



# **Living the Golden Rule**

**By**

**Loving Your Neighbor**

**A Seven-Week Daily Devotional Guide**

# Living the Golden Rule By Loving Your Neighbor

## A Seven-Week Daily Devotional Guide

### Introduction

This Seven week, daily devotional is designed to complement the “Do Unto Others” Worship Series at First Presbyterian Church, San Leandro, Fall 2024. There are 6 daily devotionals each week intended for use Monday – Saturday, beginning the week of Sunday, Sept. 8 and continuing at the end of the week of Sunday, Oct. 20.

### Theme: Love Your Neighbor

Jesus was very clear that we are called to love God and to love our neighbors, and throughout his ministry he taught and demonstrated what it looks like to love our neighbors. This seven-week daily devotion guide explores how loving one another is the foundation for living the Golden Rule and treating others as we want to be treated.

In an increasingly polarized world, embracing the Golden Rule can help us to find ways to demonstrate love to all those whom we encounter, our families, our friends, our neighbors, and particularly to those with whom we differ, breaking down barriers and making our communities look more like the Kingdom of God.

### Guiding Scriptures

Matthew 22: 37-39

37 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

Matthew 7:12

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

### Weekly Focus:

- Week 1: The Power of Kindness
- Week 2: Testify to Love
- Week 3: The Power of Humility
- Week 4: A Sheep or a Goat?
- Week 5: Finding Common Ground
- Week 6: Religion and Politics
- Week 7: Love is the Way

### Implementation:

This daily devotional is a combination of the daily devotional “Living the Golden Rule by Loving Your Neighbor” originally created by Resurrection, a United Methodist Church to support the sermon series “#Love Your Neighbor” during the 2020 Kindness Campaign, then were slightly modified to support the 2024 Do Unto Others campaign\* and the daily devotional “Living the Golden Rule By Being Just, Kind and Humble” originally created by Resurrection, a United Methodist Church to support the sermon series “What God Requires” during the 2020 Kindness Campaign then were slightly modified to support the 2024 Do Unto Others campaign.\*

Each daily guide (Monday - Saturday) includes scriptures, context, reflection questions and a prayer intended to be used by individuals as a personal daily devotion.

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# Week 1: The Power of Kindness

## Day 1: Kindness begins with God

**Scripture:** Psalm 18:46-50

**Context:** As with many other positive qualities, the Bible did not say kindness springs automatically out of the human heart's generous impulses. Psalm 18 praised God's kindness to David, using the multi-layered Hebrew word *hesed*. Modern English versions often use a phrase like "faithful love" to render *hesed* when it speaks of God, while often choosing "kindness" to express *hesed*'s meaning when it's about how people act (as in Micah 6:8). \* As in today's text, in Psalm 90:14-17 kindness begins with God.

### Reflection:

- We often discuss our "legacy," sometimes making it sound (and perhaps thinking) as if the legacy is solely the result of our own work. The psalmists, on the other hand, always sought to give God the praise, whether for a victory in battle or in reflecting on the results of a long life. "With God's help, there is the possibility of something enduring amid the reality of the shortness of human life." \*\* Have you ever asked God's divine kindness to be a major force shaping your legacy? Will you?
- God showed David "faithful love" or "kindness" (Hebrew *hesed*)—but not just David. Galatians 3:26 said we are "all God's children through faith in Christ Jesus." God offers that same loving kindness to everyone who chooses to be his child. What does it mean to your faith to know God values you as much as the writer of Psalm 18? In what ways has God "rescued" you over the course of your life, from both outer and inner "enemies"?

**Prayer:** Lord God, it's easy for me to forget that, often quietly and unobtrusively, you are always with me. Enable me to remember and value your kind presence shaping and guiding me. Amen.

\* Based on notes on Psalm 18:50 by Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reayburn in *A Handbook on the Book of Psalms*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1991, p. 53.

\*\* J. Clinton McCann, Jr., study note on Psalm 90:17 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 942 OT.

## Day 2: God's kindness reflected by his servant David

**Scripture:** 2 Samuel 4:4, 9:1-13

**Context:** Israel's King David was close friends with Jonathan, son of King Saul. Jonathan said, "The two of us made a solemn pledge in the LORD's name when we said, 'The LORD is witness between us and between our descendants forever'" (1 Samuel 20:42). Those were not just nice words. David, secure as king (after a struggle with Saul's "house"—cf. 2 Samuel 3:1), asked, "Is there anyone from Saul's family still alive that I could show faithful love for Jonathan's sake?" In fact, there was.

### Reflection:

- A new ruler or boss (then or now) often aims to get rid of anyone who was loyal to a former leader. Mephibosheth, King Saul's grandson, with limited mobility due to a childhood accident, likely lived in hiding. David used the Hebrew word *hesed* (that key word that expressed God's deep covenant love and kindness) three times for what he wanted to show Jonathan's remaining son. What does seeing how David kept his promise to Jonathan tell you about the value he attached to kindness?
- Don't you wonder what went through Mephibosheth's mind when he got the news that King David had summoned him to appear? Many preachers have observed that David's act in extending *hesed* to Jonathan's son is an early image of what God gave all of us in Jesus. What feelings does the prospect of facing God after your earthly life ends trigger in you? God offers divine kindness to all of us; only you can choose to refuse it. Please don't!

**Prayer:** Ruler of the cosmos, I see a dim reflection of you in the loving kindness your servant David showed. Teach me how to trust your *hesed* toward me, and to extend it to others as David did. Amen.

## Day 3: Wisdom and prophecy calling for kindness

**Scripture:** Proverbs 21:21, Zechariah 7:9-10

**Context:** We can think kindness means relatively “small” actions like baking a few extra cookies to take to a neighbor’s house. Well, yes, but it takes in much more. The sages of Hebrew wisdom grouped kindness with “big” ideas like life, righteousness and honor. And the prophet Zechariah, in a passage that addressed the question of whether Israel should resume certain rituals after their return from exile, instead linked kindness to justice issues.

### Reflection:

- Zechariah reminded Israel that “devout faith is demonstrated, not in rote ritual, but in rendering ‘true judgments, ...kindness and mercy’ (verse 9). We are to act on behalf of the powerless in our world, taking particular care not to do harm to widows, orphans, aliens and the poor.” \* How does your heart respond to Zechariah’s prophetic call to extend “kindness” beyond the easiest people to reach to those who may need it the most?
- Proverbs 21:21 used the sweeping Hebrew word *hesed* in its sense of kindness toward others. “The two qualities righteousness and kindness sum up a good life.” “Those who pursue’ means anyone who “shows or tries to show the two qualities referred to.” \*\* How does Proverbs’ wisdom here match up with your list of what makes for a “good life”? How intentionally do you “pursue” righteousness and kindness?

**Prayer:** Creator God, I’m often busy figuring out “the good life” for myself, with only my own pleasure as the major guideline. Show me, day by day, how to live in ways that pursue righteousness and kindness. Amen.

\* *Rebekah Close LeMon, study note on Zechariah 7:3-10 in The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible. HarperSanFrancisco, 2005, p. 1373.*

\*\* *William D. Reyburn and Euan McG. Fry, comments on Proverbs 21:21 in A Handbook on Proverbs. New York: United Bible Societies, p. 453.*

## Day 4: Jesus on how we should treat others

**Scripture:** Luke 6:27-36

**Context:** Jesus taught his followers how to live with his peace and joy. Yet he realized that not all would be willing to accept what he taught: “I say to you who are willing to hear.” The types of behavior Jesus described are not natural to any of us. We only move toward Jesus’ kind of open, fear-free life as we allow the Holy Spirit to reshape our natural impulses to grow the fruit of kindness in our lives. (cf. also Matthew 5:44-45)

### Reflection:

- Jesus gave specific examples, not to set up new, onerous rules for us, but to show in practice the spirit in which he called us to live. As *The Message* put Luke 6:30, “If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.” \* When has someone touched your life for the better by living kindly and generously? When have you found the joy of extending kindness to someone else?
- Luke linked the Golden Rule (“Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you”—verse 31) to Jesus’ words about how to treat enemies. In what relationships do you find it hardest for you to treat others as you’d wish them to treat you? How can Jesus’ teaching help you discern how to live out the Golden Rule in ways that bless others while you maintain healthy boundaries and self-care?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, pray for those who mistreat me? Love my enemies? You did it, but you were—well, you. I’m willing to listen to your teaching, and to learn your ways. Amen.

\* *From Eugene H. Peterson, The Message. NavPress, 1993-2002.*

## Day 5: Paul’s grateful amazement at God’s kindness

**Scripture:** 1 Timothy 1:12-16, 2 Timothy 2:23-25

**Context:** The apostle Paul looked back on the days when, as an angry young Pharisee named Saul, he proudly persecuted and killed Christians (Acts 7:57-8:1, 9:1-2). Despite that, he said, Christ's favor, love and faithfulness had "poured all over me." He maintained a lifelong sense of wonder and gratitude for the way God's kindness had reshaped his life focus at a time when he was fighting against God. And one way he expressed that was urging everyone he worked with to show kindness.

**Reflection:**

- The letters to Timothy echoed Jesus' teaching in Luke 6:27-28, which we read yesterday: "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you." Acting like that is not natural to any of us. In what ways can you allow the Holy Spirit to reshape your natural impulses to grow the fruit of kindness toward all people in your life?
- Jesus asked, "If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don't even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matthew 5:46-47). Kindness to people who are kind to you is just good manners. But "kind toward all people"? That only grows, over time, as the Holy Spirit's godly presence shapes you. In what ways has Jesus made you kinder than you used to be?

**Prayer:** Come, Holy Spirit! Grow kindness in me, not as wimpy emotionalism to please those I like, but as hard-edged, practical determination to live a life that reflects my Lord Jesus' way of treating people even as he worked to defeat evil with good. Amen.

## Day 6: The kindness "family" of qualities

**Scripture:** Colossians 3:12-13, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

**Context:** [We will look at these two compelling passages at the end of all but week 4 in this daily devotional.] Nowhere in Scripture will you find, "Treat your neighbors with kindness, unless their beliefs differ from yours." Implicit in Paul's instructions was the understanding that we are to treat all people with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. We are, in fact, to love all people. Yes, this becomes more complicated when people's fundamental beliefs are not the same as yours, especially if they do not treat you in these ways. Rather than looking at this as a problem and trying to "fix" them, Paul said (cf. especially Romans 14:1- 15:7) that gives us a way to love extravagantly, working to find unity in unexpected places. In today's world, we have the chance to do that in digital spaces as well as in the more personal settings Paul no doubt had in mind.

**Reflection:**

- Paul wrote in Romans 14:19, "So let's strive for the things that bring peace and the things that build each other up." Why is this harder when people's beliefs are different than yours? What is one concrete thing you can do this week that builds up another person, especially a person with whom you differ? What principles can guide you in deciding when loving your neighbor is more valuable than winning an argument? John Wesley, Methodism's founder, said in a sermon titled "A Catholic Spirit," "Even though a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without doubt, we may." \* How did Paul's teachings in today's passages shape Wesley's theology? Is there someone in your life with whom you do not think alike, yet you need to love alike?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, give me clarity about my daily need for your forgiving, empowering grace to nurture and grow me. And grow me into a person who makes kindness and forgiveness central to my rhythm of life. Amen.

\* You may read Wesley's sermon, "A Catholic Spirit" edited into modern English at <https://www.crivoice.org/cathspirit.html>

## Week 2: Testify to Love

### Day 1: Jesus identified the greatest commandments.

**Scripture:** Matthew 22:36-40

**Context:** Jewish rabbis debated: were all commandments equal or was there a greater one? Asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus chose not one but two. The first was Deuteronomy 6:4: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind.” But he added Leviticus 19:18: “You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Jesus said the point of all other truths is to lead us to love God and neighbor more fully. God wants us to show contagious love to all we know.

#### Reflection:

- Jesus said every key Bible principle, all the truths we know about what God wants, “depend” on the two commands he quoted. What do you believe made these two commands so foundational in Jesus’ thinking, teaching and living? Can you recall any time when some belief you held led you to love God or some of your neighbors less, maybe even without realizing it?
- That second command can be challenging. Loving others the way we love ourselves is based on how God loves us—never giving up, no matter what. Our humanity makes it hard for us to love ourselves or others with God’s unwarranted love with no hesitation. But God calls us to move toward that, for our own sake and the sake of others. \* What has stopped you or made it hard for you to love yourself or someone else persistently? How might you love more fully?

**Prayer:** Gracious God, thank you for loving me unconditionally. Help me to recognize the moments in my life when I can relentlessly love those around me. Amen.

### Day 2: Love: from God to us and on to others.

**Scripture:** 1 John 4:16-21

**Context:** Some think “righteous” people aren’t kind, that following Jesus makes you critical and unloving. But not the apostle John! John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, preached a sermon on April 21, 1777, quoting John and inviting all Christ-followers, “Let us provoke all men, not to enmity and contention, but to love and good works; always remembering those deep words... ‘God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him!’” \*

#### Reflection:

- Why would John say, “Perfect love drives out fear”? 1 John 4:20 said, “Those who say, ‘I love God’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars.” Do you agree that it is often fear that leads us to hate other people? Why would hating others block any genuine love for God? Can you think of practical ways to let God’s perfect love move you in the direction of acting in love toward “others,” even if you think they deserve fear and distrust rather than love?
- “‘God is love’...touches on everything, from the individual-psychological to the radically communal ...Love and God go together; hate and God do not (4:20); fear and God do not (4:18).” \*\* Have you ever experienced a situation in which as you learned to love another person your fear of that person decreased and even disappeared? In what ways has following Christ made you and your relationships more loving?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you embodied God’s love for me. Now you call me to embody your love as I deal with other people, even people I may not like, may even fear. Grow your love in my heart. Amen.

\* From Wesley’s sermon “On Laying The Foundation Of The New Chapel, Near The City-Road, London” at <http://www.godrules.net/library/wsermons/wsermons132.htm>.

\*\* Jaime Clark-Soles note on 1 John 4:16-20 in *The CEB Women’s Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016, p. 1562

## Day 3: What brings joy to God's "shepherd's" heart?

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 34:18, 11-12; Luke 15:1-7

**Context:** Jesus, God in the flesh, came to this planet on a very real rescue mission. Drawing from the image in Ezekiel 34, he told a story about a shepherd who lost one sheep from his flock. That was only 1% of the flock, but the shepherd cared deeply about any lost sheep. He dropped everything, searched until he found that sheep—and felt great joy when he found it. Jesus' critics thought he should write off the human "lost sheep" (Luke 15:2), but Jesus in fact searched tirelessly for them.

### Reflection:

- "[Ezekiel's] metaphor goes beyond the normal responsibilities of making sure that the sheep are protected and fed. Instead it focuses on the remedial duties, caring for the sick and finding the lost. These equate to the need for kings to bring about justice for alienated and disenfranchised people." \* What are some of the ways you can actively support and work for justice for alienated or disenfranchised people around you?
- Pastor Bruce Larson wrote, "A shepherd once explained to me that sheep nibble their way into lostness. They move from one tuft of green grass to the next, sometimes right through a hole in the fence. When they're done nibbling, they can't find the hole and they're lost. Some of us know what that is—to nibble ourselves bit by bit into the far country." \*\* Have you ever been like the lost sheep, not sure how to get home? What "shepherd(s)" has God used to find you and lead you home?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you that you've never seen me (or anyone) as a "disposable asset," as someone who doesn't matter. Give me your heart for everyone in your human family. Amen.

\* HarperCollins Christian Publishing. NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, eBook: *Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture* (Kindle Locations 190424-190426). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

\*\* Bruce Larson, *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 26: Luke*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc. 1983, p. 235.

## Day 4: How the apostle summed up the Law

**Scripture:** Roman 13:8-10

**Context:** Paul sent this letter to Roman house churches (there were no big cathedrals in his day). Some were mainly Jewish; others mostly Gentile. Their standards of "righteousness" varied (cf. Romans 14:1-15:13). It was easy for them to criticize each other. Paul said the purpose of God's law or rules is to help us love. "Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor" was a big challenge to people who disagreed. It was (and is) vital, because "Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law."

### Reflection:

- Paul spoke to differences over minor issues (that seemed major to those who felt strongly about them). How do you think some of them might have initially reacted to the idea that "Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law"? Do you know anyone who is genuinely loving, but in some parts of life acts in ways that you think miss the mark? Do you believe Paul was right, or was he too soft on "law breakers"?
- How might ugly religious conflicts (e.g. the Salem witch trials, the Inquisition) have been different if Christians had always aimed to fulfill the law by loving? How can you stand for truths that matter to you without acting in unloving ways toward those who disagree? Ask the Holy Spirit to help you grow in the inner qualities (that may not come naturally) that help you live out the law of love.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, "love is what fulfills the Law" sometimes feels too easy to me. Until, that is, I try to do it—then I realize how high and hard a standard that is. Teach me how to love the way that you love. Amen.

## Day 5: Jesus' love, seeking and saving the lost

**Scripture:** Matthew 9:35-38, Luke 19:1-10

**Context:** Our “DNA” as a church is that we follow Jesus’ actions and teaching. Jesus was “a man on a mission.” He did many admirable, valuable things during his ministry on earth. He healed the sick, broke down barriers of prejudice and exclusion, taught people how to live better lives, and challenged religious hypocrisy. Yet all that grew from his one central mission. First and foremost, Jesus said, he came to seek and to save the lost.

### Reflection:

- Jesus yearned for God to “send out workers into his harvest field.” To what extent do you think “troubled and helpless...sheep without a shepherd” expresses the spiritual state of your neighbors, co-workers, even some people you know in church? Are you willing to become one of the workers Jesus wished for? What abilities and resources has God given you that you can use to help reach troubled, helpless people with the good news of Jesus?
- Jesus said he “came to seek and save the lost.” Scholar William Barclay wrote, “In the New Testament ‘lost’ does not mean damned or doomed. It just means in the wrong place....A man is lost when he has wandered away from God; and he is found when once again he takes his rightful place as an obedient child in the... family of his Father.” \* In what ways has God “found” you, and given you your rightful place in God’s family? When have you been able to help God find someone else?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you for coming “to seek and save the lost,” including me. Guide me to the ways I can join you in doing that great, world-changing work. Amen.

\* *William Barclay, Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Luke (Revised Edition). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975, page 257.*

## Day 6: Love can heal and unite

**Scripture:** Colossians 3:12-14, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

**Context:** In Colossians 3, the apostle Paul listed six positive qualities we can “put on” (verses 12, 14), with love as the crowning quality in the list. That kind of inner changing is not as quick and easy, of course, as changing a soiled garment for a clean one. If it were, we’d need verse 13 about forgiveness, or Corinthians’ words about what love isn’t, a whole lot less! Nevertheless, God offers you these qualities. But God never forces positive growth on you-- it is up to you to decide to “put them on” to make your life better.

### Reflection:

- Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “People who are enslaved to anger and malice may think they are ‘free’ to ‘be themselves’, but they are in bondage.” \* Have you ever said words meant to hurt, and then wondered, “Why did I say that?” What helps you understand your feelings better so you don’t blurt out damaging words? Before you forward that e-mail, or post that tart response on social media, are you willing to ask, “Does this give grace? Does it build up? Can I picture Jesus sending this?” How can you keep your mind and heart open to learn how to better love your neighbors, even those who have infuriating reactions to election campaigns and results?

**Prayer:** Loving Jesus, help me to speak and live so that words like “peace,” “unity,” “humility” and “love” will be the main qualities others see in me. Amen.

\* *N. T. Wright, Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 56).*



## Week 3: The Power of Humility

### Day 1: God honors the humble

**Scripture:** Proverbs 3:34, James 4:6-10, 1 Peter 5:5-6

**Context:** Proverbs was the outstanding example of what we call “wisdom writing.” Hebrew sages, who traced their beginnings back to the reign of Israel’s King Solomon (cf. 1 Kings 5:12), studied and collected concise sayings, pearls of wisdom about good ways to live a life pleasing to God. One of those very short sayings (Proverbs 3:34) was so simple and powerful that both James and Peter later quoted it in their letters to early Christians.

#### Reflection:

- Scholar John Goldingay wrote, “You could say these early chapters of Proverbs are about trust in wisdom, not trust in Yahweh, but the wisdom they urge is Yahweh’s wisdom. Paying attention to wisdom is Proverbs’ equivalent to paying attention to Yahweh. Moses speaks of paying attention to Torah and the Prophets speak of paying attention to Yahweh’s word, and they are all referring to the same thing.”\* What sources of insight most help and inspire you to trust God’s wisdom?
- Proverbs’ phrase “shows favor” has strong overtones that may have made it especially appealing to the two apostles who quoted it. “Shows favor’ is literally ‘gives grace,’ which means he is kind, gracious, good.”\*\* What do you believe might incline God to extend grace more readily to a humble person rather than to an arrogant, pushy, entitled person?

**Prayer:** Loving Lord, preserve me from the error of “being proud of my humility.” Help me genuinely recognize my need for your favor and wisdom and ask you for them with a genuinely humble heart. Amen.

\* John Goldingay, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 18.

### Day 2: It’s wise to be humble

**Scripture:** Proverbs 11:2, 16:19, 29:23

**Context:** Proverbs 11:2 is particularly worth our attention this week. “The word rendered humble is used only here. Its verb form is used in Micah 6:8 ‘to walk humbly with your God.’ Humble or ‘modest’ refers here to a person who does not overestimate himself or herself, that is, does not pretend to be more important than he or she is.”\* But the word used in the other two proverbs also “means ‘humble’ or ‘lowly,’ the opposite of ‘proud’ or ‘arrogant.’”\*\*

#### Reflection:

- “When pride comes, so does shame”? Jesus told a parable to show one way that could happen (cf. Luke 14:7-11). If a man proudly assumes that he must have the best seat at a feast (in Jesus’ day no woman would have done this), he might feel shame if the host asked him to give it up for a more honored guest. Take a lower seat, said Jesus—if you’re moved up, there’s no shame. Was that just about “image management,” or Jesus’ direction on the best way to live?
- Most of the Old Testament world, and on to Jesus’ day, saw humility as a weakness. “Plutarch wrote a self-help book that might crack bestseller lists in our day: *How to Praise Yourself Inoffensively*. A classic example of the genre is *The Achievements of the Divine Augustus*, written by Emperor Caesar Augustus himself...with copies distributed throughout the empire.”\*\*\* How did the wisdom of Proverbs (and Micah) point to a totally counter-cultural set of attitudes and actions?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, it’s hard when I don’t think the people around me value me as highly as I deserve. Weave into my psyche the reminder that you honor the humble. Amen.

\* William D. Reybun and Euan McG. Fry, *comments on Proverbs 11:2 in A Handbook on Proverbs*. New York: United Bible Societies, p. 241.

\*\* *Ibid.*, p. 356

\*\*\* Ortberg, John, *Who Is This Man?: The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

## Day 3: The temple God most wants: a humble spirit

**Scripture:** Isaiah 66:1-2

**Context:** Chapter 66 is the last chapter in the book of Isaiah, ending a section that clearly spoke to the spiritual issues the Israelite people faced after their exile in Babylon ended. One important task for them was to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (cf. Haggai 1:7-8). But the prophet reminded them that God didn't need the Temple; they did. As they came to worship, God was watching to see if they brought a spirit that humbly recognized their daily need of God, not a spirit of proud self-sufficiency.

### Reflection:

- The central problem [Isaiah] has identified in the human race is that of self-exaltation. We try to solve the basic problem of our extreme fragility, both physically and psychologically, by lifting ourselves up in order to gain power." \* Any applause we can generate from other humans is temporary and conditional. How have you learned, in your approach to worship, to move beyond "What will they think?" to "What will God see in me?" as your driving question?
- "Naturalist William Beebe told of President Teddy Roosevelt. The two searched the sky for a star-like spot near the lower left corner of the Great Square of Pegasus. Roosevelt would recite: "That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun." Then Roosevelt said, 'Now I think we are small enough!'" \*\* What helps you see yourself the "right" size before God?

**Prayer:** Lord God, as I worship and serve, keep me aware that my call is to reflect your great love and kindness, not to outshine you. Let your glory humble and uplift me every day. Amen.

\* John N. Oswalt, *The NIV Application Commentary: Isaiah. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003, p. 694.*

\*\* Found at <https://bible.org/illustration/now-we-are-small-enough>.

## Day 4: How a humble king arrived

**Scripture:** Zechariah 9:9, Matthew 21:5

**Context:** Isaiah wrote of Israel's hope that God would send a faithful heir of David's royal line to rule forever (cf. 1 Kings 9:3-5, Isaiah 9:2-7). Zechariah 9:9, which Matthew cited in Matthew 21:4-5, distinguished a king on a donkey, who came in peace (cf. 1 Kings 1:31-35), from a conqueror's war horses. With Rome's military power ostentatiously displayed around Jerusalem (especially at Passover time), Jesus deliberately followed Zechariah's "template" to show himself as a humble king.

### Reflection:

- Jesus came to Jerusalem like a king arriving, but one who came in peace. Why did that make "the chief priests and legal experts" angry? Some Israelites profited from the status quo with Rome. "The aristocratic priests belonged to Jerusalem's wealthy ruling class.... they probably also have political objections." \* Many wanted a military king like David who led Israel to victories in war. But Jesus' followers praised a gentle "Son of David" who said to love your enemies. Do you?
- It's unlikely that those who shouted that Jesus was the "Son of David" analyzed the theological fine points that title might imply. When the "proper" religious authorities objected to the shouting and to its implications, Jesus said he valued people's joy. If we are "to know, love and serve God," How can you think clearly and precisely to "know God" without losing the ability to "love God" through joyful expressions of praise like those as he rode into Jerusalem?

**Prayer:** Lord, Jesus, help me learn and understand all I can about your saving life, death and resurrection while retaining the capacity to simply cry with joy, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Amen.

\* HarperCollins Christian Publishing. NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, eBook: Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture (Kindle Locations 220539-220542).* Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

## Day 5: Jesus' humbling answer to the "greatest" question

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:3, 5, 18:1-4

**Context:** When the disciples asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus called a little child to sit among them as his answer. Our world and culture tend to value children more highly than the culture Jesus lived in, but we'd still be unlikely, left to our natural impulses, to answer a "greatest" question as Jesus did. And we'd surely struggle to regard as "blessed" or "happy" (the language Jesus used could support both meanings) those he mentioned in Matthew 5.

### Reflection:

- In the "beatitudes," Jesus would have used an Aramaic phrase that meant a supreme gift from God, a joy not reliant on good circumstances or fortune. Scholar N. T. Wright said, "In our world, still, most people think wonderful news consists of success, wealth, long life, victory in battle. Jesus is offering wonderful news for the humble [and others]."\* Do Jesus' words in any way ring true for you? Do you wish you had the "blessedness" he offered to the hopeless and humble?
- Jesus often drew on the prophets who came before him. "As verses 3–4 are based on Isaiah 61, so verse 5 finds its background in Psalm 37:11.... The meek (or "humble") of this verse and the "poor" of verse 3 are the same people viewed from a different perspective. In fact, in the language of Jesus the word could hardly be distinguished from 'poor.'" \*\* Do you believe the relative prosperity almost all of us in the U.S. have makes it easier or harder to experience Jesus' blessing on the humble.

**Prayer:** King Jesus, you could have dazzled us. Instead, you came to an obscure village, lived among ordinary folk, and served instead of demanding your rights. Help me learn from your model of humble service. Amen.

*N. T. Wright, Matthew for Everyone, Part 1. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 37.*

*\*\* Barclay M. Newman and Philip C. Stine, comment on Matthew 5:5 in A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew. New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, p. 110.*

## Day 6: Love, forgiving, humble, unifying

**Scripture:** Colossians 3:12-14, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

**Context:** Paul was emphatically practical in his letters to the Christians in Corinth. He would have grown up reciting the Shema, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5). Jesus, Paul's Lord, said that was the greatest commandment, and added, "You must love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). The next logical question for Paul, like Christ's followers ever since, was, "What does it look like to love my neighbor?" These were his answers. It looks like being humble—not thinking of yourself more highly than others. It looks like being gentle—take a deep breath if you feel angry, speak carefully. It looks like being patient—while waiting, focus on God instead of yourself. Love requires compassion (suffering with others), kindness (honor and consideration) and forgiveness to all God's children.

### Reflection:

- As you read this list of loving actions, how do you feel? Great? Guilty? Condemned? If you're not perfectly living this list, remember: none of us are. Start with, how can you be more loving this week? Instead of trying to grow in all areas at once, choose one characteristic Paul lists and focus on living into a new way of loving. Loving attitudes and actions are both individual and public, local and general. Think more broadly than just yourself. What can your family, your community, your church, your city, your state, your nation do to be more loving to people you've never met? How can you join in God's work to extend divine love to all people?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I want to love all my neighbors, everywhere. Help me start close to home and guide me as I expand my vision to be more and more like your vast, world-changing vision. Amen.

## Week 4: A Sheep or a Goat?

### Day 1: The parable of the unexpected “neighbor”

**Scripture:** Luke 10:25-37

**Context:** “Go and do likewise”? Jesus wasn’t saying the legal expert (or you) are off the hook as long as you don’t ignore a man thieves have beaten and left in a ditch. Jesus’ story said the Samaritan’s far-reaching mercy cost time, money, and emotional energy. He used his resources to relieve another person’s suffering. In the story, he wasn’t even finished when he got the broken man to an inn—he had to go back and pay the innkeeper. So, Jesus’ call—“go and do likewise.” Offer extravagant, practical mercy that costs something.

#### Reflection:

- Jesus used religious officials (priest, Levite) to represent those who claim a relationship with God, yet don’t act on it. Where do you see yourself in this story? Are you the priest or Levite? Are you the Samaritan, from a group the priest and Levite looked down on? Do you feel battered and helpless? Jesus called us to become like “the one who demonstrated mercy.” How do you (or could you) act on your relationship with God by offering compassion and healing?
- Has helping someone else ever cost you a significant amount of money, time, or energy? If so, reflect on your inner responses as you were showing mercy. (Don’t hurry—let yourself feel those feelings and thoughts again.) Then recall your inner responses after the crisis when you knew you had helped someone heal. Do you believe giving help when it costs something is worth it?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, place someone in my path who will give me the chance to act like the Samaritan. Teach me that I’m here to help others. And in all the broken places of my life, show me mercy, Jesus. Amen.

### Day 2: Not ceremony, but justice, faithful love and humility

**Scripture:** Micah 6:6-8

**Context:** The prophet Micah spoke to the kingdom of Judah’s urge to keep religious ritual and “conspicuous consumption” side-by-side. On God’s behalf, he urged a different agenda: “Do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.” Micah felt that pious rituals matter less than simply treating people justly.

#### Reflection:

- Micah kept ironically proposing bigger and bigger sacrifices in verses 6-7 to try to please God. He ended with child sacrifice, a ghastly practice among some of Israel’s neighbors. What do the three divine requirements Micah listed tell you about what God is like? “To walk” was the Hebrew way to identify a person’s lifestyle. In what ways does your lifestyle reflect your choice to “walk humbly” with your God?
- In what ways do your culture and community fall short of doing justice, embracing faithful love and walking humbly with God? Scholar Gary Smith said, “Micah’s delineation of God’s requirements... includes no negative statements about what is forbidden to the Israelites. It presents a positive case of what God thinks is best for humankind.” \* How can you actively move yourself, your family, your workplace and community toward God’s best for humankind?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, my goal is to walk humbly with you. Lead and guide me into the newness of life that you died and rose again to offer me. Amen.

\* Gary V. Smith, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hosea, Amos, Micah*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001, p. 555.

## Day 3: The ever-flowing stream of justice

**Scripture:** Amos 5:21-24

**Context:** Amos was probably the first Hebrew “writing prophet.” On God’s behalf, he urged those who exploited others to stop trusting in showy religious ceremonies, to “let justice roll down like waters.” Pastor Ginger Gaines-Cirelli put his idea vividly: “God doesn’t say, love me with your mind alone, thinking Goddish thoughts.... God doesn’t say only love me with your praiseworthy feelings surrounded by nothing and no one that challenges you to stretch yourself .....the call is to love with everything we’ve got, with SOUL, with our deepest wholeness and essence and humanity...that which connects us to our neighbor.” \*

### Reflection:

- How can you be alert for opportunities in everyday activities like your work, leisure activities, shopping and other pursuits to make choices that bring about righteousness and justice? What risks or costs might you face to make those choices? To what extent are you willing to act consistently for justice and righteousness?
- Amos itemized God’s charges against Israel: “They have sold the innocent for silver, and those in need for a pair of sandals. They crush the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way.” (Amos 2:6-7). If Amos wrote today, rather than in 700 B.C., what issues do you think he might list for our culture? How can you be an active change agent whose words and actions move our society toward God’s ideal of justice and righteousness?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, all throughout our world, there are hungry children and desperate people facing injustice. They are all your people—help me to care about them as much as you do. Amen.

\* From Pastor Cirelli’s Oct. 25 sermon at Foundry United Methodist Church, Washington, D.C. Full sermon available at <https://www.foundryumc.org/>.

## Day 4: Words without actions can’t “love your neighbor”

**Scripture:** Isaiah 58:2-10; James 2:8, 14-17

**Context:** Isaiah 58 likely spoke to Israelites returned from exile in Babylon. Too many of them saw the return as a time to resume “business as usual,” and wondered why God didn’t honor their feasts and fasts. Like Amos and Micah 150 years earlier, the prophet said instead of showy, external fasts, they needed to “fast” from oppressing others. Jesus’ brother James saw that some early Christians had the same spiritual problem. A “faith” unwilling to actively help struggling people, he wrote, is no faith at all.

### Reflection:

- Jesus, as prophetic as any of his servants, echoed Isaiah and Micah (and quoted Hosea 6:6) when he said, “Go and learn what this means: I want mercy and not sacrifice” (Matthew 9:13). How has experiencing more of God’s mercy changed your heart and led you to a life of greater service? Are you growing in showing mercy to others? To whom can you extend mercy today?
- James wasn’t suggesting a good “balance” between faith and works, as though we need a 50/50 mix of the two. We need 100% of both—100% merciful actions growing out of 100% faith in God’s gracious acceptance of us, for which we show gratitude. What are some of the faithful actions in loving your neighbor(s) you have seen grow in your life as you respond to God’s grace?

**Prayer:** O God, I want to live a life that honors and pleases you. Help me to offer you my heart, my inner being, before I offer you anything else. Guide me today and each day. Amen.

## Day 5: Learning by Serving

**Scripture:** Mark 7:24-30

**Context:** When the needs of the world threaten to overwhelm us, we might decide that we are unable to serve others - they just end up off our priority lists. Looking beyond ourselves by opening our eyes to the suffering in the world makes our lives more complicated, but richer, as we expand our notions of who deserves our help. Additionally, in serving others we often learn that our own problems are not as bad as we once thought.

### Reflection:

- Jesus is ‘hiding out’ at an unnamed home in Tyre, perhaps on the run from those who are upset about his lack of observance for “tradition” or he is worn out from trying to meet the needs of an ever-increasing crowd. If you have ever had a bad week, perhaps you can identify with Jesus here. Some scholars think that the right way to read this healing is to focus not on the demands of the woman. Instead of looking at what Jesus did, they say look at what Jesus learned. We don’t often think about Jesus learning anything, do we?
- And this is what Jesus learns, this is what Jesus becomes open to: that healing is not reserved for those that he thought were the ones he had come to save. That all the exiles of the earth are part of this new story, that God’s grace is not reserved for particular people, or particular locations. Jesus changes. He allows a perspective foreign to his own to move him from an attitude of prejudice to an attitude of inclusion. He allows himself to be humbled, rearranged, and remade. How might God be calling you to change in the way that Jesus does here?

**Prayer:** Holy One, you called Jesus into a wider ministry than he could ever have imagined. Help us to be attuned to what you would have us learn about helping those who are quite different than us. Amen.

## Day 6: Finding Jesus in the hungry, the sick and the prisoners

**Scripture:** Matthew 25:31-40

**Context:** People who don’t have enough to eat or wear, who can’t afford good (or any) care if they’re sick, who are in prison, who are outsiders in your community—most of us are willing to do a little something to help “them.” Jesus called people like that “the least of these brothers and sisters of mine.” Joining in Jesus’ work to renew the world means seeing that the poor, the sick, the prisoners, the aliens are not “them” at all—they’re “us.” Jesus called us to build a legacy of loving our neighbors, his brothers and sisters, as one human family, caring and sharing the way he did.

### Reflection:

- Do you have goals to change the world? In what specific ways can you personally join in Christ’s purpose, to change the world for the better? In prayer invite Jesus to fire your imagination and give you big dreams. Write or print those God-given dreams and put them where you will see them often.
- In Jesus’ story, the “sheep” he said had helped him were surprised: “When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?” They saw need, not a chance for reward. What can help you learn to see in the faces of the people you meet, especially the outcast or hurting, the face of Jesus? When have you felt the freedom and joy that comes from blessing others because you know God cares about them?

**Prayer:** O God, keep my eyes and my heart open to see your face in the faces of hurting people around me who need your touch through me. Amen.

## Week 5: Finding Common Ground

### Day 1: A star to reach Zoroastrian priests

**Scripture:** Matthew 2:1-12

**Context:** Who were these wise men (Greek magoi) who came from the East seeking the newborn “King of the Jews”? They weren’t “kings” (the Christmas carol notwithstanding), and the text never said how many there were. “From the east” probably meant they were Persian, most likely Zoroastrian students of the stars. They followed an unexpected star toward the alluring hope that a new King offered the world a fresh start.

**Reflection:**

- These weren’t the first Persians in the Bible. Over 500 years earlier, Persia defeated Babylon and let exiled Hebrews go back to Jerusalem. The Persian king Cyrus received high prophetic praise (cf. Isaiah 44:24 - 45:6). The prophet called him God’s “shepherd” and God’s “anointed” (Hebrew mashiach), even though God said, “you don’t know me.” Are you at all surprised that God would move a prophet to so praise a foreign king with limited (if any) grasp of “correct theology”?
- The followers of a foreign religion may have tracked the star for as much as 18-24 months. (After their visit, Herod brutally ordered the death of every boy 2 years old and younger.) Yet when these wealthy foreigners “saw the child with Mary his mother [a poor peasant girl],” they fell to their knees and “honored him.” What does that tell you about the God who invited Zoroastrians through the stars and valued their worship of the newborn king?

**Prayer:** Lord of the whole world, you didn’t want only people with the “correct” theology to share heaven’s joy at Jesus’ birth. Thank you for caring enough to reach far beyond human boundaries to share that joy. Amen.

### Day 2: Blessing “all the families of the earth”

**Scripture:** Genesis 12:1-3, Jeremiah 29:1-7

**Context:** God made great promises to Abraham, including “a land I will show you” and “I will bless you.” Such promises tempt human nature to think, “God likes me more than anyone else!” But God blessed Abraham so that he and his descendants would share the blessing: “All the families of earth will be blessed because of you.” And after Babylon’s brutal capture of Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah urged the Israelite exiles to pray for the prosperity and peace—of Babylon! Even as defeated exiles, he urged them to love their neighbors.

**Reflection:**

- Just before Abraham’s story, Genesis 11:1-9 told the story of the Tower of Babel. Scholar Theodore Hiebert wrote, “The text itself emphasizes the human wish to preserve one common culture (11:1-4). This wish comes into conflict with God’s aim to create a new world with different cultures (11:5-9).” \* Too often people see difference as a threat, something to hate and resist. What (if anything) has helped you learn to value the diverse human family God created?
- Jeremiah was calling Israel’s exiles to be both smart and generous. “People aren’t being urged to seek the welfare of their own city but to commit themselves to a city where they don’t belong and that they think they’ll soon leave. They’re to seek the welfare of the city where they’re forced to live because their own welfare is tied up with that city.” \*\* How does the prophet’s message point to why it’s important for you and your church family to better love your neighbors?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you wanted Abraham to care about blessing “all the families of earth.” Plant that kind of heart in me, too, as one of Abraham’s spiritual descendants. Amen.

\* Theodore Hiebert, study note on Genesis 11:1-9 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 200T. Explored in depth in his book *The Beginning of Difference: Discovering Identity in God’s Diverse World*. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2019.

\*\* John Goldingay, *Jeremiah for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015, p. 145.

## Day 3: Teaching Israel that God pitied Nineveh, “that great city”

**Scripture:** Jonah 4:1-11

**Context:** What did Jonah think was “utterly wrong”? He hoped to see Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, leveled! But Jonah 3:10 said, “God stopped planning to destroy [the people of Nineveh], and he didn’t do it.” The Hebrew Scriptures included this story, not to endorse Jonah’s attitude, but through God’s challenge to the angry prophet to show that God’s caring and love truly extends to the whole world.

### Reflection:

- The writer of Jonah had a superb ironic touch. The book described what would have been an astounding preaching success—a whole city repenting and turning to God. The preacher’s reaction? “Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry” (Jonah 4:1)! What made Jonah so angry? Is it possible for God to care about (120,000) people without approving violent or destructive actions like Assyria’s cruelty toward Israel (and all other nations)?
- The story of Jonah ended with a question, not a statement. God asked Jonah, “Can’t I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can’t tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” Is there any person or group of people you’d rather see God “zap” than to see them repent? Is it right for God to extend heaven’s offer of mercy to all people?

**Prayer:** Lord God, sometimes, like Jonah, I wish you’d hate people I hate. But you call me to change my attitude, not yours. Guide and lead me as I wrestle with that change of spirit. Amen.

## Day 4: Jesus’ expansive mission

**Scripture:** John 4:27-40, Matthew 28:16-20

**Context:** Jesus’ disciples seemed to think no sharing could do any good in the hostile territory of Samaria. Jesus modeled an important spiritual vision for them. “Open your eyes,” he said, “and notice that the fields are already ripe for the harvest” (verse 35). Jesus’ actions in Samaria were an early preview of the “Great Commission” he gave his followers. It included (and includes) caring about “all nations,” making continual choices to invest our energy and talents in making the lives of others better.

### Reflection:

- John 4:27 said Jesus’ disciples were “shocked” to see him talking to the woman at the well.\* They might have understood him shaming her about her racial or moral inferiority. But he offered her “living water” (verse 10) and told her he was the Messiah everyone hoped for (verse 26). In short, he treated her like any other human being he cared about and came to save. How can Jesus’ example upgrade the way you treat and relate to any “Samaritan women” you encounter?
- Jesus claimed “all authority in heaven and on earth.” He said he would use that authority in this way: “I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.” In his day, that meant not even the Roman Empire could block him from being with his followers. And no power on earth today has the authority to make Jesus abandon you. How can knowing Jesus is with you give you courage, strength and peace? How can it make us fearless as a congregation?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, teach me anew this week to recognize and value your image in myself, and in all the people, male and female, happy and hurting, who cross my path. Amen.

\* You can watch an 8-minute clip from the 2003 film *The Gospel of John* (using the text of John from *The Good News Bible*) which brings the story in John 4 alive.



## Day 5: Paul's passion to reach Gentile philosophers

**Scripture:** Acts 17:16-34

**Context:** On his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul spent time in Athens, the “other religions” capital of his world. Athens was, in its day, what we might call a university town, with lots of novelty-loving philosophers. Given a chance to speak to a gathering on Mars Hill, Paul declared his own faith winningly while giving a model for dealing respectfully and lovingly with people of different faith traditions.

### Reflection:

- Luke, maybe with a wry smile, wrote that the Athenians and their foreign guests “used to spend their time doing nothing but talking about or listening to the newest thing.” Paul’s message about Jesus, especially his resurrection, seemed very novel in Athens. Could it be that in increasingly un-Christian parts of our culture and world, the “novelty” of the good news might get more of a hearing from some people than its antiquity?
- Some people would expect the apostle Paul (and Christians after him) to denounce the Athenians as pagan libertines and idolaters, going straight to hell. But Paul’s actual sermon had a respectful, inclusive tone. (In verse 28, he quoted a Cretan philosopher named Epimenides and the Stoic poet Aratus.) Was quoting pagan writers “selling out” his faith? How can openness to faiths and cultures other than your own allow you to create conversation rather than condemnation?

**Prayer:** King Jesus, when Paul preached in Athens, he quoted Greek poets and Cretan philosophers. Help me to know the culture around me well enough that I can use it to communicate without letting that culture subvert my faith. Amen.

## Day 6: Persistent, indomitable love for all neighbors

**Scripture:** Colossians 3:12-14, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

**Context:** In these passages the apostle Paul said God calls us to be people who live in loving community with our neighbors. Contracts or policies, though some of them are needed, don’t make that happen. Loving your neighbor grows naturally as we commit ourselves to living as Jesus’ followers, letting him show us who is our neighbor and how to love each neighbor. “Love, which is the perfect bond of unity” is the mighty force that over- comes prejudice, hatred, distrust and all the influences that divide us from one another. “Love your neighbor” reaches well beyond “tolerate your neighbor” to create genuine caring and community, even in places where to human eyes that seemed impossible.

### Reflection:

- Colossians called all of Christ’s followers to show five qualities: “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” When have you showed those qualities toward a neighbor, or had a neighbor show those qualities toward you? What other responses might you or they have chosen? Would those alternatives have made things better or worse? Colossians went on to make a sweeping statement in 3:17 about loving your neighbor: “WHATEVER you do, whether in speech or action, do it ALL in the name of the Lord Jesus.” How can doing whatever you do in Jesus’ name shape your way of life? How can you work, shop, drive the freeway, react to today’s news (even the political news), cheer for your favorite professional sports team or your kid’s soccer team or discuss the family budget and future holiday plans “in the name of the Lord Jesus”?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, please keep shaping me into a person of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Give me the grace to love as you have loved me. Amen.

## Week 6: Religion and Politics

### Day 1: Words can be deadly

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:21-22, 43-48

**Context:** Jesus forcefully described the spiritual danger of choosing to despise our neighbor(s) and hold them in contempt rather than loving them. The Old Testament did not say “hate your enemy,” but some rabbis thought it did: “The command to hate enemies, while emphasized by some contemporary Jewish sects, was not explicit in Scripture, but extrapolated from pious examples there (Ps 31:6; 119:113; 139:21).” \* Jesus stressed God’s mercy to both “the evil and the good.”

#### Reflection:

- Jesus saw “Romans insulting Jews, Samaritans attacking Jews, Jews fighting back, different Jewish parties insulting and attacking each other....Jesus takes the commands of the law and shows how they provide a blueprint for a way of being fully, genuinely, gloriously human...Every time you decide to let your anger smolder on inside you, you are becoming a little less than fully human.” \*\* When has deep inner anger shrunk your ability (or someone else’s) to be fully human?
- “Idiot”? “Fool”? We’re just kidding, right? Not in Jesus’ day. The Aramaic and Greek words he cited could destroy a person’s reputation and label that person as less than human. What kinds of words and ideas do we use today (in politics, but not only there) to create the same effect? How is that kind of speech (and thinking) the direct opposite of loving your neighbor?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, teach me how to love all the people you love, as hard as that feels. Help me to love because your love has changed me inwardly. Amen.

\* HarperCollins Christian Publishing. NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, eBook: *Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture* (Kindle Locations 219237-219240). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

\*\* Wright, N. T., *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15 (The New Testament for Everyone)* (pp. 42-44). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

### Day 2: “Don’t judge”

**Scripture:** Matthew 7:1-5

**Context:** Jesus knew that we humans are quick to judge others. He also knew we tend to overlook or excuse similar (or even worse) things in ourselves. That pattern is destructive and hurtful in workplaces or families. But somehow, taken into the realm of politics, it seems to go on steroids. Has there ever been a time when a political figure you disagree with came under fire, and you thought, “Actually, the side I favor has done similar (or even worse) things”?

#### Reflection:

- “Don’t judge” did not mean “Don’t have opinions” or “don’t vote.” It just meant “Don’t hold those who reach different conclusions in contempt.” Did you see the ad that the two main Utah candidates for governor in 2020 filmed together, modeling respect and unity regardless of the outcome? (Watch the ad here: [https://www.youtube.com/shorts/w5\\_ajRH0QN8](https://www.youtube.com/shorts/w5_ajRH0QN8)) If candidates can do that, how can their backers (including you) follow suit, and love even your neighbor who votes differently?
- Of course, Jesus’ words applied not just to politics but to all relationships. Think about all the family or friend relationships you have. Is it possible for two people to both care deeply about each other’s well-being, and yet come to different conclusions about the best way to address issues that arise? Can they work together toward solutions without doubting each other’s honesty or motives?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as our nation votes, please rid my spirit of contempt and judgment. Remind me that people, in my nation or in my family circle, who disagree with me aren’t necessarily dishonest or unworthy of love. Amen.

## Day 3: Blessing God while cursing human beings?

**Scripture:** James 3:4-12

**Context:** James described people taming BIG, dangerous animals like lions, tigers, or elephants. But humans have yet to tame the small organ we call the tongue. It can do damage that reaches farther than any animal, fire or ship. Because you were made in the image of God, you can choose to use your tongue to speak words that give life, like a warm, crackling fire in your fireplace rather than words that are as destructive as a forest fire.

### Reflection:

- Are you an optimist or a pessimist? Your general outlook on life might be influencing the words you speak. Humans are designed with the ability to control their tongue; you have that ability. But we humans are also imperfect, and at times we make undesirable or hurtful statements, even though this is not God's hope. What helps you, whether you're feeling optimistic or pessimistic right then, to speak life-giving words rather than destructive ones?
- Peter Bohler, a friend of John Wesley (Methodism's founder) told Wesley when he was struggling to have faith: "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith." \* Sometimes our feelings shape our words. Other times our words determine our feelings. This week try to speak with optimism and respect, even at moments when you don't feel optimistic and respectful. Ask God to use your own words to change your heart, as well as uplifting others.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, sometimes those who disagree with me bug me so much that I wonder "where they came from." Remind me that they, like me, ultimately came from your creative heart, and help me to see them (and treat them) as you do. Amen.

\* From <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.ii.xi.html>.

## Day 4: The source of judgmental things we say

**Scripture:** James 4:1-6, 11-12

**Context:** James pointed to the inner sources of our behaviors long before the birth of modern psychiatry. Romans, Jews and Samaritans blamed each other for conflict, as people still do today. But James said conflict is often rooted not in the noble motives we try to claim, but in deep inner cravings for "more." He asked, bluntly, "You who judge your neighbor, who are you?"

### Reflection:

- When you find yourself with strongly negative feelings about a political candidate or election winner, do you ever look inside and ask, "What is there in me that feels threatened or frightened by this person?" In what ways can James' wisdom, encouraging us to recognize the inner sources of conflict, help us love our neighbors in more Christ-like ways, in politics and other parts of life?
- History says political foes accused Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt (3/4 of Mount Rushmore!) of deceit, ruining freedom, having vile habits and more. Rev. Adam Hamilton wrote, "Does the Lord give us an exemption from practicing the Scriptures when it comes to our political leaders...and others with whom we disagree? This does not mean we are not to practice discernment. Nor does it mean we should remain silent in the face of wrongdoing. Yet we can make known our disagreements with others while doing so in love and with respect for the other." \* Can you? Why or why not?

**Prayer:** Lord of life, help me tame my tongue, and the inner insecurities that so often set my tongue off. Help me to respond to the grace you give me by living ever more faithfully. Amen.

\* Hamilton, Adam, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White* (p. 22). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

## Day 5: Say “what is helpful...for building up the community”

**Scripture:** Ephesians 4:25-32

**Context:** We’ve seen, over and over, what happens when people use words to tear down community and set people against one another. Ephesians 4 made it clear that God cannot possibly find such words and thoughts acceptable. Fix firmly in your mind and heart a resolve to “only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community,” not just politically but in all ways.

### Reflection:

- Ephesians 4:32 said our ideal is to treat one another “in the same way God forgave you in Christ.” Have you learned ways to “be angry without sinning” (verse 26)? What steps can help you grow a character strong enough to treat others as God treats you?
- Scholar William Barclay wrote, “Paul...tells us to be kind (chrēstos). The Greeks defined this quality as the disposition of mind which thinks as much of its neighbour’s affairs as it does of its own. He tells us to forgive others as God forgave us. So, in one sentence, Paul lays down the law of personal relationships—that we should treat others as Jesus Christ has treated us.” \* Which of your attitudes come closest to living up to that standard? In which do you see the most room for growth?

**Prayer:** King Jesus, give me the courage to speak truth in love, the humility to say I’m sorry when I’m wrong and the heart to forgive others who admit a wrong. Amen.

\* William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians (Revised Edition)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 160.

## Day 6: Agape—even (maybe especially) in politics!

**Scripture:** Colossians 3:12-14, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

**Context:** Imagine reading 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 at the start of every political rally or commercial. (That’s not possible, of course, in our religiously diverse country, but for a moment imagine we could do it without implicitly favoring any one faith.) How might it change the tone of our politics? Duke professor E. P. Sanders wrote, “The Corinthians fell short with respect to love of one another, as his discussion of their meetings indicates. There were factions.... Paul rose to the occasion by writing 1 Corinthians 13. If he had written nothing else, his fame would be deserved.” \* Scholar N. T. Wright clarified the depth of Paul’s thought. “The description Paul gives in verses 4–7 is not an account of what Hollywood means by ‘love’.... Paul has in mind something which, though like our other loves in some ways, goes as far beyond them as sunlight goes beyond candles or electric light. Look closely for a moment at the type of person he describes in verses 4–7. This passage describes someone doing and being things which in the eyes of the world would be rubbish.” \*\*

### Reflection:

- Here is Wright’s suggestion as to how to best weave the principle of agape into all of your life, including your politics: “Perhaps the best thing to do with a passage like this is to take it slowly, a line at a time, and to reflect on at least three things: first, ways in which we see this quality in Jesus himself; second, ways in which we see it (or more likely, alas, don’t see it) in ourselves; and third, ways in which, if we were like that, it would work out in practice.... It should always be done in prayer.... this life is within reach of each one of us; because it is the life of Jesus, the life inspired by the spirit, the life which is our birthright within the Messiah’s body.” \*\*\*

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I want to BE the kind of person you call me to be—and I’m not, not yet, not fully. I open my heart and invite your Spirit to continue changing me from the inside out. Amen.

\* Sanders, E. P., *Paul: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)* (p. 122). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.

\*\* Wright, N. T., *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians (The New Testament for Everyone)* (p. 172). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

\*\*\* Wright, N. T., *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians (The New Testament for Everyone)* (pp. 174-175). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

## Week 7: Love is the Way\*

\*This week's guide follows a sermon preached by Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry based on his book *The Power of Love* (Penguin Publishing Group)

### Day 1: God's power revealed in love

**Scripture:** 1 John 4:7-12

**Context:** This definitive passage said that loving one another grows out of our identification with the heart of the God of the universe. It isn't just that God loves us. God IS love. If the creator's love is the ultimate source of our life, then, as Bishop Curry put it, "There's power in love. There's power in love to help and heal when nothing else can. There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will. There's power in love to show us the way to live."

#### Reflection:

- "'God is love' does not mean to say that love is one of God's activities, but that all His activity is loving activity. Whether he creates, or rules, or judges, he does so in love. All that he does is the expression of his nature which is—to love." \* Verse 11 called all of God's children to grow toward loving as God does. What helps you to grow toward having all you do be an expression of love?
- The Greek word agape was not the emotional "luv" of pop culture (which can be temporary). Agape was a chosen attitude. Believers "are not to think that brotherly love automatically goes on and on. While in many respects it is self-sustaining, it must also be supported by the exercise of the will.... They were not to love them because they were perfect, for they were not perfect.... Love makes allowances. Love tries to help. Love looks at the good people do in preference to dwelling on their defects." \*\* How can you choose to love in that robust, tough-minded way?

**Prayer:** Dear God, you ARE love—what a mind-stretching truth. You know it's not quite as natural for me to love. Please keep loving me as you stretch my ability to reflect your love to others. Amen.

\* C. Haas, M. De Jonge, and J. L. Swellengrebel, *A Handbook on the First Letter of John*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1972, p. 121.

\*\* L. L. Morris, article "Love" *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997, pp. 697-698.

### Day 2: Jesus' message: turning our world right-side up

**Scripture:** Acts 17:2-8

**Context:** Love isn't just "spiritual"—it changes the world right now. Bishop Curry noted, "This movement was perceived as somehow reordering the way things were, 'turning the world upside down'.... the reason the movement was turning the world upside down was because members of the movement gave their loyalty to someone named Jesus and committed themselves to living and witnessing to his way above all else.... The way of Jesus will always turn our worlds and the world upside down, which is really turning it right-side up." (*Bishop Michael Curry. The Power of Love* (p. 75). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.)

#### Reflection:

- Opposing people or systems in power will often feel like turning the world upside down. Whether in your home, your work, your friendships or your community and nation, those in power tend to want to stay in power, even if they aren't using their power in ways that fit with God's principles. Can you name a time when you opposed a powerful force for reasons of principle? What was the outcome? Regardless of the visible outcome, how did doing that affect your inner self?
- Jesus was counter-cultural and regularly upset the status quo with his teachings and actions. The people who were in charge rather quickly perceived him as a threat, despite his apparently lower status and power than theirs. Jesus tends to upset the status quo of our lives when we become disciples, too. In what ways has Jesus turned your world upside down...or right-side-up?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I don't want to maintain the status quo. I'm ready for you to be in charge, to upset my life in the best way possible. Help me be a part of creating a world that is right-side-up. Amen.

## Day 3: “Divine flame”—in all true love

**Scripture:** Song of Solomon 8:6-7

**Context:** On May 19, 2018, over a billion people watched Bishop Curry preach Prince Harry and Meghan Markle’s wedding ceremony. Today’s reading was the text the couple chose. Bishop Curry summed up the Bible’s point this way: “The message of God is very simple. Love one another. Take care of one another. Take care of creation. And while you’re at it, love me—love God. Do that and you will find your way. That is the core of the gospel.

### Reflection:

- Putting Song of Solomon in the Hebrew Scriptures (guided, we believe, by the Holy Spirit) showed vividly that God created and affirms human love. The unmarried apostle Paul hinted that God gives some the gift of living celibate happily (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:2-7), but the Scripture never said a celibate person is holier than one who faithfully loves another. Have you, in your own life or the lives of people you care about, seen the beauty and holiness of committed human love?
- Today’s reading’s passionate poetry saw human love growing out of God’s love, extending and expressing it. The phrase “Its darts are darts of fire—divine flame!” was literally, in Hebrew, “a flame of Yah” (the short form of the divine name from Exodus 3:14). How did that phrase make our ability to love more than a simple biological drive, and link it to God’s serving, self-sacrificing love?

**Prayer:** Lord God, you created me out of your love, and you planted a seed of that love deep within me. Let me always value and respect the holiness of that wonderful gift from your heart. Amen.

## Day 4: Jesus revealed the key to true life

**Scripture:** John 3:3-8

**Context:** Life is a major theme from the very start of the gospel of John (cf. John 1:3-5). So it made sense that, when Jesus met the cautious Pharisee Nicodemus (he sought Jesus in the dark of night), Jesus used the image of birth to point to the new quality of life he offered. As Bishop Curry put it, “He said to Nicodemus, ‘You must be born again.’ In the Greek it can be translated born again, born anew, or born from above. And the point, I think, the only reason to be born is so that you can live. God wants you to live.”

### Reflection:

- How did Jesus connect the ideas of “birth” and “new life” as he spoke with Nicodemus? Trace the role that God’s Spirit, and your openness to the Spirit’s work, play in creating that new spiritual life. In what ways can Jesus’ image of wind working invisibly, yet powerfully illustrate the Spirit’s work in your life? How, if at all, are you living in a new way due to God’s presence in your life?
- Most members of the group called the Pharisees (from a Hebrew word that meant “set apart”) opposed Jesus’ ministry. At times, Jesus felt anger at their hard-hearted “righteousness” (cf. Mark 3:5). Yet he never wrote them all off as “enemies” or “hopeless.” When a Pharisee like Nicodemus showed any willingness, however tentative, to listen, Jesus responded in love. What does his conversation in today’s reading teach you about one aspect of loving your neighbor?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you’ve never written me off; you never will. I open my heart to your Spirit’s work in giving me the refreshing, renewing gift of new life. Amen.

## Day 5: Jesus' love the source of our love

**Scripture:** John 13:34-35, 15:9-10

**Context:** Bishop Curry highlighted how the setting of Jesus' "new commandment" showed that loving is much more than a fuzzy, fluffy sentiment: "This was not long before Jesus' death, when he would show what love looks like; giving of the self, even sacrificing the self for the good and well-being of others." \* The command to love one another was not new, but "as I have loved you" took "love" to a whole new level.

### Reflection:

- Jesus began John 15:9 with ten key words: "As the Father loved me, I too have loved you." As the moon reflects the sun's light, our love for others reflects God's love for us. In what practical ways do you live out your commitment to love God and others? To what extent are you able to view self-giving, not self-gratification, as key to the kind of love that makes life genuinely worth living?
- Jesus showed the disciples what one writer called "a triad of love." The Father loves me, Jesus said. In the same way, I have loved you. Now, as I have loved you, love one another. We often fall short, but this kind of love is willing to do the hard work of binding wounds and working to reconcile. How does it bring you strength to know Jesus' love for you is rooted in God's eternal love? How can we live out Jesus' committed, steady love toward one another and our neighbors?

**Prayer:** O Lord, help me increasingly to love, not as an outward disguise to hide my anger or pain, but from my heart as your love overflows and bubbles out of me to bless others. Amen.

## Day 6: "Real power. Power to change the world."

**Scripture:** Colossians 3:12-14, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

**Context:** Bishop Curry suggests, "Someone once said that Jesus began the most revolutionary movement in all of human history; a movement grounded in the unconditional love of God for the world; a movement mandating people to live that love, and in so doing to change not only their lives but the very life of the world itself. I'm talking about power. Real power. Power to change the world." Want to change the world? Come join in loving your neighbor! (*Bishop Michael. The Power of Love (pp. 9-10). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition*)

### Reflection:

- "As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other." Sound simple? The perceptive British Christian C. S. Lewis found that it isn't as simple as it sounds: "I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me....I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me....Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances....that [real forgiveness] we can always have from God if we ask for it." \* How have you learned that you can't genuinely forgive without loving, and can't genuinely love without a willingness to forgive? As you compare Jesus' positive impact on our world over the last 2,000 years with the sad legacy of all the violent, revenge-driven tyrants who've tried to build empires, can you understand Bishop Curry's words about "power to change the world" more clearly?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, give me clarity about my daily need for your forgiving, empowering grace to nurture and grow me. And grow me into a person who makes forgiving and loving a rhythm of my life. Amen.

\* C. S. Lewis, "On Forgiveness" in *The Weight of Glory and other addresses*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1976, pp. 178, 181. (Lewis's entire essay on forgiveness is well worth reading.)