible teaches that the way we speak matters greatly to God and has an out-sized impact on our lives and the lives of those around us. The writer of Psalm 101 captures God's comments about how we speak about one another, saying, "Whoever slanders his neighbor secretly I will destroy" (Ps. 101:5a). In James 3, speech is compared to destroying fire, restless evil, and deadly poison (James 3:5b–12). If speaking wrongly to or about another member of God's family is akin to poisoning them, no wonder Paul considers it important to address the ways in which our new life in Jesus' kingdom should change the way we talk! Paul suggests that, since we are now united with each other through our union with Jesus, when we harm others with our words it is the same thing as harming ourselves.

CONVERSATION

Ephesians 4:25 Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

1. Paul says that we are now members of one another. Does this seem to be true to your experience as a Christian? If so, how, and if not, what would you imagine that it would look like if we were to be more united as members of one body?
2. What happens if a person lies to himself or herself? Is that a healthy way to live? What does this idea of being united with each other, members of one another, mean for our honesty with one another?
3. According to this passage, what are the principles of Christian leadership in taming the tongue? For what reasons might a Christian leader feel temptation to not speak truth? How does the church create a culture of public truth-telling within controversial or divisive issues?

Gossip and slander (or as we might say it today, talking badly about people) is often caused by anger, whether the anger is recognized or not. There is some disagreement about the proper translation of Ephesians 4:26, whether it is saying that at times it is justifiable to be "righteously angry" or whether it is calling attention to the existence of anger (i.e. "Beware: anger!"). Either way, Paul's focus is not the justification of the source of anger, but what should be done with that anger.

4. In what instances do you find it easy to "let the sun go down on your wrath?"

5. Paul suggests in verse 25 that we should “speak the truth” with each other. What does this have to do with our actions around anger in verse 26?
 6. Most of us would agree that it is usually easier to tell someone else about our anger, rather than broaching conflict with the person at whom our anger is directed. Why is this?
 7. Verse 25 reminds us that we ourselves have sin. What does this say about the way we should approach the one we are angry with? What if it turns out we are actually wrong?
- Ephesians 4:28–5:2 reflects on the renewal and reconciliation that Jesus is working in us and in our actions: the thief becomes a philanthropist (28), speech that destroyed becomes speech that builds up (29), and bitterness, anger, and wrath become kindness, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice (4:31–5:2).
8. How does healthy conflict move a person from anger to forgiveness? Do you think that conflict is always necessary for forgiveness to occur? What does our story as Christians have to say about this?

NEXT STEPS FOR THIS WEEK

- Each morning this week spend five minutes thinking and praying about the way you speak to others and about others. What are some ways that you tend to let your words be like poison (e.g., lying, angry words, correcting others unnecessarily, harshness, thoughtless questions, failure to speak truth...)?
- Humans are quick to make associations between people and things. When you think of coffee, who is the first person that comes to mind? Who is the first person that comes to mind when you think of the Boston Common? Now to reverse it, try to think of someone that you might not like, even if it is just a little bit. Once you have that person in mind, what is something that you associate with them, something that they might enjoy? It could be anything: a place, a food, a website, a song. As a practice of reconciliation this week, consider going to that place, eating that food, or listening to that song and looking for something redeeming when you do. Is there something you can enjoy about that thing? Does this in anyway change the way you view them? Does this change the way you might speak with them or the way you speak about them?
- At our **All-Church Prayer** (*Saturday, April 9; 8:30–9:30 am*), we will deal with this topic together. Register at www.parkstreet.org/events.

| Notes

“WHEN THE RIGHT AND OPPORTUNE MOMENT COMES FOR SPEAKING, SAY SOMETHING THAT WILL EDIFY.... BAD HABITS AND INDIFFERENCE TO SPIRITUAL PROGRESS DO MUCH TO REMOVE THE GUARD FROM THE TONGUE. DEVOUT CONVERSATION ON SPIRITUAL MATTERS, ON THE CONTRARY, IS A GREAT AID TO SPIRITUAL PROGRESS, ESPECIALLY WHEN PERSONS OF THE SAME MIND AND SPIRIT ASSOCIATE TOGETHER IN GOD.”

~ **THOMAS À KEMPIS**,
THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

“THE WHOLE LIFE OF CHRIST WAS
A CROSS AND A MARTYRDOM,
AND DO YOU SEEK REST AND
ENJOYMENT FOR YOURSELF?
YOU DECEIVE YOURSELF, YOU
ARE MISTAKEN IF YOU SEEK
ANYTHING BUT TO SUFFER, FOR
THIS MORTAL LIFE IS FULL OF
MISERIES AND MARKED WITH
CROSSES ON ALL SIDES. INDEED,
THE MORE SPIRITUAL PROGRESS
A PERSON MAKES, SO MUCH
HEAVIER WILL HE FREQUENTLY
FIND THE CROSS, BECAUSE AS
HIS LOVE INCREASES, THE PAIN
OF HIS EXILE ALSO INCREASES.”

~ THOMAS À KEMPIS,
THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

WALK IN IMITATION OF CHRIST

~ By Michael Balboni

Ephesians 5:1–2

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND ON “BELOVED CHILDREN”

In general, the overwhelming image of children in the Bible is that they are cherished by their parents, by their nation and by God.

Parents dote on their children with devotion unparalleled in other relationships. Their ardent prayers to bear children (Gen. 15:2–3; 16:1–2; 20:17; 1 Sam. 1:27; 2:20; Is. 54:1) and their celebrations at the birth of a child (Jer. 20:15; Luke 1:66) demonstrate this. Parents store up wealth for their children (Ps. 17:14) and want to give them good gifts (Matt. 7:11; Luke 11:13; 2 Cor. 12:14). Parents become desperate if their child is near death (1 Kings 17:23; 2 Kings 4:18–30; Mark 5:39–40; Mark 7:30; John 4:49).

Except in times of idol sacrifice, Israelites as a nation cherish children (Judg. 18:21; Ps. 127:3; Is. 7:14; 9:6; Hos. 9:16; Micah 1:16; Matt. 2:18; Matt. 19:29). God’s laws and edicts cherish children (Lev. 18:21; 20:3–4; Deut. 33:9; Josh. 1:14; Mal. 4:6). God himself defends them (Ps. 72:4; Hos. 11:10). Jesus stopped for children, took time with them (Matt. 18:5; 19:13; Mark 10:16; Luke 9:48; 13:34) and healed them (Mark 7:30). Love for children is one evidence of “a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17; Mal. 4:6).

God’s children are especially cherished and privileged (John 1:13; 11:52). John, “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” captures this tone when he addresses his readers as “dear children” seven times in his first epistle (1 John 2:1, 12, 13, 18, 28; 3:1, 7). God has compassion on his children (Jer. 31:20) and never forgets them (Is. 49:15). They have eternal contentment, eternal life (Luke 20:36; Gal. 4:31; 1 John 3:2; 1 John 4:4; 1 John 5:19). The right to be God’s child is extended to all (John 1:12; Rom. 8:16, 21; 9:8; 1 John 5:1), to Gentile and Jew alike (Gal. 4:28). Just as one’s behavior signals one’s family back-

ground (1 John 3:10), so God's children are called to behave as children of the King (Deut. 14:1; Eph. 5:1, 8; Phil. 2:14–15; 1 John 3:18; 1 John 5:2).

These images of children add warmth and depth to the promises that God looks on us as a father looks on his children. Younger and different from adults in maturity and innocence, a child is dependent on others, in a position to learn, and reflects the present situation and future hope of his or her parents; above all, a child is cherished. As children of God we yearn for the contentment that comes naturally to children; we adjust our position to assume the stance of a child because we understand that Jesus said, "Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15). Most of all, we rest like a child, content that he deals with us "as a father deals with his own children" (1 Thess. 2:11).^{xii}

Paul's command to "be imitators of God" flows from understanding yourself "as beloved children."

PART One

1. What does the ordering of this wording in 5:1 display about the nature of the gospel?

2. Now consider Ephesians 5:1 along with the two verses listed below.

Discuss the spiritual and psychological impact within a church when we truly know that we are "beloved children."

...and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.' Luke 3:22

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;
1 John 3:21

3. Is there some part of your life where you are not entirely convinced that you are deeply beloved by God? Example: If I were to be completely honest before the group, I still have trouble believing that God loves me in X way. If there is such a way, share with your group. After someone shares, be sure to say thank you to that person for being honest. Receive that person's honesty, and without responding or trying to convince him or her otherwise, have one person pray into that area of needing the illumination of God's love.

4. For a church to be deeply healthy, it will know itself to be “beloved.” *Agapētos* is an adjective meaning beloved, dear. It refers to a person who is in a special, close relationship with another. It is a term of endearment used to indicate someone who is considered dearly loved or valued. For authors like Paul, Peter, and John, the word is used to indicate their close bond as believers in Christ.
5. What additional steps might Park Street Church take in growing our spiritual identity as “beloved children”? Are there parts of our congregational life that should be reconsidered or altered in order to deepen a special, close relationship both with God and one another?
6. In what ways might Christian leaders encourage a church to see that they are “beloved”? What can spiritual leaders say or do that undermine the church’s acceptance of being God’s beloved children?
7. Are there any specific steps either you as an individual or you as a small group might take to promote this identity within the sphere of your influence that grows a deep love in the congregation?

PART Two

1. The ultimate example of imitation is Christ himself, who loved us and gave himself as a sacrifice for us. As you reflect on Jesus Christ, what is it about him that moves your heart and mind? Share together specific stories, attributes, and actions about Jesus that touch you, and motivate you to become like him. Being as specific as possible, write down and discuss together how you want to imitate Jesus. Pray together at the end over what is shared.
2. A healthy church has healthy spiritual leaders who are worthy to be followed and imitated. Look up Hebrews 6:12, Hebrews 13:7, 1 Corinthians 4:14-16, 2 Thessalonians 3:7.
3. Has there been a spiritual leader you deeply admired and tried to imitate in some way? Share a story of imitation of someone who showed you personally and directly what it means to follow Christ in a sacrificial way.

4. Park Street Church leaders need your encouragement and blessing to become more sacrificial spiritual leaders who are even more like Christ. Consider offering an encouragement or a prayer for congregational leaders to become more deeply like Jesus in thought, word, and deed (Heb. 13:7).

5. Every one of us is called to pursue maturity so that seekers and those younger in the faith might see our lives and be inspired to follow Christ. As you go into Holy Week, consider sharing with your group one way that you want to become stronger, better, more like Jesus, so that others might imitate you in virtue and spiritual fruit. Pray for one another that this fruit grows in our lives.

NEXT STEPS FOR THIS WEEK

As we walk through the steps of Jesus this Holy Week, make a concerted effort to prioritize listening deeply to the Lord each day in devotions, and attending the services listed below. As you go into Holy Week, bring before the Lord the way you desire for the Holy Spirit to transform you into the image of Christ.

- Maundy Thursday Communion Service
- Good Friday Service(s)
- Good Friday All-Church Prayer Meeting of Repentance and Confession
- Easter Sunday: Christ, our Lord, has risen! He has risen, indeed!

For specifics on service times, visit www.parkstreet.org.

^{xii} From Ryken, L., Wilhoit, J., Longman, T., Duriez, C., Penney, D., & Reid, D. G. (2000). In *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (electronic ed., p. 143).

^{viii} from the *Lexham Theological Wordbook*

Notes |

“REMEMBER THE PURPOSE YOU
HAVE UNDERTAKEN, AND KEEP
IN MIND THE IMAGE OF THE
CRUCIFIED. EVEN THOUGH YOU
MAY HAVE WALKED FOR MANY
YEARS ON THE PATHWAY TO GOD,
YOU MAY WELL BE ASHAMED
IF, WITH THE IMAGE OF CHRIST
BEFORE YOU, YOU DO NOT TRY
TO MAKE YOURSELF STILL MORE
LIKE HIM.... THE RELIGIOUS WHO
CONCERNS HIMSELF INTENTLY
AND DEVOUTLY WITH OUR
LORD’S MOST HOLY LIFE AND
PASSION WILL FIND THERE AN
ABUNDANCE OF ALL THINGS
USEFUL AND NECESSARY FOR
HIM. HE NEED NOT SEEK FOR
ANYTHING BETTER THAN JESUS....
IF THE CRUCIFIED SHOULD
COME TO OUR HEARTS, HOW
QUICKLY AND ABUNDANTLY WE
WOULD LEARN!”

~ THOMAS À KEMPIS,
THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

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