

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

Sept/Oct 2022

GIVE US  
THIS DAY



ALSO: VIRTUES OVER VICES

Friends:

Whether we eat bread or some other staple, we all need food to live. So it's no surprise that something so basic as "bread" is mentioned more than 500 times in the Bible. This month, Pastor Julia Prins Vanderveen, who loves to bake, focuses on the theme of bread as it's found in Scripture. Ultimately bread in the Bible serves as a vivid image and reminder of our need for God's Word, his truth for everyday living. God's truth is the only spiritual sustenance that can satisfy the deepest needs of our souls.



In the month of October, Pastor Scott DeVries helps us in understanding virtues and vices and how they affect our daily lives. The Bible teaches that virtues, such as contentment, humility, and faithfulness, help us grow into our God-given destiny to become our true selves and to live life to the fullest. On the other hand, vices, such as pride, greed, and sexual immorality, distract and disrupt our lives, harming our relationships with God and others. The Bible's teaching on these matters can help us on our journey of growing into Christlike living as we follow and serve Jesus in the world.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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**"Give Us This Day"**  
**Julia Prins Vanderveen**



**"Virtues over Vices"**  
**Scott DeVries**

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TODAY (USPS 185-140),  
Volume 72, Number 5,  
published bimonthly by  
ReFrame Ministries, formerly  
Back to God Ministries  
International, at 1700 28th  
Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI  
49508-1407. Periodicals postage  
paid at Grand Rapids, Michigan,  
and at additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes  
to Today, 1700 28th Street SE,  
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407.

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Cover photo: Lightstock



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**Ministries**

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Back to God Ministries International

# october

## Virtues over Vices

**Scott DeVries**

This month we will look at virtues and vices described in the Bible and how these affect our everyday lives. It can be helpful to think of virtues and vices from a growth mindset. Virtues help us grow into our God-given destiny to become our true selves, receiving life to the full as God intends for us (John 10:10). Vices work against that destiny, sometimes just distracting or disrupting our lives but more often harming our ability to live well.

For me, learning to trust that virtue is something to *grow into*, and that vice is something to *grow out of*, has had a healthy effect on my spiritual life. When it comes to growing out of vices, I am less tempted to fall into the opposing traps of either letting myself off the hook from my vices, or beating myself up about them. They instead become marks of maturity, and I learn that I will outgrow them faster by recognizing them and learning how to do better. This, in turn, helps in avoiding spiritual pride that can result from focusing too much on virtues, and at the same time it avoids a sense of defeat, burnout, or spiritual depression that can result from denying virtue. My prayer is that these devotions will have a similar effect on your spiritual life and that you too may gain understanding in how to grow out of a vice or into a virtue.

*Scott DeVries has served as a church pastor and as a ministry coordinator in the Holland, Michigan, area. He currently works at facilitating connections between the twenty-plus ministries and 1,100 churches of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. He has a passion for prayer, church organization, and studying the Scriptures in their original languages.*

## CONTENTMENT

*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.*

—Philippians 4:11

*Contentment* was a powerful word to the Greek-speaking people of Paul's day. To be content literally means "to find everything you need within yourself."

Many teachers in that day believed that contentment was the greatest virtue. But their version of contentment was based on self-accomplishment. To become content, they taught, a person had to be able to provide completely for himself or herself.

Paul knew that it was a myth to think that a human being can be completely self-sustaining. And yet here he looks within himself and finds that everything he needs is there within him. How did it get there? God put it there. God's own Spirit had begun living inside of Paul.

This contentment provided by the Spirit of God gave Paul

tremendous freedom. He goes on to say that sometimes his physical needs have been met, and sometimes they have not been met. But even when he has not had enough food, clothing, money, or other basic needs, he has still found that God's peace and strength have been present within him.

Jesus, live in us. Fill us with your Spirit's strength and peace, we pray, and help us to trust that you will provide whatever else we need for today. Amen.

## PRIDE

*Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.*

—Proverbs 16:18

The same two kinds of pride show up in many languages. Both kinds have to do with being majestic or exalted in some way. One kind of pride is good—for example, when parents view the development of their children as remarkable. But the other kind of pride is very bad.

Throughout Proverbs we read about the good development that can happen when someone pursues wisdom. True wisdom is gained through God. And even though a wise person can go through many ups and downs in life, the wisdom they've gained will help to hold their life together.

But beware of trying to keep it all together on your own. Beware of the pride that makes you think that anything you built on your own is worth more. Or that because you built it by yourself you won't

need anyone's help to hold it together. Or, most dangerous of all, that because you have been self-sufficient, you are a greater person than people who have relied on others.

That kind of pride leads to destruction. Poetically this verse is saying that if you have built something without God, then it isn't built very well. It's not built to last. Sooner or later, the so-called majestic life you built without God will simply fall apart.

Father God, keep us from the foolish pride that prompts us to build our lives on the rickety version of success prized by this world. Amen.

## HUMILITY

*Humility is the fear of the LORD; its wages are riches and honor and life.*  
—Proverbs 22:4

The rewards promised in Proverbs 22:4 are fleshed out in verses 1-3. Avoiding pride is not enough. We need to lean away from it and become humble.

God makes both the rich and the poor, says verse 2. In this context, “rich” does not refer to having an extravagant life. Having riches, or wealth, means that when we are doing God’s work—that is, living God’s way—we can count on receiving everything we truly need to keep going.

And wealth isn’t the most important reward. Honor, a good name, is more desirable than great riches, says verse 1. By humbly following God, we gain the respect of other good people, and we probably gain some respect from some not-so-great people also.

The most reliable reward of humbly following God is life

itself. When we are humble enough to rely on God’s direction, it is amazing how many pitfalls we avoid. We avoid the problems that pride falsely says we can handle ourselves.

When we are humble, we are amazed how often God helps us steer clear of trouble that we didn’t even see coming. When we are humble and we see or hear of someone’s folly leading to ruin, we learn to say, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” That’s because, as verse 3 notes, the unwise keep going right into trouble; they don’t have God to guide them.

Dear Jesus, life can be so tricky. I could easily fall into troubles that would hurt me physically or financially or even ruin my good name. You alone can guide me safely through. Amen.

## GREED

*"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."* —Luke 12:15

I didn't think I was greedy until I read this passage again. Jesus warns us to watch out for all kinds of greed. The kind of greed I usually thought about had to do with very wealthy people wanting more. But Jesus doesn't focus on that kind of greed here.

In the context of this passage, a man is arguing with his brother over their inheritance. The family has enough to hand down, but Jesus sees that this man is still worried if he will truly have enough. He is greedy not for luxury but for security. Ouch! I didn't even know that kind of greed existed. But many of us have it. We want a little bit more so that we don't have to worry.

Jesus points us away from greed based on worry. So long as we aim to live God's way, aligning ourselves with God's purpose for us in this world

(seeking his kingdom), and so long as it is not yet time for our heavenly inheritance, God will give us what we need to live for him each day. Wanting more than that is a type of greed. And that will distract us from fully living the life of joy and peace we are created for. So let's repent and learn to let go of our worry-based greed.

Creator and Provider, we exist because you want us to. Forgive us for trying to build our own security. Our worries cost this world too much. Amen.

## STEADFAST ENDURANCE

*"Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to . . . test the inhabitants of the earth."*  
—Revelation 3:10

Jesus suffered terribly because of how sinful our world is. After suffering, Jesus even died because of our sins. He endured suffering and died so that our sins would be paid for and our deaths could be overcome. Then, on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead in triumph—yet we must not lose sight of his suffering.

The believers who made up the church in ancient Philadelphia (in Greece) held tightly to the story of Jesus' suffering. It inspired them enough to face their own suffering and persecution. And Jesus said they would be rewarded for their steadfast endurance.

In this passage, what is called "patience" is more like extreme patience. It's the kind of patience that is required to endure doing the right thing and living the right way even when

you can't see any benefit in doing so. It is the virtue of holding on even when the reward might not come in this life.

Jesus' reward was that his death opened up a door to allow us to spend eternity with him. And our reward is that being devoted to Jesus allows us to step through that door and spend eternity with him.

He believed that you and I are a reward worth dying for. Do we believe the same about him?

Dearest Jesus, when this world refuses to reward us for being like you, help us to focus on the reward of living with you forever. Amen.

## LICENTIOUSNESS (LICENSE TO SIN)

*They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.*  
—Jude 4

The small book of Jude is about people who are part of the church but mistake the grace of God for a license to do whatever they want. Jude points out that by their actions these people deny that Jesus is the Lord of their lives. If they are not serving Jesus, whom are they serving?

Many sins seem good in the moment. The question we often fail to ask is, “How does this actually benefit me?” Or if we do ask that question, we settle for a superficial answer. Sometimes we may not feel sure that doing things God’s way will bring much of a benefit—or perhaps the benefit God offers won’t come about for a long time.

To truly follow Christ means to live as he lived. It means treating his grace not as a license

to sin but as a license to grow away from sin.

Jude makes clear that we often can’t tell when people who sin without remorse have “slipped in among” us. It’s easy to be confused because although we try to live into Christ’s freedom from sin, we often mess up too. All Christians sin, and Jesus forgives us for that. But living as if our sins don’t matter in this world can cause tremendous hurt and pain to others and ourselves.

So let’s not be fooled—real freedom belongs to those who choose to follow Christ.

Lord Jesus, show us the damages of our sin, and transform us to want to live your way always. Amen.

## JOY

*"Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. . . . Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."*  
—Nehemiah 8:10

How long should we feel sorry for our sins? If we move on too fast, does that show we aren't really sorry? Are we doing some injustice to God or to others we have sinned against? Or, if we hold on to being sorry too long, does that mean we do not trust enough in God's power to forgive?

Guilt can be hard to get over. The feelings can last a long time. And perhaps that's what we deserve. But since all sins are against God, even when a sin is also against others, God's situation is totally opposite to ours. He could demand that we wallow in our sorrow. But that's not who God is. God loves us and is overjoyed when we want to be in a good relationship with him again. In fact, God has so much joy when we repent of our sin that his joy provides the strength we need to forgive ourselves.

Nehemiah urged the people to experience that joy. He called for a feast so that the people could enjoy fine foods and drinks and share with others. This wasn't about just going through motions; it was about recognizing that God's law calls for a relationship with us. And as far as God is concerned, if we are ready to stop moving away from him and start moving toward him, that brings him the most joy.

Dear God, drive your joy—the joy of a relationship with you—deep into us. Amen.

## SEXUAL IMMORALITY

*Avoid sexual immorality . . . to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable.*  
—1 Thessalonians 4:3-4

“Sexual immorality” includes every sexual sin. But a lot of sexual behavior is not sinful. Followers of Christ today are often challenged to discern which sexual behaviors are sinful and which are not.

The guidelines in our reading for today show us when a sexual behavior is good and when it has crossed a line. Good sexual behaviors are holy and honorable. *Holy* means “set apart for service to God.” *Honorable* refers to showing respect and honor to God and others, recognizing that they have exceptional value. Sexual activities are holy when they honor God, building up his kingdom. Sex within marriage can be holy. The joy of holding hands with someone you’re attracted to can be holy. These can also be honorable, as can many other activities that express our sexuality.

But sexual behavior that is driven by passionate lust or takes advantage of someone is not good. Passionate lust refers to being so caught up that we are not even concerned for our own good. And taking advantage means serving our self at another person’s expense.

Being holy and honorable in our sexual behavior will set us widely apart from the world, for the world invites us to pursue any sexual desire. This may be uncomfortable for us, and it may require a lot of grace if we mess up. But the reward is sexually holy, honorable living that is part of the full life God promises.

Lord, help us not to harm ourselves or others with our sexuality but to give and receive the deep joy of holy, honorable intimacy. Amen.

## SELF-CONTROL

*The grace of God . . . teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives.*  
—Titus 2:11-12

In this passage *self-control* literally means “having a sound mind, or being reasonable.” It is basically the opposite of living in confusion, ignorance, or indifference about making choices that support healthy living.

God’s grace saves us from *ungodliness* (literally, “an unworshipful life”) and from being a slave to the world’s ideas of what we need or want. We are not born with the ability to just say “no”—at least not on a regular basis and not without something else to say “yes” to. If we are without God in our life, all of our “yes’s” are basically guesswork. Our guesses sometimes make things worse, and sometimes a little better—but without God we cannot find the path to full life.

In his grace, however, God has already said “yes” to something

else for us. Through the work of the Savior, Jesus, God has said “yes” to our redemption, giving us a whole new way of life. And because of this, God can now train us to say “yes” to better and better choices in our everyday living. That’s self-control.

Self-control is the God-trained ability to understand and choose which options bring us closer to being our best selves.

Jesus, make our path clear today, and give us the self-control we need to choose that path. When we choose wrongly, correct us gently. And when we choose correctly, encourage us, we pray. Amen.

## VAIN CONCEIT

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.*

—Philippians 2:3

People who are filled with vain conceit pretend that they are better, stronger, and more capable than they really are. This applies to anyone who thinks they have made it on their own, without the help of God or other people or opportunities.

When I think of conceited people I have known, they are not usually those who have had to work the hardest or who have had to climb very far up the social ladder. Ironically, conceited people are often those who have done very little for themselves while benefiting from lots of privileges and opportunities.

Whom would you rather follow? Someone who realizes that other people and circumstances have helped them gain success in their lives—such as supportive parents, teachers, mentors, friends, and cowork-

ers, as well as opportunities for education, training, and work experience? Or would you follow someone who thinks they have gained success entirely on their own?

Jesus was the opposite of vain. All of the glory and majesty of God were his, and yet he came to live and serve among us in a humble way that would cause people to find his glory in the kind of person he was and the kinds of things he did. He gloried not in himself but in building others up. If we want to be truly successful, we ought to have the mindset of Jesus.

Jesus, the truth about you came through in the way you lived among us. Help us not to be selfish or vain but instead to be like you. Amen.

## HOSPITALITY

*Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.*  
—Hebrews 13:2

When this passage in Hebrews was written, people were expected to show generous hospitality to travelers who might have nowhere else to stay as they went from town to town.

The context of this advice urges believers in God to show love and care for one another as well for others who may be in need, such as strangers, travelers, and people in prison. This advice echoes the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, where he teaches that caring for the needs of others is like doing the same for him.

This passage in Hebrews also invites us to consider that a stranger or visitor we encounter might be an angel—that is, a messenger from God (see also Genesis 18). The point is that we should treat anyone we meet as being so valuable and worthy of our time that they

might be sent from God, and that showing love and care to them would be like doing the same for the Lord himself.

This can be hard to imagine, especially if hospitality is not common in our culture and we need to be wary of danger. But here the Spirit of God is challenging us simply to treat others well, showing love and kindness to everyone, no matter who they are. In other words, we are called to love and care for others just as the Lord has done for us.

Lord, in a world that can often be scary, help us to treat strangers as if they were sent from you. Amen.

## DISCORD

*Since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly . . . acting like mere humans?* —1 Corinthians 3:3

We live in a world of discord, and Christians are not immune. “Discord” is another possible translation of the word for “quarreling.” Other options could be “contention,” “strife,” and “rivalry.” The idea here isn’t just intellectual debate, or even strong disagreement. Discord has to do with allowing our disagreements to separate us.

Christians are supposed to have the Spirit of God, who knows the deepest things of God. Over time, the Spirit helps us to understand God and to live more and more in line with God’s will.

When we don’t understand other Christians or we flat-out disagree with them, perhaps instead of trying to lecture them about what we think, we should engage in times of healthy and humble sharing and questioning together. We should try to recognize the

signs of the Spirit’s work in each other and wonder what the Spirit is doing in the person we do not understand. The most likely scenario is that God has each of us on different learning paths, and perhaps by intertwining those paths, even uncomfortably, we could advance in the process of maturing in Christ.

In your relationships today, what can you do to work toward unity in the Spirit rather than discord?

Lord, we make slow progress against our vices and toward your virtues. Help us to recognize that people who have a sincere but different relationship with you might have some understanding that can help us grow closer to you. Amen.

## EMPATHY

*Encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.*  
—1 Thessalonians 5:14

The Greeks had a word for “encouragement” that was quite similar to our understanding of empathy. It came from the idea of being with someone in their story. That’s the word Paul uses here for helping the disheartened. Disheartened people are basically those who have lost some of their hope.

In our reading for today, Paul urges us to be our best selves for everyone we encounter. Some people find that easier to do than others do. People who are disheartened can be a bit difficult to spend time with. The emotions of others tend to affect us, so we might prefer to be with people who have happiness and excitement to share. But Paul points out that to be truly Christlike, we also need to give our time to those who are struggling.

It’s interesting that Paul also goes on to tell us to “rejoice

always” (v. 16). Entering into a disheartening story should not dishearten us. It might make us sad or angry, but it shouldn’t cause us to lose hope.

With hope we retain joy despite the sadness or anger we may feel with a disheartened friend, because we know that the disheartening things of this world do not have the final say. And we can bring that hope and joy into the other person’s story, doing so in a way that shows they are not alone. With that simple action, we can help to change their story by being a part of it.

Jesus, as you have entered into our stories, shared our pains, and yet become our hope, let us be like you for others. Amen.

## CAUSING DISSENSION

*Watch out for those who cause divisions. . . . Keep away from them.*  
—Romans 16:17

A couple of days ago we looked at the trouble that discord can cause among us as Christians. It's sinful to have that kind of disunity, and it's even worse to try to create disunity.

Causing dissension may be one of the vilest forms of deception we see in the church. It preys on some of the best impulses Christians have toward loving one another. It happens when a person or a group starts focusing on the flaws of others. And slowly they make that focus a central and necessary part of being in a relationship with them. Unsuspecting friends will slowly find their relationships eroding with the people who are supposedly flawed. This process has ended up destroying congregations.

Paul tells us to be on guard against people who cause dissension, and to leave them alone. That might sound like

Paul is building dissension, but unity in serving Christ cannot grow if a person or group is trying to destroy that unity. Actually we often find that people who sow dissension want relationships just as badly as the rest of us do. When they are shown that having a relationship with the body of Christ means being unified with others, dissenters will often come back around, and we can welcome them back gladly.

Jesus, you offered relationships that would unite everyone with you. May we live that way also. Amen.

## ENCOURAGEMENT

*"Encourage [Joshua], because he will lead Israel to inherit [the land]."*  
—Deuteronomy 1:38

If you have become an expert in your work, how you would feel if someone younger and less experienced were chosen to take up your role?

Moses had led God's people out of Egypt and across the Red Sea (Exodus 1-15). He had received God's law and taught it to the people (Exodus 20-50), and by God's grace he had brought them to the edge of the promised land. But the people had rebelled, and God had turned them back to wander in the wilderness for forty years (Numbers 13-14). Now they were about to enter the promised land again, but Moses would not be leading them in. God had chosen Joshua to do that instead.

In Deuteronomy, Moses gives his farewell address, and here he says God told him to "encourage" Joshua. More literally, this means "strengthen." But

couldn't *God* have given Joshua all the strength he needed? Was that a bit like rubbing salt in Moses' wounds?

This seems counterintuitive at first, but it is actually a great gift to Moses to be the one to strengthen or encourage Joshua. As Moses empowers Joshua in front of everyone, Joshua steps in to continue Moses' success rather than just being his replacement. Joshua's success becomes part of Moses' legacy.

How might you encourage and strengthen someone taking up the role you have had?

Lord, grant us success where you want us to serve, and help us to raise up people to continue your work after us. Amen.

**EASILY PROVOKED**

*Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.*  
—Ecclesiastes 7:9

God leads us into good times and bad times. Both can serve God's purpose in helping us grow. This does not mean God causes our suffering, nor that something good will always come from every bad situation. But sometimes our bad times can be used by God for our greater good, if only we'll pay attention.

If we get annoyed or angry too quickly, we're not likely to consider that what seems like a bad time to us might just be a hard but important lesson for our personal growth.

What provokes you? Homework? Rules? Traffic jams? Having to wait in line? Having to work hard? Not getting a promotion? Not winning a game? It's easy to get annoyed when things don't go our way or we don't get what we want. But how often do we see these

kinds of things as learning opportunities?

Working on being less easily annoyed by a learning opportunity can give us a great start on this virtue. It can help to apply problem-solving skills as well, preparing us to move on to harder situations. And in cases where someone is actually at fault for a problem in our lives, this can help us handle the problem in a constructive way—even if it's necessary to apply consequences.

Anger is a powerful tool. When it's used too quickly, it tends to cause more harm than good. God is slow to anger, and we do well to follow his example.

God, thank you for not quickly getting angry with us. Help us to be slow to be provoked as well. Amen.

## PEACEMAKING

*Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*

—James 3:18

Peace is so much more than an absence of conflict. Peace involves people and systems working in harmony together. Peace is an existence full of well-being, in which our bodies, our relationships, our environment, and even our governments and economies are healthy. Peace even grows righteousness, which brings flourishing and justice for all. Where there is righteousness, people treat each other with love, patience, and all other virtues. Peace is an existence we dream of, which Jesus promised to bring us.

Peace is not here yet. But we can have tastes of it. We can even build little communities of it for a time. The Holy Spirit built a community of peace among the early Christians (see Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37). And some examples today include

Christians living in “intentional communities” together.

Sometimes our calling and our God-given responsibilities in this world prevent us from creating a community where we can live mainly with others who share our desire for peace. But we can learn a lot from such communities, and we can be peacemakers in the world at large.

Where do you see a lack of peace in the community you are a part of, and what can you do to sow some peace there? Do you already know how to do that? Whom could you learn from?

Lord Jesus, come quickly to bring your peace forever. In the meantime, teach us practical ways to be peacemakers where we are today. Amen.

**ENVY**

*Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD.*  
—Proverbs 23:17

It's tempting to admire rich and famous people who seem to have every pleasure in this world. They seem to have everything at their fingertips—money, fine food, adventurous travels, sleek cars and other toys, beautiful houses in beautiful places, power in business and politics. Don't they have it all?

The Bible often cautions against having too much desire for the things other people have. That can lead to internal unrest that's unhealthy for the soul.

Envy often involves not only a desire for something but also a demand that no one else should have it. And the sin of envy might tempt us to commit more sin in order to get what we want—to lie, cheat, steal, or even kill for it.

However, says the writer of our passage today, it is far better to pursue doing things God's way. When we live God's way, our future will be secure, even if it doesn't seem exciting or extravagant by the world's standards. In fact, when we are truly wise and in tune with God, we will have as much desire for God's way as we might be tempted to have for the life of people who seem to have everything.

Provider God, give us our daily bread today, and help us not to be tempted to do anything sinful to get more. Amen.

## LOVE

*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* —1 John 4:10

This might be the most powerful sentence ever written. With all the volumes written about love, even with all the Scriptures that talk about love, this is the only place where God wrote down his definition of love for all to see. Love is not simply a feeling, or an action, or even a commitment—although all of those things are involved. Love is beyond words and has been communicated most clearly through the Father's will and the Son's sacrifice—when Jesus died on a cross so that our relationship with God could be restored.

No matter what angle we view it from, God's love is always more. From the angle of the Father, he sacrificed what was dearest to him for the sake of those who needed him more. From the Son's perspective, he sacrificed himself so that we could be restored to the

Father. And from our perspective, to the extent that we can see it honestly, we were lost and without a hope in the world. Because of our sin, we were headed for destruction with no way to save ourselves. So God "sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Why? Because he loves us.

And in the light of that love, there is more: "If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, my love is so much less than yours. How can it be that my weak love can complete yours? Help my love to grow. Amen.

## HATE

*Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar.*

—1 John 4:20

In our polarized world today, this statement is a convicting reminder, isn't it? Its message is quite simple: anyone who hates another person does not love God.

When I was growing up, I thought hate was a thing I felt only in the rarest moments of my deepest anger. That was certainly a severe form of hate, and I'm glad it was rare and fleeting. But I've learned that the Bible teaches there are several other forms of hate as well. In fact, a much more common form of hate can occur when we simply cease to care about someone at all. Hatred begins when we stop caring about what is good for someone. And it can range all the way to wishing harm or death on them.

I have seen a lot of statements from Christians and non-Christians alike that wish harm on

their opponents in politics, in lifestyles, and even in sports! It's one thing to wish that opponents would change their minds or hearts, and it could even be an act of love to try and convince them to change, as long as we did so using virtues. But if we start wishing that our opponents would leave the country, be embarrassed, need to hide something about themselves, or maybe even get sick or worse, then we are entertaining hatred.

Dear Jesus, teach us to wish the best even on our enemies. May your love so overflow from us that it also fills our opponents and returns to us. Amen.

**KIND/USEFUL**

*He [has shown] the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.* —Ephesians 2:7

Sometimes we use the words *kind* and *nice* interchangeably. For many of us, the word *nice* simply means that something is pleasant. But in the Bible the Greek word *chrestotes*, translated as “kindness,” goes deeper. It refers to making ourselves useful or beneficial to others, and sometimes that is not pleasant.

In Ephesians 2 we read some amazing things about the grace of God. By God’s grace we receive the free gift of salvation from our sins. The gift is free, and yet we sometimes forget that it changes us. Grace gets results. Grace is useful, beneficial, kind.

Grace is useful because it changes us. It lifts us up. It seats us on a heavenly throne with Christ Jesus—we become minor rulers serving the King of kings! But don’t forget that kings have responsibilities. Our

royal responsibilities include showing the grace of God to everyone, everywhere. We do that by living out the good works that the King of kings has prepared for us to do. And when we do those good works, we become useful (kind) to the world, which in turn can better understand the grace of God expressed through the kindness of Christ Jesus to us.

Lord Jesus, what you did on the cross was so kind. It wasn’t pleasant, but nothing has ever been more useful to us. Help us to do the good works we are called to do, and to be kind (useful) to the world as well. Amen.

## WRATH

*Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.*  
—Psalm 37:8

Injustice makes us angry. That's okay, but we must be careful. Psalm 37:8 cautions us not to fuss so much about the evil we see that we become evildoers ourselves.

First, we see evil or injustice, and we begin to fret about it. It's not fair that by doing evil things some people gain power and wealth. And what if that evil gets directed toward us? If we fret about it too much, we can begin to get angry. "Why doesn't anyone stop them?" we cry. "We ought to put them in their place!" And if we stay angry, that can grow and become wrath. In wrath, we can be consumed by our anger. If we are not thinking straight and are not careful, we can fall into behavior that leads to evil.

A lot of research in past decades has shown that this kind of progression is behind a lot of criminal activity. Someone

experiences injustice, and before you know it, they are acting unjustly too. Maybe at first they directed their evil at people who were hurting them. But it doesn't always end there.

Though wrath may not always lead to criminal activity, it is destructive. Wrath can cause things like mocking, bullying, and other unjust activities as well.

The solution is to avoid even fretting about evil. God will provide justice, and he will provide for our needs as well. We might not be able to stop everyone else's evil, but we can at least stop ourselves by resting patiently in God.

Dear God, help us to trust that you will provide justice fittingly in your time. Amen.

## PATIENCE

*I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience. . . .*

—1 Timothy 1:16

Earlier this month we looked at the virtue of steadfast endurance (Oct. 5), a sort of superpatience. Today our attention is on the more normal patience we need as we deal with waiting in everyday life. Perhaps the most common example of this is the patience that parents and teachers hopefully showed us while they were waiting for us to grow smarter and wiser.

It's heartwarming that Paul uses this type of patience to describe Jesus' waiting before we repent and commit our lives to him. It suggests that Jesus never lost sight of our future in him. He knew he would win us over; it was just a matter of time. So he was patient, being the best of teachers, even when we insisted on doing things our own wrong way.

This passage prompts us not to hide the patience we needed

from Christ. We should be open about our sinfulness and repentance and faith so that the patience Jesus had with us will be on full display. And as we share the story of Christ's patience with us, we will grow in patience and understanding toward others who still need to "believe in him and receive eternal life."

Dear Jesus, many of us have come so far because of your patience with us. Help us to grow more and to share your patience with others. Amen.

## IDOLS/FALSE GOODS

*Put to death . . . whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.*  
—Colossians 3:5

This passage reminds me of my swimming instructor when I was young. The instructor stood just a few body lengths away from me in the pool, but as I swam toward him, he moved backward so that I would stretch my abilities to reach him. When I reached him, he showed me how far I had gone, and, more importantly, I found that he had improved my confidence.

While I was swimming, I wanted so badly to reach the instructor. And Jesus wants us to reach for him like that. But in the pool of life there are many other things we could grab onto. None of them are as safe as Jesus, but many of them seem easier to reach.

These other things we want to grab are idols. Idols can be false gods or false goods. This passage is warning us about

false goods. We get greedy for things that seem able to help us, but they can never be as safe as Jesus. In fact, these things are so unsafe that if we don't let go of them, they will bring us to destruction.

It's not safe to grab onto the false goods or idols of this world when we simply need to keep stretching toward Christ, who is with us always (Matthew 28:20).

Lord, keep near to us so that we don't lose confidence in reaching you. And free us from the things of this world that falsely offer the safety that only you can give. Amen.

## TRUST ALL

*Love . . . always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*  
—1 Corinthians 13:7

We talked earlier about the power of God's love and how amazing it is (Oct. 19). Let's look today at what love does to trust.

Our passage tells us that "love . . . always trusts." Other translations say that "love trusts all things." The original Greek text says, more simply, "trusts all"—always and all things. When I first noticed that, it seemed impossible to me.

Have you ever been let down by someone only to find that it was because they never trusted you? You might want to scream about who turned out not to be trustworthy! I learned early in life not to trust people that I sensed didn't trust me. But that can lead to a destructive cycle in which people begin to trust each other less and less.

Love offers a different approach. Love says, "I'll give you trust." Period.

An unrelenting effort to "trust all" moves us to dig as deep as we need to in order to find what is trustworthy. And that always brings us to God.

The world will let you down, and you should feel free to move yourself to safety when you need to. But God's perfect love can drive us to look constantly for new ways to trust.

God, in and through your perfect love, help us to find trust that doesn't depend on circumstances but on you. Amen.

## SORCERY

*"Keep on, then, with your magic spells and with your many sorceries. . . . Perhaps you will succeed, perhaps you will cause terror."*  
—Isaiah 47:12

It may be surprising to hear that sorcery is still practiced today, not just in remote parts of the world but even in towns and cities in the Western world, and among well-educated people. Some sources say it's actually on the rise.

Ancient Babylon was full of sorcery in Isaiah's time. And many people credited sorcery for the rise of Babylon. But God showed Isaiah that Babylon would fall, and it did—and no amount of sorcery could save it.

Through Isaiah, the Lord mocks sorcery in this passage. It has no power over the true God. Babylon's downfall came not from a lack of sorcery or misreading the stars. Babylon fell because all its attention to manipulating natural and supernatural forces came

down to selfishness, which leads only to ruin.

Modern sorcery or witchcraft is no different. It misses the big picture. And even if it saw the big picture, it would be powerless to bring it about or stop it.

Don't fall prey to the promises of today's sorcerers and their crafts. In the end all true good is in the hands of God.

Lord and God, protect and strengthen us with your true goodness. Though strange and powerful forces may be at work around us, help us always to trust in you. Amen.

## MERCY/COMPASSION

*"Learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." —Matthew 9:13*

Some years ago the United States Senate held confirmation hearings for a top government position. The appointee had done something bad in the past but had also done some good things since then. Sadly, the most disappointing part of the process was in the arguments that were made in favor and against. The underlying belief on both sides was that bad people stay bad and good people stay good. People don't change.

Jesus didn't believe that about people. The whole point of Jesus' coming was to change people. And while only God can truly change people, God grants those changes abundantly. That's because God acts with mercy, and he calls us to do the same.

Too often people get caught up in trying to please God by their acts of worship, including

sacrifices—that is, giving things up in order to please God. But if our actions are just self-serving, they are not sacrificial. Yet, ironically, if we act with mercy toward someone struggling to turn their life around, that is a sacrifice that pleases God.

In Christ, we can believe that a person's life can change. And if you are wondering if God will accept you despite what you've done with your life, yes, he absolutely will accept you. Give your life to him today, and pray for others to encourage you in your life of faith.

Dear Jesus, thank you for your grace in turning our lives around. Help us never to withhold the mercy you have shown to us. Amen.

## WICKEDNESS

*"Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold."*  
—Matthew 24:12

As time passes, this passage becomes more frightening. Perhaps every generation feels that the signs of the end times are increasing. Perhaps the signs *are* increasing. Certainly the generations that are still living have seen plenty of earthquakes, famines, and wars. And certainly today we see an increase in wickedness, at least in some places.

The particular wickedness Jesus warns about in verse 12 could be called "lawlessness." It goes beyond refusing to live God's way, and it basically refuses to live according to anyone's rules. It's the attitude that believes "It's only illegal if I get caught."

The problem with this wickedness, according to Jesus, is that it works against love. It holds no commitment to another and has no willingness to sacrifice for anyone. In the end

times most people will care only about themselves, and most people's love will grow cold.

Taken to the extreme, that's a bone-chilling thought. It will be "survival of the fittest" among people who are most violent and crafty. May Christ return before we become so lawless.

Spirit of Jesus, guide our lives to save us from lawlessness. Fill us with your love and wisdom, we pray. Amen.

**GOODNESS/EXCELLENCE**

*Make every effort to add to your faith goodness . . . knowledge . . . self-control . . . perseverance . . . godliness . . . mutual affection . . . love.*  
—2 Peter 1:5-7

Have you ever stopped to think about what “goodness” actually is? It was probably one of the earliest concepts we learned. Something was good if we felt positively about it. And later, as we grew, we learned to add descriptions such as beautiful, healthy, pleasant, and more.

The kind of goodness that Peter describes here was prized in the Greek culture. It pointed to a kind of excellence that could overcome a great difficulty. For example, this would describe a Greek athlete who gained a victory despite an injury that would have kept most others from competing.

Christ challenges us to make our best efforts in striving with excellence to live like him. By his Spirit, he has given us the power—and even the victory. And in line with our being

made in God’s image, I believe, we can find great satisfaction in our productive efforts to live as we are called. The level of goodness described in this passage is about doing our very best to live for Christ, and at the end of the day we can look back with satisfaction on the spiritual challenges we have faced and thank God for helping us.

Lord, help us to strive for goodness/excellence as we seek to live for you each day. Amen.

## EVILNESS

*They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil.* —Romans 1:29-31

Ever since sin came into our world, we human beings have been thinking up new ways to do bad things or to do things badly. And if we think we are immune from this, we are only deceiving ourselves.

Creativity is part of the image of God given to human beings, and, sadly, we have put our creativity to use to destroy as much of the rest of God's image in us as possible. That's what our passage today in Romans warns about.

God has always been there for us to find, but until the Lord came into our lives, we refused to find him. We didn't want to. Our sinful nature turned us away from God. We wanted to pursue bad things, or if we wanted to pursue anything good, we wanted to do it our way.

In the opening chapter of Romans, Paul is clearly angry about all the evil that people have done in the world, and then in chapter 2 he turns a corner. Every person has had some part in this creative sinfulness we've brought into the world, and if any of us thinks we can judge another, we are condemning ourselves.

Even so, God has been kind and merciful to forgive us and show us a better way. And since God has been kind to us, we can and must spread that kindness to everyone else as well.

Dear Jesus, remind us that your way is better than our old way. Show us all your kindness, forbearance, and patience, we pray. Amen.

## FORBEARANCE

*Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?*  
—Romans 2:4

Romans 2:4 reveals the path by which we and others come to repentance. It's all because of God's kindness.

But too often we assume that the threat of judgment is what leads to repentance. "If only we can show people how bad they are, then they will be sorry," we think. Or perhaps if we can show them the consequences of their actions—like some negative life outcomes, or the ultimate punishment of going to hell—then they will repent, right?

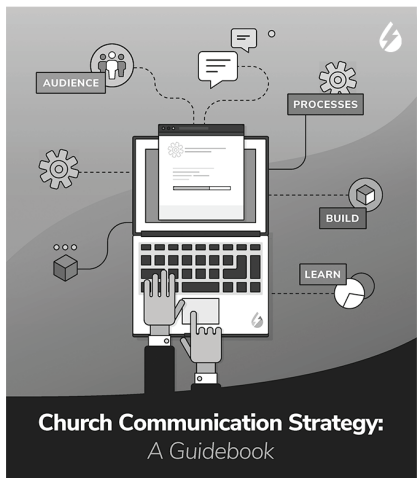
But the path to repentance is quite different. Instead, God is kind with us. And God waits patiently for us to notice his kindness. And rather than showing us our consequences, God actually holds back our consequences—at least many of the worst ones. Holding back consequences is called

*forbearance*. God forbears with us until we see his kindness.

It is God's kindness that leads to our repentance. God's example challenges us to somehow forbear with other people's unrepentant attitudes. It's not our place to judge them or bring about their consequences. In fact, perhaps, like Christ, we ought to help bear others' consequences. We should show the kindness, patience, and forbearance that God has shown us.

Dear Jesus, this world is still full of vices. Help us to endure in forbearing with others, just as you have endured with us. Amen.

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