

Today

July/Aug 2018

refresh, refocus, renew

*Our Faith
Journey*



ALSO: THE DISCIPLINE OF HOSPITALITY

Friends:

My wife and I have long enjoyed having people stay with us. When we lived in Boston and Chicago, friends would come to tour the cities and be our guests. We also took in boarders over the years, offering young people a place to live while experiencing a little family life. Now we are using our home as a formal B&B in our spare time.



Hospitality is all about welcoming the traveler into rest and safety. It's about making space for people to dwell with you, even to the point of being inconvenienced. God has shown us the depths of hospitality—not only when he welcomed us into existence in his image, but also when he came to live in our mess and suffered in our place. In this issue of *Today* we explore both being on a journey and offering hospitality.

In August, pastor Lloyd Wicker examines hospitality from a biblical perspective, imitating Christ's sacrificial gift by which he makes room for us with him, even though we don't deserve it.

But first, in July, pastor Bret Lamsma sets us on a journey. We never stand still in the journey of faith, and we keep learning and growing along the way. We are all called to be travelers on the path to full life in Jesus.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Steven Koster". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steven" and the last name "Koster" clearly distinguishable.

—Steven Koster

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"Our Faith Journey"
Bret Lamsma



"The Discipline of Hospitality"
Lloyd Wicker

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Executive Editor: Steven Koster

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ReFrame
Media

Our Faith Journey

Bret Lamsma

july

Did you know that everyone is walking a journey of faith? Whether we are young or old, we are moving either toward or away from Jesus Christ. There is no standing still in our faith journey. Jesus taught this in all his interactions with people. He challenged everyone to be changed to have genuine faith and to know what it means to be a disciple, journeying toward his Father with every step they take. This July, then, may we all journey closer to God as we reflect on Jesus' life-changing teachings.

Bret Lamsma is director of faith formation at a church in Denver, Colorado, and has served churches in Michigan and California in youth, intergenerational, and educational ministries. Bret and his wife, Julie, have two children, and he enjoys hiking, camping, and visiting national parks with his family.

The Discipline of Hospitality

Lloyd Wicker

august

To most people, hospitality has to do with receiving and entertaining guests, who are usually on friendly terms with the host. The Bible reveals a calling to do that and much more. To show hospitality means living out the call to invite people to share Christ's love and presence, recognizing that Jesus invited people who were outcasts, marginalized, and sinners of all kinds to share in God's kingdom. Following his example, we are called to make room for strangers as well as friends, welcoming everyone into full life with God.

Lloyd Wicker has been a pastor for more than eighteen years and has served churches in Illinois, Washington, and California. He currently serves as a chaplain with the United States Navy in Sicily. Lloyd and his wife, Heidi, have three children.

ROOM FOR OTHERS

"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

—Matthew 25:40

The life of following Christ is not just about "me, me, me." The gospels challenge us repeatedly to devote our lives to living for others. Jesus equates serving others with serving God.

All too often, though, our lives become consumed by our own plans. Our schedules may be filled with important, honorable things to do. Yet we often risk focusing only on our own plans and missing out on the opportunities God gives us to make room for others in life.

Matthew repeatedly stresses that if we love God, we will inevitably love others. In fact, if we don't love others, our love for God is in question. Love in action is not just for the people closest to us but also for people who are marginalized, suffering, and in need. When we care for such people, we

are actually showing our love for Jesus.

For many of us, the thought of showing hospitality tends toward shared time with friends and family. But do we consider hospitality as an active expression of our faith? The Bible calls us to "welcome the stranger" and "practice hospitality." More than making room, hospitality calls for Christians to be ready even for the unexpected. While our deeds of compassion and mercy are not the means by which we enter God's kingdom, they show that we are part of God's family.

Lord, help us to see the opportunities you give us to care for others. Make us generous in compassion and care as we live each moment today. Amen.

CALLED TO HOSPITALITY

Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

—Romans 12:13

If showing hospitality meant we always had to throw elegant parties and impress our guests, most of us would not bother with it.

The Bible's instruction to "practice hospitality" is much simpler. Though it includes some planning and calls for showing people a warm welcome, hospitality is more about cultivating relationships and sharing the love that God has shown us.

Paul, who wrote to the Romans, considered hospitality an everyday practice and described it as vital to spiritual growth. More than throwing grand parties and putting on a performance, hospitality is about inviting people into our lives and sharing from what we have—both as giver and recipient.

One day, my wife found that she needed one more egg for a recipe she was making.

Catching the eye of a new neighbor, she asked if she could borrow an egg. Out of her need for something so minor, a new relationship formed. Being dependent on another allowed her to receive not just the egg for her recipe but also a new friendship.

To be a neighbor is to be both neighborly and open to neighborliness. Love looks out for others and recognizes the effect our actions will have on others when we make decisions. It calls us to attend not just to blessing others but to being blessed by them as well.

God, you have been generous to us. Teach us to share generously with the people around us, and to bless them by accepting their generosity as well. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

SELFLESS GENEROSITY

"When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed." —Luke 14:13-14

Do you know what a *quid pro quo* mindset is? It means "I will do something for you that equals the value of what you do for me." Jesus has a dramatically different picture in mind when he talks about hospitality.

When we think of throwing a party, we tend to include people we like and who are like us. But Jesus presses us to reach out toward the fringes of community life. This kind of outreaching love and care is what distinguished the early church from its surrounding environment.

Two attitudes that are vital to Christian character are generosity and humility. Nurturing both in your life helps guard against a destructive and blinding mindset that ignores the needs and circumstances of others around us. Something as ordinary as sharing a meal

is an expression of respect and equality. It includes sharing not just our resources but also ourselves, and it speaks loudly to our values and commitments.

We are all recipients of God's grace and provision. We are all guests at his table, and God, our Host, is abundantly generous. Look for opportunities to be outrageously generous to people who least expect it and who are least able to reciprocate. A sign of humility involves wanting to help others when you would gain nothing from it.

How can you go out of your way to bless someone today?

Jesus, as we have generously received your good gifts, help us to pursue opportunities to be generous to others in our gratitude to you. Amen.

A HEART FOR SERVING OTHERS

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him.

—Mark 10:51

Bartimaeus somehow knew that Jesus was more than just a popular prophet and miracle worker. He called him "Son of David," a title that described the Messiah, the long-promised deliverer of God's people. This declaration was a prelude to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as the Lord's anointed, the true King.

Walking into the town of Jericho, Jesus was surrounded by a roaring crowd, but that did not keep him from hearing the cries of a person who truly needed him. Other people ignored or rebuked this "nobody" named Bartimaeus, but Jesus saw his faith and called him.

With God's help, we must learn, despite life's distractions, to train our eyes to see and our ears to hear the needs of people around us. When Bartimaeus came over to him,

Jesus asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" This question shows Jesus' focus on serving the needs of others. And never did he say, "Now you owe me." Instead, highlighting the man's trust in him, Jesus said, "Go . . . your faith has healed you."

We learn from Jesus the importance of being selfless and not losing sight of our mission. We recognize that our mission as followers of Christ is to be attentive to our community and to include the people we meet, day-in and day-out. We remember that our help must go out to others, not just to those who can help us.

Sharpen our senses, Lord Jesus, to see and hear the people around us today, and give us hearts that long to serve them as you did. In your name, Amen.

SEEING BEYOND THE SURFACE

"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

—Luke 5:32

When Jesus chose his disciples, he did some things people did not expect. Levi was a tax collector—part of a socially despised profession known for corruption and greed. Tax collectors were labeled as “sinners” by the Pharisees, a group of religious leaders who were concerned with following their own interpretation of God’s law and avoiding “unclean” people or behavior.

Calling Levi to discipleship, Jesus challenged him to a totally new way of life. And in his response, Levi’s life changed forever. He left everything to follow Jesus. Levi also “held a great banquet for Jesus at his house,” and a crowd of tax collectors and others joined in. As we might guess, this attracted the criticism of the Pharisees.

It is tempting to limit our social circles to people who are mostly like us. Yet Jesus re-

veals his priorities when he responds to the Pharisees by saying, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” He cared more about reaching people lost in sin than being criticized by self-righteous legalists. The result: lives changed for eternity.

The danger of piety is separatism. Our mission as Christ-followers is to engage the communities where we are planted. While we rightly separate ourselves from evil deeds, we must never isolate ourselves from people who have yet to meet Jesus and hear his good news.

God, give us eyes to see the need for new life and joy in people who do not know Jesus, and may we help in leading them to him. Amen.

THE ART OF RECEIVING

"Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." —Mark 10:15

At the time of Jesus' teaching ministry, children had little status. They were often pushed aside as second-class citizens. So Jesus' words got the attention of his listeners when he invited children to come near. This wasn't the first time his disciples had heard Jesus' teaching on this—and it wasn't the last time they tried to prevent access to Jesus. But Jesus would have none of that. He drew close to people whom society tended to cast aside.

Some Christians have an attitude of pushing away people who are poor or who are different from them. There are many ways that we can tend to huddle close, excluding people who don't fit our standards. Yet we don't see that attitude in anything Jesus did. In fact, again and again Jesus reached out to the marginalized.

To enter into the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says, we must receive it with complete dependence and trust—like a child. Children are at the mercy of their caregivers. They cannot protect themselves, defend themselves, or provide for themselves. They have to rely on and trust their caregivers for everything they need.

God wants us to see that we have the same kind of dependence on him for life and salvation. Trusting in him, relying on his power and mercy and grace, we can receive these wonderful gifts and enjoy full life forever.

Lord Jesus, we are glad for the gift of salvation. Make us generous in sharing the gift of your love with others, inviting them to believe and trust in you too. Amen.

LOVE'S GENEROUS EXPRESSION

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

What an interesting idea! By showing kindness to strangers, you could be showing kindness to a messenger of God. Buying an extra burger to share with a homeless person, helping someone change a flat tire on their car, offering a ride to a colleague who needs one—in these ways and more, God often gives us opportunities to show hospitality and compassion for someone who has a need.

As I encounter people who are not part of a faith community, it saddens me when they describe Christians as less-than-compassionate people. Words I often hear in these conversations are that Christians are *judgmental* and *condescending*. Many people see church buildings in their communities as little more than clubs or political action organizations. They hear church people speak out

mostly about what the members oppose.

The world needs to see Christians as people of compassion—good-news people who act like Jesus. That will happen when we nurture a habit of practicing compassion.

It is not by accident that the writer of Hebrews urges readers to love each other and to look out for the needs of strangers. It's easy to overlook the unusual or the unfamiliar. It takes the love of Christ to reach out to the stranger who might just bring a unique blessing that you never saw coming.

Lord Jesus, open my eyes today to see the strangers around me. Show me how to receive them as one of your gifts today. Amen.

SERVING WITH COMPASSION

The Twelve came to him and said, "Send the crowd away so they can . . . find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here."

—Luke 9:12

The story of Jesus feeding a crowd of thousands of people weaves together themes from throughout his ministry. These include compassion, power over creation, the ability to sustain life, and involving others in responding to human needs. We also see God's grace and providence intertwine as Jesus sends the disciples out "to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick."

It is important to realize that the people who heard the gospel and who were healed and fed were not saved and sanctified saints; they were not fully committed disciples who were ready to follow Jesus. Yet when Jesus saw their hurts and needs, he responded with love, knowing that many of them would abandon and even turn against him later. Even so, Jesus was moved with compassion, seeing their need. In the same

way, he has compassion today when he sees the hurts and needs of anyone created in the image of God.

We have daily opportunities to come alongside the people around us. It could mean dropping by the hospital or the nursing home for a visit. Perhaps it involves cooking a meal for someone. Maybe it includes simply listening to another person's story. When we seek to provide what Jesus offers, we reflect a beautiful picture of God's compassion and care for others.

God, help us to see the needs of others not as interruptions to our day, but rather as opportunities to reflect the love of Christ for people who need it. In his name, Amen.

TRANSFORMATION FROM THE INSIDE OUT

"Today salvation has come to this house. . . . For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."
—Luke 19:9-10

The story of Zacchaeus beautifully captures the message of the gospel and the transforming power of God's grace. Zacchaeus wasn't a popular person at all. As a chief tax collector, his job was to gather taxes for the Roman government. This profession was notorious for corruption. Not only was he a man of great wealth based on the job he had, but he may well have been lonely—generally rejected by his own people.

Zacchaeus was small in stature as well as being small in character. But he wanted to see Jesus, so he climbed a tree to see over the crowd. As Jesus approached, he picked out Zacchaeus and invited himself to the man's home. Certainly this would have upset the townspeople, but Jesus saw something in Zacchaeus that only God can see in a person.

He saw the man he could be. And Zacchaeus's transformation was dramatic. His salvation came not because he returned a large part of his riches, but because he received the grace and mercy of Jesus—and it changed the way he lived. His transformation was public and personal and urgently important.

From sinner to seeker to follower, Zacchaeus became an example of the change that takes place in our lives because of Christ. Yes, the same happens in our lives too, because a change of heart leads to a change of character and behavior.

Thank you, Jesus, for your transforming grace and mercy. Change us from the inside out so that our words and actions rightly reflect your ongoing work in our lives. Amen.

COURAGE IN THE MIDST OF HARDSHIP

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.
—1 Peter 4:8-9

The apostle Peter encourages the church not only to anticipate hardship but to prepare for trials that will inevitably come. One way to do that is to prepare our minds. Through suffering, our confidence can be renewed, knowing that Christ is at work in us. For many of us, the difficult times in life lead to the most powerful testimony of God's presence and work in our lives.

Not only are we to prepare our minds, but we must also prepare our hearts to endure hardship. When Peter writes, "Love covers over a multitude of sins," he is referring to the way our sins affect our relationships with other believers. The Christian life is not about finding faults in one another. It's about mercy and forgiveness. It pleases God when we get along together. How can we do that? We show hospitali-

ty, making guests feel welcome and sharing our resources. We serve one another, being good stewards of the gifts God has given to us. We serve and encourage one another as people who speak "the very words of God."

If we expect to thrive in hard times, it will require unity and a commitment to live peacefully together. Loving generously also demonstrates our own understanding of the love and mercy of God that we have received.

God, give us grace to understand how loving we can be as your disciples. For you have forgiven and loved us, no matter the circumstances. Amen.

WHO IS OUR NEIGHBOR?

He wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"
—Luke 10:29

It can be difficult to show compassion to someone you might despise. It can also be difficult to receive help from such a person. That's because you would think of that person as an enemy. This parable is about showing God's love and compassion without strings attached, even for an enemy.

The question could be asked, "How could a holy God offer love to any of us, who are basically his enemies because of all the sins we do against him?" The answer is grace (unearned favor)! (See Romans 5:6-11.)

In Jesus' parable, a priest and a Levite pass by and notice the man who has been robbed and beaten, but they keep going without offering any help. Then along comes a Samaritan. (In those days the Jews and Samaritans despised each other.) This man stops and takes action in practical ways. He

doesn't just throw money at the problem; he also gives his time and resources to see that the beaten man is restored to health again.

Many people tend to measure their love for God by their commitment to church attendance, Bible study, giving money for ministry, or volunteering at church. Yet loving our neighbor demands more. To love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength goes hand in hand with loving our neighbor as ourselves. We are commanded to do both—regardless of who they are, what they have done, or where they come from.

Lord Jesus, give us eyes to see the people around us and to care for their needs, even if it may be inconvenient or difficult. Give us the desire to share your love. Amen.

LIVING AND RECEIVING THE GOSPEL

The woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth."
— 1 Kings 17:24

I find it amazing that of all the places God could send Elijah, he sent the prophet to a widow in Zarephath. It was probably surprising to Elijah too. God had sent him out of Israel, the land of his people. This caused Elijah to depend on the hospitality of an outsider.

God directed this widow to supply Elijah with food, and yet she herself was very poor. In several ways—being a widow, poor, and from a land outside Israel—she was one of the last people we might expect to be chosen as a host for a prophet of the Lord. From the story, it sounds like she wasn't a follower of God either.

In our focus on religion, we often gauge success on the basis of performance: How often do you pray to God? Do you follow the teachings of God's Word? Do you worship God

faithfully? In this story, however, the God of grace uses someone who is foreign to all of those ideas. That's what makes grace so amazing—we can do nothing to earn it.

God goes to the outsider. He goes to people who are on the margins. The widow and Elijah are both blessed by each other's presence and help. There's no place for superiority or inferiority. It is through embracing the other that grace can be mutually experienced. When we follow God's direction, we not only share his grace with others but also receive it.

God of grace, we want to know who you truly are. Guide our living so that we not only share the grace you give but also receive it. Amen.

MORE THAN OUTWARD APPEARANCE

She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.
—Acts 16:14

Lydia was a wealthy business-woman. She was also a worshiper of God. Paul met her and some other women gathered for prayer outside Philippi on the day of worship. When Paul shared the good news of Jesus with them, God opened Lydia's heart to believe and be baptized, committing her life to Christ.

Lydia was a faithful believer in God, but she had not heard the good news about Jesus, the Son of God who came to pay for our sin so that we could be saved and have new life. When God opens our hearts to believe this amazing message, we are filled with joy, comfort, and new life. The Lord changes us from the inside out, and we want to live joyful lives of gratitude because of that transformation. It's not a burden; nor is it done just out of obligation. We delight in obeying and

praising God as an expression of the change within.

Lydia's dynamic coming to faith resulted in her household being baptized as well. She persuaded Paul and his companions to stay at her home while they were in Philippi. She extended hospitality as a true expression of her new faith in Jesus. And by staying in her home—a non-Jewish home—Paul was also showing the grace and love of God.

Father, help us to understand and experience the power of the gospel so that we can be changed to enjoy new life. Help us to reflect your ongoing work in us so that others can see it too—and believe. Amen.

PRACTICING EMPATHY

Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.

—Exodus 23:9

When we first moved overseas, everything was different for us—language, food, roads, social rules. It was humbling to need help from others to do something as simple as paying for public parking. I won't forget the kind woman who helped us and kept smiling and talking in Italian—though we couldn't understand a word. Her smile and dedication to help were a great gift.

Though our situation is much different from that of Israel in Egypt, I know the feeling of being a foreigner in need of help. God reminded Israel to remember their history of being vulnerable so that they could understand how strangers might feel in their midst.

Consider how refugees driven from their homeland or immigrants who have left their home might feel in a strange place.

God commanded his people not to oppress a foreigner or visitor or stranger for the simple reason that oppression hurts deeply. God's people were to have empathy for others who came from a foreign land and needed help and hospitality, not opposition or oppression.

People who do not have the power of wealth and social status are to be protected by the law and supported by those who are in positions of power and influence. Tempting as it may be to follow the crowd, our identity as God's people demands that grace be our guide.

Lord God, we quickly forget what it's like to be dependent. As we remember the grace we have received in Christ, make us generous to care for others, knowing you have been generous to us. Amen.

DO NOT BE ANXIOUS

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

—Romans 8:28

Several times in these verses Jesus says, “Do not worry,” or “Do not be anxious.” Yet simply telling an anxious person to stop being anxious rarely helps. Does anyone who is anxious make the choice to be that way? Why, then, would Jesus say this? His words run much deeper than simply saying “Stop it.” He reminds us that there are things beyond our control that require us to trust in God’s care and provision.

I’ve had to learn this lesson repeatedly in life. I’ve never been in charge. Yet my humanness wants desperately to be in control. I don’t like being dependent on others. And I often give lip-service to my dependence on God. My insecurity drives my desire for control, and realizing that I’m not in control intensifies my insecurity—and the result is anxiety.

Jesus points out that God provides abundantly for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. God cares deeply for all of his creation. So we can be confident that God will certainly provide for us.

And with God’s providence comes his amazing power to reset our focus in life. We cannot get past our anxiety without knowing that God, who is in control, also loves us and knows what is best for us—always.

Father, help us to let go of our worry and stop being anxious about tomorrow. Teach us to trust in you, knowing you will work all things for good, in line with your purpose and for your glory. Amen.

THE GOSPEL IN WORD AND DEED

He told them: "Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt."
—Luke 9:3

God has called you for a mission, and he has equipped you with everything you need to carry it out.

When Jesus called the disciples, he gave them all they needed to minister on his behalf in the towns and villages. He enabled them to preach the kingdom of God and heal people everywhere. There was no need to bring anything else along to complete that mission. He sent them with instructions to accept people's hospitality as God's provision for them. They were to stay with people who received them, developing relationships and being content with what they were given. But if rejection happened, they were to move on, warning people about rejecting the truth. They had to move on because time was short and the mission was great.

Jesus' ministry is still about word and deed. We have been empowered to serve in these critical areas. The message is powerful, and our words must be spoken with acts of compassion for a world that needs to hear the good news. But to teach that God loves sinners means little if we do not also show God's love by helping to meet human needs.

We have all that we need to fulfill our calling as Christ-followers. Let's be faithful in sharing his message with words and actions. And let's trust the results to the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.

Father, make us passionate about the mission you have given us. Guide us to be faithful with the good news and the new life you have given us, sharing your love with others. Amen.

HOSPITALITY IN BECOMING A SERVANT

"Now that I . . . have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

—John 13:14-15

In our culture today, we don't have an automatic equivalent to Jesus' instruction to wash one another's feet. But we can figure out that it's mainly about showing hospitality and serving one another.

The roads of Palestine were unpaved, and with sandals as the common footwear, people's feet would get really dirty—sometimes caked with dust and mud. As a result, before you entered someone's home, a servant would come with a pitcher of water and a towel and wash your feet. It was a customary act of hospitality—like someone offering to hang up your coat and scarf on a cold day as you entered their warm home.

On the night of the last supper, Jesus took the role of a servant as he got up from the meal and began washing his disciple's feet. In doing this, Jesus was

teaching his disciples an important spiritual principle. We come to Jesus with nothing of our own, and we must receive from him and be ministered to by him before we have anything to give. Then, having been served, we go and do the same, sharing with others the fullness that God has poured into our hearts.

In this example, Jesus provided a profound symbol of his call to servanthood. Following him is not about position, power, or prestige. We serve because Christ has served us first.

Father, help us to see that your Son, by kneeling at our feet, has done everything for us. Enable us to find joy and fulfillment in serving others as we have been served by you. Amen.

DOING LIFE TOGETHER

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. —Acts 2:42

We learn a lot about what community looked like in the early church. It included things like sharing meals, caring for one another, worshiping together, and praying together. The early church took community seriously. It wasn't just an occasional event or gathering. It was regular and ongoing. They valued spending quality time together, and they did it often.

We see in the early church a focus on what matters—the Word of God, fellowship, worship, and prayer. We see who matters—the body of Christ doing life together. And we see that it isn't just a once-a-week event. It also isn't about being a church in one place or even in a building. The Bible says the Lord added to their number every day. There was room for others—more and more.

In our culture of focusing so much on individual desires,

biblical community can seem a bit strange to us. But it's all about relationships, and that is something we can grasp even in this “me first” world. Relationships always involve sharing—time, experiences, material goods, and more—and sharing requires an ongoing personal investment. It endures through joys and struggles over the long haul. Doing life together is one of the strengths of biblical community. The gift we *share* always has room for others, even when it is messy.

In what ways can you invest more in your relationships with God and others today?

Father, with you, we want to live fully together as your people, wherever you have placed us. Thank you for this gift. Amen.

YOU HAVE BEEN PREAPPROVED

He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ. . . . —Ephesians 1:4-5

In the first-century Roman world of the Ephesians, being adopted meant receiving a new identity and a new name. No matter what had happened in your past, you were given a clean slate on adoption day. It was irrevocable. There was no going back to the way it was before. It was once and for all—a permanent arrangement.

When the apostle Paul compares our life in God to adoption, he is saying, “You are part of the family now.” It’s an invitation to get comfortable and to settle into this new relationship. We need not live in fear anymore because we belong to the Father. He has claimed us as his own. God invites us to relate to him as his cherished children.

No matter what has happened in your past, God sees the person you are becoming. So don’t

live like an orphan. Recognize who you are in Christ. You have been preapproved by God. He has adopted you and blessed you, and he is ready for you to join in the work and livelihood of his kingdom. You have been redeemed and forgiven. Your sin is paid for.

Christian faith is about more than believing certain facts; it means living into the lordship of Christ and letting that reality permeate every aspect of life. You are a child of the King, a recipient of the ultimate act of hospitality—God’s hospitality. Everything has changed. Thanks be to God!

Holy Spirit, come and remind us that we are your children. Help us live into that reality so that our lives reflect the character of Christ. In his name, Amen.

LIVING OUT THE STORY OF GOD

"The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

—Luke 10:2

By the time Luke's gospel was written (after A.D. 60), the church had entered into a new generation of believers. They had limited memories of its start and development. Memories of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Paul's missionary journeys were fading. Much had changed. Many of the believers wondered what God was up to now, and why Jesus hadn't returned yet in their lifetime (see 2 Peter 3). They wondered what it meant to be the church now.

Many generations of people since then have asked similar questions. In the story about Jesus sending out 72 followers, we gain some insight into what it means to be the church. We discover the answer when we go into the neighborhoods and communities where we live. We discover the genius of what God has been about since the

very beginning—God is at work in the everyday, ordinary places where his people live.

Still today, we are invited to live out and to share the love of God as a community committed to love and peace and justice. We exist not just for ourselves but to practice what it looks like to be the body of Christ, as people being formed into the image of the Son. We live out the story as God's missionary people—serving as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all creation in Christ Jesus.

God of mission, we want to live into the calling that we are your missionary people. Give us eyes to see the spaces into which you lead us, and give us courage to walk there. Amen.

CALLED TO REMEMBER

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. —Ephesians 2:13

If we follow Christ, we have a relationship with God that is bound to be expressed in our relationships with other people. But we often forget that. We can easily create barriers in the name of race, religion, gender, churches, communities, families, friend groups, and more. While these differences can help us think about who we are, our sinful nature distorts them in such a way that we put up walls that divide us. We should celebrate diversity, but it should not lead to division.

The apostle Paul says we can find unity in the foundation that has already been laid in Christ. Being connected to one another increases our effectiveness as God's people. It increases our strength as well as our worth. In the ultimate act of hospitality, God sent his Son, Jesus, making reconciliation possible between us and God.

Through Christ's work on the cross, we are united as his people once and for all. Unless this is the case, there is no good news. Unless this is the case, we are lost in our sin—excluded from the kingdom and separate from Christ.

We celebrate that the dividing wall has come down. Paul urges us to remember that we were once excluded but that God drew us near to himself so that we can become “one new humanity,” inviting everyone to join God's household in Christ.

God, you went to great lengths to bring us into your family. Help us remember, and make us generous in welcoming others into the family too. Amen.

DOERS OF THE WORD

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.
—James 1:22

Jesus, who fulfilled the Word of God and is himself called the Word (John 1:1), set the standard for Christian living. Comparing yourself to anyone else will never give an accurate picture of who God wants you to be.

James uses the example of looking into a mirror but doing nothing to improve our appearance. The kind of mirror James is talking about was not made of glass like our mirrors today. It would have been a highly polished piece of metal, and to get a clear image, you would have to look intently, holding it at just the right angle with just the right amount of light. James explains that we have to look intently into the law of God to see what God wants us to be. Notice that the focus is not on looking at oneself or at anyone else. The focus is on God's law—the im-

age of the person God wants you to become.

With God's Word as the standard, says James, we must be doers of the Word, and that means putting God first in all we do and showing Christlike love to everyone around us. It means looking out and caring for people whom everyone else forgets: the most vulnerable, such as widows and orphans, who don't have others to lean on. It means caring for those who cannot care for themselves.

Who are those people in your community? How can you be a Christlike influence in the world instead of being influenced by the world?

Thank you, Father, for your Word. Help us not only to listen but to do what it says. Amen.

UNCOMPROMISING LOYALTY TO CHRIST

"Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."
—Matthew 10:39

Some of Jesus' sayings seem to contradict other things he has said. Today's text is one of those. Why would the Prince of Peace say that he did not come to bring peace? Doesn't Jesus say in other verses that he came to give us peace? Did Jesus really come to turn us against members of our own families?

Well, not necessarily, but he is pointing out here that conflicts, even with family members, could happen because we follow him. That's because Jesus calls us to live a new life, putting our old ways of sin behind us. But the people around us might not like that change.

Following Jesus can cause rifts in families, friendships, and other relationships. He demands full allegiance over every other human relationship or earthly pursuit. It is really about changing our priorities. There are many competing loyalties

that we must give an answer to in life. The devoted Christ-follower knows that at the end of the day, only one love matters. Our loyalty to and love for Christ must take first place. That commitment will change not only your life but also the lives of the people around you and the generations to come.

Following Jesus is not just a commitment of a few hours of your time or a few dollars from your paycheck. Following Jesus requires all of you—all that you have and are, and all that you will be. And this is life as it's meant to be—full life that will last forever.

Lord, we want to put you first in our lives. Help us to show your love and be a blessing to others. Amen.

GENEROUS GIVING

"When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."
—Matthew 6:3

For many of the people Jesus was speaking to in this passage, generosity and righteousness were considered the same. And it was not uncommon that people publicized their giving.

That happens today too. We see it when a famously wealthy person gives part of their fortune to a charity—along with a press release and media interviews.

Public recognition can feel good. It can be nice to hear praise when you can provide something that would otherwise not be possible. But Jesus says there is an even greater reward for people who give quietly. Who do you want keeping the records when it comes to your generosity? Is the applause of the world better than the reward of blessing from God?

When it comes to giving generously, three principles come

to mind. First, no one is too poor to give. Even if you are struggling to get by, God will bless your generosity. Second, generous giving should be sacrificial. C. S. Lewis said that the safest rule for giving is to give more than you can spare. Finally, the amount you give ought to be decided in your own heart and not given out of compulsion. It is a private matter between you and God.

The purpose of your giving should not be to impress others. Instead, it is a discipline that should increase your faith in God to provide for you and to draw you closer to him.

Generous God, all that we have is from you. Make us good stewards of all you have entrusted to us—trusting in faith that you will continue to provide. In Jesus, Amen.

THE ENDLESS DEBT TO LOVE

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

—Romans 13:8

If we are trying to live the Christian life and we fill it with Christian things—Christian books, conferences, music, movies—there may be something missing. If we leave no room in our life to be inconvenienced by service to others, we are missing a vital part of Christlike living. What we do, how we live, and how we treat others comes down to a matter of love. Paul notes this in our passage today, describing it as a permanent debt we owe—a debt owed every day.

Love involves more than an action shown to another person. Love consists of an underlying attitude and mindset that motivates our actions toward others. It's not an attitude reserved only for fellow believers; it's also for everyone who is not part of the community of believers. It is an ongoing theme

that Paul continues to talk about in many of his letters.

Pursue love today. Let it guide the way you think. Let it be evident in your patience and kindness. Let it lead you toward forgiveness, truthfulness, and endurance. In everything you think about today, and everything you say and do today, let love be the motivation. Filled with God's love, we can't help overflowing with love and care for others.

Father, help us to love others because we are filled with your love. Enable us to give this gift regardless of how we have been treated; may we follow Jesus' example in all we do. In his name, Amen.

THE MARK OF A COMMITTED DISCIPLE

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."
—John 13:35

What is the mark of a Christ-follower? There is great danger if we let our commitment to Christ get distorted by allegiance to a specific cause or issue. Jesus was clear that following him is not about political or power agendas. It cannot be reduced to a theological tradition or a denominational boundary either. The mark of the Christian, according to Jesus, is love.

This is what makes Christianity unique. Love is the essential principle of the Christian faith, and Jesus is passionate that we show love for one another.

When Jesus gives this command, there is no room to read it as optional. Love is a requirement of being a follower of Christ. And this is no abstract idea. Jesus makes clear that we are to follow his example. And through the Holy Spirit, who came to build and grow the church after Jesus left his disciples and

ascended to heaven, we have Christ's love in abundance.

Jesus said that it is by our love for one another that others will know we are his disciples. Showing Christ's love is one of the most basic methods for spreading the good news of Jesus, and yet it is sometimes the most difficult thing for us to do.

The command to love one another is to reflect Christ's love for us—unconditional and sacrificial. By this, the world will know who (and whose) we are.

Loving God, you have given us a visible witness to the world by your love. May the passion of our lives and our love for others—all supplied by you—be the invitation by which a watching world will know you. Amen.

GRACEFUL WORKING TOGETHER

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.
—Romans 15:7

If we are serious about living a life of Christian faith, we must keep in mind how our actions affect others. We cannot grow in faith all by ourselves; nor may we forget to tend to the well-being of others. Even if we have broad diversity, there can be unity when our shared focus and purpose are about loving God and neighbor. Mutual hospitality is a vital part of building unity as God's people.

We build unity when we look out for one another. This means we are to help others out, even when it might not be convenient. Paul speaks directly to believers who are "strong," including himself in that grouping, because those who consider themselves "strong" can easily be tempted to look down on others who are not like them.

Going even further, Paul says we are to accept one another

just as Christ has accepted us. How did Christ accept each one of us? He accepted us with plenty of faults.

We have all experienced being let down by other people, and we have all been guilty of letting others down. Paul also reminds us that we are to forgive just as we have been forgiven. And he urges us to put on the virtue of love because that is what binds us together in perfect unity.

In what ways can you share God's love to help build unity?

Gracious God, we confess that our tolerance for others can be lacking. Unite us as your people and make us gracious toward others just as you have been gracious to us. In Jesus, Amen.

SEEKING SHALOM IN HARDSHIP

"Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."
—Jeremiah 29:7

Nobody likes to feel as if their life is stuck on hold. It does not feel good to be trapped in a situation where you don't want to be, while longing for a place you can't reach. I've encountered many people in situations like that. I have also felt that way myself at times. Sometimes it lasts for a short season; other times it lasts much longer.

God called Jeremiah to be his prophet during a deeply painful time for his people. Many of the people were in exile—taken far from home, away from everything they knew and loved. Through Jeremiah, God urged the people to live in hope, raising families, settling in, and trusting that the Lord had plans and a future for them.

We, too, often celebrate that God has plans and a future for us, and we mustn't forget that he is with us even if we

feel that our life is stuck. Just as God wasn't finished with his people in exile, he isn't finished with us.

Perhaps you know how tough it can be to feel stuck on hold. How can you live into that as a child of God today? What does praying for peace and prosperity look like right now?

God can bless you in your situation. What is more, you can be a blessing to others. God is still with you—even now.

Mighty God, strengthen us to live as your people here and now, regardless of our circumstances. Assured of our kingdom citizenship, we pray for the peace and prosperity of our community here and now too. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SEEING JESUS THROUGH THE CROWD

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."
—Mark 2:5

This is one of several gospel stories in which we see people approach Jesus in order to help a friend or loved one. So many people had gathered that the house was full. Some were curious; some were suspicious; some may even have come to stir up trouble. It was "standing room only," and the friends of the paralyzed man could find no way in. Did no one see their need and offer to let them pass through? Perhaps we have all been guilty of that—so focused on our own interests that we can't see the needs around us.

The four friends refused to let their friend be overlooked. They decided to lower him through the roof of the house to see Jesus. It had to be an incredible group effort. Jesus saw it too, and he recognized the depth of their faith in going so far to bring their friend to him.

Christians have had many opportunities to help others. When natural disasters strike, for example, churches and Christian organizations have mobilized teams to go out and build or repair homes, donate food and clothes, and provide funds where needed. Perhaps you have helped in such efforts, or with community development or medical clinics. There are needs everywhere!

Let's keep our eyes open to see people around us today who need help and may also need to meet Jesus. They are precious to the Lord and well worth our efforts.

Father, we get so focused on our own needs that we sometimes fail to recognize people with even greater needs. Give us eyes to see and courage to act in your name. Amen.

GOD OF JUSTICE

In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.
—Isaiah 42:3-4

God takes justice very seriously. Through Isaiah, God declares that the Messiah's purpose on earth is to establish justice—and he will not give up until that work is complete.

We know today that the Messiah described here is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to conquer the power of sin in this world (see John 1-10). He came to bring forgiveness of sins and new life. He came so that we could receive his righteousness and live by it. In following Christ, we are agents of God's mission in this world.

Our part in God's mission includes leading people to salvation in Jesus, feeding the hungry, caring for the poor, visiting the sick, and encouraging the discouraged. This has historically been the ministry of the church. God brings justice; we point people to the One

whom God sent to establish it. In following Christ's example, we help reveal to the world what Christ came to do as the fulfillment of God's promise.

There is no shortage of needs in the world. It can be discouraging and overwhelming to consider how much injustice seems to prevail. Yet we cannot let that stop us from taking steps today to join in God's mission. Let's not grow impatient either. God isn't finished yet. In the meantime, we can be involved in a small part of what God has promised, and he will do it. We put our hope in him.

Father, in your plan to bring justice, we thank you for sending your Son. In our work for your justice in this world, give us wisdom and insight. Amen.

SERVANT HOSPITALITY

In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

—Philippians 2:3-4

What does greatness look like? People are drawn to celebrities. I can remember times when I've been able to shake the hand of a celebrity—feeling my heart race and fumbling over my words. Fame tends to distort our perception of the qualities we should admire and aspire toward. It is always refreshing to see people who are able to remain humble even though they have reached great heights in their life. It is also rare.

If anyone deserved celebrity treatment, it was Jesus. Yet that is not what happened. Instead, Jesus came to show us what true greatness really looks like and what true greatness does. Jesus' ministry on earth was a ministry of humble service. There was nothing pretentious about him. He didn't expect special treatment. He did not chase after fame. In fact, on

more than one occasion, he told others to remain quiet about what they had seen him do or hear him say.

What we learn from Jesus by his example is the importance of putting the needs of others ahead of our own. Our life is not about the pursuit of comfort or recognition. On the contrary, in pursuing God's purposes, our life is second. This is one characteristic about Jesus that we can and should imitate. We are never more like Jesus than when we are serving others.

Father, in our desire to be more hospitable, create in us a heart that aims to serve others in Jesus' name. May we discover that true greatness is not in fame or position but in humble service. Amen.



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