



**JESUS**  
AT THE  
**CENTER**  
OF THE  
**KINGDOM**

**DAILY DEVOTIONAL**



In Matthew 5, we find ourselves at the heart of Jesus' timeless sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. Here, Jesus doesn't merely deliver a set of moral guidelines; He unveils the very essence of the Kingdom of God and our role within it. It's not just about living better; it's about Jesus being at the Center.

Throughout these pages, we'll uncover the radical teachings of Jesus that challenge our societal norms and personal convictions. From the Beatitudes to the call to be salt and light, Jesus presents a revolutionary perspective on what it means to be citizens of His Kingdom.

Together, we'll learn what it truly means to center our lives on Jesus and His Kingdom, allowing His teachings to shape our thoughts, actions and relationships. Get ready to be challenged, inspired and transformed as we journey through *Jesus at the Center of the Kingdom*.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'B' followed by a horizontal line and a cursive 'J'.

Bryan Jones, Senior Pastor



# DAILY PRAYER AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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*"... Our Father in heaven..."*

Matthew 6:9b (NLT)

- What do You want to say to me today as my Father?

*"... may Your name be kept holy."*

Matthew 6:9c (NLT)

- What do You want to reveal to me about Your power today?

*"May Your Kingdom come soon."*

Matthew 6:10a (NLT)

- Help me make Your priorities my priorities today.

*"Give us today the food we need,"*

Matthew 6:11 (NLT)

- Is there anything specific You want me to do with my time or the people I'm around today?

*"and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us"*

Matthew 6:12 (NLT)

- Reveal to me anyone I need to forgive or ask for forgiveness.

*"And don't let us yield to temptation..."*

Matthew 6:13a (NLT)

- Is there anywhere I'm vulnerable to temptation?

# POOR IN SPIRIT

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*LORD, hear my prayer! Listen to my plea! Don't turn away from me in my time of distress. Bend down to listen, and answer me quickly when I call to You.*

Psalm 102:1-3 (NLT)

*He will listen to the prayers of the destitute. He will not reject their pleas. Let this be recorded for future generations, so that a people not yet born will praise the LORD. Tell them the LORD looked down from His heavenly sanctuary. He looked down to earth from heaven to hear the groans of the prisoners, to release those condemned to die.*

Psalm 102:17-20 (NLT)

One of the best things I've learned as a parent is to get down on my children's level. This has proven especially important in times of discipline. Rather than towering over them and raising my voice, I've found getting on their level and having a conversation much more fruitful. When I need to communicate something important to them, or even when they're excited to share something with me, I get down on one knee to look them directly in the eyes. I think descending to their level, listening and engaging shows an attentive love.

I'm so thankful that God shows us that same type of love.

When we cry out to God, He hears us. Our prayers don't stop at the ceiling or fall on deaf ears. When we humble ourselves before Him, He takes note as we pour out our hearts to Him. Psalm 102, at least in my Bible, is described as a *prayer of one overwhelmed with trouble, pouring out problems before the LORD*. What a privilege that we can come to our God whenever we're feeling overwhelmed. Knowing that we can talk to our Creator about all we experience and feel is comforting in a fast-paced world full of trouble and trial. And not just talk to Him about it, but know He truly listens and cares. The Bible is full of instances of God's people crying out to Him, only to see Him intercede in powerful, miraculous ways.

Do you believe He will do so for you?

**APPLICATION:** Whatever is weighing heavily upon you right now, name it aloud before God. Ask Him to be near to you and give you comfort and peace.

**PRAYER:** Almighty God, You are the Creator of all, yet You still choose to know me. Remind me that You love me and listen to me when I cry out. Grow my reliance on You and my trust in You. In the name of Jesus, amen.

# MOURNING

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*The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; He rescues those whose spirits are crushed.*  
Psalm 34:18 (NLT)

Such a short verse, but so impactful. Perhaps you've not realized the full depth of the grace in this verse yet. And I say yet because even if you've never suffered heartbreak, grief or loss, the time is coming when you will. At some point in your life, you will hit a breaking point. Anguish and sorrow can come crashing down upon you like a waterfall out of nowhere. For some, it's the loss of a loved one. For others, it's having something beloved unexpectedly taken from you, like a job, home or pet. For others, it's wrestling with bouts of depression. Whatever the circumstance, the good news is still the same: God is with you.

The term *Emmanuel* is one often reserved for the Christmas season. It means *God with us*, and I think we are wrong to confine this wonderful term (and songs containing it) to December. God is with us all the time, not just when we're celebrating the birth of Jesus. When everything in your personal life seems to be going wrong—God is right there. When things are chaotic in our world—God is not absent. From 9/11 to wars to economic collapse to pandemics—God is not caught off guard. He's not distant and removed. He is right there with us and for us.

Where do you take your grief? Your sorrow? Your broken heart? For many, refuge is found in an online community. We post and pour our hearts out on a keyboard for *friends* and followers to behold. But do we take it to God? Other times, we disassociate and distract, looking for comfort in sports, substances or romance. What if instead of running to these things, we ran to God?

Whatever you've been through or may be going through right now, God is right there. It may feel like He is distant, but He never moves. It's us who drift away from Him or, at times, deliberately walk away. I implore and beseech you to turn back to Him. He sees your troubles, knows you intimately, and loves you desperately.

**APPLICATION:** How can you remind yourself that God is with you? Is it posting Scripture somewhere prominent, like your bathroom mirror or steering wheel? Is it setting daily prayer reminders? Is it asking an accountability partner to check in with you regularly? Consider what step God might be leading you to take.

**PRAYER:** Gracious God, You are Emmanuel even when I don't feel that way. Help me to bring my broken heart and grief to You. Be my refuge and shelter. In Jesus' name, amen.

# MEEKNESS

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*You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though He was God, He did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, He gave up His divine privileges; He took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When He appeared in human form, He humbled Himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.*

**Philippians 2:5-8 (NLT)**

Do you know the difference between meekness and weakness? We don't use the term meekness often in our day and age, possibly because it's in such short supply, so we can often confuse the two. Weakness is an absence of power. Meekness is power under control. So, let's consider the ramifications of Christ being weak versus meek. If Christ was weak, then His life was taken from Him. Pilate and the conspiring Pharisees were the ones who put Him on the cross. But we know this is not what really happened. Jesus was meek—He had all the power in the universe available to Him, yet He chose restraint. Consider what Jesus said to Peter when he tried to defend Jesus with a sword:

*But one of the men with Jesus pulled out his sword and struck the high priest's slave, slashing off his ear. "Put away your sword," Jesus told him. "Those who use the sword will die by the sword. Don't you realize that I could ask My Father for thousands of angels to protect us, and He would send them instantly? But if I did, how would the Scriptures be fulfilled that describe what must happen now?"*

**Matthew 26:51-54 (NLT)**

That's not weakness at all. Jesus could have stopped what was happening at any point, but He willingly gave His life up to rescue and redeem the lost. Jesus even tells Pilate that he has no power over Him except what was given from above (see John 19:11). Jesus, in humility and meekness, deliberately walked a path of sacrifice. He died to save the lost, and not just any death, but a horrifyingly painful and shameful death on a cross.

And it's with this in mind that Paul tells us we must have the same attitude as Christ. I pray you're never in a position where you might have to lay down your life for someone else literally. But metaphorically speaking, we should regularly sacrifice for others. We are called to walk humbly and meekly. How can you do that today?

**APPLICATION:** Does your life look like Christ's? Are you walking in humility? Are you living meekly? How might you emulate the attitude of Christ at home? At work? Everywhere in between?

**PRAYER:** Father, help me to live as Your Son Jesus did—meekly and humbly. Take my pride away that I might be a more accurate picture of the Savior to the world around me. In Jesus' name, amen.



# HUNGRY FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

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*"I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living."*

Amos 5:21-24 (NLT)

Have you ever been accused of hypocrisy? Few things sting like this accusation, especially when we know it's not accurate or fair to be deemed hypocritical. Part of the reason that particular insult hits so hard is that, on some level, we feel like we actually are hypocrites. We alone know our inner thoughts and private actions. We may publicly purport to follow Christ, but we are intimately acquainted with all the areas where we fail.

In this passage, it's God who is accusing His people of hypocrisy. He sees their religious gatherings and recognizes that they're only surface-level. He rejects the offerings of those whose hearts, in truth, are far from Him. Even their worship songs are rejected. Why? Because they are hypocritically offered. What was true thousands of years ago when this was written is still true today: God is not interested in a show. He's not impressed with religious posturing or your ability to speak fluent Christian-ese. Just showing up on a Sunday and going through the motions is not what we're called to.

God is interested in our hearts and minds being transformed. When this truly happens, it impacts the way we live our lives. In particular, He's looking for justice and righteousness. Do you see these in your life? In a world where injustice is frequent, how are you pursuing justice? This might require radical generosity on your part as we pursue equality. You might be called to advocate for those who have no one else to stand in the gap on their behalf. To pursue righteous living simply means to reject that which God calls sin. We live in a time where truth is deemed relative, and morality has become a blurry gray. But the truth is God clearly speaks on what is right and wrong. To surrender and submit to His authority means agreeing with what He has said.

Your life can make a profound impact for the sake of the Kingdom. Let's be sure that we're authentically bought into who Jesus is, what He has done, and what He calls us to.

**APPLICATION:** Is there an area of your life where you've been living hypocritically? What is inconsistent? What do you need to confess to God right now? What steps can you take to pursue justice and righteous living?

**PRAYER:** God, help me remember that You are not just Savior but Lord. Help me bring every area of my life more fully under Your authority. May my life be marked by a pursuit of justice, mercy and righteous living. In Jesus' name, amen.

# MERCIFUL

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*Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you. Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are His dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered Himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God.*

**Ephesians 4:31-5:2 (NLT)**

How we treat each other matters.

Radical statement, I know. We can read the above passage as a checklist of what we must do. But we must first understand why how we treat others matters. Consider what 1 John 4:20 (NLT) says: *If someone says "I love God" but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?*

If you want to know if someone truly loves God, take a long, hard look at how they love those created in His image. If there's constant anger, bitterness and grudge-holding, how does that reflect a heart transformed by the Spirit? Instead, we must be kind, gentle and forgiving. According to Jesus, God won't forgive us if we refuse to forgive others (see Matthew 6:14-15). The truth is some of us are quick to take offense at even the smallest slight—we must remember that love covers a multitude of sins (see 1 Peter 4:8). For others of us, we have had real hurts and harms inflicted upon us by others. While you must move toward forgiveness, understand that it may take time. And forgiveness does not always equal reconciliation, though this should be our goal where possible.

If you're struggling with imitating God, as Ephesians 5:1 says, consider spending some concentrated time in the gospels. Study the interactions of Jesus. Look for the ways that He demonstrated love, then look for ways to emulate Him in your day-to-day life. He showed immense grace—giving that which is not deserved, and mercy—not giving that which is deserved. How can you do the same?

**APPLICATION:** Take stock of your relationships. Consider making a list of all those you interact with regularly: family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, etc. As you look over each name, pray for them! Ask God to reveal how you can glorify Him in how you treat each individual.

**PRAYER:** Lord, thank You for the relentless grace and mercy You show me. Help me to show that same grace and mercy to others, loving them as You have loved me. In Jesus' name, amen.

# PURE HEART

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*Purify me from my sins, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Oh, give me back my joy again; You have broken me—now let me rejoice. Don't keep looking at my sins. Remove the stain of my guilt. Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me. Do not banish me from Your presence, and don't take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and make me willing to obey You.*

Psalm 51:7-12 (NLT)

Psalm 51 is a powerful and poignant piece of Scripture. Penned by King David after being confronted by the prophet Nathan for his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah, it's a powerful lament before God. We see David ask God to create within him a clean heart. Nowadays, we hear advice like *listen to your heart* or *always follow your heart*. While well intended, to be sure, this is terrible advice. Consider what the Bible says about our hearts in Jeremiah 17:9 (NLT): *"The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?"*

No lack of clarity there. Deceitful and wicked are the terms used for our hearts. And in our most honest moments with ourselves, we know this is true. We're naturally selfish—no one ever has to teach a baby to scream *mine!* when another child grabs their toy. We want what we want when we want it, which is usually right now. Left to follow the desires of our hearts, we'd likely wind up shipwrecked. But the good news is that God transforms our hearts. Consider the following from Ezekiel 36:26 (NLT): *"And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart."*

God promises to perform the ultimate heart transplant. He replaces our wicked, stubborn, deceitful heart with a new, tender, responsive heart. That's what David was asking for in Psalm 51:10—a heart loyal to God.

**APPLICATION:** Heart check time—where are you at with God? You may have been following Jesus for a long time at this point. You might even be known as a person after God's own heart, like David. But like David, you're susceptible to slipping back into selfishness and sin. Is there anything you need to confess to God? Is there anything you should confess to a brother or sister in Christ so they can pray for you?

**PRAYER:** Father, You know my heart better than I do. Reveal anything in my life that is out of sync with You. Create a clean heart within me and renew a loyal spirit within me. Thank You for the forgiveness You continue to show me each day. In Jesus' name, amen.

# PEACEMAKERS AND PERSECUTION

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*"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in Me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."*  
John 16:33 (NLT)

Following Jesus isn't always easy—another revolutionary statement, I know. But I've found that we are often surprised by life's difficulties. Some go so far as to say that if God really loved us, we wouldn't experience the hardship we do. And while I won't pretend to love the difficult times, I can honestly say that during each storm, I've been able to see God at work. Jesus never promised things would be perfect in this life (though He does have some wonderful things to say about the life to come). In fact, in the passage above, He guarantees we will have struggles in this world. But He also offers us the comfort that He has overcome the world. And through Him, we can as well.

The most difficult seasons of our lives often directly result from our relationships. A simple truth we've probably heard since childhood is that we can't control anyone else. We don't know the baggage or wounds someone may be operating out of. All we can control is how we respond to those around us. Consider the words of Paul in Romans 12:17-18 (NLT): *Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.*

Do everything **you** can to live in peace with everyone. They might be doing everything they can to not live in peace with you. But our call is clear. Remember that Jesus has overcome this world. Seek to live at peace, refusing to pay back evil with more evil. Trust in His justice and His timing.

**APPLICATION:** Are you feeling overwhelmed and overcome by the world? Take a moment to meditate on John 16:33. Consider putting it somewhere you can see regularly—a phone background, Post-It note on the fridge, bathroom mirror, etc. If you're having difficulty in a relationship, pray for that person and ask God to bless them. It's difficult for bitterness to take root in your heart when you're fervently seeking the blessing and benefit of that person.

**PRAYER:** God, help me to remember that You are sovereign. Jesus, You have overcome, and through You, I can also. Help me pursue peace in all my relationships and bless those who would persecute me. In Jesus' name, amen.

# SPREADING LIGHT BY DOING RIGHT

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*No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what He requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*  
Micah 6:8 (NLT)

*"In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father."*  
Matthew 5:16 (NLT)

Have you ever told the Lord or a loved one, *Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it? Father, just show me the right thing to do!*

God has told us what is good. The Bible displays God's heart of love toward us and provides His loving guidance on how to experience life with a heavenly Father we can trust.

The Bible is full of good things God has told us. In this verse, He tells us what He wants from us, even what He requires of us.

*Do what's right.* Some Bible translations say, *do justice.* Most of us know in our hearts the right thing to do, but if we're unsure, we can typically find guidance or at least a principle in God's Word that will show us what's right. God has told us what is good.

*Love mercy.* Seek to show kindness to someone who doesn't appear to deserve it. Look for the good in those around us instead of accentuating the negative. Be quick to forgive those who make mistakes, as we would hope to be forgiven by them.

*Walk humbly with your God.* What a privilege! The God of the universe wants to walk alongside us through this life. Because He knows best and He knows what's coming around the corner, He wants to take the lead. He wants us to walk through life holding onto His hand like our lives depend on hanging on to Him. He wants us to walk in humble dependence on Him.

How would it feel to be around someone seeking to do what's right, showing kindness and mercy to you and others, and showing humility by following God's guidance rather than demanding their way? Sounds like a place of brightness rather than darkness.

May we be instruments of God's light today!

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to show you something good He wants you to know today. Watch for someone to whom you can show kindness or mercy today.

**PRAYER:** Father, help me think of the good things You want me to know today. Lead me to do what's right, show mercy to those around me, and depend on You.

# WORDS MATTER

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*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.* Colossians 4:6 (NIV)

*"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."* Matthew 5:13 (NIV)

I think many of us have had conversations in which the other person speaks to us in a harsh or frustrating manner. I don't typically look forward to going back into those conversations. However, I feel I can be more transparent with someone who shows me grace. How can I let my conversation be full of grace?

Possibly, it includes thinking of the person I'm talking with as more important than myself (Philippians 2:3-4). Maybe it's being more interested in what's happening with the other person than what's happening with me. Or maybe it's showing kindness in the way I talk with someone.

But how do I season my words with salt so that I know how to answer everyone?

I like to eat food that has some salt on it. French fries, potato chips, tortilla chips, popcorn, even watermelon—what am I doing to myself right now?! Time for a snack! I think a little bit of salt makes things taste better and sometimes makes me want to eat a little bit more. During biblical times, and even some today, salt was used as a preservative to prevent the decay of food. Salt is a food enhancer—either improving the taste or prolonging the freshness of our food.

I believe our words are seasoned with salt when our thoughts are marinated in the Spirit and Word of God. When we ask the Spirit of God what He wants us to know and read the Bible to know God better, we add *salty thoughts* to our conversation with the Spirit of God. Jesus describes the Word of the Spirit of God as *life* (John 6:63).

We become the salt of the earth when we have the Spirit of God living inside of us. We can share that saltiness, that life enhancer when we allow the Spirit of God to speak to and through us. What's inside our hearts and minds eventually shows in our speech (Matthew 12:35). Our words will bring life to those around us as we invite God's Spirit to speak to us personally through His written Word and in our minds as we seek Him.

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to show you how you might speak in an uplifting way to someone today.

**PRAYER:** Father, put Your thoughts on what You want me to know in my mind today. Fill my mind with Your written Word and Your love so my words may speak life to those around me.

# LIGHTING UP THE DARK

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*Do everything without complaining and arguing so that no one can criticize you. Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people.*      **Philippians 2:14-15 (NLT)**

When I think about God using me to be a light to my world, I get a little overwhelmed. How can someone like me make a difference by shining God's light in a dark world?

But I feel encouraged when I think of how a small candle, even a match, lights up a dark room. It's also encouraging to realize that the way I react to circumstances can be a light to those around me. How significant would it be for a person to face difficult issues without complaining or arguing, especially when surrounded by complaining people?

I admit that sometimes I like to complain. It just seems to feel good to look at a situation's negative side and express how that circumstance or person is causing all kinds of problems for me. But I must also admit that it doesn't feel great to be around someone constantly complaining that things aren't happening according to their liking.

I realize we can be a light to others through the words we say. But sometimes, we can be a light through what we don't say. Complaining or arguing can signify that my life is about me, my way or getting what I want.

How can I be a person who doesn't complain or argue? It's a matter of perspective. If I am the center of my universe and believe things should happen according to my wishes, I will constantly find reasons to complain. But if Jesus is the center of my universe, I'll seek His perspective on a given situation, trust Him to make things right, and help me understand my role in making things better.

Allowing Jesus to show me His perspective will lead me to thankfulness rather than complaining. The complaining attitude will drive people away, but the thankful attitude will be attractive. The complaints are repulsive, but the gratefulness is attractive. Let God's light of thankfulness shine through you today.

*Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.*      **1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NLT)**

**APPLICATION:** Think of something that is hurting, aggravating or frustrating you today. Ask God to show you how to give thanks in that circumstance.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for being with me and promising to work good out of anything that happens for those who love You. Guide me to trust You today.

# LIVING IN THE LIGHT

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*This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in Him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin.*

1 John 1:5-7 (NLT)

God is light. It's who He is. There's no darkness in God or with God. Everything that's in the light is seen. There's nothing hidden. Total transparency!

So, if I say I'm in relationship with God, but there are things in my mind or my life that I'm trying to hide from Him, then I'm not living in the truth. When I'm totally transparent with God, communicating with Him about every area of my life, not covering anything up, then God says we're in fellowship, we're right with each other. And the sacrificial death of Jesus cleanses us from ALL our sin.

Living in the light doesn't mean I'm living perfectly. Living in the light means nothing is hidden; I'm totally transparent with God. I'm giving God full access to my life.

*If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that His Word has no place in our hearts.*

1 John 1:8-10 (NLT)

If I try to act like I have no sin, then I'm fooling myself because we all have some sin in our lives. But when I confess that sin to God, agreeing with God that this is not something I want in my life, He is faithful and just to forgive me and cleanse me from that sin and ALL other sins.

You know the guilt you feel when you try to cover up something that you don't want anyone else to know? Bring it to the light. Confess it to God, ask Him to remove that sin, and let the light of His love and forgiveness shine on you.

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to bring to your mind anything you're holding onto or trying to hide from Him. Confess and release that to God.

**PRAYER:** Father, show me anything in me that's not submitted to You. Help me be open with You about that, and give me the strength to release it to You.



# LIGHT FROM THE LORD

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*For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light! For this light within you produces only what is good and right and true. Carefully determine what pleases the Lord.*

**Ephesians 5:8-10 (NLT)**

The Ephesian church had a problem. Not only had they once lived self-centered, immoral lives before they came to Christ, but now false teachers were coming into the church who were telling them that God wanted them to be happy and that freedom in Christ meant it was okay to continue to sin. Paul warned them about these teachers when he said, *...We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth.* **Ephesians 4:14 (NLT)**

Paul reminds the Ephesian believers of the transformative power of the Gospel. He paints a vivid contrast between their past lives, characterized by darkness, and their present reality, illuminated by the light of Christ. This light not only dispels darkness but also brings about a profound change in their identity and behavior. As recipients of this light, they are called to live in accordance with its nature—radiating goodness, righteousness and truth.

Just as darkness flees in the presence of light, so too should the remnants of our former selves fade away in the brilliance of Christ's presence. The light within us isn't passive; it actively produces what is good, right, and true. It guides our thoughts, words and actions, shaping us into vessels of God's love and grace. As we abide in this light, we become beacons of hope and transformation in a world shrouded in darkness.

Living as people of light involves intentionality and discernment, yet many Christians miss out on the insight made available by the light of God's Spirit. Paul urges us to carefully determine what pleases the Lord, aligning our lives with His will and purposes. This involves a continual process of renewal and growth as we surrender our desires and preferences to God's perfect plan. It's a journey marked by obedience, humility and reliance on the Holy Spirit to illuminate our path.

**APPLICATION:** Reflect on the light we've received from the Lord. Are there areas of our lives still entangled in darkness? Let's invite the light of Christ to penetrate every corner of our hearts, exposing sin and bringing about repentance and healing.

**PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for the light of Christ that has transformed our lives. Help us to live as people of light, radiating Your love and truth to a world in need. Give us the wisdom and discernment to carefully determine what pleases You in all we do. May our lives bring glory to Your name.

# THE POWER OF GOD'S LIGHT

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*"No longer will you need the sun to shine by day, nor the moon to give its light by night, for the LORD your God will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set; your moon will not go down. For the LORD will be your everlasting light. Your days of mourning will come to an end."*

Isaiah 60:19-20 (NLT)

I was a mile and a half down in a cave, spelunking with friends. I love adventure, but this was a bit more than we bargained for. Our guide told us to turn off our headlamps. Total darkness enveloped us. I could not see my hand right in front of my eyes. I had never experienced darkness like that. We all realized that if we lost our headlamps, or if they failed, we would likely not make it out alive.

Isaiah's prophecy paints a breathtaking picture of the transformative power of God's light. In a world where the sun and moon have been the primary sources of illumination, Isaiah declares a radical shift. No longer will the people rely on these celestial bodies, for the Lord Himself will be their everlasting light. This imagery transcends the physical realm, symbolizing God's abiding presence and glory among His people.

One day, God's presence will be our light in the New Jerusalem. But Jesus tells us that we have this divine light inside us now. God's light represents His divine attributes—His love, truth and righteousness—illuminating the darkness of our lives. Just as the sun's radiance dispels the dark, so too does God's light dispel the darkness of sin, despair and hopelessness. In His light, we find healing, restoration and the promise of a new dawn.

I had never been more grateful to see our headlamps light back up. We could navigate the narrow passages again by the light each of us had. Hours later, when we emerged from the cave, the brilliance of the sunlight was almost blinding.

I don't know what darkness, mourning or pain you are facing. Take comfort today that *the Lord will be your everlasting light. Your days of mourning will come to an end.* Jesus promises never to leave us or forsake us. Isaiah reminds us that our present circumstances are not permanent, for God's light banishes the darkness and brings forth new beginnings.

**APPLICATION:** Reflect on the power of God's light in your life. Are there areas where you're allowing darkness to linger—sin, doubt, fear or bitterness? Invite God's light to penetrate those places, bringing clarity, healing and transformation.

**PRAYER:** Thank You, Lord, for being our everlasting light. In the midst of darkness, illuminate our hearts and minds by Your Spirit, dispelling the shadows of sin and despair. Help us to walk in the light of Your presence.

# LIGHT THAT LEADS TO LIFE

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*Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, "I am the light of the world. If you follow Me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."*

**John 8:12 (NLT)**

I remember as a child trying to go to sleep in my bed when I glanced up to see what I thought was a monster hovering by the door of my room. As I pulled the covers over my head, I cried out to my parents in fear. When my dad turned the light on in my room, I saw that the monster was actually a jacket hanging over the door. What a relief! My fear was magnified, and my perspective was off because I couldn't see the full truth of the situation without the light.

As we navigate the challenges of this life, we can be overwhelmed by obstacles that seem greater than we can handle. However, we can experience reassurance and peace when the light of God's truth brings a new perspective to whatever we're facing.

In this profound declaration, Jesus identifies Himself as the light of the world—the ultimate source of illumination and guidance. In a world of darkness, His light shines bright, offering hope, truth and the promise of abundant life. Those who choose to follow Him are no longer bound by the shadows of sin and despair but are led into the fullness of life found only in Christ.

The light that Jesus offers is more than just physical brightness; it is the light that leads to eternal life. It illuminates the path of righteousness, guiding us away from darkness and toward the presence of God. This light reveals the depth of God's love for us, drawing us into relationship with Him and transforming our hearts and minds.

As followers of Christ, we are called to walk in His light—to embrace His teachings, to embody His love, and to reflect His glory to the world around us. In doing so, we not only experience the fullness of life that He offers but also become beacons of hope and truth in a world searching for meaning and purpose.

**APPLICATION:** Are there areas of your life where you're walking in darkness—where you've strayed from the path of righteousness or allowed sin to cloud your vision? Let's surrender those areas to Jesus, inviting His light to illuminate our hearts and guide our steps. As we follow Him, let's allow His light to shine through us, illuminating the darkness and leading others to the source of true life.

**PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to be the light of the world. In Him, we find hope, truth and the promise of abundant life. Awaken our hearts and minds by Your Spirit, guiding us in the path of righteousness. Help us to follow Jesus faithfully, surrendering to His light and allowing it to lead us into the fullness of life found only in Him. May we shine brightly with His love and truth, guiding others into relationship with You.

# CHRIST IS THE END OF THE LAW

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*I know what enthusiasm they have for God, but it is misdirected zeal. For they don't understand God's way of making people right with Himself. Refusing to accept God's way, they cling to their own way of getting right with God by trying to keep the law. For Christ has already accomplished the purpose for which the law was given. As a result, all who believe in Him are made right with God.*

**Romans 10:2-4 (NLT)**

Have you ever encountered someone who stubbornly clings to their own way of doing things? No matter how many people show them better alternatives, they refuse to change. You'll often hear them say *I've always done it this way*. They can become so entrenched in a way of doing things that they refuse to change even when a clearly better way of doing something comes along. Consider modern conveniences like cell phones, for example. Imagine that you have a friend who refuses to update to a cell phone, insisting that their pager is all they need. Pagers were great...thirty years ago! But we've leapt forward into something that is clearly a better way to communicate.

Paul speaks about the Israelites in this passage from Romans. He's dealing with people who are stubbornly clinging to an old way of doing things. They believe that by keeping the law, they can be made right with God. After all, they'd always done it that way! But in truth, no one had ever been able to keep the law perfectly. It has all been a vain effort of ceaseless striving. Jesus came to fulfill the law, providing a new way of being made right with God.

Isaiah 64:6 says that man's best attempts at righteousness are like filthy rags. Imagine taking a dirty dishcloth and continuing to wipe your counters and dishes with it. It's teeming with bacteria and clearly smells. Would you continue to use it? Of course not. But that's what we do when we count on our own ability to keep God's commands. Instead, we need to rely on the righteousness imparted to us by Christ, who did live a perfect, sinless life. He sacrificed it on our behalf, and now we can be made right with God through His Son.

In short, stop trying to be good enough. You'll never get there. Trust in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

**APPLICATION:** Have you been trying to earn God's love? Is there any area where you've been striving instead of relying on the imparted sanctification and justification we have in Christ? Confess this to God and repent. Ask Him to help you be wholly reliant on Him.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for the gift of Your Son Jesus. Help me live in light of His sacrifice, no longer striving to be made right with You by my own efforts. Thank You for Your unmerited grace and mercy. In Jesus' name, amen.

# FULFILLED BY LOVE

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*Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God's law. For the commandments say, "You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet." These—and other such commandments—are summed up in this one commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God's law.*

**Romans 13:8-10 (NLT)**

Love your neighbor as yourself. Such a simple thing to say, but at times, a difficult thing to do. Yet, it's an incredibly important part of what Jesus has called us to. He was once asked what the greatest commandment in the law was. Jesus answered by saying the following in Matthew 22:37-40 (NLT): Jesus replied, *"You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: "Love your neighbor as yourself." The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.*

Jesus is saying that we must love God and love people. It's a foundational principle, not just here at Brookwood, where we have it in most of our logos, but for all believers. And don't miss that He calls us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. I must confess—I'm very good at loving myself. I make my wants, needs and desires a priority quite easily. To intentionally love someone by prioritizing their wants, needs and desires ahead of my own? That's a lot tougher. But that's exactly what Jesus did.

Consider what Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (see Matthew 26:36-46). He begged the Father for any other way to accomplish the mission of redemption. He asked that the cup He was about to drink be taken from Him. But He ultimately was wholly surrendered to the path before Him—sacrificing Himself for others. If our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ could love others by sacrificing His life, how can we do anything less than sacrifice ourselves to love our neighbor well?

**APPLICATION:** How can you love your neighbor as yourself this week? Is there a task you could accomplish for them? Is there a decision you could yield to them? Is there a chance for you to demonstrate empathy through active listening? Is there some other random act of kindness that you could consider? Ask God to guide you!

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for the love You demonstrated in Your Son Jesus. Help me to love like He did—sacrificially. Show me how I can love my neighbor as I love myself today. In Jesus' name, amen.

# SCRIPTURE IS GOD BREATHED

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*All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.*

2 Timothy 3:16 (NLT)

Do you remember the first time you went to a buffet? With crystal clarity, I can cast my mind back all those years and recall the unmitigated joy I felt upon beholding the plethora of choices before me. And while I was excited about all the options, it was more so the ability to pick and choose what I wanted. If your house growing up was like mine, what was made for mealtime was what you got—no ifs, ands or buts about it. But when I walked into that buffet, I knew I could take what I wanted (bread and dessert) and leave what I didn't (vegetables).

Sadly, that's the approach of many with God's Word. I'll take what I like and leave the rest. I'll have a heaping helping of peace and eternal life. But sacrificial love of my neighbor? Praying for those who've wronged me? Adhering to a sexual ethic out of step with the world today? No thanks.

That's not how God works. He's not a buffet. You can't kind of sort of accept His ways—you either do or you don't. And I'm not saying there won't be areas where it's more difficult to submit to His authority. We have a sinful nature, live in a fallen world, and have a very real enemy who opposes us. But there are some who prefer to cherry-pick what they like and ignore the parts that they don't. Often, it's the passages that call us to confront sin within ourselves. But we must understand that God's Word is God-breathed. According to Paul in the passage above, God's Word does several things for us:

1. Teaches us what's true.
2. Shows us what's wrong in our lives.
3. Corrects us.
4. Teaches us what's right.

Are you allowing God's Word to be the ultimate guide for your life? If not—begin today.

**APPLICATION:** Consider your approach to God's Word. Is it a steady part of your diet, or is it an occasional add-on? Are you picking and choosing what you like and leaving the rest? Consider adopting a strategy for reading all of God's Word. It doesn't have to be January to begin to read through the Bible in a year—start today!

**PRAYER:** Father, Your Word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path. Use Your Word to continue to refine me. May Your Holy Spirit illuminate the text as I commit myself to studying Your ways. In Jesus' name, amen.

# GOD'S WORD STANDS FOREVER

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*"The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the Word of our God stands forever."*  
Isaiah 40:8 (NLT)

Bob Dylan once famously sang *the times they are a'changin'*. He was right—think of just how much the world has changed in the relatively short period you've been on Earth. The medical and technological advancements alone are incredible. But alongside these largely wonderful changes, we've seen other changes that are less savory. Where once it seemed we had moral absolutes that nearly all could agree upon, we now live in a time where truth is increasingly viewed as relative. Whatever works for you works for you, and whatever works for me works for me. The problem with that way of thinking is that we have no ultimate truth to appeal to when what we each hold as our truths come into conflict.

Consider Paul's warning to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 (NLT): *For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. They will reject the truth and chase after myths.*

Eerily accurate, right? What was once called good is now branded as evil. What was once universally reviled as evil has become mainstream. Those who hold to the Word of God are in many ways viewed as archaic and out of step. We're following an ancient text that can't possibly be relevant today, right?

Wrong. The Word of God is as applicable today as when it was written. It's not out of step with the world today—the world today is out of step with God's Word. God's Word is holy, inspired and alive. Hebrews 4:12 (NLT) says this: *For the Word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.*

**APPLICATION:** Commit anew to God's Word. When will you spend time in it each day? What verses will you memorize? How will you share it with others?

**PRAYER:** Lord, thank You for Your Word. Grow within me a desire to know it and share it. Help me to build my life on Your Word and Your way. In Jesus' name, amen.

# TRUST THE WORD LIKE JESUS

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*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. For forty days and forty nights He fasted and became very hungry. During that time the devil came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took Him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, "If You are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'He will order His angels to protect You. And they will hold You up with their hands so You won't even hurt Your foot on a stone.'" Jesus responded, "The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the LORD your God.'" Next the devil took Him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. "I will give it all to You," he said, "if You will kneel down and worship me." "Get out of here, Satan," Jesus told him. "For the Scriptures say, You must worship the LORD your God and serve only Him.'" Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus.*

**Matthew 4:1-11 (NLT)**

Jesus, the Son of God, was tempted by the devil. That same devil, our great accuser and adversary, still roams this earth, looking for those that he might devour (see 1 Peter 5:8). He's not relegated to hell, wearing a red leotard and poking sinners with a pitchfork. He's real and actively engaged with all his spiritual forces in opposing those who follow Jesus.

As you can see in the passage above, every time the enemy came at Him, Jesus responded with God's Word. Would you be able to respond like Jesus? How many Bible verses have you committed to memory? You may be thinking—I don't have a great memory. I'm right there with you! But do you know how many song lyrics I know? How many random, useless facts are rolling around in my head that will never help me even if I wind up on *Jeopardy*? Tons! What if you and I made it our goal to memorize Scripture? To take up the Sword of the Spirit (see Ephesians 6:17) and be prepared to stand and fight the spiritual forces that oppose us?

**APPLICATION:** Come up with a Scripture memorization plan. You can have a lofty goal of memorizing a whole book or shoot for just one verse. Either way—start!

**PRAYER:** God, help me to answer temptations and trials with Your Word. Help me to carry it in my heart and mind that I might always be ready to proclaim truth in the face of falsehood. In Jesus' name, amen.



# ANCHORED IN GOD'S WORD

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*Teach me Your decrees, O LORD; I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding and I will obey Your instructions; I will put them into practice with all my heart. Make me walk along the path of Your commands, for that is where my happiness is found. Give me an eagerness for Your laws rather than a love for money! Turn my eyes from worthless things, and give me life through Your Word. Reassure me of Your promise, made to those who fear You. Help me abandon my shameful ways; for Your regulations are good. I long to obey Your commandments! Renew my life with Your goodness.*

**Psalm 119:33-40 (NLT)**

Do you desire to spend time in God's Word?

Before you give the Sunday school answer of *yes, of course*, really think about it. Do you get excited to dive into the Scriptures, expectant that God will illuminate through the power of His Spirit? Or do you view time in your Bible as a chore? Something you have to do versus something you get to do? The problem with viewing studying the Scriptures as another item on your spiritual checklist is that you can grow dispassionate and disinterested in hearing from Almighty God.

Stop and consider the magnitude of what we have in the Bible. The Creator of the universe has revealed Himself to us. We find stories that reveal the enduring goodness and faithfulness of God. We have wisdom and guidance for navigating the potential pitfalls that we all encounter in our day-to-day lives. We have a prophetic glimpse of what is to come. We find the words and doings of Jesus Christ, the Author and Finisher of our faith.

The psalmist in our above passage asks God to give him an eagerness for God's Word over the love of money. Can we honestly say we'd rather spend time studying Scripture rather than receiving monetary compensation? He goes on to speak of turning his eyes from worthless things and finding life in the Word. I'm sure it's just me, but my eyes behold a ton of worthless things regularly. My doom-scrolling and addiction to entertainment on screens in the grand scheme of eternity is worthless. And it's time I could be spending in the Word. I'm not saying we should spend every waking moment reading the Bible. But I'm sure you would agree that there's room for us to increase our time in the Word.

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to grow within you a love for His Word. Pick a reading plan, whether that's a deep dive into a book, working your way through the Gospels, or doing some type of thematic Old Testament study. Whatever works for you—just take a step!

**PRAYER:** Father, Your Word is life. Would You grow within me a desire to see how You've communicated Your love? Help me to fall more and more in love with You as I study the Scriptures. In Jesus' name, amen.

# JESUS FULFILLS THE LAW

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*Under the old covenant, the priest stands and ministers before the altar day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again, which can never take away sins. But our High Priest offered Himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then He sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand. There He waits until His enemies are humbled and made a footstool under His feet. For by that one offering He forever made perfect those who are being made holy.*

**Hebrews 10:11-14 (NLT)**

It is finished.

Jesus said this on the cross right before He died. His perfect life was coming to an end, and His sacrifice complete. Three days later, He would rise from the dead, conquering sin and death forever. Because of this redemptive work, we operate under the new covenant. No longer do we have to sacrifice animals over and over for our sins. Jesus' sacrifice paid the debt for once and for all.

No longer do we have to live up to the law. God knew when He gave it that we wouldn't be able to fully satisfy the requirements. Jesus alone perfectly satisfied the law, and then, with His death and resurrection, He established the New Covenant. We are no longer under law but grace. Consider the words of Paul in Romans 6:14-15 (NLT): *Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.*

So, let us embrace this grace! Rather than striving and failing over and over in our own power, let us rest in the finished work of our Savior. He is our High Priest and Mediator for all time (see Hebrews 4:14-16). In the song *It is Finished* by Hillsong, we find the following lyrics:

*It is done, it is finished  
Christ has won, He is risen  
Grace is here  
Love has triumphed over death forever*

Hallelujah! Amen!

**APPLICATION:** Cease your striving. Come to the end of yourself. Trust fully in the redemptive work of Christ. It is finished. What would it look like to recognize this more fully in your life?

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for the gift of grace. Help me to cease relying on myself and trust fully in the redemptive work of Jesus. Cover my heart, soul and mind with your grace and mercy. In Jesus' name, amen.

# DON'T LET ANGER CONTROL YOU

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*And "don't sin by letting anger control you." Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil.*

**Ephesians 4:26-27 (NLT)**

It's not a sin to be angry.

It's possible you already knew that. But I believe that for many of us, we've always heard we shouldn't get angry. That to do so is to sin. And that simply can't be true, because Jesus, who was perfect and knew no sin, was at times angry. Other translations of Ephesians 4:26 say: *in your anger, do not sin*. This phrasing makes it even clearer that anger is not necessarily a sin.

Some things are justifiable to be angry about. The miscarriage of justice. The harming of the least of these. Oppression, evil and sin should stir something inside us—a righteous outrage and indignation. God calls us to speak to these situations. That's why Jesus flipped the tables and made a whip to drive out the money changers and their business (see John 2:13-17).

But the key is not to let your anger control you. I know there are times when I allow my emotions, particularly anger, to run away with me. Perhaps you've been there. You started with what you believed was a justifiable reason to be upset. Perhaps even a moral line had been crossed and sin committed. If we're not careful, we can easily slip into a place where that anger and indignation can turn into pride and rage. Before you know it, you're the one in the wrong, even if you started in the right. Anger makes a terrible master.

I think of Proverbs 29:11 (NIV): *Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end.*

As you're experiencing strong emotions, it's almost always a good idea to slow down. Ask some questions as you restrain your immediate response. Do I have all the facts? Am I being objective? Has a sin been committed? Was there maliciousness behind what has taken place? I've found that walking through questions like these helps me not to let my anger run away with me, even if there are legitimate grounds to be moved to anger.

**APPLICATION:** Who is in control—you or your emotions? Stop right now and consider the anger you've felt lately. Walk through the questions outlined in the paragraph above. Ask God to give you wisdom and discernment in this. Then, ask Him to help you to control your emotions.

**PRAYER:** Father, help me not to vent my rage fully. Through the power of Your Spirit, grant that I might harness my emotions. Do not let me sin in my anger; instead, bring honor and glory to You in my responses. In Jesus' name, amen.

# GENTLE ANSWERS

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*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

Proverbs 15:1 (NIV)

How we respond to others in their anger is significant. This isn't some stunning revelation; you've experienced this firsthand. You know that your words, tone and body language can escalate or diffuse a situation. When someone is furious, we want to respond gently, kindly and truthfully. The problem is that we sometimes forget the gentleness and kindness and push in on truth.

This is why you can be right but be wrong in how you go about it. Think about it—for once, you were in the clear. Maybe you can even document it. This argument is yours to win! It's your time to show them how out of line they are! So, you begin to really let them have it. The facts are on your side. The truth is on your side. They must grovel and beg your forgiveness or else.

What a horrible way for a Christ follower to respond. First of all, no one wins in an argument. Don't get me wrong, there are times when we must stand firmly for the truth. But even then, we must safeguard ourselves against devolving into a back-and-forth where both sides are predominantly concerned with scoring points off the other.

Instead of brazenly taking verbal swings at someone who is angry, what if we responded with gentleness and calmness? When one person is yelling and gesticulating wildly, and the other person refuses to match that energy, I've found that, more often than not, the person who is raging out will start to calm down. Do beware—telling someone to calm down will almost always have the opposite result. Instead—be gentle in your response. Composed. Measured. Commit to not antagonizing or stirring up further conflict. This may require you to humble yourself, especially if you're objectively in the right. But it's in these moments we must ask ourselves which we value more—being right or the relationship.

**APPLICATION:** How are you responding when someone comes to you with conflict, frustration, or outright aggression and anger? Ask God to show you how to live out Proverbs 15:1 in your relationships. Is there anyone you need to go back to and apologize for how you responded? Be open to this step of humility as God leads you.

**PRAYER:** Lord, help me respond to those around me as Your Son Jesus did. Grant me a supernatural amount of gentleness as I seek to interact with those in my life lovingly. In Jesus' name, amen.

# FIERY CONSEQUENCES

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*An angry person starts fights; a hot-tempered person commits all kinds of sin.*  
Proverbs 29:22 (NLT)

Are you the type of person who goes looking for fights?

This may be tough to see within yourself. It might require you to have some honest feedback conversations with those closest to you. For others, we know we have a quick trigger and can start a fight at the drop of a hat. This is not the way to honor Christ.

As someone who has, on regular occasions, gone looking for something to be upset about, let me tell you: I'm often quite successful. And when I go looking for things to rile me up, I almost always wind up taking that to a place of confrontation. Not lovingly, gently or biblically. Sometimes I just want to throw down. And over years of doing so I've gotten quite good at equivocation and moral justifications. Again, this is not the way to honor Christ.

According to Proverbs 29:22, there's something else to consider beyond just how we manage our anger. Hot-tempered people often commit all kinds of sin. It's easy to see this pattern once you're aware of it. You allow your anger to run away with you, so then it's easy to use foul or abusive language. Or perhaps you turn to an indulgence of some kind to escape from the strong emotions you're experiencing. Drugs, drunkenness and pornography are just a few examples of escapism that lead us further away from Christ and into sin.

Beware of anger ensnaring you and taking you to a place that is not honoring to Christ. Don't give yourself a pass and say something like *I'm just a passionate person*. Passion is one thing, while self-indulgent anger is quite another. Consider the progression that James outlines in James 1:14-15 (NLT): *Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.*

I don't know about you, but these verses are a sobering warning to me. If I'm not careful, what started as just anger can give birth to something far more damaging. Beware.

**APPLICATION:** What are you angry about? Are you starting fights? In response to these questions, take time to pray, process and possibly even journal. Can you see a pattern in your life where anger controlling you leads to further sins? Ask God for wisdom and self-control.

**PRAYER:** God, help me to honor You in every area of my life. Create in me a heart that is committed to peace and restoration in my relationships. Safeguard me from falling away from You. In Jesus' name, amen.

# RELATIONAL RESTORATION

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*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. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.*

Colossians 3:12-15 (NLT)

Sometimes, it feels really good to hold a grudge.

Maybe you're not proud of it. Maybe you wouldn't even say it as plainly as I just did. But you know deep down that you relish the resentment. You may not even remember every detail of what started the bitterness; you just know that it's there, and it's not something you want to release. Sometimes, this is from a series of smaller slights. Other times, we've been genuinely wounded in some deep ways. No matter how it started, the truth remains the same: we must move toward forgiveness.

For a Christ follower, forgiveness is not optional. Because of the forgiveness we've experienced in Christ, we must forgive others. Paul says in the above passage to *make allowance for each other's faults*. The truth is it can be pretty easy to zero in on someone's (many) faults. But what if we made allowance for them instead of mentally cataloging their every shortcoming? What if we held space for our brothers and sisters in Christ to not be perfect? When we're able to do so, I believe we're clothing ourselves in love.

Read verse 12 above one more time. Slowly. Are the words in that list descriptors of you? Merciful? Kind? Humble? Gentle? Patient? Ask God to help you grow in these areas.

**APPLICATION:** Short, sweet and seemingly simple: who do you need to forgive? I say seemingly simple because to acknowledge that you need to forgive them and then to actually do so are not the same. What step can you take toward forgiveness today?

**PRAYER:** Lord, help me to forgive as I have been forgiven. Grow within me a desire for harmony, restoration and reconciliation in my relationships. Please help me release any anger, bitterness or grudge I've been holding onto. In Jesus' name, amen.

# BROKEN DOWN WALLS

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*A person without self-control is like a city with broken-down walls.*

Proverbs 25:28 (NLT)

Can you name the fruit of the Spirit? If you can't, you can find the list in Galatians 5:22-23. Perhaps you were able to recall love or patience, but I think self-control, which is listed last, is often overlooked. As the Spirit of God guides our lives, we should grow in self-control. This is evidence, or fruit, of our being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Solomon, credited as the wisest man ever lived, has an interesting take on self-control. He says that without it, we're like a city with broken-down walls. That language may not seem to make much sense, but we're reading it through the lens of here and now. A principle of good hermeneutics (biblical interpretation) is that we must first seek to understand what the Scriptures meant to their original audience.

In biblical times, walls were a safeguard against wild animals, bandits and invading armies. Cities would have walls that ran all the way around them as a first line of defense. Recall the fall of Jericho (see Joshua 6), where God supernaturally interceded on behalf of the Israelites to bring down the mighty walls surrounding the city. In a perhaps less well-known story from the Old Testament, we see Nehemiah leading the people of God to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. Everyone hearing this proverb of Solomon would have implicitly understood the value of walls.

So, too, should we understand the value of self-control. It can protect us from the flesh, the fallen world and its temptations, and the onslaught of the enemy and his forces. Without self-control, we're prone to making decisions that will ultimately lead us away from God rather than toward Him. Unfortunately, we often see self-control reduced to the ability to refuse dessert or make a splurge purchase. It's so much more than that! In the context of our message from this week, self-control will help us respond appropriately in our anger and as we encounter the anger of others.

**APPLICATION:** On a scale of 1-10, where would you rank yourself when it comes to self-control? Consider asking those closest to you where they would see you falling on that scale. Ask God to help your self-control to grow, and if you'd be so bold, also ask Him for opportunities to practice self-control.

**PRAYER:** God, help me to honor You in how I think, speak and act. Grow within me the fruit of Your Spirit, particularly self-control. Help me to be gracious, patient and merciful in my relationships, just as You have been with me. In Jesus' name, amen.

# COUNTERCULTURAL RESPONSE

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*Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back," says the LORD. Instead, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads." Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.*

**Romans 12:17-21 (NLT)**

I want to confess something to you. More than once in my life, I've made the statement, *I'm not going to get even. I'm going to get ahead.* I know—it's awful. I'm sure you can't relate to this depraved way of thinking. But on more occasions than I'd care to count, I've fantasized about exacting my sweet, sweet revenge on others. And to push in that final 2% with you—there have been times I've taken that fantasy and turned it into reality. Pure spite, vindictiveness, bitterness or even hate is what it was. And this is not the way for a Christ follower.

Paul makes it clear in his letter to the Romans that revenge is not ours to take. In fact, it belongs to God. So, when we seek to balance the scales ourselves, we're actually stealing from God. I don't know about you, but trying to take something from God doesn't rest well with me. We must trust that God, who sees and knows all, will ultimately set all things right in the end. He is both sovereign and good. And yet, sometimes, we feel like God is a little too patient or gracious with our enemies. You might read that sentence and realize how foolish that sounds, but it's how we act when we decide to take justice into our own hands.

Instead, we are called to bless our enemies. Turn the other cheek. Refuse to pay back evil with more evil. We're to be cycle breakers, ending the hate and violence that's been done to us by refusing to perpetuate it any further. We conquer evil by choosing His way, which is deeply countercultural. The world says to look out for number one and do what you've got to do to make sure no one crosses you again. Jesus says to be a peacemaker. The two concepts are fundamentally at odds.

**APPLICATION:** Are you harboring any thoughts of revenge? Getting even? Getting ahead? Are you holding onto any deep-seated anger or bitterness? What obstacle stands in the way of releasing that and moving towards forgiveness? How can you conquer evil by doing good? Who is an enemy that you can seek to bless?

**PRAYER:** Father, help me to walk in Your ways and live as Your Son Jesus did. Show me how I might bless others, even my enemies. Especially my enemies. In Jesus' name, amen.



# PATHWAY TO PEACE

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*“If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won’t accept the church’s decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector.”*  
**Matthew 18:15-17 (NLT)**

All week, we’ve talked about how to process through our anger and move toward grace, forgiveness and restoration. But what’s the biblical process for walking through conflict and attempting reconciliation? Our passage today lays it out pretty clearly.

When we have a conflict with someone, the first step is to go to them privately and address it. Unfortunately, we more often run to everyone but that person to discuss what happened and our feelings about it. In our digital day and age, we might even take to social media and make some thinly veiled comments that we hope they see so they can feel the appropriate levels of guilt. But this is not the way.

We must go directly to that person and have a conversation. There’s a productive and an unproductive way to go about this. You can go in guns blazing, making lots of accusatory statements that leave them no wiggle room. To be clear, this is the unproductive way. The productive way is to share your perception of things, making more *I* statements than *you* statements. Then, ask for clarity and help to understand. And once you’ve asked, you have to do the really hard thing—actually listen. Not just listen to come back over the top with your cleverly prepared response. But listen to understand with an eye on restoration and forgiveness.

Jesus lays out that if this is not successful, you’re to try again, this time with one or two trusted friends who can help act as mediators. Should that prove unsuccessful, then it’s time to involve some leadership from the church. We want to be abundantly gracious, seeking at every turn to restore. Far too often, we’re quick to write people off and put them on blast. But we would be devastated to have others treat us this way. So let us recall the Golden Rule and do to others as we would have them do to us.

**APPLICATION:** Who do you need to have a potentially difficult conversation with? What obstacles stand in the way of doing so? Is your spirit in a place where you can do so in good faith? If not—ask God to help you work on the plank in your own eye before you move to the speck in someone else’s. When you’re ready, take the step. Have the talk. Pursue peace and reconciliation.

**PRAYER:** God, help me as I seek to be an agent of peace. Grow within me a desire to restore and reconcile where possible. Please give me the words to speak. May You be glorified even as I have difficult conversations. In Jesus’ name, amen.

# ONE STEP AT A TIME

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*They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When He had spit on the man's eyes and put His hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." Once more Jesus put His hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.*

**Mark 8:22-25 (NIV)**

In the Bible, there seem to be two ways of transformation. One is breakthrough, where God shows up instantly in a moment and transforms us. We see this with Paul and the Damascus Road. Then, in Mark, Jesus heals a demon-possessed boy that the disciples couldn't, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, and then Jesus instantly breaks bread and feeds 5,000 people. There seem to be several stories in the Bible where God works instantly, where breakthrough appears to happen in a moment. Then there are stories like the one above, and I believe this shows that some transformation is a process. Look at Peter; he seems to have bad instincts and denies Jesus, but over time, God grows him into a mighty man of faith. This verse, I believe, can be a great encouragement to many because it shows that God sometimes works in a process. Sometimes, the transformation is slower and doesn't happen in a moment.

Now, to be clear, God is all-powerful; there is nothing wrong with His power in the verse above. The issue isn't with God. It's with us. Sometimes, we need several touches of Jesus before our spiritual eyes are truly opened. Some people have salvation stories, like Paul and the Damascus Road, where you can share the moment God transformed you. Others have a series of moments where God slowly but surely began transforming them. Don't focus so much on the starting point; what matters most is what the Spirit has done in you now. Have you been changed, or are you changing? This is the sign of real faith. Also, in certain struggles and addictions, there are times when God creates an instant breakthrough, but in my journey to purity, it was a process. Whatever your struggle may be, ask if you are making progress in the area and celebrate it. Pray for instant breakthrough, but trust that sometimes God will transform us through a process over a period of time. Keep seeking after Him, but don't let discouragement keep you from taking the next step. Take it one day at a time and one step at a time.

**APPLICATION:** Take a step each day and allow God to transform you.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to guide and empower you. Ask Him if you have made progress in this area. Ask for breakthrough, but ask to trust Him each day.

# GUILT VERSUS SHAME

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*"I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions, for My own sake, and remembers your sins no more."*  
Isaiah 43:25-26 (NIV)

There is nothing more toxic in our spiritual life than shame. We must not confuse shame with guilt. It took me a long while to distinguish between the two. Guilt says *I made a mistake*, while shame says *I am a mistake*. God allows us to feel guilt and the weight of a bad decision so we can grow from it. This is good. It's a coach calling his best player to a higher standard they can meet. This is important. God knows that as His children, we have been given all the tools to live to a higher standard of holiness through the Spirit. There are times we let our flesh win, but that's not who we are. We are freed and new creations if we are in Jesus. This means God will allow us to feel guilt when we live beneath who we are called to be and who He knows we can be. In this case, it's the kindness of God that leads to repentance.

Shame is a whole other animal. Shame creates paralysis. One of the ways to distinguish between shame and guilt is to understand that guilt creates a desire to change, while change just entraps you. Shame makes you feel like there are no possibilities and that you are destined to grind it out for the rest of your life, finding very little victory or freedom. Shame makes you feel like a mistake, and those feelings get you to sabotage yourself with more bad decisions. You feel that the mistake or bad behavior is who you are. Shame makes us feel like a fraud. I believe many people have fallen away from Jesus because of a failure to distinguish between guilt and shame. If you make a mistake, you are not a counterfeit Christian. We all make mistakes, but what matters is that you remember your identity. Remember that it is beneath you, and God has called you to a higher standard because you are His child, and He has given you every spiritual blessing to overcome your mistake. Remember this today, and let hope and forgiveness dwell richly in you. He remembers your sin no more because your identity has changed. If you are struggling, remember the forgiveness and power you have in Jesus. This will cause you to live in deeper freedom.

**APPLICATION:** Remember your identity, not your sins, today.

**PRAYER:** If you are struggling with any shame, ask the Spirit to remove it. Ask the Spirit to remind you that He wouldn't call you to a standard you couldn't meet. Pray that you will see yourself as the Spirit does, a child of God. Ask for a deeper awareness of the power that lives inside you.

# POWER AND AUTHORITY

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*And He called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. And He said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics."*

Luke 9:1-3 (ESV)

Years ago, I was in Chicago, and we had a neighborhood block party. I had quite a few fireworks that we were planning to shoot off. The problem was fireworks were illegal in Chicago. We set some off, and then a police officer came by and told us to stop. We did it for a while, and then, when we thought the coast was clear, I set off some powerful and big ones. The same officer came back right when I was lighting the fuse. He let me know this would be the last warning he would give, and I got the message loud and clear. I had this power (fireworks) in my garage but had no authority to use it. So, it just sat there.

Jesus gave us His power, the same power that set the sun and moon into place, the same power that spoke man into existence, the same power that flowed in Jesus is in us. A lot of us believe this. What we fail to see is our authority to use it. Some people don't think they are advanced enough as a Christian. They think only the elite Christians have the right to ask God to work in mighty ways. So, the power of God sits dormant in our hearts and souls, like those fireworks did in my garage. We need to awaken to a deep understanding of what it means to be in Christ. The verses above show that Jesus' power is available, and as His children, we have the authority and the right to be bold in Jesus' name. We should be asking for miracles, casting out demons, speaking words of life, sharing our faith, and trusting in the provisions of Jesus. Why? Because we have His power and the right to bear His power. Authority and power are your birthright and inheritance.

**APPLICATION:** You have the right to bear the power of God!

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to help you see the power and authority you have in Jesus. Ask Him to show in what areas you are doubting His authority. You've been given authority over every unclean spirit.

# RUN, CHRISTIAN, RUN!

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*One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite." Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (Now she was purifying herself from her monthly uncleanness.) Then she went back home. The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, "I am pregnant."*  
2 Samuel 11:2-5 (NIV)

Those who think they will never fall are probably the most likely to fall. Peter told Jesus that he would never deny Him; sometime later, he denied Him three times. I don't know if David thought he wouldn't fall into sexual temptation, but be leery of any pride that leads you to believe you are above falling in a particular area. In sexual temptation, and really, any temptation, there will be something that jolts or shocks you. David came out and saw a beautiful woman. It's important to remember that temptation isn't a sin, but what we do with those feelings can lead us to destructive and sinful places. David saw a beautiful woman, but instead of running away, he lingered. He allowed himself to put himself in a no-win situation. There are times when the Spirit jolts us, and we become aware we are in a dangerous place. If we delay, then we are dead. The solution is to run, to flee from the devil, and then God will draw near in a new way.

I can tell you what I'm learning is that it's a series of missteps I tend to make. David saw this woman. Then he inquired about this woman. Then he sent someone to bring this woman to him. He had fallen before he had ever connected with her. Sexual temptation and the love of money are the only two sins we are told to run from. David didn't run from it; rather, he walked right into it, costing him a huge price. Remember that lust first begins with looking. So, if you run from something, you are no longer looking in that direction, and then you can look directly at Jesus. God will always be faithful to provide a way out, a jolt that causes you to come to your senses; then, you must flee and run from sexual temptation. If you delay, it will kill you, spiritually speaking.

**APPLICATION:** God has called you to flee from sexual temptation.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit if there is any situation you are lingering in that He would call you to run from. Ask the Spirit to reveal anything that is causing you to fall prey to sexual temptation, then commit to run from that person or thing.

# PURE IN HEART

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*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”* Matthew 5:8 (NIV)

The end goal of purity isn't purity; it's to see God. This was transformative for me to understand. Sometimes, we try so hard to be pure that we fail to see the end goal. You can abstain from sexual temptation, greed, drunkenness, bitterness and anger and still not see God. So, purity can't be the end goal. The Pharisees were pure on the outside, but they didn't see God; in fact, they looked to kill Jesus. Simply put, being pure for the sake of being pure was never that compelling to me. It wasn't a vision that captured my heart and imagination. Honestly, it seemed almost impossible to be completely pure in this day and age, and I got exhausted by constantly looking at my purity progress. When I was pure from sexual temptation, I felt pride, and then when I messed up, I felt a crippling shame. Then something hit me from this verse: the pure in heart see God.

Think about it: the negative, bitter person or the sexually immoral can read the Scriptures and get nothing out of it. Why? Because their hearts are hard, not soft, toward God. Those who are pure can see God in the pages of the Scriptures. They learn to see Him in the people around them. They learn to see Him in the blessings each day, while those who aren't pure have a heart disconnected from God. Sexual sin kills the heart. This was so transformative for me because it gave me a true desire to guard my heart. I want to see God and feel His power in new ways. I sat with a friend, and he said something that struck me. He said, *Bryan, from your purity comes your power.* I haven't forgotten that. We consider being guarded and pure as a weakness in a culture of impulsiveness and instant gratification. However, your patience and purity are what give you spiritual power. God wants to reveal more and more of Himself to you. Purity of heart is the lens that allows you to see more of God. Guard your heart and protect your heart, not for purity's sake, but so you may see and know God. You will find that He will fill your heart and soul in a way no sexual sin can ever satisfy. The enemy wants you to think you are settling if you don't engage in certain sins. This is a lie. You were made for God; only He brings lasting joy and life.

**APPLICATION:** Your purity gives you power.

**PRAYER:** Ask God to cause you to seek after purity so that you can see Him in new ways. Ask God to reveal how you were made for Him alone and how everything else is a cheap substitute.

# LOOK UP

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*I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip—He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.* **Psalms 121:1-4 (NIV)**

A key to life is looking up. Our whole perspective and attitude change when we keep our eyes on Jesus. Looking up reminds us that our help comes from God alone. There will come a time in your life when you will be crushed without divine strength. What do you do? You look up! You get your eyes on Jesus. He is where your help and strength come from. Doesn't matter if it's lust, fear, anxiety, jealousy, bitterness, comparison or any other sin; they all originate in our eyes. When we linger, when we dwell on the wrong things, it starts to affect our heart and soul. Thus, God has called us to get our eyes on Him! To Look up and allow Him to change our whole way of thinking.

One of the things that has to die in us for our faith to thrive fully is our independence. Independence is a treasured trait in our culture but deadly in our faith. The way to overcome this is first to admit you can't do it in your strength. We don't overcome by our strength or our might but by the Spirit. Thus, we have to keep our eyes locked and fixed on Him. When I find myself falling prey to temptation or sin, I can always trace it back to what my eyes have been fixed on. If I keep looking at Jesus, if I keep drawing near, then He will transform me. The truth is sometimes we don't want to draw near because we want to hold onto our habits, hurts or rights. Looking up can't be a weekly rhythm. It has to be a part of your daily rhythm. The things you are looking at will promise to fill you up or satisfy you, but that is a lie from the enemy. The only way to have lasting joy and fulfillment is by looking at the Spirit. Remember this so you can be unwavering in killing the sins of the flesh. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.

**APPLICATION:** Get your eyes fixed on the right thing today.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to guide and direct you. Ask Him to help you look up at Him and see the value and worth of Jesus. Jesus at the center of our lives is the only thing that brings lasting life joy. Give whatever you are holding onto to Him!

# KNOW YOURSELF AND YOUR ENEMY

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*In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.* **Ephesians 6:16 (NIV)**

I took a year off from ministry. I was unhealthy and finding way too much of my identity in my work. We will always have struggles, but I knew I had some spiritual surgery that I needed to do in my heart and soul. While I took off that year, I came across a sermon in which the preacher shared that every person who falls in ministry, life or the Bible can be traced to three reasons:

1. The untamed desires of a sensual person.
2. The need for power for a weak person.
3. The unteachable spirit of a prideful person.

This was like a wrecking ball for me to process. I saw myself in a little bit of all of those, but personally, the first one was the one God was causing me to be aware of. This is important because the enemy knows which one you struggle with, and he will send his flaming arrows at you in that area. The Bible is clear: our battle isn't against flesh and blood, which means there is an enemy who surveys your life and knows exactly how to tempt and distract you. Have you ever wondered why temptation seems to hit you in exactly the right spot? It's because the enemy knows your weakness. Safeguard against those things and live with a wisdom. The shield of faith will defend you, but it only works if pointed in the right direction. So, knowing from which direction the enemy will be firing his darts at you is essential to your victory. God is mightier than the enemy's attacks, but we can't operate in ignorance. We must know ourselves, God and the plans of the enemy to find victory. To be naïve is fatal when there is a roaring lion that wants to devour you spiritually. So be on guard. Don't be afraid. God is bigger than the enemy, but we must be aware.

**APPLICATION:** Know where the enemy is going to attack you.

**PRAYER:** Ask God to make you aware of where you struggle. Pray into the three reasons people fall and ask the Spirit to make it clear if you are guarded or vulnerable to the enemy. Ask God to strengthen you so you don't give the devil a foothold.



# HONESTY AND INTEGRITY

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*Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like Him.* **Colossians 3:9-10 (NLT)**

Think about a time in your life when you were lied to. It's happened to all of us. How did it feel when you found out the truth? Did you feel betrayed? Wounded? Despondent? Or maybe you're just numb to it at this point because you've become so used to the lack of integrity and honesty in the world today.

Among believers, it should be different.

We are called to be men and women of integrity. We follow Jesus, who is the way, *the truth* and the life (John 14:6). That means we should be committed to speaking the truth; dishonesty and duplicity should have no place among believers. Our lives are to be a testimony to the transformation we've experienced in Christ. What we say and do impacts what we've often called our witness. I'm firmly convinced that lying absolutely impacts our ability to witness to others.

I'll just confess that it's difficult for me to trust someone who I know has a reputation of dishonesty. If they've lied before, even if not to me personally, in my mind, it calls into question the veracity of anything and everything they may be saying to me now. And I believe that's largely how non-believers view those who purport to follow Christ but play fast and loose with the truth.

Now, you may be saying to yourself, *I don't tell any whoppers—just little white lies every now and again*. Compromise your integrity a little, and I believe you're opening the door to compromising it a lot. You may be seeking to spare someone's feelings, but I would submit that we can and should speak the truth in a loving, tactful way.

**APPLICATION:** Have you been lying to anyone? Are you viewed as someone of shady character and questionable integrity? What steps can you take to repair your reputation and restore your witness? Who do you need to confess to and be honest with?

**PRAYER:** Father, help me to live as a person of integrity. Renew my mind and make me more like Your Son Jesus. Grant me opportunities to speak the truth and help me to do so in love. In Jesus' name, amen.

# GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES

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*For example, there was God's promise to Abraham. Since there was no one greater to swear by, God took an oath in His own name, saying: "I will certainly bless you, and I will multiply your descendants beyond number." Then Abraham waited patiently, and he received what God had promised. Now when people take an oath, they call on someone greater than themselves to hold them to it. And without any question that oath is binding. God also bound Himself with an oath, so that those who received the promise could be perfectly sure that He would never change His mind. So God has given both His promise and His oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to Him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. It leads us through the curtain into God's inner sanctuary. Jesus has already gone in there for us. He has become our eternal High Priest in the order of Melchizedek.*

**Hebrews 6:13-20 (NLT)**

Has anyone ever said to you *just trust me*? I confess that this is a difficult thing for me to do at times. I want to assume the best in people and give them the benefit of the doubt, but blind trust... is difficult. For me, trust comes with time. And nothing builds trust faster than someone following through on what they said they would do.

I'm so thankful we serve a God who makes good on His promises. The passage above highlights Abraham. In Genesis 18, God promises Abraham that he will have a son and that through that son, he will have innumerable descendants. Sarah overhears the promise and laughs because she is well past her childbearing years. But in Genesis 21, we see God make good on His promise—these two senior citizens welcome Isaac. Sometime later, in Genesis 22, we see God command Abraham to sacrifice his son. Ultimately, God intervenes and provides a sacrifice, sparing Isaac. I love the insight that Hebrews 11:17—provides into Abraham's way of thinking. He trusted God's promise that Isaac would be the first of a multitude of descendants so much that he believed if God allowed Isaac to die, that God would raise him from the dead. Keep in mind that at this point in history, no one had ever died and come back to life. What faith in the promise of God!

There are a multitude of other promises we could examine in the Scriptures that God has kept. I encourage you to do so as you weigh the question—do I trust God?

**APPLICATION:** Dive into Scripture and discover the promises of God. Consider how He has been faithful in your own life. Ask God to help your faith and trust in Him to abound all the more!

**PRAYER:** Father, You are good, sovereign and trustworthy. Help my faith in You to grow. Thank You for Your faithfulness through the generations. Please help me to remember this when I am in the valley. In Jesus' name, amen.

# HONOR ONE ANOTHER

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*Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.*

**Romans 12:9-10 (NLT)**

What is the difference between pretending to love someone and really loving them? I think it's all in your actions. It's easy to say *I love you*, but it's harder to prove it with what you do. In fact, people have for generations used those three little words as a means to an end. It's manipulative and hurtful. We are called to love because we have been loved, not because of what we can get out of saying those words.

Real love is sacrifice. Consider the way God has demonstrated His love for us. He didn't remain distant in heaven, just saying He loved us. He proved it with His actions. Jesus, the only son of God and Himself God, left heaven and came to earth. He lived a perfect life, which He then voluntarily surrendered in excruciating fashion upon the cross. He then rose from the dead on the third day—hallelujah! What commitment to love. What sacrifice.

How do you love others? Do you just say it, or do you prove it with your actions? Real love requires real sacrifice. I tell folks all the time that marriage and parenthood have been the great refiners in my life. To love a spouse and children well, you must sacrifice yourself. And in truth, you don't want to sacrifice just out of some sense of duty. Paul says in the passage above to take delight in honoring one another. To love with genuine affection, not dutiful obligation.

How are you loving others?

**APPLICATION:** What would it look like for your love to grow for others? How can you sacrifice for them as Christ sacrificed for you? Make a list of the four or five closest relationships in your life. Under each name, jot down a few ways that you might demonstrate your love for them. It could be scheduling a regular time to pray together. Perhaps it's finding ways to affirm and encourage. Maybe it's just spending some distraction-free quality time. Ask God to help you love others well in His name!

**PRAYER:** God, You have shown me how much You love me. I don't deserve it, but I am so thankful for it. Help me to love others out of the overflow I've received from You. In Jesus' name, amen.

# KEEP YOUR PROMISES

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*One day David asked, "Is there anyone in Saul's family still alive—anyone to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?"* **2 Samuel 9:1 (NLT)**

2 Samuel 9 is one of my favorite stories in all of Scripture.

To fully grasp the impact, you have to understand the relationship between David, Saul and Jonathan. Check out 1 Samuel 18-20 if you'd like to dive deeper yourself, but I'll summarize it for our purposes here. Saul was Israel's first king, but he wasn't a very good one. So, God appointed David to become the next king. This wasn't yet public knowledge, and in the course of time, David came to serve in Saul's court. There, he became close friends with Saul's son Jonathan. Eventually, Saul grows jealous of David and, in time, tries to kill him. Jonathan ultimately helped David escape after swearing loyalty to each other and sealing a bond between them and their children forever.

Fast forward to 2 Samuel 9. David is king, and both Saul and Jonathan are dead. David remembers the promises that he and Jonathan made to one another to love each other's families well. So, he inquires about any opportunities to make good on his promise. He learns about Mephibosheth, the crippled son of Jonathan, who has been living in exile. David summons Mephibosheth to court. It was a common practice of new kings at that time to completely eradicate the family of previous or rival rulers. This, in theory, would prevent future uprisings. Mephibosheth arrives expecting nothing good, but in 2 Samuel 9:7 David tells him to not be afraid, for he intends to show kindness because of the promise he made to Jonathan. Mephibosheth goes from exile to the table of the king—truly a beautiful story. And this all happened because of deep love and the honoring of a promise.

**APPLICATION:** David went out of his way to show great kindness to Mephibosheth. Who can you go out of your way to show great kindness? How can you demonstrate radical love for God through your love for others?

**PRAYER:** God, thank You for the deep and enduring compassion You have on us. Help me to show that same love, kindness and compassion for others. Show me who I can love well that You might receive glory. In Jesus' name, amen.

# GOD'S INTENT FOR MARRIAGE

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*Some Pharisees came and tried to trap Him with this question: "Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife?" Jesus answered them with a question: "What did Moses say in the law about divorce?" "Well, he permitted it," they replied. "He said a man can give his wife a written notice of divorce and send her away." But Jesus responded, "He wrote this commandment only as a concession to your hard hearts. But 'God made them male and female' from the beginning of creation. 'This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.' Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together."* **Mark 10:2-9 (NLT)**

The religious leaders of Jesus' time often sought to trap and trick Him into saying something that they could use against Him. They hoped to get something they could use to turn Him over to the Romans, or short of that, at least discredit Him in the eyes of the people. In this particular instance, they're presenting Him with the topic of divorce. Jesus, as He so often does, goes back to the Scriptures (as should we when faced with difficult questions). The religious leader points out that Moses permitted divorce, but Jesus presses into why and then explains God's plan for marriage.

Marriage is meant to last forever. It's more than just the signing of a paper that is submitted to the government for tax breaks. Marriage is a covenant, which is not a word we use often today. It's essentially a sacred promise, and in marriage, it's between more than just the bride and groom. The marital covenant includes God. He is what ultimately joins the two together into one—because of this, Jesus said that no one should split apart what God has joined together.

Now, to the hard part. There are times when divorce is the healthy step. Jesus, in the sermon on the Mount, cites infidelity (Matthew 5:32) as legitimate grounds for divorce. Abuse would be another reason to end a marriage as no one should be unsafe in the relationship that should be most sacred. While these are legitimate reasons to end a marriage, I believe this does break the heart of God. Marriage is meant to be between one man and one woman forever. If you or someone you love has walked through divorce, please don't walk away from this feeling shamed or less than. God is gracious and loves us deeply.

**APPLICATION:** If you are married, how can you commit to strengthening that relationship? If you are not married but someday desire to be, what steps can you take to be the healthiest version of yourself for that day? If you never desire to be married, ask God to show you how He wants to use your life for the Kingdom!

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for the relationships that You give us. Please help me to embrace authentic, Christ-centered community. May my love for You be demonstrated in my love for others. In Jesus' name, amen.

# LOYALTY AND DIVINE DISPLEASURE

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*Give honor to marriage, and remain faithful to one another in marriage. God will surely judge people who are immoral and those who commit adultery.*

Hebrews 13:4 (NLT)

We live in a time where marriage is increasingly seen as something that can be opted out of quite easily. If you're not happy, just get divorced. Bored? Divorce. Decide you're interested in someone else? Easy—just get divorced. This is not God's intent for marriage.

One of the most common reasons marriages end is because of infidelity. I don't believe that most people wake up one day and just decide to have an affair. More likely, it begins with a disconnection at home. Then, there's someone with whom an emotional connection has been established. It's easy to grow more and more distant from your spouse when you're growing closer and closer to someone else. Part of protecting a marriage is safeguarding your emotional connections with members of the opposite sex who aren't your spouse.

Another facet of honoring your marriage is guarding your eyes. I think of what Job said in Job 31:1 (NLT): *"I have made a covenant with my eyes not to look with lust at a young woman."*

We live in a time when pornography is a billion-dollar business. It's a pandemic the likes of which the world has never seen. And while some may say that no one is being hurt by its use, I would disagree. Jesus makes it clear that lust in the heart is equal to having physically acted upon it (Matthew 5:28). Part of honoring marriage is refusing to engage in pornography.

**APPLICATION:** Are you married? If so, are you remaining faithful in your marriage? Are there any relationships with members of the opposite sex who aren't your spouse that need to be pruned? Are you engaging in any activity that is dishonoring to your marriage, and ultimately to God? If you're not married, your application is to still pursue purity. In your dating relationships and in what you're viewing—honor God.

**PRAYER:** God, help me to live my life according to Your standards. Protect me from falling prey to rationalizing behavior that is out of step with Your ways. May Your Spirit guide me in every part of my life. In Jesus' name, amen.

# MUTUAL SUBMISSION

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*And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

Ephesians 5:21 (NLT)

Bring up Ephesians 5 in any conversation about marriage, and you're likely to set someone on edge. Unfortunately, there's a history of only citing Ephesians 5:22, which calls for wives to submit to their husbands. When we cherry-pick one verse out of context, we almost always fail to grasp the fullness of what God is communicating.

Yes, wives are exhorted to submit to their husbands. What a weighty responsibility to lead! In my marriage, there have been only a few times where my wife has said aloud to me, *I'm submitting to your authority as my husband in this*. Rather than this being a time of exulting in my *win*, this has caused me to humble myself and make sure I'm aligned with God's will.

There's further context in Ephesians 5. Husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loved the church (5:25). This means that husbands are called to sacrifice on behalf of their wives. To lay down their lives for their wives. It's in this context that wives are called to submit. Sacrifice and submission are both needed. And there's a reciprocity involved in submission, as evidenced by Ephesians 5:21.

A healthy marriage, or any relationship for that matter, is one of give and take. There must be a mutual respect and honor present. When there's not, things fall out of balance. One partner may seek to take advantage of or dominate the other. It goes against the very idea of partnership! May we live out relationships that honor both Christ and one another.

**APPLICATION:** If you're married, have a conversation with your spouse about sacrifice and submission. Perhaps have a conversation about the health of your marriage at this juncture. If you're not married, consider the health of your closest relationships. Are you loving sacrificially?

**PRAYER:** Almighty God, please help me to love those around me as You love me. Please help me to walk in humility, willingly sacrificing for the sake of others. In Jesus' name, amen.

# JUSTICE BELONGS TO GOD

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*Do not take revenge, My dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is Mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.*

**Romans 12:19 (NIV)**

*Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?*

**James 4:11-12 (NIV)**

Have you ever been so angry you could barely see straight? Maybe you were driving. Maybe someone did something at work or just said the wrong thing at the wrong time. What'd you do next?

I'd been trying to get a promotion. I worked hard every day to be the best employee and show that I deserved it. Then the announcement came. Another person got the promotion. I was devastated and angry, feeling like someone less worthy had been promoted. I took it out on that guy and those above me, but that was the wrong way to handle it. Instead of trusting God, I took matters into my own hands.

This happened to Peter. Jesus had just finished praying when Judas and a mob from the chief priests came to arrest Jesus. Peter witnessed this, then drew his sword and cut off the ear of one of the chief priest's servants. Peter lashed out in anger. Jesus healed the injured man and reaffirmed that He is the Son of God. We must remember that justice belongs to God.

**APPLICATION:** As you go through the day, pay attention to how you react to situations that make you upset or angry. Each of these is an opportunity for you to turn to the Father to help you not judge. Pray and ask Him to guide you when you are struggling.

**PRAYER:** Father, I thank You for Your great love and mercy. Help me remember that You are the judge of all things, and I need not give into my selfish desires to seek retribution. Give me Your heart for those who I feel have wronged me, and let me see them as You do. I love You, God. Amen.



# A GENTLE RESPONSE

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*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*  
Proverbs 15:1 (NIV)

*Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.* Philippians 4:5 (NIV)

Relationships are hard! Some days, it is just so difficult to navigate conversations with friends, family or coworkers. We can sometimes be offended by even the smallest things. Unfortunately, we don't always handle these situations very well.

Proverbs 15:1 presents us with two courses of action. Can you relate to these? In any kind of relationship, the second half of that verse can lead to terrible outcomes. One of the most challenging things for us is using the right words with the right tone. What we think is a nice, gentle answer might be perceived as harsh. Choose your words carefully!

Thankfully, we have God's Word to help us. In James 1:19 (NLT), we see the best way to approach a conversation. *Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.*

We must remember we need to listen to others, pray for what God wants us to hear and say, and not react in anger. In our desire to be right and think we know the best way to do things, we can easily put someone down and change a conversation into something that destroys a relationship.

**APPLICATION:** Look back on your conversations in the last few days. How did you handle them? Did you reply with grace and love, or were you harsh? How could you have handled them differently? Before any conversations you have today, prepare your heart by praying for God to help you be quick to listen and slow to speak. Leave room in your conversation for the Holy Spirit to work.

**PRAYER:** Almighty Father, thank You for Your kindness. I ask that You give me wisdom as I talk to people today. Help me to be gentle in my responses so others can see Your love in me. Amen.

# LOVE WINS

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*But Joseph replied, "Don't be afraid of me. Am I God, that I can punish you? You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people. No, don't be afraid. I will continue to take care of you and your children." So he reassured them by speaking kindly to them.*

**Genesis 50:19-21 (NLT)**

*Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.*

**Colossians 3:13 (NLT)**

Have you ever harbored a grudge against someone? It's an easy thing to do. Blame someone else for how your life is based on actions that they took earlier in life.

Joseph is one of the greatest examples of someone who could've held a grudge against his brothers and not done anything to help them out. They had wronged him severely, and his life suffered immensely because of it. But God was faithful to Joseph in his suffering.

We are prone to not only hold onto grudges but also withhold forgiveness and friendship because we are angry or hurt. I remember this happening multiple times with my siblings. They would do or say something that hurt me, and I wouldn't want anything to do with them. There would be long gaps without each other in our lives because we refused to deal with the situation. In the end, we would talk about it and work it out. The relationship mattered, so the love of family won out.

Joseph forgave his brothers for their actions, giving us a powerful example to follow. Not only did he forgive, but he also loved his brothers and allowed them to stay with him in Egypt. Just like Joseph, we are called to love and forgive.

**APPLICATION:** From whom are you withholding forgiveness and love? Ask God to move your heart to a spirit of forgiveness for that person. Reach out and extend the hand of forgiveness and love to that person. They may not receive it, but you will have forgiven as Jesus forgave us. Meditate on today's Scriptures and ask God what He wants you to know.

**PRAYER:** God, I thank You for Your Son Jesus and the forgiveness of my sins. His sacrifice shows me a depth of love I cannot understand, but I am so grateful. Help me to have a forgiving and loving heart for others in my life. Amen.

# RESPOND WITH BLESSING

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*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

**Romans 12:14-18 (NIV)**

It happened in a moment. Someone had been insulting and threatening me. I saw him with his friends, and I had a choice to make. Instead of moving on, I confronted and challenged him. I chose to answer his anger and hate with my own anger and hate. This was before I was a believer.

When we follow Jesus, we don't see people in the same way or respond to things as we did before. We live contrary to what the world expects. Repaying evil with goodness, blessing and love is mind-blowing to the culture. We are transformed!

The apostle Paul is one of the best examples of transformation in the Bible. As a pharisee, he was devoted to killing those who followed Jesus' teachings. Paul encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus and became a believer. Neither the Jews nor the new Christians knew what to do because he now preached Jesus as the Messiah. Paul changed how he dealt with people, not answering evil and violence with the same.

As we go through our days, we face the choice of how we react to people around us. Scripture is clear about how we are to respond. We are to live in peace and harmony with those around us, not thinking that we are better than others. The enemy uses anger, hate and evil to divide us, so we must be on guard.

**APPLICATION:** Seek opportunities to show God's love to others, even when they might not show it to you. If someone yells at you or is hateful, don't give it back to them in anger. Respond with love and blessing and invite God into the moment.

**PRAYER:** God, it is so hard some days to respond as You call me to. Help me to love everyone as You love them, not repaying evil and hate in kind. Please give me strength to not respond in my flesh, but as You would. Amen.

## MAKE ALLOWANCE FOR EACH OTHER'S FAULTS

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*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.*

Colossians 3:12-15 (NIV)

We're all going to mess up. Intentionally or not, there are things we're going to do wrong. What happens when we do that? Hopefully, we have surrounded ourselves with people who will walk through our mistakes with us and not cast us aside.

King David made some serious mistakes in his life. He even went so far as to sleep with someone else's wife. The story of David and Bathsheba is full of infidelity, deception and murder. Even though all of this happened, God did not abandon David. There were consequences to his actions, but God never left him.

We also have to live with the consequences of our actions and choices. When we make mistakes, we need to own up to them and ask for forgiveness from those we've harmed. This passage in Colossians tells us not only to forgive others but also to love them. This allows us to live in harmony.

This is all almost impossible if you have not experienced the transforming love of Jesus. Out of this, our lives are different. Once this transformation has happened, we see the Fruit of the Spirit that Paul wrote about in Galatians, *...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.* Galatians 5:22-23a (NIV)

These traits help us understand and love people, even when they have done something wrong. We should forgive and continue to be in relationship with the person, showing them the love God showed us through His Son Jesus.

**APPLICATION:** Look back over the last few weeks and see if there has been an instance when you didn't make allowance for another's faults. Pray and seek God's forgiveness, and then seek the person out to forgive and mend the relationship.

**PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for forgiving my sins and making allowance for my faults. I strive to grow closer to You and live like Jesus in all that I do. Help me to forgive and see others as You do. Amen.

# JESUS, OUR EXAMPLE

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*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*  
Ephesians 4:32 (NIV)

*But if anyone obeys His word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in Him: Whoever claims to live in Him must live as Jesus did.*  
1 John 2:5-6 (NIV)

The chief priests wanted Him dead. This Jesus. The Son of God. The Messiah. They did not want Him to cause any more disruptions or lead people away from the Jewish faith. They had Jesus arrested and taken to Pontius Pilate to be tried and crucified. What a horrible injustice.

There have been many times in my life when I have felt wronged and was faced with the choice of how to react. Frustration, anger and hate are emotions that want to surface first if something unjust happens. As a follower of Jesus, I know how I am supposed to react, and thankfully, we have the perfect example of how to respond when the worst happens to us.

Jesus was beaten and humiliated, forced to wear a crown of thorns and a purple robe. The Roman soldiers were mocking Him as the King of the Jews. He suffered immense pain and suffering during this event, yet He did nothing. Jesus could've called down an army of angels, but His path was set, and He knew it must be so. We should see this example of how Jesus reacted and do the same. God is in control, and we must leave these in His hands. It is difficult to do that because the struggle is real and challenging. Even as Jesus endured the pain and torture, the chief priests and temple guards continued to cry crucify. When you choose not to react, your refusal might cause more anger and frustration in those who have harmed you. Keep your eyes on Jesus and remember how He acted in these moments.

**APPLICATION:** Pray for those who wrong you. Ask God to change their hearts. Examine your heart and ask God to remove any hatred or anger you've harbored.

**PRAYER:** Loving God, thank You for the example of Your Son Jesus. He came to earth to show us how to live and what we should do when faced with adversity. I thank You for the ability to come to You for strength and guidance when I am wronged. Give me peace and strength for the challenges ahead. Amen.

# LIVE WITH HUMILITY

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*You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though He was God, He did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, He gave up His divine privileges; He took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When He appeared in human form, He humbled Himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.*

**Philippians 2:5-8 (NLT)**

We look up to success. Highly successful people are celebrated in our society. People want to be like the rich and famous, buying up books and fashions that these celebrities sell or wear. This happens both inside and outside the church. Unfortunately, humility can be hard to find.

Jesus is the model of humility for us. He humbled Himself so much that He gave up His place in heaven to come to earth as a man and sacrifice Himself for our sins. Do you seek money, fame, power or to be the best at everything? Wanting to be successful is not wrong in and of itself, but you must be humble in all that you do. Jesus talked about how the religious leaders of the day acted and warned against it, saying... *"Beware of these teachers of religious law! For they like to parade around in flowing robes and receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces. And how they love the seats of honor in the synagogues and the head table at banquets. Yet they shamelessly cheat widows out of their property and then pretend to be pious by making long prayers in public. Because of this, they will be more severely punished."* Mark 12:38-40 (NLT)

How do you act when dealing with people? Are you fair and humble, or are you critical in the way you treat others? Remember the example of Jesus and how He did not hold onto His rights and privileges. He made Himself a humble servant.

**APPLICATION:** Take the time to elevate those around you. Look for the good in them and celebrate that. Champion others over yourself so that you become known as an encourager who wants others to grow and succeed.

**PRAYER:** Jesus, thank You for Your sacrifice and Your example of a humble leader. As I seek to emulate You, help me remain humble. I ask You to be a part of every relationship I have and let my life be a living example of Your humility. Amen.

# ENDLESS LOVE

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*The LORD is good to everyone. He showers compassion on all His creation.*  
Psalm 145:9 (NLT)

*As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.*  
Ezekiel 33:11a (NLT)

Today's Scripture reminds us that there is no one too far away from God's love. David's words in Psalm 145 couldn't be any clearer, *The Lord is good to everyone.*

I don't know about you, but I don't always love people. Sometimes it's because I don't agree with them (or they don't agree with me!). But other times, it's because I'm simply exhausted. I've poured out and poured out, and there's nothing left to give. I either grow cold or distant, or I simply don't have it in me to go another mile. Sometimes, even another step.

God is not like that. His love never runs out. Not only does God do *good to everyone* and *shower compassion on all His creation*, but David also declares in another Psalm that God's *endless love stretches from one eternity to the other* (Psalm 103:17a TPT). God has an always and forever kind of love!

Pastor Greg Burdine describes God's endless love using the Biblical image of an overflowing cup. He writes: *The overflowing cup refers to the lavish abundance and generosity of God. No drips, trickles or small portions. It's not rationed. God pours rivers of living water, waterfalls of His grace. If we give gifts to show our love, how much more does God enjoy giving to us?* What's even more amazing is that His love extends to people who deny Him or insult Him—even the most vile criminals. If He can love even the worst of the worst, how much does He also love you?

**APPLICATION:** Spend time reflecting on your need for love today. Name areas of your life, your heart, which remain untouched by the love of God.

**PRAYER:** God, thank You that Your love doesn't run out. Thank You that Your love is available no matter what I do or how far I run. Fill me in those places I've not yet experienced You, and give me a love for others that can only come from You. Amen.

# THE NATURE AND POWER OF LOVE

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*This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience—it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive: it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep account of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it is glad with all good men when truth prevails. Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen.*

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a (JBP)

You've probably heard today's passage at a thousand weddings! If you're like me, you've become so familiar with these words they've lost all meaning. My mind wanders as the words are being read. I intentionally used the *J.B. Phillips New Testament* translation in today's Scripture with the hope of breaking through the familiarity. These nuanced words provide some fresh insight into both the nature and power of love.

This passage tells us two things that love is and eight things that it's *not*. The best way to understand each of these is to see them in the life of Jesus. We could replace the word love with the name Jesus, and the description would make perfect sense. Jesus is patient and kind. He always seeks to build us up and not tear us down. He is humble and isn't provoked easily when we sin. Jesus has no limit to His endurance and is able to fill us with endless hope. And if everything else went away, Jesus would remain. God is love (1 John 4:8, 16), and this is perfectly revealed in the life of Jesus.

**APPLICATION:** Slow down and meditate on today's Scripture. Make a list of all the ways love is described in this passage. Thank Jesus for making this kind of love available to us.

**PRAYER:** Jesus, I am amazed by Your love. I wish I could be more like You so the world could see more of who You are. Help me love the way You do. Amen.



# LOVING THE UNLOVABLE

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*"Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."* Luke 6:31-36 (NIV)

It's one thing to talk about God's unconditional love, but it's quite another way to extend unconditional love to others. Let's be honest, some people are simply difficult to love. If you think of specific people you've come in contact with over the past few days or weeks, you'll likely notice that some of them have been easier to love (and be around) than others. There are people you like to spend time with and others you avoid. There are people who treat you with kindness and respect and others who hold a grudge or take advantage of you. But be careful as you categorize them, though, as some of those very people may be putting you on the hard-to-love list!

Loving the unlovable shapes who we become. As we extend grace and mercy, we actually become like Jesus. As one pastor once told me, *you always need to have one difficult person in your life. It will do you good* (not my favorite thing to hear at the time!). Not only that, but loving those who are difficult reminds us of God's unconditional love. That, though we were sinners, God loved us and sent His Son to die for us (see Romans 5:8). God showed us in the greatest way what it looks like to love the unlovable! Loving the unlovable also reveals to a lost and hurting world that there is One who loves them. This is what it means to be the church.

**APPLICATION:** Think of someone you've had a difficult time loving. Do something nice for them and see what happens!

**PRAYER:** God, thank You for loving me when I was unlovable. I pray You'd fill me with Your mercy and compassion so I can love people the way You do. Amen.

# LOVING THROUGH SERVING

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*"If you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey that has strayed away, take it back to its owner. If you see that the donkey of someone who hates you has collapsed under its load, do not walk by. Instead, stop and help."*

Exodus 23:4-5 (NLT)

*For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love.*

Galatians 5:13 (NLT)

When I was in seminary, one of our course requirements was to do a service project in the community. We could volunteer to work with kids in an afterschool program, visit people who were sick in the hospital, or spend time with elderly folks in nursing homes. There was a long list of options, but quite honestly, I didn't want to do any of them. The requirement felt a bit forced. I had studying to do, and this sort of thing just didn't fit into my schedule. The seminary meant well; looking back, I see why that was part of the program.

By the time I chose a project the only thing left on the list was to visit a women's shelter. So, I went. I'll never forget that experience. As I walked into the room, I was overcome with emotion. I saw the faces of the hurting women and welled up with tears and a love and compassion I'd never felt. I could only imagine what they'd been through. In place of the inconvenience and apathy I'd been feeling, my heart was broken. And when several of the children ran up to me and wrapped their arms around my legs, my heart melted.

Sometimes, we have a deep love for serving others, and that's beautiful. But other times, we don't have that love, and we simply need to take a step and allow God to move us into the expression of love He designed us for, the love He's had for us all along.

**APPLICATION:** If God has given you a heart to serve, thank Him for the privilege it is to join Him caring for others. If you've not been moved to serve others in a while, ask God to renew your heart and consider ways to serve.

**PRAYER:** Father, I don't always feel like serving others. Sometimes it's just too much. Reveal someone You've put in my path, and give me a heart to serve. Amen.

# LOVING WITHOUT REVENGE

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*"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth." When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.*

1 Peter 2:22-23 (NIV)

*Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.*

1 Thessalonians 5:15 (NIV)

It's been several years, but I still remember driving our kids to school. Many streets had speed zones and were extensively patrolled by policemen. Thankfully, I was never in such a rush that I risked getting a speeding ticket (it had been over 30 years since I'd gotten pulled over, and I wasn't about to break my record!). There were many times, though, when impatient drivers would speed past me to get to school or work. I can remember secretly thinking to myself *I hope they get caught*. And with a feeling of superiority and judgment, I slowly drove on.

God's not like that. He's not out to get us. He doesn't seek revenge. As today's Scriptures show us, if there was anyone justified in lashing out, it was Jesus. The cruel mistreatment He suffered is hard for us to imagine. The insults. The mocking. Torture to the point of death. There are simply no words to describe what happened. Yet Jesus did not *pay back wrong for wrong*. As the saying goes, *two wrongs don't make a right*. Nothing good ever comes from taking revenge. As Marcus Aurelius once said, *The best revenge is to be unlike him who performed the injury*.

Even though there is a lot of violence, hate and prejudice in the world, don't let that cloud your vision of God's love. You've likely been mistreated, but let's remember Jesus' example to love without revenge. May we not become like the people who've wronged us.

**APPLICATION:** Move from revenge to love.

**PRAYER:** Jesus, thank You for the example of loving without revenge. I want to be like You, and I pray for the Holy Spirit to help me experience patience and love toward those who hurt me and those around me. Amen.

# MAKE PEACE

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*When people's lives please the LORD, even their enemies are at peace with them.* Proverbs 16:7 (NLT)

*But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.* James 3:17-18 (NIV)

With a quick word search, you'll find that the word peace (or peaceful, or peacefully) appears in the Bible more than 250 times. There are several ways this word (or concept) is used.

Sometimes, the word peace describes the restored relationship we have with God when we believe in the full and final saving work of Jesus. He took upon Himself the penalty for our sins and made us right (justified) with God. He paid our debt. Justice has been served. The moment we believe, we move from being enemies of God to having peace with God. Romans 5:1-2 and Colossians 1:20 describe this kind of peace.

Other times, peace refers to the experience of calm and rest we feel as we release our anxiety and burdens to God. It's the deep breath we're able to take when the pressures of life lift from our shoulders and the internal racing and wrestling come to a halt. Psalm 23 and Philippians 4:6-7 come to mind as examples.

Another way Bible writers used the word peace was to describe times of rest between nations who'd been at war. It's when the military returns home and the violence and killing stops. You can see this kind of peace in Leviticus 26, Ezekiel 34, and Isaiah 52.

Today's Scripture speaks of another kind of peace. It's the peace in our relationships. It's what happens when we rid ourselves of bitterness and anger. It's even the peace we feel when we forgive (and pray for) our enemies. It's the result of relinquishing envy and jealousy and moving to a place of harmony and unity with the people around us. This sort of peace brings intimacy in the church, in marriage and with friends (and even strangers and enemies!).

**APPLICATION:** Reflect on today's Scriptures and ask God for a spirit of peace toward others.

**PRAYER:** Jesus, thank You for paying my debt and making peace between me and You. Thank You that I have a place to go with my anxiety and stress. I pray You'd cover our world with grace and bring peace among the nations. And now more than ever, I pray You'd help me offer and make peace with the people around me. Amen.

# LOVE IN ACTION

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*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

1 John 3:16-18 (NIV)

*"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."*

John 13:34 (NIV)

I love tacos. I love sunsets. I love it when my car is clean. We sure throw the word *love* around a lot! Today's Scripture teaches us that true love is much deeper. God's love goes way beyond the simple pleasures in life.

One of the most often used words for love in the Old Testament is *hesed*. Scholars have said that this word is quite possibly the most beautiful word in the entire Bible! Because *Hesed* is the defining characteristic of God, it's not surprising that it's virtually untranslatable. In fact, *Hesed* is so rich with meaning that it has been translated in 169 different ways in 6 different English translations. Scholars don't know exactly what to do with it.

But even more than a feeling or a particular experience, love is an action. Fun fact: In 1535, the very word lovingkindness was invented in an attempt to express love as both emotion and action. Love is something we do. It's a choice we make to care for ourselves and others in tangible and practical ways. It's wrapped around the idea of living our lives for God because of who He is and what He's done.

As C.S. Lewis writes, *God's love is not wearied by our sins & is relentless in its determination that we be cured at whatever cost to us or Him.* For God, love is more than a feeling. It's an action. Love is sacrificial and always centered around the good of others.

**APPLICATION:** Choose one way to put love into action today.

**PRAYER:** God, I'm amazed that You don't merely have loving thoughts toward me, which I know You do! But that Your thoughts and feelings cause You to act. You've shown me so much love, and for that, I am eternally grateful. Fill me with Your love today so I might love others with my actions. Amen.







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