

ELEMENTS

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LOVE

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JY

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PEACE

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PATIENCE

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KD

KINDNESS

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GD

GOODNESS

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FAITHFULNESS

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SELF-CONTROL

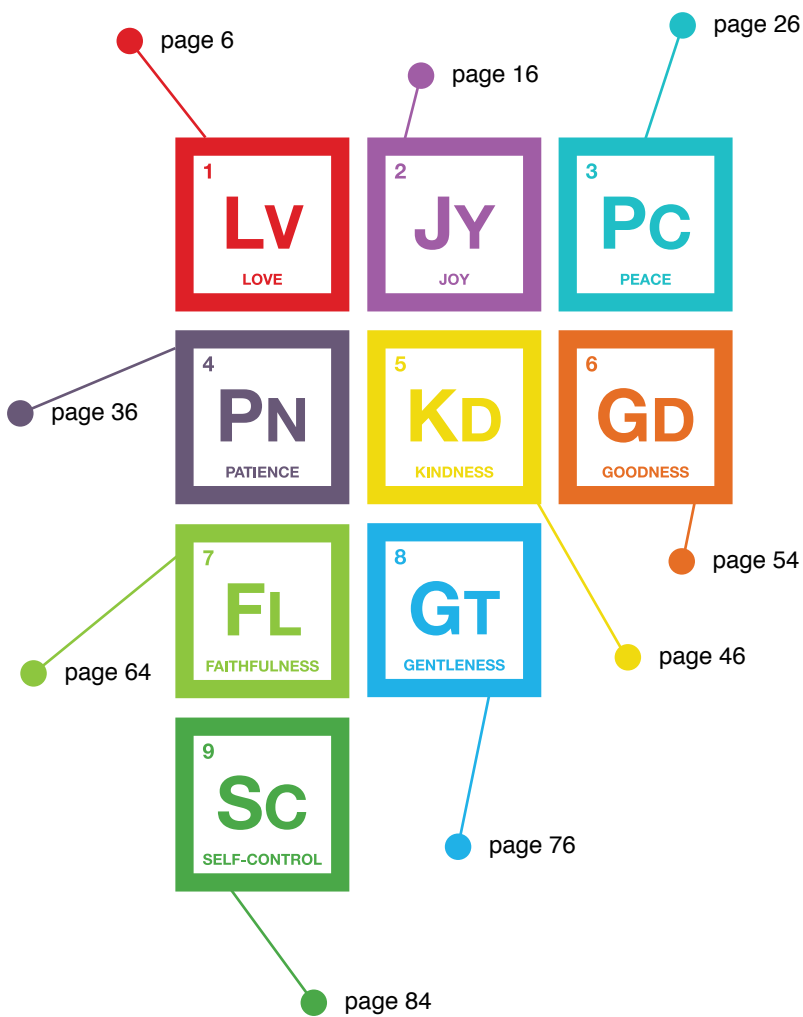
ELEMENTS



**National
Community
Church**

theaterchurch.com/elements

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“Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5



Imagine an entire church accepting Jesus' challenge, remaining in him, and bearing the kind of fruit that only the Spirit can produce within us. How would that change us, change our church, and ultimately change our city?

National Community Church is known for being innovative, for doing church in new ways, and for remaining orthodox in belief while being unorthodox in practice. That's our DNA. You have heard me say before that, if the Kingdom of God had departments, we would work in research and development. We need to keep doing church in ways no one has thought of before because we need to reach people that no one has reached before.

At the same time, we have to make sure we develop the character that is required to sustain that calling. That character is reflected in the fruit of the Spirit. Jesus alludes to it in John 15 and Paul lists several elements of the fruit in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Imagine the impact we could have on our families, our friends, our workplaces, and our neighborhoods, if we were producing that kind of fruit in our lives. I believe it would make a radical difference and set us up for where God wants to take us next.

I want to invite you to join us over the next 9 weeks as we seek to remain more deeply in Jesus and thereby produce these elements in our lives. I encourage you to take notes on the messages, journal what you are learning and experiencing, join a small group where you can learn and grow together, and ultimately, make the fruit of the Spirit habits in your life.

Pastor Mark

INTRODUCTION

This spring, we're praying that every NCCer would connect with a small group.* We're specifically encouraging folks to consider an Elements group and live out the fruit of the Spirit with other NCCers.

These groups and this curriculum are designed with three components.

1

The first is a Bible reading plan that you can use as a personal devotional tool. Most of the passages of Scripture are relatively short and are intended to be meditated upon and digested, not simply read.

2

The second piece is the body of the curriculum designed to draw out truths found in Scripture and encourage discussion on the application of those truths in our lives. We believe that we were created to be in community with one another and that community is the context in which we are best able to grow in our faith.

3

The final piece is a take-away, something to help answer the question, "Now what?" The fruit of the Spirit aren't just traits we exhibit twice a week—in church and at small group. Rather, we are called to be on mission every day, living out the character, ways, and mission of Jesus in every aspect of our lives.

Join us as we dig into Scripture, dive into community, and engage our world.

You can find all of the Elements groups listed online at ncc.gd/elements

**Small groups are gatherings of five to fifteen people that meet regularly—usually weekly—and are designed to foster community, spiritual growth, and opportunities to serve.*

HOW DO I JOIN A GROUP?



1

Visit theaterchurch.com/groups to find a group that interests you.

2

Email the group leader for further details.

3

Show up.

NCC Worship brings you an instrumental soundtrack for the Elements series. We hope that the songs will be a soundtrack to your prayers as together we ask God to make us carriers of His character through the fruit of His Spirit.

**DOWNLOAD THE ALBUM
AND OTHER RESOURCES AT:**

theaterchurch.com/elements



Choosing Someone Else's Highest Good

Weekly Reading Plan

Day 1: Luke 10:25-37

Day 2: 1 John 4:7-16

Day 3: Luke 7:36-47

Day 4: Deuteronomy 7:7-9

Day 5: Psalm 136

Sermon Notes

What are the two or three things the Holy Spirit spoke most clearly to you through this message?

How will you respond to Him?

EXPERIENCE

Reflecting Back

As we start this group together, let's take some time to learn a little more about one another:

- If you could go to any concert in the history of the world, what concert would you attend?
- What accomplishment, before the 9th grade, are you most proud of?
- We will spend the next 9 weeks diving into Galatians 5:22-23, the fruit of the Spirit. When you read the list, what fruit seems to be most abundant in your life? What fruit seems to be least abundant in your life?

Introduction

There has never been a more popular topic for authors, artists, poets, musicians, movie directors and storytellers than love – the longing for it, the basic human need for it, the pain endured to experience it, and the pain inflicted by it. It's really difficult to find any story that does not contain some thread of a love story – whether romantic love, family love, or friendship love – embedded in it. It seems that good stories don't exist outside this idea of love. There has never been a concept more talked about, sung about, written about, questioned, wrestled with, or disappointed in than the topic of love.

At the same time, we use the word so broadly that it has lost much of its meaning. With the same breath, we might say that we love our families, we love our pets, we love football or ballet or opera, we love chocolate or filet mignon or Brussels sprouts, and we love God. What kind of love does God demonstrate to us and in turn call us to display?

Love is the first fruit of the Spirit mentioned and it is the one that serves as an umbrella for all of the others. When we truly love God, we will experience joy and be compelled to faithfulness. When we truly love others, we will relate to them with patience, gentleness, and kindness. To fully understand

the fruit of love, we have to begin with the character of God and we have to put it into practice.

The Text

1 John 4:7-16

Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love – not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.

And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us. Furthermore, we have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. All who declare that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God. We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love.

God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.

- The passage clearly states that God is love. Have you observed that or experienced that in your own life or in the life of someone else? What does that look like?
- The Scripture says that no one has ever seen God but that His love is brought to full expression in us if we love each other. What does that practically look like?
- It has been said, “It doesn’t matter what people think about us, but it does matter what people think about

Jesus because of us.” Describe someone who taught you something about Jesus just by the way they lived. What do you think people think about Jesus because of you?

Love Begins With God

1 John 4:7-8 states that love comes from God and that God is love. Any understanding of love must begin with understanding the nature of God. It's not merely that God loves or that He does loving things; rather, He is the very essence of love itself. He is the origination, pure expression, and ultimate definition of love. Love is at His core and is most purely expressed in Him, by Him, and through Him.

The idea that God is love cannot be adequately understood outside the context of the doctrine of the Trinity. Scripture shows us that God exists in three persons who walk in inseparable unity and community with one another. We see evidence of this as early as the creation account in Genesis.

Genesis 1:26 states, “Then God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us.’”

Notice the pronouns. “Let *us*.” To be like “*ourselves*.” Notice that God refers to Himself in the plural sense. Genesis 1:1 tells us that God was creating, Genesis 1:2 tells us that the Spirit was hovering over the chaos of creation, and John 1 tells us that all things were created by the Son.

In addition, we see the Trinity active at Jesus' birth (Luke 1:35), Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:16-17), and in Paul's benediction to the church at Corinth (2 Corinthians 13:14).

The bottom line: God exists in community and He is inherently relational. Therefore, He is both the source and object of love.

God then invaded the world with love. He created man and woman in His image with the capacity for community. When Abraham lifted the knife high into the air to sacrifice his son, God provided a lamb in the thicket. In the Passover, He demonstrated His redeeming love and instituted the

celebration of it. With the giving of the Ten Commandments, He declared that He was a God of compassion and mercy. The Psalmists declared His love 100 times. Hosea showed us a God whose fierce and redeeming love is almost incomprehensible.

God loved the world so much that He sent His son to the world. On the way to the cross, Jesus demonstrated love over and over again. He restored the ear of the high priest's servant, He granted forgiveness to those who crucified Him, He promised eternal life to the thief crucified next to Him, and He made sure that His best friend would take care of His mother.

The culmination of God's love was demonstrated at the cross itself. Not a sappy, sentimental feeling but a love that gave everything.

- What do you think about the concept of the Trinity? Are you confused, fascinated, in awe, not convinced, or ...?
- If God Himself exists in community, how does that affect your understanding of how and why we should be in community ourselves?
- Do you have trouble believing that God is love? Why or why not?

Love is Demonstrated By Action

Love is an action, not a feeling. It is much better experienced than explained. God's highest demonstration of love towards us was not a good feeling He had about us, but the action of laying down His life for us.

When we walk in the fruit of love, it will not simply change our minds or our hearts; it will change the direction of our hands and feet. As Maegan Hawley has said, "The attributes of God's faithfulness and beauty will send us to our knees but God's love will send us to our neighbor."

Because God has loved us, we should love others. 1 John

4:6 encourages, “continue to love one another.” In Luke 10, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 to confirm that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. He also offers Leviticus 19:18 as a practical explanation: love God by loving your neighbor as yourself. When a young lawyer asked Him who qualified as a neighbor, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan – the enemy who stopped to help a stranger and went the extra mile to ensure that he was taken care of. Love means choosing the highest good of another person. Love means sacrificing our preferences and priorities for the sake of another person.

On the night of His betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus picked up a towel and washed His disciples’ feet. He personally demonstrated the way He wanted them to love one another. A few verses later, He gave them a new commandment: “So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” (John 13:34-35)

Love comes full circle. When we love other people, we show them what God is like. As 1 John 4:12 says, “His love is brought to full expression in us.” The way we relate to one another paints a picture of who God is.

- Read Luke 10:30-37. What character(s) do you resonate with the most in this story?
- Based on this teaching, who in your life would Jesus consider your neighbor?
- What are some of the obstacles we face when trying to love one another? What makes it difficult?
- What is one practical thing you can do this week to love another person?

EXPRESS

Pick a couple of these to live out being on mission every day:

- Each day this week, tell a different person that you love them.
- Bless someone anonymously.
- Invest your day off in serving someone else. Consider doing this with someone else from the group.
- Determine your love language and share with a friend or family member. For more information, visit <http://www.5lovelanguages.com/profile/>
- Connect with Love Speaks, the NCC/A18 HIV/AIDS task force. Learn more at aoneeight.org/package/hivaids-task-force/

Pray the Scriptures

“God, pour Your love into my heart by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 5:5)





A vibrant purple background featuring a large, intricate splash of ink or paint that creates a complex, swirling pattern. The splash is darker in the center and fades into the background color towards the edges.

2

JY

JOY

Happiness That Doesn't Depend On Circumstances

Weekly Reading Plan

Day 1: Luke 1:26-55

Day 2: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Day 3: Nehemiah 8:9-12

Day 4: Psalm 100; 96:11-13; 66:1-2; 47:1-2

Day 5: Philippians

Sermon Notes

What are the two or three things the Holy Spirit spoke most clearly to you through this message?

How will you respond to Him?

EXPERIENCE

Reflecting Back

- How did you practically put love into action over the past week?
- Did you think about God or relate to Him any differently this week because of last week's study?
- Does practically and intentionally loving others help you experience God's love better? How?

Introduction

Our culture is obsessed with happiness. Even with the desire to be authentic and admit when we're not happy, we still want what we want when we want it - even if it means we're a little hypocritical. We may not always attempt to achieve happiness the best way, but even in our pet indulgences and guilty pleasures (including our addictions) we see a glimpse of how we're hardwired: to enjoy. To be full of joy. To be joyful. Being joyful and expressing joy is part of God's original plan for us. We're meant to embrace it, and it is intended to be authentic.

Joy and happiness are fundamentally connected. Happiness, by definition, is a feeling of wellbeing. Joy is that same feeling of wellbeing *regardless of what we're going through*. Joy contains happiness; it is happiness rooted to eternal truths and promises in Christ, not stuck on the outcome of temporary situations.

But let's not pretend that joy can't be downright difficult. We may lose a job, have difficult family situations or relational struggles, do the right thing without anyone noticing, become sick, or lose somebody we love. We may even wrestle with depression for no apparent reason. In these situations, the overriding sentiment toward joy can be that it's a gift not given to us. It can feel like we're losing our identity, grieving over lost time or potential.

In John 16:33 Jesus says, "In this world you will have trouble.

But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Take heart.

This tiny yet powerful phrase acknowledges suffering and anguish while calling us to joy. It doesn’t change our situation but it changes us.

The apostle Paul “took heart.” In the book of Philippians, he unpacks the mystery of joy. Writing from prison, Paul doesn’t ignore the reality of his troubles. He faced potential execution, but despite his uncertainties Paul encourages his friends in Philippi to protect their faith with joy: “Whatever happens, my dear brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. I never get tired of telling you these things, and I do it to safeguard your faith.” (Philippians 4:12)

The Text

Philippians 4:6-8

*Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!
Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do.
Remember, the Lord is coming soon.*

*Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything.
Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.
Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds
anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts
and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.*

*And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix
your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and
pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are
excellent and worthy of praise.*

- This passage brings up worry and anxiety. Joy and fear are at odds with each other. What worries, anxieties, or fears are joy-stealers for you?
- This passage says to tell God what you need, and thank Him for all He has done. What are some things you are thankful for that have gone unexpressed?

What are some things you need?

- Paul says to secure our thoughts on true and good things. Have you ever done this before in a challenging situation? What does this look like while still maintaining authenticity?

Joy Changes Our Perspective

Joy has a powerful ability to shape how we think.

Gratitude. Being thankful opens our eyes to joy. When we are intentional about gratitude, we receive the gift of “eyes to see” beneath the surface to what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. (Philippians 4:8)

Think about the Biblical principle of reaping and sowing. If we sow critical and negative thoughts, foster bitterness, find things wrong instead of finding things right, brush off the little graces or fail to celebrate successes, then guess what kind of person we become? We either get bitter or we get better as we go through life. Gratitude helps us get better. Sow thoughts and words of gratitude and find yourself delighted by the smallest things and never taking the important things for granted.

Suffering. Louisa May Alcott said, “I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship.” None of us take the step from happiness to joy without a trial. To “take heart” is to strengthen our soul with the unchanging truth that joy is not found in the lack of bad situations, but in how God redeems them.

In prison, Paul found his identity, his sense of peace, his purpose, and his future tied up in what Christ had accomplished for him on the cross. The only thing he wanted for was the resurrection (Philippians 3:10-11). He even mentioned in Philippians 4:12 that, “I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little.”

Paul’s strength was in the joy he found in knowing Christ.

He ultimately understood God was doing something more meaningful in his life than his personal safety or comfort. He saw his time in jail as an opportunity to share Christ and a chance to write his friends in Philippi – the very reason we have this letter today!

- Have you ever been through a season where joy was difficult? What helped you find joy during that time?
- Does joy come easily or with difficulty for you?
- Has joy ever changed your perspective on a situation? How so?
- Recall a time when you had the joy of the Lord. How did it come about?
- Is there a situation in your life where you need to take heart? Describe.

Joy is Found in the Presence of God

God is fun and He calls us to celebrate with Him.

Worldwide, some of the most meaningful moments happen around the table. It is the gathering point for families during the busyness of the week. Diplomats from conflicting countries meet at the table to resolve conflict. Special celebrations like weddings, baptisms, and birthdays all have an element of community feasting. Even when we want to casually connect with friends or celebrate something small in our lives, we go out for dinner. There is something special – even in ordinary life – about sharing a meal. These celebratory acts help us taste the unity God intended for us, the communal element to enjoying God's presence.

It is easy to think of worship in the Old Testament as a funky sacrificial system we are grateful to no longer maintain. But the sacrifices were only the first half of the worship experience. After the sacrifices were made, the Israelites were ready to be in God's presence. They were fully and properly prepared to express their joy in celebration!

Feasts were formal celebrations that filled the Hebrew calendar. In each feast, they celebrated something about who God is, while enjoying the provisions of God:

- The Feast of Unleavened Bread acknowledged that God's presence sustained them.
- The Feast of First Fruits celebrated God's provision as the Israelites joyfully gave back the best of their harvest (we get our modern understanding of the tithe from this celebration).
- The Feast of Weeks expressed thanks to the Lord that the hard work of the harvest was finished.
- The Feast of Tabernacles was a reminder that God dwelled with them in the desert and He would always make His presence among them.

Finally, the feast of all feasts: Passover. Passover was like their 4th of July. It was a huge freedom party. The feasts taught the Israelites to recognize and declare God's goodness and enjoy His earthly blessings.

In jail, Paul understood this. Celebrating God gives us His perspective and leads us into joy. In the same way God called the Israelites to celebrate His presence through feasting, Paul commands the Philippians to "rejoice!" Today, God wants us to experience the joy in His presence through celebration.

- What do you think about the fact that God is fun and wants us to celebrate? How does that impact your understanding of God?
- Would describe your faith experience as fun?
- What has God done in your life that is worth celebrating?
- What are some simple ways you can celebrate with God in ordinary, everyday life?

- If you were to create a modern day feast calendar that celebrated something about God 4 times a year, what would those feasts be?

EXPRESS

Pick a couple of these to live out being on mission every day:

- Start a gratitude list. See if you can get to 100 things. Choose to notice the little things.
- Find reasons to celebrate. Gather friends or family around the table.
- Attend a comedy show as a group.
- Spend time with someone who doesn't take things too seriously.
- Visit a nursing home and bring joy to the residents. Consider doing this with others from your group.

Pray the Scriptures

"Lord, grant me the joy of Your presence and the pleasures of living with You forever." (Psalm 16:11)







CHAPTER 3: PEACE

Trusting God's Got It

ENCOUNTER

Weekly Reading Plan

Day 1: Luke 24:33-53

Day 2: John 14:25-31; Esther 1-5

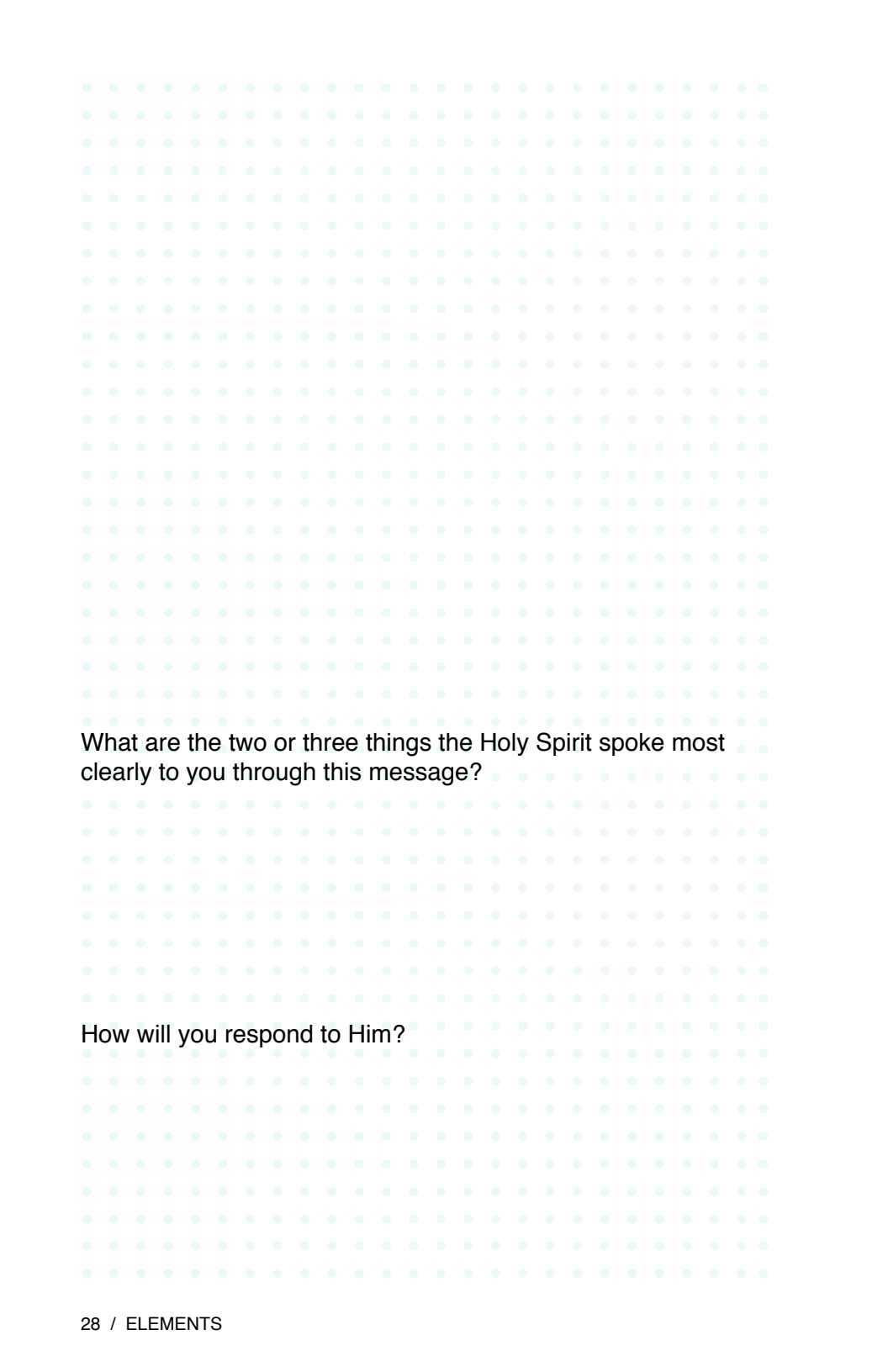
Day 3: Esther 6-10

Day 4: Psalm 119:161-168; 34:1-15

Day 5: Romans 8:1-11

Sermon Notes

A large rectangular area filled with a grid of small, light blue dots, intended for taking handwritten notes during a sermon.



What are the two or three things the Holy Spirit spoke most clearly to you through this message?

How will you respond to Him?

EXPERIENCE

Reflecting Back

- What ways did you choose to express joy this past week?
- What was the most meaningful thing that happened last week through seeking to express joy?
- After being intentional about joy, is there anything you will incorporate into your life on a regular basis?

Introduction

Peace is trusting God's got it. Easy in theory but difficult in real life! We live in a culture that is powerful and capable. We are energized by opportunities, driven to succeed, and are constantly on the go. When people ask us how we're doing, the go-to response is no longer "fine," it's "busy." Busyness is a badge of honor that we complain about but secretly wouldn't have any other way.

Where is the gift of peace in all of our comings and goings and *doings*?

Not that our "doings" are bad. In fact, followers of Christ have an obligation to add real, tangible value to the world. God gives all of us time, talent and treasures to produce something meaningful with. He wants His people to be a blessing.

Peace isn't at odds with the things we are called to do; it is the way we are to go about doing them. Do we rely on our abilities over God's anointing? Do we make our schedules or do we pray over our calendars?

Queen Esther certainly left a mark on the world. She is famous for her beauty, bravery, patience, and humility. She was also a person of deep peace. Her biggest contribution came from what she did when she trusted God had everything under control.

In the events just prior to the text below, Esther had already

been appointed queen. Haman, a wicked palace official who didn't know Esther was a Jew, had the king decree a racial genocide to eliminate the entire population of Jews in Persia. Esther's uncle Mordecai asked Esther if she would make a plea before the king on behalf of her people.

The Text

Esther 4:10-17

Esther told Hathach to go back and relay this message to Mordecai: "All the king's officials and even the people in the provinces know that anyone who appears before the king in his inner court without being invited is doomed to die unless the king holds out his gold scepter. And the king has not called for me to come to him for thirty days." So Hathach gave Esther's message to Mordecai.

Mordecai sent this reply to Esther: "Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?"

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die." So Mordecai went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

- Esther seemed to have peace when nothing about her situation was peaceful. Have you experienced anything similar?
- Have you ever had to resolve to trust the Lord, even when it was difficult? What was that experience like?
- Have you ever engaged in a spiritual discipline like fasting before an important decision or situation? How did that impact your peace?

Obedience Increases Peace

Esther's first response wasn't one of peace; it was anxiety. She probably wasn't initially feeling "God's got it." Rightfully so! She had good reason to feel overwhelmed, stressed, and fearful.

In many of our situations, we do too. Most of us probably aren't facing life-threatening situations (unless we have a serious health issue), but life can still be extremely stressful.

The book of John records some words of Jesus about peace: "I am leaving you a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give." (John 14:27)

As followers of Christ, a life marked by peace is anchored in trusting that God is bigger than our circumstances. Not only is peace healthy for us personally, but it also makes our lives attractive to non-believers. But only if it is peace that comes from God! The peace of the world trusts in unsteady things to feel okay – having enough money, being friends with the right people, maintaining a certain standard of living, or getting that highly coveted job. We can even trust in our own ability to control our lives, so we fill them to the brim. It's easy to think that if we just accomplish one more thing on our list we'll feel more peace. Somehow the list always increases, along with our anxiety levels.

One thing helped Esther turn from her own efforts at peace to the peace of God: obedience.

As soon as Esther agreed to do what she knew God had placed her in the palace for, she made decisions and acted from a place of deep trust in the Lord for the rest of the book. Was she still afraid? Probably, her life was at stake! But she didn't let that fear determine her reality.

Esther was able to move forward in peace, confident that God had the situation in His hand. Whatever would happen was His will, not hers, and that was enough. As she and the community fasted and prayed, God gave her a strategy. As she followed and obeyed, God rearranged the pieces of the story to save

His people.

Esther will forever be remembered for the story of how she approached the king uninvited. Her unique act of obedience is an example for us about the blessings of peace.

When we stick to the things God has asked us to do, we aren't weighed down by conflicting priorities or compelled to do things for the wrong reason. When we're satisfied with what God wants to do through us, we don't feel the need to compete with what God is doing through somebody else. We can trust God enough to let it go.

A life of peace requires margin. Time and space to rest, reflect, and pray. Time to enjoy life and the people He has put in it. The real test of our trust in God is our ability to step away from really great things because we know they're not on our assignment list.

Obedience increases our peace.

- Describe the season in your life when you felt most at peace. What made it peaceful?
- Have you ever felt the peace of God in a situation where it didn't make sense in the natural world?
- What has the most negative effect on your peace?
- Do you have a tendency to over-commit to things? If so, what influences your decisions to do things that you probably shouldn't? If not, how did you set boundaries?
- Most of the time, we see a step of faith as something we do. But it can require just as much faith to *not* do something. Is there anything you can cut out that would open up more space for peace?

Peace is Worth Fighting For

When Jesus said "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9), He didn't mean the conflict averse. He meant the ones

who would work for reconciliation.

We are called to be at peace with each other. Psalm 34:14 says, “Seek peace and pursue it.” It’s easy to think that peace is keeping quiet – we call it “keeping the peace.” But God calls us into real peace with Him and peace with each other – peace that endures conflict and comes out stronger on the other side.

Our peace with each other ought to look a lot like the peace we have with Christ because of the cross. Christ gave everything when it wasn’t His fault so we could be one with God. We’re to do the same for our neighbor, so that we can be in community with one another.

That’s what Esther did. She chose to stir the pot in all the right ways. She went against protocol and pursued a husband who hadn’t pursued her with the goal of self-sacrifice on behalf of her community. The situation the Jews were in was Haman’s fault, not Esther’s. Yet she chose to bear the burden and take the personal risk for their restoration and freedom.

Proverbs 10:18 says, “Hiding hatred makes you a liar; slanderer others makes you a fool.” Relational peace requires us to be both honest and honoring. Getting one of those down may be easy enough, but both require us to fight our natural inclinations. We can build up pain and resentment in private while refusing to gossip or grumble in public, or we can vent and spread gossip (slander) to get the issue off our chest. Either might make us feel better in the moment, but neither reconciles the relationship. In order to harbor no ill feelings from conflict and refuse to gossip, we must tackle the issues head on.

If we want people to know Jesus but we don’t act like Him in our relationships with one another, we won’t be effective! In all relationships, we have a choice of how to respond:

- The way of God: Forgiveness. Love. Honesty. Intentionally building each other up.
- The way of the world/flesh: Bitterness. Building up

relational walls. Having to be right. Tearing others down.

Do we think the way of the world is a more effective way to achieve peace than the way of God? When we seek peace and pursue it, the relationship we are trying to restore becomes more important than ourselves. We set aside our preferences, sacrifice the right to be right, and even give up the right to be offended. It takes strength to seek peace, and hard work to walk through confrontation well.

Amidst our fight for peace, we still need to trust that God's got it. Esther couldn't control the king or Haman, but she trusted God to do what only He can do. He certainly did!

- Do you know anyone who is a natural peacemaker? What qualities do they display?
- What do you think of the seeming contradiction that peace is something we must fight for?
- What is the place for trusting "God's got it" in fighting for peace?
- What are some ways you can fight for peace in your own life?

EXPRESS

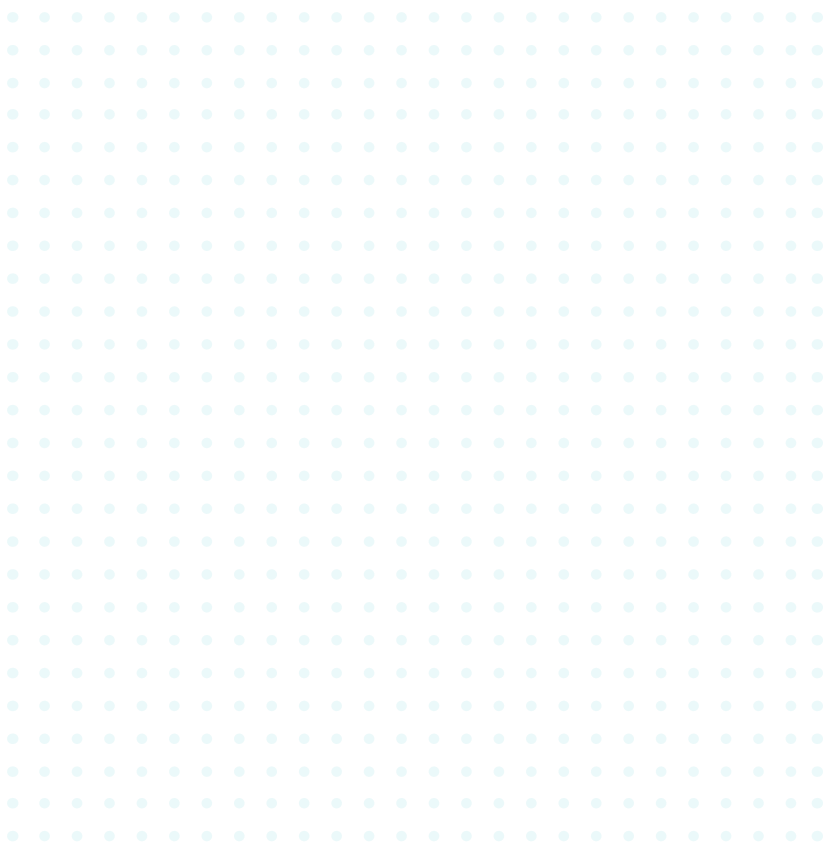
Pick a couple of these to live out being on mission every day:

- Practice Sabbath. Spend the day doing the things that refresh and reenergize you – the "get tos" not the "have tos" – or doing nothing at all.
- Find a quiet place and talk to God out loud. Tell Him the things that are causing you to not have peace. Ask God to take care of those things and tell Him that you trust Him with them. Spend some time resting in God's presence.

- Help someone else obtain the thing you most want.
- Write a note of encouragement to someone who tends to be discouraging to others.
- Attend the Southeast White House Reconciliation Lunch – Wednesday, February 18 from 12:30-1:30pm. RSVP to Dan Andrews: dan.andrews@theaterchurch.com

Pray the Scriptures

“God, I am trusting you to keep me in perfect peace when my mind is fixed on You.” (Isaiah 26:3)





4

PN

PATIENCE

Sticking It Out When You Don't Want To

Weekly Reading Plan

Day 2: Genesis 12:1-7; 15:1-7; 16-17; 21:1-7

Day 4: Luke 22:31-61; John 21:1-17

Day 5: James 5:7-11

Sermon Notes

What are the two or three things the Holy Spirit spoke most clearly to you through this message?

How will you respond to Him?

EXPERIENCE

Reflecting Back

- How did you express peace this past week? What was the most challenging part of the week? What was the most peaceful part of the week?
- Last week we talked about personal peace and relational peace. How did expressing peace to others affect your personal sense of peace?
- Is peace going to be something you “pursue” after this week? How can this group serve what God is doing in your life?

Introduction

There are two kinds of patience. There’s the patience you need when you’re stuck behind the world’s slowest driver, and then there’s the patience you need when you’re waiting on a dream deferred: finding a spouse, starting a business, having a child, achieving financial freedom, leading a loved one to Jesus.

The first kind of patience is important because it helps us achieve the peace that we discussed last week. This type of patience isn’t usually high on the priority list for driven and ambitious people. We have a lot to accomplish, a lot to get done. So anything that slows us down is a problem. Even though properly channeled drivenness and ambition can be huge assets, they can also result in a simple, crass, craven selfishness wherein we view ourselves as the most important people on the planet. “I’m important. What I’m doing is important. If you’re holding me up, you need to knock it off right now.”

The key to growing in this type of patience is to create a little more margin – leave a little bit earlier, take on a little bit less – so that a minor delay doesn’t send the day into a tail-spin.

The result of this type of patience is a greater sense of peace.

But that second kind of patience, that's something else. On one level, it's a fruit we've all needed at some point. We're so fed up with high school, we can't wait to start working or start college. We're so ready to get out of college, we can't wait to get to the "real world." We're so tired of the entry-level job – the one we couldn't wait to start while we were in college – we can't wait to get something better.

And then there are those who have been forced to learn patience of the extreme kind.

The Text

Genesis 12:1-4a, 4c, 5b; 15:1-2, 4-6; 16:16; 17:1, 5b, 8, 17-20a, 21; 21:1, 5

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you."

So Abram departed as the Lord had instructed.... Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran... and headed for the land of Canaan....

Some time later, the Lord spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, "Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great."

But Abram replied, "O Sovereign Lord, what good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son? Since you've given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth."...

Then the Lord said to him, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own who will be your heir." Then the Lord took Abram outside and said to him, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!"

And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith....

After ten years, Abram became impatient and, at his wife Sarai's urging, fathered a boy named Ishmael with Hagar, Sarai's servant.

Abram was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born....

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am El-Shaddai—'God Almighty.' Serve me faithfully and live a blameless life.... I am changing your name. It will no longer be Abram. Instead, you will be called Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations.... And I will give the entire land of Canaan, where you now live as a foreigner, to you and your descendants. It will be their possession forever, and I will be their God."

Then Abraham bowed down to the ground, but he laughed to himself in disbelief. "How could I become a father at the age of 100?" he thought. "And how can Sarah have a baby when she is ninety years old?" So Abraham said to God, "May Ishmael live under your special blessing!"

But God replied, "No—Sarah, your wife, will give birth to a son for you. You will name him Isaac, and I will confirm my covenant with him and his descendants as an everlasting covenant. As for Ishmael, I will bless him also, just as you have asked.... But my covenant will be confirmed with Isaac, who will be born to you and Sarah about this time next year."

The Lord kept his word and did for Sarah exactly what he had promised.... Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born.

- Abraham waited for 25 years for God to fulfill His promise, and even then it was only a partial fulfillment. Abraham had two sons, but he wasn't "many nations" and he didn't possess the land that God had promised. We often grow impatient after a few weeks or months, much less waiting a quarter-century. Are there areas

in your life where you need to be patient and wait for God's timing?

- In other parts of the story, we learn that Abraham's attempt to "help God along" by fathering Ishmael resulted in a lot of turmoil, and it's easy to fault Abraham for this. But how many of us wouldn't have tried to give God a hand a decade after an unfulfilled promise? When are some times in your life when you've tried to hurry God along? What was the result?

God is Patient

In 1 Timothy 1:15-16, Paul writes, "This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners'—and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life."

Oh how grateful I am that God is patient with my sins. We often fall into the trap of thinking we're "good people," and yes, we were created in the image of God so there is good in us. But we are also fallen. We can never hope to measure up to the perfect standard of a holy God.

God in His patience continues to extend His grace to us. When we fall back into the same habitual sin that we've fallen into a thousand times before, when we fail to learn a lesson that God is trying to teach us, when we mistreat one of His children whom He loves, God is still there, extending grace, forgiving, restoring.

- What are some of the places in your life where God continues to demonstrate His patience?
- Do you think God's patience ever wears thin or even wears out? Why or why not?

Patience with Others

In Jesus' day, the religious leaders taught that you should

forgive someone three times, so Peter, one of Jesus' closest followers, comes to Jesus and asks, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" (Matthew 18:21b)

Peter thought he was being all smooth – "I know how to impress Jesus – be willing to forgive more than twice what is required!"

But Jesus replies, "No, not seven times, but seventy times seven!" (Matthew 18:22) and goes on to tell this story:

"Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt.

But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you

pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart." (Matthew 18:23-35)

In this story, the master is God, we are the servant with the massive debt, and the fellow servant represents the people in our lives who have wronged us. Essentially, God is saying we need to extend the same forgiveness and patience to others that He has extended to us.

- Who are the people in your life with whom you need to be more patient?
- What triggers impatience with others in your life?
- What are some practical things you can do to cultivate patience with others?

EXPRESS

Pick a couple of these to live out being on mission every day:

- Pray for three people with whom you need to be more patient.
- Each time you find yourself in line this week, let someone else go ahead of you.
- Reflect/journal on something that you wanted but had to wait for or something that you currently want and are waiting for.
- Schedule a meal without cell phones.
- Make a prayer list for times when you are stuck waiting

– in traffic, on the metro, in line, etc. – and use it.

Pray the Scriptures

“Lord, I bring by requests before You and wait expectantly.”
(Psalm 5:3)

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5

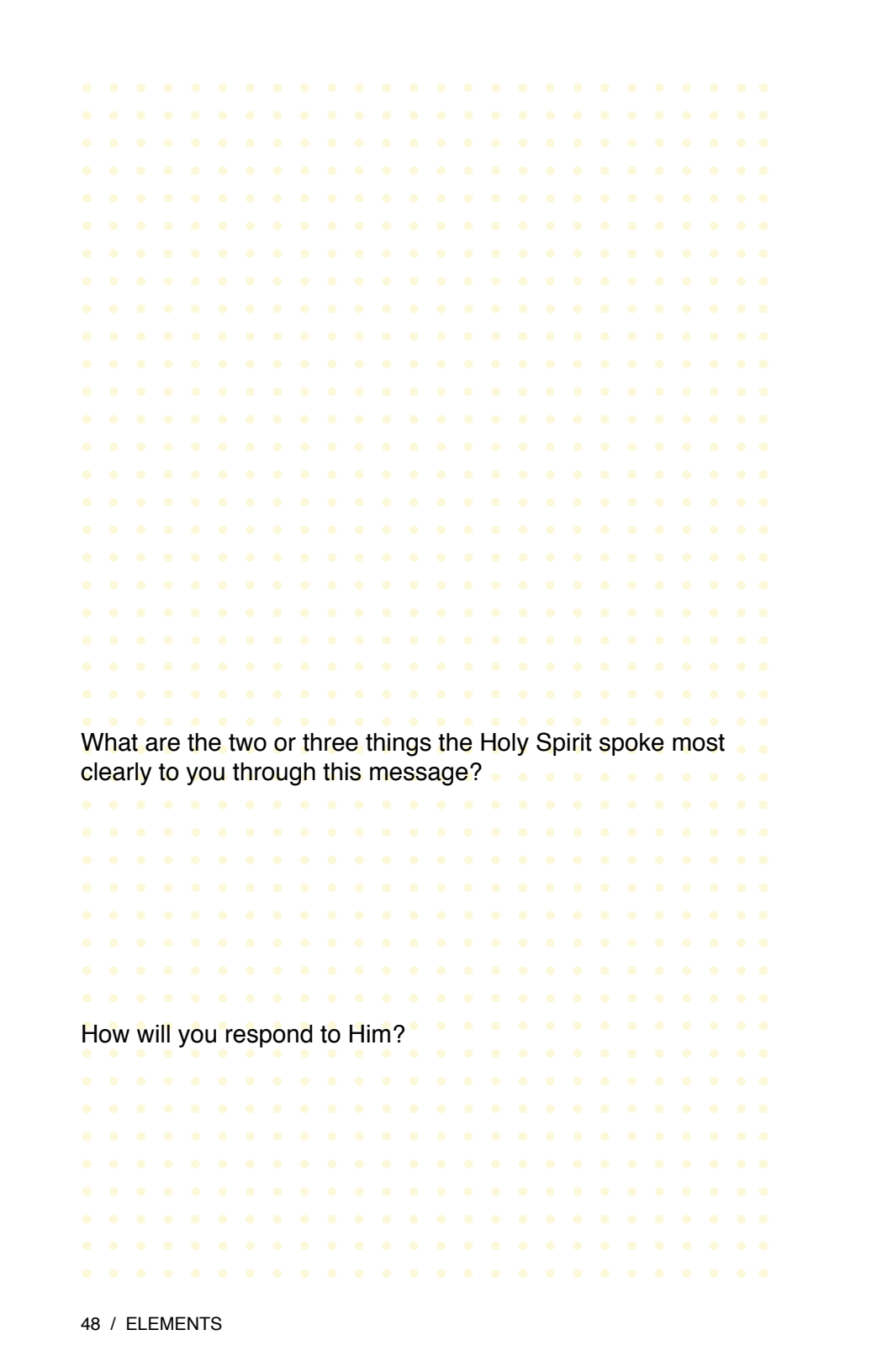
KD

KINDNESS

Expressing Gratitude to God Through Service to Others

Weekly Reading Plan

Day 5: Matthew 25:31-46



What are the two or three things the Holy Spirit spoke most clearly to you through this message?

How will you respond to Him?

EXPERIENCE

Reflecting Back

- During the last week, when did you find yourself feeling impatient, and what did you do about it?
- Going forward, what can you do to continue to cultivate patience in your life?

Introduction

God wants us to be nice.

That's what we often think when we think about kindness, isn't it? But kindness is much richer and deeper than simply being nice to people.

Kindness is about serving, caring, and showing compassion. It's about blessing and bearing burdens. It's about radical hospitality, unconditional love, unqualified forgiveness, and the gift of presence.

When we recognize and accept God's kindness towards us, we are enabled to extend kindness to others. We can see people through God's eyes and with His compassion, responding as He does, with kindness and graciousness.

The Text

Luke 6:27-36

"But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other cheek also. If someone demands your coat, offer your shirt also. Give to anyone who asks; and when things are taken away from you, don't try to get them back. Do to others as you would like them to do to you.

"If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them! And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much! And if you lend money only

to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return.

“Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.

- What’s the difference between love and kindness?
- What are some concrete acts of kindness expressed in this passage?
- How has God demonstrated kindness towards us?

Responding to God’s Kindness

We don’t often think about God’s kindness towards us. But really, how else would you characterize the grace and mercy He bestows upon us? The salvation He extends to us – isn’t that an act of kindness?

In Titus 3:4-7, Paul writes, “When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of his grace he declared us righteous and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.”

The kindness of God isn’t the result of anything we’ve done to earn it. Luke 6 speaks of God’s kindness to “those who are unthankful and wicked,” while Titus 3 says it’s “not because of the righteous things we had done.” Ephesians 2:9 states, “Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.” It is out of His unconditional love that God is kind toward us.

So, how are we to respond to the unmerited kindness of God?

Romans 2:4 says, “Don’t you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can’t you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?”

God’s kindness and unconditional love aren’t meant to indicate that He approves of anything and everything we do. Rather, as some like to say, God loves us just as we are, but also loves us too much to leave us that way.

As the Titus passage indicates, He washes away our sins and gives us new life in the Spirit. Our task is therefore to walk in that new life and live out the fruit of the Spirit, turning from our sin.

- How has God’s kindness, grace, and mercy, as evidenced in His gift of salvation, impacted your life?
- Are there any areas of sin you need to turn from in response to the kindness of God?

Loving a Sick, Hungry, Imprisoned God

By now, you have undoubtedly noticed that many fruit of the Spirit are characteristics of God that we are meant to reflect ourselves. Considering that the Spirit is a member of the Godhead, that shouldn’t come as a big surprise.

But what’s even more fascinating is that by extending a fruit of the Spirit like kindness toward other people, we are in fact extending it to God Himself.

In Matthew 25:31-40, Jesus told His disciples:

“But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come,

you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'

"Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

"And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'"

Too often, we think of caring for the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned as good deeds we can do to earn the favor of God. In reality, they are very tangible ways we can express gratitude to God for what He has done for us.

The gift of salvation, healing, restoration, and wholeness that God gives to us is something we can never repay, never fully express our appreciation for. But one small way we can show God our gratitude is in extending kindness to the least of these and thereby serving Him.

- It's been said that if Satan can't make you bad, he'll make you busy. So often, it's our busyness that prevents us from taking the time to show kindness to those around us. What are some steps you can take to start living at a pace of life that enables you to serve God through kindness to others?
- What can you do to cultivate an attitude of gratitude in your life so you'll want to serve others?
- What fears do you face when you think about ministering to the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned?

What can you do to overcome them?

EXPRESS

Pick a couple of these to live out being on mission every day:

- Pay for the meal/coffee for the person behind you in line.
- Find a way to serve a neighbor.
- Do something kind for a person who is not kind to you.
- Perform one random act of kindness per day. Do one of them with your group.
- Join Adopt-a-Block this Saturday at 10 AM at the Southeast White House (2909 Pennsylvania Avenue SE). Contact Avery Marks to RSVP or for details: avery.marks@theaterchurch.com

Pray the Scriptures

“Thank You, O Lord, for Your kindness. Help me to turn from my sin.” (Romans 2:4)





6

GD

GOODNESS

CHAPTER 6: GOODNESS

Pushing Back the Darkness

ENCOUNTER

Weekly Reading Plan

Day 1: Psalm 107

Day 2: Jeremiah 33:1-13

Day 3: John 10:1-18

Day 4: Zechariah 9:14-17

Day 5: Ephesians 5:8-10; Galatians 6:9-10

Sermon Notes

What are the two or three things the Holy Spirit spoke most clearly to you through this message?

How will you respond to Him?

EXPERIENCE

Reflecting Back

- How did you extend kindness to someone in a tangible way this past week?
- Has the Spirit been calling you to serve anyone in particular? If so, how are you going to respond?

Introduction

The annual goodness test was trickier than the reading test, the spelling test, or the dreaded fractions test. As I sat on the lap of the adored red-suited stranger, I recounted all of my wishes: some books, some games, a trip to DisneyWorld, a puppy, etc. Then, the test came. I always knew it was coming and I knew my answer should be firm and confident, but it always gave me pause. “Have you been a good kid this year?” How was I supposed to answer? Evidently, this guy had sneaky elves serving as his spies. And if I had been lucky enough to slip something past them, there was still the Jesus issue. That guy never slept. Did Jesus and Santa ever talk? Surely at least one of them knew I had hit my sister, been disrespectful to my parents, been mean to some kids at school, and complained every time I had to clean my room. But what kid didn’t? What was the real meaning of the question?

What constituted “good?” Was I comparing myself to my previous year’s behavior? Was I comparing myself to other kids? Was I comparing myself to Jesus? If my teachers had granted me A’s in conduct, did that count for good? Or was goodness more about who I was deep down inside? I always meant well. If my intentions were good or I knew in my gut that I was really a pretty good kid – would that suffice?

That’s where my answer always went: “I could have been better, but deep down I’m a good kid.”

For me, goodness was a state of being. Or at least a state of wishing. Of good intentions. It was an inward virtue that I

hoped would mature more and more as I grew older. When we look at goodness as it is understood Biblically, however, we find that there is no being without doing. God declared that creation was “good” not simply because it passed a test or met an expectation but because it was functional. It had the ability to accomplish the purposes given to it. One definition of goodness is “holiness in action.” Goodness means taking active, intentional, and strategic steps to push back the darkness and usher in the Kingdom of God.

The Text

Psalm 107:1-15

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good!

His faithful love endures forever.

Has the Lord redeemed you? Then speak out!

Tell others he has redeemed you from your enemies.

For he has gathered the exiles from many lands,

from east and west,

from north and south.

Some wandered in the wilderness,

lost and homeless.

Hungry and thirsty,

they nearly died.

“Lord, help!” they cried in their trouble,

and he rescued them from their distress.

He led them straight to safety,

to a city where they could live.

Let them praise the Lord for his great love

and for the wonderful things he has done for them.

For he satisfies the thirsty

and fills the hungry with good things.

Some sat in darkness and deepest gloom,

imprisoned in iron chains of misery.

They rebelled against the words of God,

scorning the counsel of the Most High.

That is why he broke them with hard labor;

they fell, and no one was there to help them.

“Lord, help!” they cried in their trouble,

and he saved them from their distress.

He led them from the darkness and deepest gloom;

he snapped their chains.

*Let them praise the Lord for his great love
and for the wonderful things he has done for them.*

- Goodness is defined by and depicted first by God himself. List all the examples of God's goodness you see in this passage.
- Can you think of some occasions when God's actions didn't seem good? How do we understand those moments in light of this attribute of goodness?
- Make a list of 10 good things God has done in your life.

Goodness in Action

Goodness is not merely a state of being; it is a state of doing. God is not just good because He is without sin. He is good because of what He does. When we look at Psalm 107, we see so many dimensions of His goodness – He redeems, provides, protects, listens, blesses, and rescues. God demonstrates goodness in His actions. Goodness is not simply an inward virtue to strive for but an outward expression of God's character to demonstrate.

In Acts 10:38 we read that Jesus went about doing good and healing all those who were oppressed by the devil. He was fighting evil with good and pushing back darkness through His actions. Jesus did the same things His Father did in Psalm 107. He redeemed those who were lost, delivered those in bondage, and restored into community those who had been exiled from it. He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, gave freedom to the woman caught in adultery, welcomed the children, infused strength into the legs of the lame, made the Samaritan woman an evangelist, and called questionable characters to join His team of disciples.

Jesus teaches this principle in the parable of the three servants in Matthew 25. A man goes on a long trip and entrusts various amounts of money to three different men. To one, he gave five bags of silver. To another, two bags. And to the third, he gave one bag of silver. The first man invested the money and generated another five bags of silver. The

second man likewise invested his money and received another two bags for his investment. Both of these men were labeled by their master as “good and faithful.” The last man simply buried his bag of silver for fear of losing it. The master had much harsher words for him: wicked and lazy. While the man’s intentions were good – he did not want to lose his master’s money – he was condemned for his lack of action.

Jesus has not called us to play it safe, to hold down the fort, or to sit tight and wait for the storms of life to pass on our way to eternity. He has called us to bring His Kingdom to earth. Following Jesus doesn’t mean having a certain mindset or striving for a content state of being. Following Jesus means doing what Jesus did the way He did it. Goodness means we stop playing defense and start playing offense to push back the darkness and let the light of God shine in the world.

- Read Matthew 25:14-28. What are your initial reactions to this story? What does it tell us about the character of God? Which character resonates with you the most?
- If goodness is a state of doing more than a state of being, then is it possible for people who are not followers of Jesus to demonstrate this fruit of the Spirit? How? What is the connection between goodness as a virtue and goodness as action?
- Is your faith passive or active? What did your actions this past week communicate to others about the character of God?

Goodness in Reaction

It has been said that it is much easier to *act* like a Christian than to *react* like a Christian. Goodness is not a fruit of the Spirit that only finds expression in our actions but also in our reactions. When life, work, family, and friends squeeze us, what comes out?

In Luke 6, Jesus outlined the way His followers were to react. His counterintuitive and countercultural commands included turning the other cheek, giving more than requested, going

further than expected, and lending to those who cannot repay. Only on the lips of Jesus Christ were found the words: “Love your enemies.” Many great ancient philosophers taught about virtue, being good, and rising above expectations, but Jesus was the only one who went so far as to say “love the one who hates you.”

Loren Cunningham, the founder of Youth With a Mission (YWAM), frames it as “ministering in the opposite spirit.” If someone speaks badly about you, say a word of praise about him. If someone wants to curse you, find a way to bless her. If someone intends to hurt you, offer them comfort. The same is true with the circumstances we find ourselves in. We can be prophets of hope when all seems lost, givers of love in the midst of hate, and brokers of peace in times of conflict. When we minister in the opposite spirit, we allow the light of God to eradicate the darkness of the world, and we show others what God is really like.

As followers of Jesus, we have to examine our actions towards others, but we must also be intentional about our reactions. Are we reacting like Jesus? Is goodness expressed when evil is intended towards us? Are we pushing back the darkness in the way we react to the circumstances around us?

- Read Luke 6:27-36. Which of those statements is the hardest for you to put into practice?
- Have you ever turned the other cheek, given more than requested, or gone further than expected? What happened? What was the outcome?
- Sometimes Jesus reacted to His enemies with sarcasm, with hard truth, or even by wielding whips. Other times, He reacted with silence, questions, and a servant heart. How do we know what reaction Jesus is calling us to at any given time?
- What is the difference between turning the other cheek and being a doormat, allowing others to take advantage of you, or becoming victim to an abusive situation?

EXPRESS

Pick a couple of these to live out being on mission every day:

- Share a meal with someone who is homeless and listen to their story.
- Bless your neighborhood – pick up trash, take cookies to your neighbors, etc.
- Find an opportunity to provide tutoring for a child.
- Make it a point every day to “make someone’s day.”
- Attend NCC’s Second Saturday Serve with your group.

Pray the Scriptures

“Thank you, Lord, for Your great love and the wonderful things you have done for me!” (Psalm 107:8)





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7

FL

FAITHFULNESS

The Depth of Your Impact is Determined by the Duration of Your Investment

Weekly Reading Plan

Day 2: Proverbs 3:3; Psalm 89

Day 4: 2 Timothy 2:1-13

Day 5: Hebrews 3:1-6; Hebrews 11

Sermon Notes

What are the two or three things the Holy Spirit spoke most clearly to you through this message?

How will you respond to Him?

EXPERIENCE

Reflecting Back

- How did you practically put goodness into action over the past week? How did you put it into reaction?
- Did you think about God or relate to Him any differently this week because of last week's study? How has your understanding of God's goodness changed?

Introduction

We live in a place characterized by short-term commitments: six months in this job, a year in that one, then on to the next position or even the next city.

And there's nothing inherently wrong with that.

When you're a staff assistant barely covering rent and working a job that you could have done nearly as well at 16 as at 22, you jump at the chance to move up for a bit more pay and more substantive work. When you get married and have kids, wanting to move closer to home and closer to family makes perfect sense.

But it's also true that those who make the biggest impact – who make the biggest difference – are typically the people who make a long-term investment. This is true whether you're building a business, working a job, or even simply being a friend.

There are three phases to any endeavor.

The first is the start-up phase. There's always an initial learning curve. You have to figure out how to do the accounting for your new business, who's who at your new job, or the basic life history of a new friend. This phase might last a few weeks, a few months, or a few years.

But once you're through it and have reached the second phase, you're probably fairly competent. You put in the

time and effort; you're seeing results. You have a profitable business, you get good reviews at work, and you've built a meaningful friendship.

Most of the time we bounce between the start-up and competency phases. We start something new. We figure out how to do it. We do it for a while. We get bored. We move on to what's next and start the cycle all over again.

When we do this, we miss out entirely on the third phase.

In the third phase, the simple "how-tos" fade into the background. You can run the business, do the job, and relate to the friend almost without thinking about it. Instead, you're able to focus on excellence. Your mind is free to see the things you didn't notice when you were preoccupied with getting the job done, to root out inefficiencies, to look past the façade to the true condition of a friend's soul.

In the third phase you've built the trust and relational capital that allow you to get more done because it's easier to convince people your ideas will work. You get more latitude to operate. You know who to go to in order to get things accomplished.

It's in this phase that we truly see dividends on our investment. We begin to experience more significant and more meaningful results because we've put in enough time to achieve excellence.

The Text

Ruth 1:16b-17; 2:10-12; 3:1,3-10

In Ruth, we read the story of a young Moabite woman whose Israelite husband dies. Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, decides to return to Israel and says goodbye to her two daughters-in-law, but Ruth refuses to let her go alone.

"Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me

severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!”

Ruth goes with her to Israel where she spends her time working to support herself and Naomi, gathering the scraps left over after the harvest in the fields of Boaz, one of Naomi’s wealthy relatives. Boaz takes notice of Ruth and takes steps to ensure she is able to gather enough and that none of his workers mistreat her.

Ruth fell at his feet and thanked him warmly. “What have I done to deserve such kindness?” she asked. “I am only a foreigner.”

“Yes, I know,” Boaz replied. “But I also know about everything you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband. I have heard how you left your father and mother and your own land to live here among complete strangers. May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully for what you have done.”...

One day Naomi said to Ruth, “My daughter, it’s time that I found a permanent home for you, so that you will be provided for. ... Now do as I tell you—take a bath and put on perfume and dress in your nicest clothes. Then go to the threshing floor, but don’t let Boaz see you until he has finished eating and drinking. Be sure to notice where he lies down; then go and uncover his feet and lie down there. He will tell you what to do.”

“I will do everything you say,” Ruth replied. So she went down to the threshing floor that night and followed the instructions of her mother-in-law.

After Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he lay down at the far end of the pile of grain and went to sleep. Then Ruth came quietly, uncovered his feet, and lay down. Around midnight Boaz suddenly woke up and turned over. He was surprised to find a woman lying at his feet! “Who are you?” he asked.

“I am your servant Ruth,” she replied. “Spread the corner of your covering over me, for you are my family redeemer.”

“The Lord bless you, my daughter!” Boaz exclaimed. “You are showing even more family loyalty now than you did before, for you have not gone after a younger man, whether rich or poor.”

Boaz goes on to marry Ruth, ensuring that both she and Naomi will be provided for.

- Often in ancient societies, the death of a husband meant a life of poverty and hardship for his wife. It would have been prudent for Ruth to simply marry another man from her people, but she refused to leave her mother-in-law to fend for herself. Are there situations where God has called you to be faithful despite the difficulty that may entail?
- Ruth is not the only example of faithfulness in this story. Boaz was a relative of Naomi’s, but there was a closer relative who was actually responsible for taking care of her and Ruth. Are there people who have stepped in and demonstrated faithfulness to you, perhaps even when that faithfulness should have been someone else’s responsibility?

God is Faithful

The fruit of the Spirit are traits rooted in the character of God, and those fruit on display in our lives are reflections of the image of God in us.

Faithfulness is no exception. In 2 Timothy 2:13, Paul says, “If we are unfaithful, [God] remains faithful, for he cannot deny who he is.”

God’s faithfulness is one of the key themes of the Old Testament. God chose the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to be His people – to have a unique relationship with Him that would display His glory to the world.

He brought Jacob's family to Egypt to save them during a famine. Over the course of the next 400 years the Egyptians enslaved Jacob's descendants, but God had not forgotten them. He raised up a leader named Moses to liberate His people.

Through a series of divine interventions God rescued the Israelites from the Egyptian Pharaoh. During their journey out of Egypt, God continued to provide for them. Though they were in the midst of the wilderness, the Lord ensured they always had enough to survive.

But the people rebelled against God, wishing themselves back in captivity in Egypt, treating the salvation, promise, and provision of God with contempt, failing to believe that He would provide as He said.

So God forced them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. Yet He never stopped providing for them. They always had enough.

At the end of the 40 years He brought them into the land He promised to give them, and yet they continued to rebel against Him. Over and over the people of Israel were faithless and yet God remained faithful. He continued to rescue them from their enemies.

Until one day God allowed His people to be taken to Babylon in captivity.

But even in Babylon God did not forget them. After seventy years he brought them back.

Throughout all of this, God's faithfulness did not waver. In fact, all along He was planning the ultimate act of sacrifice, the ultimate demonstration of love, the ultimate proof of faithfulness: the death of Jesus on the cross.

- What does God's faithfulness to the people of Israel teach us about our relationship with God?

- We are often “faithful until” – until it’s too hard, too inconvenient, too uncomfortable – but God shows us what it means to be “faithful through” –through difficult circumstances, challenges, even the faithlessness of others. Are there examples of God’s “faithfulness through” in your own life?

The Rewards of Faithfulness

Often, faithfulness reaps rewards.

When we are faithful at work, we may be promoted and reap financial benefits. Faithfulness in marriage results in a comfort and stability achieved over the course of years.

Ruth is faithful to Naomi, and the result is a loving and wealthy husband. Genesis recounts how a faithful slave and prisoner named Joseph became the prime minister of Egypt.

However, the apostle Paul was faithful to the call of God on his life to share the good news of Jesus with people in distant land, and he writes in 2 Corinthians 11:23b-28:

I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again.

Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea.

I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not.

I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without

enough clothing to keep me warm.

Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches.

Ultimately, Paul died while imprisoned in Rome.

Few, if any, have done more to advance the Kingdom of God than the Apostle Paul, and I doubt many will reap greater eternal rewards. But in the here and now, Paul didn't do so well.

The fact is that faithfulness will often reap rewards in this life. But there are times when it doesn't.

God's call to us to be faithful isn't about our benefit but about reflecting His character and glory into the world.

- Are there places of faithfulness in your life that you think may not result in tangible benefits in the here and now?
- God often calls us to be faithful in the midst of difficulty and suffering, but there are also times when our commitment to a situation or person ceases to be productive. How do we distinguish between God's call to be faithful in the face of suffering and situations where our faithfulness will bear no fruit?

EXPRESS

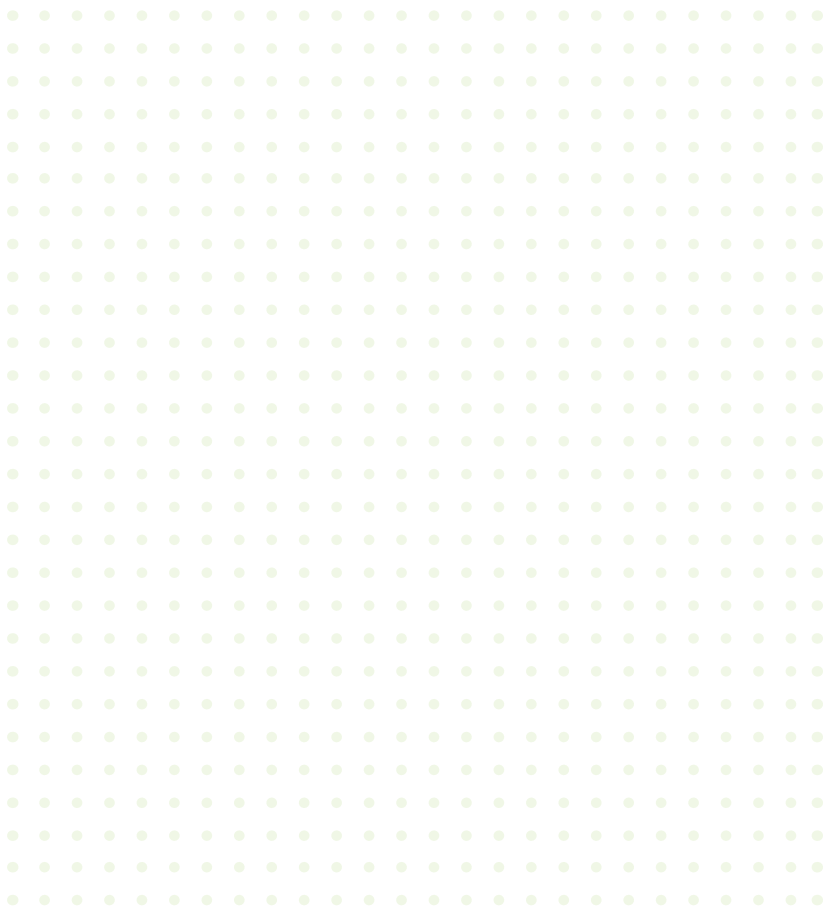
Pick a couple of these to live out being on mission every day:

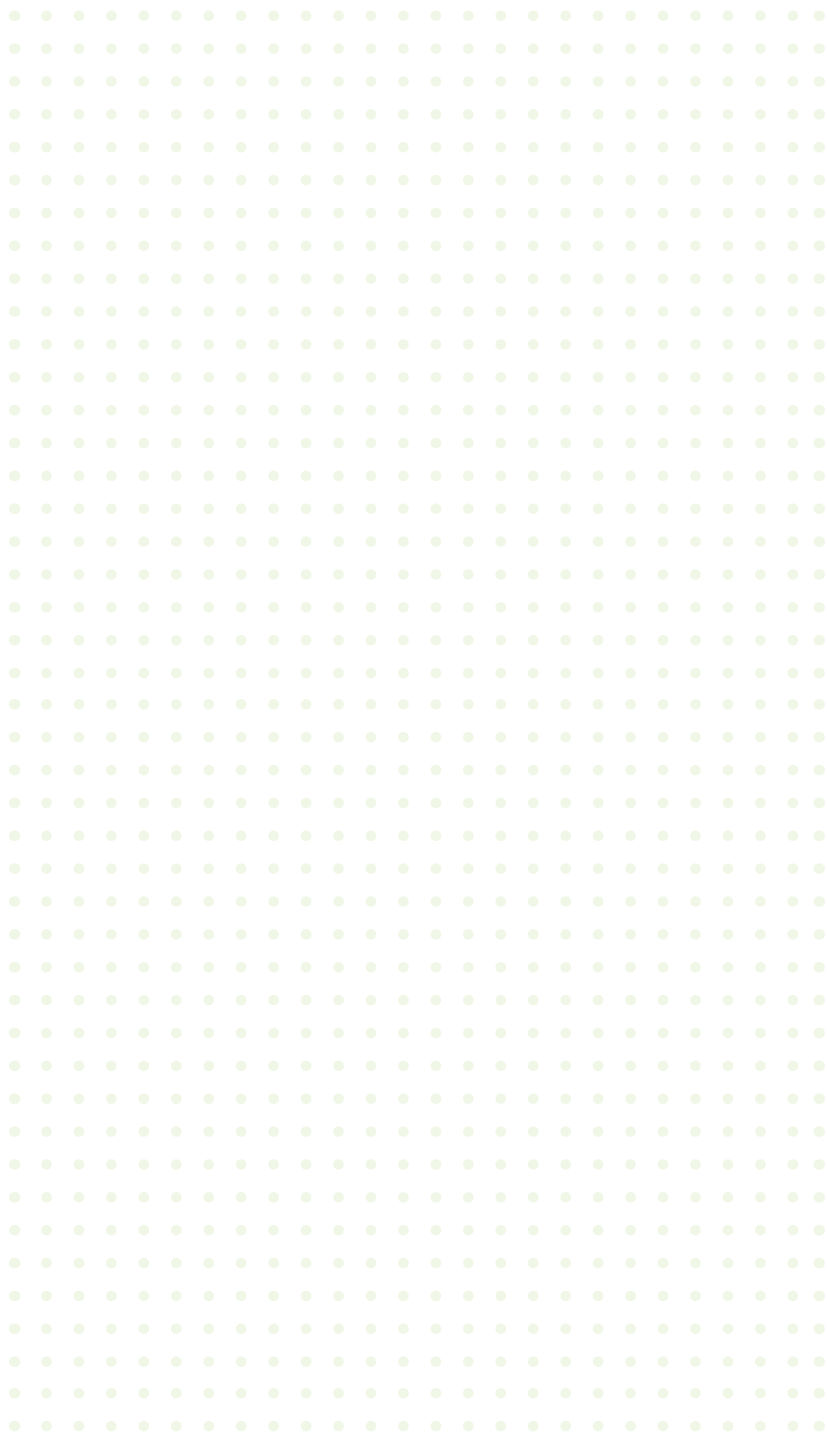
- Support a ministry/organization that has faithfully served your city.
- Join an NCC weekend ministry team.
- Find a way to demonstrate your commitment to your spouse.

- Sign up as a mentor at the Southeast White House (ernest.clover@theaterchurch.com) or Casa Chirilagua (casachirilagua.org/mentoring/).
- Sponsor a child through Compassion International. For more information, visit: compassion.com/sponsor_a_child/

Pray the Scriptures

“Lord, may Your Name be glorified for your unfailing love and faithfulness.” (Psalm 115:1)







The Proper Application of Power and Love

Weekly Reading Plan

Day 1: Matthew 11:25-30


Day 2: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Day 3: Hosea 11:1-11

Day 4: Mark 5:25-34

Day 5: Proverbs 15:1

Sermon Notes



What are the two or three things the Holy Spirit spoke most clearly to you through this message?

How will you respond to Him?

EXPERIENCE

Reflecting Back

- Has God revealed any places where you need to continue (or begin) to be faithful this past week?
- What concrete steps have you taken in the past week to be a more faithful person?

Introduction

The eighth fruit of the Spirit is gentleness, which is often translated meekness. Being gentle means to be even-tempered and balanced in spirit – a person who forgives, corrects, and brings peace. Gentleness is a condition of the heart and mind that demonstrates quiet, harnessed power. It is the opposite of harshness and violence.

Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, for I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29). A yoke is a restraint device; one that the world places upon our shoulders. However, in Christ alone we are promised a yoke that is light and easy, one that is gentle. When we receive Christ we receive His yoke and are called to extend this gentleness to others.

Fear hinders our ability to be gentle with others. If we allow ourselves to act out of fear we will act rashly, foolishly, and hurtfully, but God did not give us a spirit of fear. He gave us a spirit of power and love and self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:7). The author of Hebrews says that faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see (Hebrews 11:1). Simply put, when we act out of a confident faith it will cause an outpouring of gentleness in our lives.

The Text

Mark 5:25-34

A woman in the crowd had suffered for twelve years with constant bleeding. She had suffered a great deal from many doctors, and over the years she had spent everything she had

to pay them, but she had gotten no better. In fact, she had gotten worse. She had heard about Jesus, so she came up behind him through the crowd and touched his robe. For she thought to herself, "If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed." Immediately the bleeding stopped, and she could feel in her body that she had been healed of her terrible condition.

Jesus realized at once that healing power had gone out from him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my robe?"

His disciples said to him, "Look at this crowd pressing around you. How can you ask, 'Who touched me?'"

But he kept on looking around to see who had done it. Then the frightened woman, trembling at the realization of what had happened to her, came and fell to her knees in front of him and told him what she had done. And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over."

- Here was a woman without much hope – she had been turned away from every option and every person, and her condition was worsening by the day. Have you ever experienced a time like this, when you were miserable and saw no end in sight? How did those in your life treat you? Were they gentle?
- According to Mosaic Law this woman was unclean and forbidden to come in contact with others, lest they too become unclean. For 12 years she had likely never felt the embrace of a loved one. Think about a time when something got between you and someone you love. How did you feel? How did you react? What did you learn?
- We're not always gentle with others, but Jesus is always gentle with us. His response to this woman must have shocked the crowd pressing around Him. Rather than become upset because of her uncleanness, He calls her daughter. Why do you tend

to get upset with others? Is there someone you need to apologize to for a lack of gentleness?

Forgiveness Leads to Gentleness

In Mark 5:34 Jesus told the woman, “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over.” Unlike the Pharisees, who would have responded with anger and condemnation, Jesus extended grace and the woman who had no hope was healed. We see here that the attitude and position of our heart has a direct correlation to our ability to live in a spirit of gentleness.

Colossians 3:12-13 states, “Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.”

This passage tells us to clothe ourselves with gentleness and live out a life of forgiveness. We have all heard it said that to forgive others is to actually release ourselves. We are set free from a resentment that creates unrest in our souls. Our freedom allows us to extend the same grace to others that God has unconditionally extended to us.

When we live out a life of forgiveness it postures us in humility and gentleness towards others.

- Do you struggle with forgiving others? Why or why not?
- When Jesus cried out “It is finished!” His power was under the control of love. He could have called upon a legion of angels to come to His aid, but He submitted Himself to the will of the Father. What is controlling your ability to be forgiving?

A Gentle Person is in Control

When the unclean woman approached Jesus in Mark 5 the disciples were overwhelmed by the crowd, yet Jesus was not – He remained in control. He did not become anxious about the

situation; He simply turned around and asked, “Who touched my robe?” Just like the disciples, we have a natural tendency to let situations overwhelm us, and if we are not careful we will be overcome with fear and anxiety. However, unlike the disciples in Mark 5, we are filled with the Holy Spirit, which, as Paul reminds Timothy, is powerful, loving, and disciplined (2 Timothy 1:7).

James 1:19-21 declares, “Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.”

James, the brother of Jesus who didn’t appear to believe Jesus was the son of God until after His resurrection, specifically instructs on gentleness through control. After he witnessed the return of his brother he knew first hand the power of God and so he warns us to take heed that we do what produces the righteousness that God desires.

As Christians we understand that there is a time for passionate zeal and a time for quiet submission. We must remain inwardly centered and in control, regardless of our situation.

- Based on Mark 5, who are you currently similar to – Jesus or the disciples? Are you in control or are you overwhelmed?
- Allowing fear to overcome us is unhealthy. What fears are you harboring in your life right now? Have you prayed about them?

EXPRESS

Pick a couple of these to live out being on mission every day:

- Reply to an offense with a gentle spirit.

- Have a conversation with a child.
- Seek reconciliation with someone who wronged you.
- Make amends with someone you have wronged.
- Serve with InService at Union Station (rebecca.sadtler@theaterchurch.com) or in Alexandria (irene.bender@theaterchurch.com). Consider doing this with others from your group.

Pray the Scriptures

“God, help me to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.” (James 1:19)



An abstract, high-contrast image featuring a vibrant green background. A large, intricate splash of a slightly darker shade of green ink or paint dominates the center, creating a sense of movement and depth. The splash has various folds, swirls, and droplets, giving it a fluid, organic appearance. In the center of this splash is a white square containing text.

9

Sc

SELF-CONTROL

Set Free to Obey God's Will

Weekly Reading Plan

Day 1: 1 Samuel 26

Day 2: Luke 22:41-42

Day 3: 1 Peter 1:13-16

Day 4: Proverbs 25:28; 29:11

Day 5: Matthew 26:47-56

Sermon Notes

What are the two or three things the Holy Spirit spoke most clearly to you through this message?

How will you respond to Him?

EXPERIENCE

Reflecting Back

- How did you practically live out the fruit of gentleness in the past week?
- Have you found yourself more confident and in control when dealing with stressful situations? Has it produced gentleness in you?
- Has your relationship with God been impacted by the knowledge of His gentleness towards you? How so?

Introduction

The Galatians 5 passage listing self-control among the fruit of the Spirit is preceded by a list of fruit of the sinful nature – “When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.” (Galatians 5:19-21)

Many of those sinful fruit are avoided through self-control. In fact, self-control is often necessary to react with the other fruit of the Spirit when faced with a difficult situation or person. To be kind to the person who was unkind to you, to express gentleness when you’d rather reply with anger, to hold onto joy rather than give way to despair, to remain patient in the face of delay, to maintain peace in a situation that challenges your equanimity, to hold to the good when tempted by an attractive or selfish alternative, to remain faithful for the long haul, to love the person who is being so unlovable – all these can require the exercise of self-control.

Living with self-control can be difficult and countercultural in a society that screams self-indulgence. But as the Spirit works in us, we are enabled to “minister in the opposite spirit” – to hold our natural reactions in check and return good for evil.

The Text

1 Peter 1:13-16

So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. So you must live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then. But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, "You must be holy because I am holy."

- What are some old ways of living you had to change when you became a Christian?
- How can you tell when you are doing something to satisfy your own desires rather than because it is God's will?
- "Be holy in everything you do." What is an area of life where you need to be holy? What would that look like?

The Impossible Dream

"You must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy." Sounds like an impossible standard, doesn't it? That's because humanly speaking it is.

In Romans 7:18-19, Paul writes, "And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway."

Can you relate?

Living a life of self-control isn't something we can do under our own power, which is why self-control is a fruit of the Spirit – it's a work the Spirit performs in our lives and it develops over time.

So often we forget this and try to rely on our own strength and willpower to resist the temptation or take the step we need to take. The first principle of the Christian 12-Step program

Celebrate Recovery is “Realize I’m not God. I admit that I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and that my life is unmanageable.”

Far too often we look at the standard set by Scripture and beat ourselves up for not living up to it. But Christian spiritual maturity is not something we can simply wish into being. Just as we don’t expect a child to learn to walk overnight, we can’t expect ourselves to live a life of complete self-control overnight. But God will give us opportunities to practice self-control and, as we grow in our ability to do so, He will give us further opportunities to exercise it.

As Paul goes on to write in Romans 7:24-25, “Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

As Jesus told the disciples in regards to entering the Kingdom of God: “Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God” (Mark 10:27)

- What are some areas of your life in which you have tried unsuccessfully to change?
- Have you ever been tempted to give up on following Christ because obedience seemed too difficult or costly? What enabled you to press forward?
- What are some areas in which you’ve grown in your ability to exercise self-control?

Life in the Spirit

So what does it look like to live a life in the Spirit – a life of self-control?

In Romans 8, Paul writes,

Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit.

So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will. That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.

But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.) And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. (Romans 8:5-14)

Self-control might be better viewed as "Spirit control." It's by surrendering to the Spirit that we find freedom. Sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? We so often think of freedom as the freedom *to* do whatever we want when what we desperately need is freedom *from* what is destroying our lives.

As we yield to the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to walk in self-control, saying "no" to the deeds of our sinful nature and "yes" to the path God has for us.

We have to remember that God is a loving Father who wants what's best for His children. He wants us to flourish. When we commit our lives and wills to Him, we are set upon the path that leads to wholeness and restoration.

- Does a life of obedience to God and a life of freedom sound like a contradiction to you? Why or why not?
- Are you able to view God as a loving father who wants what's best for you? If not, what hinders you from doing so?
- What do you need freedom from? Are you willing to surrender control to the Holy Spirit and walk in obedience to Him?

EXPRESS

Pick a couple of these to live out being on mission every day:

- This week is Holy Week, the week leading up to Easter when we celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the hope we have because of Him. The Church has historically observed it as a solemn week of fasting. Consider foregoing something you would usually consume this week. You could give up:
 - Food – This could be a particular meal during the day, all food on one or more days, or some kind of comfort food (meat, sweets, alcohol, etc.). If you wrestle with disordered eating, commit to eating a healthy, balanced, appropriately sized meal three times every day.
 - Television – Spend time with family and friends instead.
 - Smartphone – If you need it for work, you could consider not using your phone to browse the Internet, play games, or engage in other non-work activities.
 - Sleep – Get up an hour earlier and spend extra time with God.

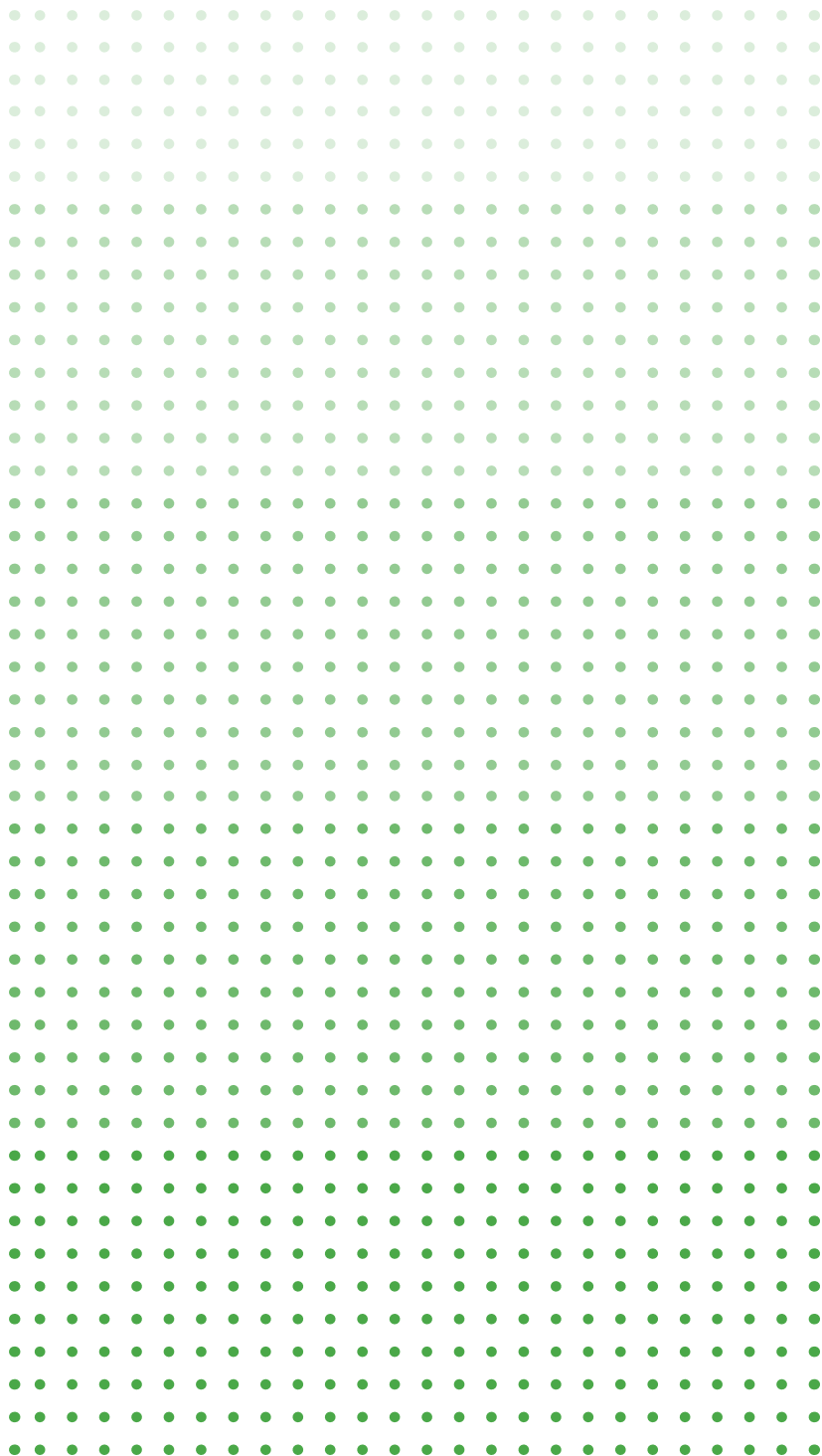
- Fasting is a great way to exercise the “no” muscle, but why not take it a step further and actually flex that “no” muscle? Pray and think it through: what’s an area of your life where God wants you to start exercising self-control? Not just for a season, but for good? Do you need to break a habit or start a new one? Do you need to watch your tongue and stop gossiping or belittling others? Start doing so. Pray to the Spirit for help and ask a friend to come alongside you for support, encouragement, and accountability.
- Create a budget and stick to it. Begin tithing if you aren’t already.
- Make a plan for your own personal spiritual disciplines.
- Attend Celebrate Recovery to get help dealing with your hurts, habits, and hang-ups. Visit ncc.gd/recovery for details.

Pray the Scriptures

“Holy Spirit, put to death the deeds of my sinful nature through Your power.” (Romans 8:13)









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