

Week One: Impact of the Cross: Implications of Jesus' Lordship

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

- Colossians 1:15-18

Jesus is given many titles in scripture including "Teacher," "Savior," and "Lamb of God." However, for all his lamb-like gentleness, it is important that the church not forget the very real 'kingliness' of Jesus. The kingdom of God began with Jesus and will continue to mature through the work of the church and the Holy Spirit until the eventual final restoration of all things. We live, breathe and take part in this restoration activity under the command of Lord Jesus.

This has very real, practical implications on how we are to live our lives including our work, how we treat others, how we use our finances, how we spend our leisure time... everything. When we commit to live under Christ's lordship we relinquish all other allegiances. We are not subject to status, social network, political party, country or even family. Rather, we are subject to Christ who taught us to die so that we may live and take part in the present and coming kingdom of God.

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any of these questions beforehand or during your group's focus time)

1. If someone were to watch a filmstrip of your day, what are the three strongest commitments they would find in your life due to how you spent your day?
2. In your personal faith journey do you tend to view Jesus more as a Savior or Teacher? Why?
3. What areas are you seeking maturity or greater depth in your faithfulness to the kingdom of God?
4. We are often drawn to things that seem good, but may conflict with our Lord's expectations for us. Are there any allegiances in your life that conflict with your commitment to living as Jesus taught and modeled?
5. Fill in the blank: "This week I will _____ in order to embody dedication to Christ and the ways God's Kingdom is breaking into earth as it already is in heaven!"

Week Two: Prayer: Communing with God

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

- Ephesians 6:18-20

To pray is to change and to be changed. For people and communities who have committed to live under the authority and instruction of Lord Jesus, prayer is an essential component of the Christian life.

Richard Foster writes: "The primary purpose of prayer is to bring us into such a life of communion with the Father that, by the power of the Spirit, we are increasingly conformed to the image of the Son... [However], none of us will keep up a life of prayer unless we are prepared to change... When we first begin to walk with God, he is gracious and marvelously answers our feeble, egocentric prayers [and] we think, 'This is wonderful!' In time, however, God says to us, 'I would like to be more than your provider. I also want to be your Teacher... and to lead you into a more excellent way...!' As we begin to follow these nudgings of the Spirit we are changed from the inside out."

Before we can effectively participate in the work of the kingdom of God, we must first be transformed through communion with God. This communion is like any committed relationship in that it requires vulnerability. Prayer is the unguarded place where the innermost parts of our hearts meet with the heart of God. This meeting might resemble the familiarity of old friends, the passionate embrace of reunited lovers, or the quarrel of a heart deeply disappointed or hurt by God's perceived distance. Whatever the tone or season, a transformative relationship with God requires consistent investment. As the prodigal son left his father's home and all the bounty provided there, when we cease to pray we sever our connection with the One who gives life. We lose our direction, we atrophy, and unless we, like the prodigal, return to the wellspring of life that is prayerful communion with God, we risk becoming lost in the spiritual badlands.

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any of these questions beforehand or during your group's focus time)

1. Outside of praying before meals, moments of worry, and immediate needs, how often do you pray?
2. Is there a season of life in which you found yourself in prayer more than other seasons of life? Why?

3. When you pray, are you open to being changed, or do you resist being changed? Why or why not?
4. When and for how long are you willing to commit to prayer this week? Do you need to let go of something so you have the time or space to pray regularly?

Week Three: Engaging Scripture

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

- 2 Timothy 3:14-17

When we pray, we spend time in communion with God. We share ourselves with God and we attend to God's prompting. Another way God speaks to the church is through scripture. In scripture we learn of our heritage, we receive instruction, and we observe the life of Jesus and model our own lives after his example. Through scripture God blesses us with guidance, comfort, and with insight into God's own nature. In Genesis we learn of God's desire for relationship. In Judges we learn of God's jealousy for our undivided devotion. Through reading the life and teachings of Jesus, we mature in our understanding of who we are in Christ.

Scripture is the Word of God to which we submit our own opinions and understanding and by which we are formed. Further, as with any exercise, we cannot be formed if we do not practice. We will never complete a marathon if we do not first engage in long-term training. Similarly, we cannot be shaped by Jesus if we only occasionally hear highlights of his sermons. We cannot be comforted by scripture if we do not seek God in our times of need. We cannot share the gospel with the world around us if we have not first been formed by the Word.

Today we are blessed with ready access to the Bible. However, in our hectic, often over-committed lives we often neglect to regularly spend time in the Word. If we hope to be formed into Christ's likeness, this cannot be so. We must be grounded in scripture, not because "It's a good thing to do," but because it is through a solid scriptural foundation that we come to understand God and come to understand our place in the kingdom.

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any of these questions beforehand or during your group's focus time)

1. In your experience, what is the most meaningful way to read scripture (reading multiple passages on a topic, reading whole books at a time, reading with a cup of coffee and a muffin, etc.). Why is this meaningful to you?
2. Do you tend to read scripture to confirm what you already think, or to change what you already think?

3. Have you ever read scripture and realized you were wrong in how you previously understood something about God, the church, or the world?
4. How can you engage in scripture this week so as to allow it to shape you in some way?

Week Four: Listening to The Spirit

"...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit."

- Galatians 5:22-25

We have thus far discussed communing with God through prayer and being formed by our reading of God's Word in scripture. Another way we discern God's will in our lives is through attending to God's prompting and through reflection. John Wesley taught that Christians mature in their understanding of the Christian faith by learning from scripture, the tradition of the wider church over the centuries, personal and shared experiences that lead to wisdom, and through sound reason.

Another way of deepening our understanding of our role in Jesus' kingdom work is to attend to the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In Galatians we are given a list of the evidences of the Spirit's work; metaphorically referred to as the fruit of the Spirit's activity. These fruits include patience, goodness, kindness, love, gentleness, self control, peace, joy, and faithfulness. We can attend to the presence, or absence of these fruits in our daily activities as a way of discerning God's prompting. We might reflect, "Are my interactions with my friends, children, or neighbors joyful? Am I patient? "Did I treat my significant other kindly and with faithfulness?" Reflecting on the presence of fruit might give some indication of God's affirmation of your interactions with the world around you. An absence of these fruits might suggest an area where God is calling you to mature. By regularly attending to the presence or absence of the fruits of the Spirit in our lives, like long-ago sailors who consistently checked the stars to confirm their bearings, we grow in our ability to discern God's prompting and direction for our lives.

Take 20 seconds to reflect on the following questions. Do not discuss, simply reflect:

1. When did you give love most today?
2. When did you receive love most today?
3. Did you miss any opportunities to give love today?
4. When did you have the deepest sense of connection with God?
5. When did you have the deepest sense of connection with others?
6. When did you feel most fully yourself?

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any of these questions beforehand or during your group's focus time)

1. When in your week did you most fully observe or experience the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23)?
2. Where was the fruit of the Spirit most absent?
3. How might attending to the fruits of the Spirit affect your understanding of yourself and your ability to make decisions in your life?
4. How will you attend to the Spirit this week?

Week Five: Humility

Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease."

- John 3:25-30

John "the baptist" was charged by God to proclaim and prepare the way for the start of Jesus' earthly ministry. Through his work he amassed a considerable following and no small degree of influence. However, once Jesus arrived, John immediately directed people away from himself and towards Jesus. Perhaps contrary to expectation Jesus then spent much of his ministry refusing people's attempts to give him power, preferring to point away from himself and to God. To assume such a posture of refusing power and pointing away from one's self is to assume a posture of humility.

Adele Calhoun writes, "Humility stems from having someone besides yourself as the center of your attention... The mirror of the public doesn't matter." We are not out to prove something, or to gather awards, accolades or notoriety. Rather, we are free to be content with ourselves as we are and as God sees us. Rather than striving for the approval of others, we strive to direct attention away from ourselves and towards God, from whom we derive our gifts and in whom we find our contentment. In assessing the balance of our time and efforts, we join John in declaring "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any of these questions beforehand or during your group's focus time)

1. What types of power, influence or control do you often find yourself seeking?
2. Who are people in your life you could give power or recognition to, rather than keeping power for yourself?
3. We emulate Jesus when we let go of power. What is a practical way you can give power or influence to someone else this week. Alternately, how can you overtly give glory to God for something you might be tempted to claim as your own glory?

Week Six: Restoration

[Jesus] stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

- *Luke 4:18-19,21*

In the beginning, God created the earth and filled it. God also created humanity to enjoy and participate in God’s creation and to share with God in caring for Eden. At some point humanity turned away from God and suffering entered the world. Because God still desired relationship, God, having sought humanity for centuries, ultimately sent Jesus, who was a part of God’s self. Jesus allowed humanity to see God again; to walk with Him, to touch Him, and to be in a relationship with Him.

When Jesus came, he proclaimed the good news that the kingdom of God had begun. This was not the final judgment and the restoration that the Jews were waiting for. Rather it was the dawn of the new era, where humanity could live in relationship with God again, and take part in ushering the kingdom of God to earth as it is in heaven.

We now live in this tension, where the kingdom of God had been inaugurated through King Jesus, but has not yet been fully realized (though it one day will be). Until that final restoration, we participate in God’s activity in the world. As disciples, we imitate the life and the teachings of Jesus as we help to heal the world around us. We patiently endure the suffering that is still in the world, but we have hope. Our hope is first that suffering will not last forever and the world will eventually be fully restored. Second, we have hope that what we do in this life matters. How we interact with those around us, how we spend our money, how we use our time... it all matters because we are a part of the present and coming kingdom of God. We work as gardeners of the new Eden, nurturing and sowing seeds that will continue to bear fruit well into eternity.

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any of these questions beforehand or during your group’s focus time)

1. Where have you seen the tension of “already” but “not yet” exist in your own life?
2. In the past week or month, how have you seen a glimpse of God (perhaps working through others) restoring the world around you?
3. Consider your plans and interactions for the coming week. What is a small practical way you will participate in the restorative work of God this week?

Week Seven: Receiving Grace

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

- *Matthew 20:1-16*

Grace has nothing to do with logic. Grace has nothing to do with economics. Grace is not earned. We cannot buy it. We can reject it, but we cannot keep God from giving it. Grace has nothing to do with fairness. The person who sins once per year and the person who has never said a kind word are both hopeless without grace and are both given grace in equal measure. A mere moment’s reflection is all we need to recognize our own need for God’s grace. Why then is it so difficult to accept God’s grace? You might be thinking, “I don’t have difficulty receiving God’s grace,” but think again. What secret things do you hide about yourself? What are you ashamed of that God has forgiven, but you have difficulty letting go of? Sin hurts. Grace does not change that. However, fear and shame are symptoms of brokenness and it is our brokenness that is mended by grace. Because of God’s unmerited favor we do not need to be ashamed. We do not need to hold on to the chains that once bound us.

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). However, God’s grace is sufficient. What is more, God’s power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). What good then comes from hiding our shame, other than an undeserved outward appearance of righteousness and an inward sense of loneliness and fear? Imagine instead

what good could come from receiving God's grace and allowing it to transform us. In grace, all weights are removed with no lingering need to squirm or hide. In grace, our weaknesses become experience through which God can work. Through grace, all of the energy we once devoted to serving ourselves or hiding our shame is repurposed. We instead have energy to draw nearer to God and to contribute to God's continuing restoration activity in the world. We have a choice then, to either reject God's grace and struggle alone, or to accept God's grace and the freedom that comes with it. This recurring choice is yours to make. Note: We sometimes need to be reminded that God's grace does apply to us. If you feel in need of hearing this reminder, find someone this week, perhaps someone sitting with you now, share yourself with them, and ask them to remind you of the truth of God's grace.

Discussion Questions

Note about this week's discussion: We will discuss forgiveness and extending grace in the next session. For today, try to focus your discussion on receiving grace.

1. Do you find it easy or difficult to receive God's grace? Why?
2. Can you name a time where you were extended grace in such a way that it influenced your understanding/acceptance of grace?
3. Different people experience grace in different ways. Some experience God's grace through reading scriptures that illustrate grace. Others, experience grace through times of confession and encouragement with a friend or mentor? Others still through natural phenomena or art. What is something that helps you experience God's grace?
4. What will you do this week to further understand, more deeply accept, or channel your thankfulness for God's grace this week? *If you need more info on grace, Philip Yancey's "What's so Amazing About Grace" can serve as a helpful resource.

Week Eight: Forgiveness In Action

One day, Lamech announced to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, listen to me! Wives of Lamech, I need to tell you something! I killed a man who struck me. He was a young man who wounded me first. Here's how I see it: if Cain is avenged seven times, then surely Lamech must be avenged seventy-seven times! Genesis 4:23-24 (The Voice) Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

- *Matthew 18:21-35 (NRSV)*

We turn now from last week's discussion of accepting God's grace, to our natural response to grace. This natural response is to extend the grace we have received to others through forgiveness. We see in the Lord's Prayer that forgiveness is a basic element of the life of a disciple. It is as necessary as is our "daily bread," though can sometimes be a bit harder to swallow. Forgiveness becomes necessary when we are wronged or hurt in some way. We sometimes fail to forgive because of pride. We sometimes withhold forgiveness because we are afraid. We fear showing weakness. We fear we will be mistreated again. We are afraid people might think we agree

with them or condone their actions. Fear makes us forget how much we love each other. When we remember that we love our neighbors, it becomes easier to forgive. Make no mistake, forgiveness does not in any way cheapen a pain that has been inflicted. Neither does forgiveness suggest there is no consequence for sin. Forgiveness does, however, put an end to the otherwise endless cycle of owing and relinquishes claims on entitlement to retribution.

Forgiveness allows the wounded to begin healing. Forgiveness allows the penitent to understand and come to reflect grace in their own lives. In Matthew 18, Peter suggests Christians should be generous, but limited in our willingness to forgive. Jesus' correction leaves little doubt that when a Christian is wronged in some way, their response must always include forgiveness. We forgive because we have been forgiven (Ephesians 4:32). We also forgive because we have experienced for ourselves the pain that comes from a lack of forgiveness between people, communities, and nations. We forgive because we believe the world is slowly but steadily being set to rights, and in a restored world all debts are settled and all wounds will eventually be healed. In forgiving, we take part in that healing.

Discussion Questions

Note about this week's discussion: We will discuss forgiveness and extending grace in the next session. For today, try to focus your discussion on receiving grace.

1. Where have you seen healing take place through the practice of forgiveness in your own life?
2. What consistent obstacles have you encountered while in the process of forgiving others around you?
3. Forgiveness is a difficult practice due to how personal it is for everyone involved. Can you think of a personal practice or rule of life that can help encourage you to engage in forgiveness? (Examples could include, having a 48 hour rule of confronting conflict, forgiveness ceremonies, taking inventory of imagined conversation when you're alone, or journaling.)
4. Who do you need to forgive this week? What will you do this week to release their debt to you and to release the hold unforgiveness has on you? Note: You do not necessarily have to revive contact with people who have hurt you in order to forgive them. If you're not sure how to forgive someone from the past, ask your community to help you think of a way.

Week Nine: The Community of Faith

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

- Acts 4:32-37

One can hardly read the New Testament without coming across the words, "one another." We read "Love one-another." "Be patient, bearing with one-another in love." "Submit to one another." The list continues. The New Testament provides countless instructions and examples including the above example (Acts 4) of the Jerusalem church's generosity that emerges from their commitment to "one another."

We often acknowledge our appreciation for community. However we sometimes have difficulty truly living into the Biblical example of community because of our culture's strong promotion of self-sufficiency as among the highest of virtues. As Christians we often struggle to live in community while still maintaining our individualism, which often results in a sort of parallel individualism, where we are self-sufficient beside each other, rather than being interdependent and willing to let go of some of our privacy, possessions, opinions, and time.

Being an individual is a wonderful thing. God made each of us unique! However, God also calls the Christian community, to submit to Jesus' Lordship, and to humbly submit to- and support one another. This includes seeking and sharing wisdom, confessing weakness and asking for help and accountability, encouraging the discouraged, and working together for the betterment of the world around us. Submission to one another also includes the sacrificial act of listening to others opinions (even when disagree) and allowing respected elders and peers to shape our own understanding and choices. In Christian community we exist and are blessed as a collective that is greater than the sum of ourselves.

Discussion Questions

1. How does being interdependent rather than self-sufficient make you feel? Why?
2. What do you struggle to submit to the Christian community? Your time? Possessions? Your opinions? Your freedom to 'do what you want?' Your weaknesses? Something else?
3. What qualities of a community make you feel welcome to share yourself, ask for help, submit, etc.?
4. What will you do to more fully open yourself up to your church community this week?

Week Ten: Conflict

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God... As you know, long ago God instructed Moses to tell His people, "Do not murder; those who murder will be judged and punished." But here is the even harder truth: anyone who is angry with a brother or sister, or speaks contemptuously toward them will have to answer to the high court. And anyone who calls his brother a fool or something similar may find himself in the fires of hell. Therefore, if you are bringing your offering to God and you remember that your brother is angry with you or holds a grudge against you, leave your gift before the altar, go to your brother, repent and forgive one another, be reconciled, and then return to the altar to offer your gift to God.

- *Matthew 5:9, 21-24 (NRSV, The Voice)*

"Dialogue... when it is an active desire to receive, to listen, to seek to go of of one's self and to admit the world of another, could not proceed... without the sacrifice of one of the partners... To engage in dialogue would be to question one's own being through the information that comes from another... Dialogue is sacrifice..."

- *Raymond Carpentier*

In recent weeks we have discussed accepting God's grace as the generous gift it is for us. We then discussed extending that grace to others through forgiveness, and have discussed what it means to live in a community of grace; a community that is greater than ourselves. As that community of grace, we turn now to being instruments of grace and peace in the world.

Being a peacemaker requires humility. Whether addressing conflict in the home, the workplace, or between larger groups of people of different faiths, races, ethnicities, or political leanings, the first step in making peace involves submitting our will to the one God who is Lord over all. Second, we must listen so that we can understand the experiences of others. This is no easy task. It is not enough to "lean on our own understanding" or imagine ourselves in someone else's situation. Rather, we must attend to the other and understand what it is like for them to be in their situation. If we are negotiating peace between two conflicting parties, we are doubly charged with understanding each party and then with helping the parties understand one-another. Without understanding, we cannot know what hurts need to be addressed and where peace needs to be forged.

Having submitted our will to God's will, and having attended to the experiences of others we then turn to God through prayer, scripture, the Christian community, etc. to inquire: "Holy Spirit, how would you have me bring greater love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, or self control to this situation." If forgiveness and grace are needed, we pray, "Lord, help us forgive in our hearts and minds, and to show the same grace we ourselves received through Jesus' death and resurrection." We pray for others, and especially pray that we may be changed or prompted, such that the Spirit is able to bear fruit in a situation of conflict through us as instruments of God's peace.

Discussion Questions

1. Where have you seen (or do you currently see) persisting conflict in your own life?
2. What obstacles have you encountered when trying to "make peace?" What would help you overcome these obstacles?
3. Where have you witnessed or been part of healing as a result of "peacemaking" in your life?
4. "Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Oh, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love others. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life."

With this prayer in mind, how will you be an instrument of peace this week?

Week Eleven: Gratitude

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

- Luke 17:11-19

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

- 1 Thes 5:18

The benefits of gratitude are well understood. Expressing thanks has a physical effect on the body with increased gratitude being associated with lower blood pressure, decreased stress, and improved sleep. Families and small communities that express appreciation and affirmation often report feeling closer and a greater sense of belonging than those that do not express gratitude. This may not be surprising as gratitude is such a basic part of the Christian life. We "give thanks" in all circumstances because whether things are going well or not, God is present and we are known and loved.

Gratitude changes how we see the world. Through gratitude, we grow in our awareness of the ways God's Spirit works to restore the world around us (often through innumerable small actions). This antidote to despair helps us develop hope, patience and even faith as we become increasingly aware of God's actions that might go unnoticed if we failed to pause and attend.

Gratitude also changes the world around us. In a time where hurt and division is so keenly felt, expressing thanks is one way we can disarm and transcend boundaries. When we identify the ways people reflect aspects of Jesus' life in their own, we affirm God's image in our neighbor. We also encourage our neighbor that God is working through them. They might reflect God in the way they serve through their

work, the ways they teach their children or care for their parents, or simply by sharing a smile that reminds people that joy is a part of God's kingdom. When we take a moment and look people in the eye with love in our own and say "Thank you for..." God rejoices in our thankfulness because through our gratitude we keep the second greatest command to love our neighbors as ourselves. (Matthew 22:39).

Discussion Questions:

1. Consider a time you were surprised by someone's gratitude for you or for something you did. Feel free to share (you do not have to share what they were thankful for, but do share how you felt at receiving their gratitude).
2. What words or actions make you feel appreciated (when people express their gratitude for you).
3. Of the people you encounter on a regular basis, who are you thankful for that might not know it?
4. There are many ways to cultivate thankfulness, but the most effective is simple practice. Examples include keeping a 'thankfulness' journal, closing the day by sharing the thing you are most thankful for from that day, writing a 'thank you' letter or card to someone. There are many ways to practice thankfulness.

How will you practice thankfulness this week?

Week Twelve: Sabbath

The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land...

You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely. The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live on it securely. Should you ask, "What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?" I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating from the old crop; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old.

- *Leviticus 25:1-5; 18-22*

Sabbath is for you. In Genesis 1 & 2 God models the ordered rhythm of productivity and rest for humanity to follow. In this rhythm, six days are spent working and on the seventh, all productivity stops and God and the world rests. Sabbath, as prescribed, is fairly regulated with prohibitions that might seem arbitrary (do not tie or untie any knots, do not walk more than 3,049.5 feet, etc.). However, these regulations are not designed to be a burden for humanity. They are designed to keep us from over-burdening ourselves and getting in our own way when it comes to trusting God. We are sometimes guided by ambition; sometimes by a fear of somehow failing if we stop trying to control everything. On sabbath, we release our control and trust God to provide.

In Mark 2, Jesus' disciples are criticized for procuring food on the Sabbath, to which Jesus famously replied, "Sabbath was made for humankind; not humankind for the sabbath." However, while sabbath can be somewhat flexible, but it is never presented as optional. Picking grain while walking down the road is very different from going in to the office or grading papers seven days a week without intentionally setting time aside to rest and enjoy God's blessings. Author and pastor Eugene Peterson and his wife referred to their sabbath as "Time to pray and time to

play." Sabbath is the time where families and communities rest, enjoy each other's company, enjoy God's blessings, and to give thanks for God's presence and activity in a given week. We sometimes refer to sabbath as a time of relinquishing, and it is; however it is also a time of receiving. We receive the blessings of rest from labor and recreation during this consecrated time. Afterall, sabbath is for us.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does your lifestyle demonstrate reliance and trust in God?
2. Are there any areas where you clearly do not demonstrate trust in God's provision?
3. How and when do you demonstrate gratitude for God's provision (through play, rest, time with family, etc.)?
4. How and when will you spend time praying and playing this week?

Week Thirteen: Gospel

And now the Lord says,
 who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
 and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,
 and my God has become my strength—
He says:
“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
 to raise up the tribes of Jacob
 and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
 that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

- *Isaiah 49:5-6*

In the earliest days of creation, God and humanity walked together in a garden and all was very good. As Christians, we believe a return to relationship with God following the example of our Lord, Jesus is the only way to truly restore the world to a new, very good, state. This relationship requires we discontinue behaviors that are not consistent with living in relationship with God (we call these behaviors sin). In entering this relationship, our sins are pardoned and we are connected to God's powerful Spirit as we begin a new, wonderful way of life as part of a vibrant, everlasting community.

We who know this know why there is reason to hope. We have learned the way that leads from sin and despair to a life of meaning and fulfillment. This is gospel (which means “good news”) and we are called to share it with the world around us. However, we cannot hope to instill lasting change if we try to do it purely on our own. We “seek and save the lost” as a community, each doing our own part. We share the gospel we know and model our imitations of Christ as individuals and in community. We welcome people who do not yet know the gospel into a community where they learn the gospel and experience what it means to live in God's kingdom community. Eventually, we eventually invite them to decide to join the community or else to decline. If our neighbor chooses to commit, we continue to walk alongside and mentor them as they adapt and grow from an enthusiastic infant Christian to a mature, seasoned member of the community of God. You see, evangelism is not a simple matter of moving people from the “unsaved” list to the

“saved” list. Sharing the gospel is the communal endeavor by which we celebrate the good news and invite others to join in the life and activity of the community of God.

Discussion Questions:

1. Who first shared the gospel with you? How did they do it?
2. How do you share the gospel? What could you do to make yourself more effective at sharing the gospel?
3. Different people have different strengths when it comes to sharing good news, modeling a Christoform life (a life modeled after Jesus’ example), coaching, etc. Share some of the strengths you see in other members of your group.
4. In what ways can you share in the communal mission of inviting people to experience the kingdom of God this week? Who would you share it with?

Week Fourteen: Hospitality

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured.

- *Hebrews 13:2-3*

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirst and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, 'Truly, I tell you, just as you did it for one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

- *Matthew 25:35-40*

Perhaps more than any other positive attribute, early non-Christians understood Christian community in terms of hospitality. The early church visited prisoners, welcomed in strangers, and cared for the sick in their midst. This neighbor-care was perhaps nowhere more evident than during the plagues, when Christians had greater survival rates because they provided basic, life-saving nursing to Christians and pagans alike. Of their efforts, Eusebius of Caesarea wrote: "All day long they attended to the dying... [to] countless numbers with no-one to care for them and distributed bread to them all." Dionysius noted of the danger that many of the Christians "...with them departed this life serenely happy." Their sacrificial love of their neighbors was a shining beacon in a dark world. Indeed, today's hospitals are largely of Christian origin.

In Genesis 18 Abraham hosted angels. In Luke 10 a good samaritan paid for a hurting stranger to be cared for at an inn. The unknowing walkers to Emmaus hosted Jesus at nightfall. Hospitality, though often inconvenient, sometimes expensive, and seldom without risk, is a quintessential and sacred part of the Christian faith. Loving and welcoming strangers is perhaps one of the most direct,

hands-on ways we imitate Jesus, who repeatedly shocked those around him by the lengths he would go to touch and attend to those in need.

Today, we imitate Jesus' hospitality in a variety of ways. We set an extra place at our tables, let those without homes use our showers and washing machines. We teach English to immigrant neighbors and job skills to the underemployed. We have been blessed with much and charged to use what we have to be a beacon in our own world, welcoming our neighbor as God first welcomed us.

Discussion Questions:

1. Leviticus 19:34 reads: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." Imagine you are a foreigner again who has just moved to Abilene. You don't have much, you don't know anyone, and you don't belong anywhere. What is the best sort of hospitality you could hope for in your new community?
2. What keeps you from offering the best sort of hospitality you are capable of? Are you afraid? Too busy? Is there some other reason?
3. What are your favorite examples of hospitality and neighbor-care (from scripture, your personal experience, etc.)?
4. What will you do to shift yourself or your family towards being more hospitable and welcoming of others this year?