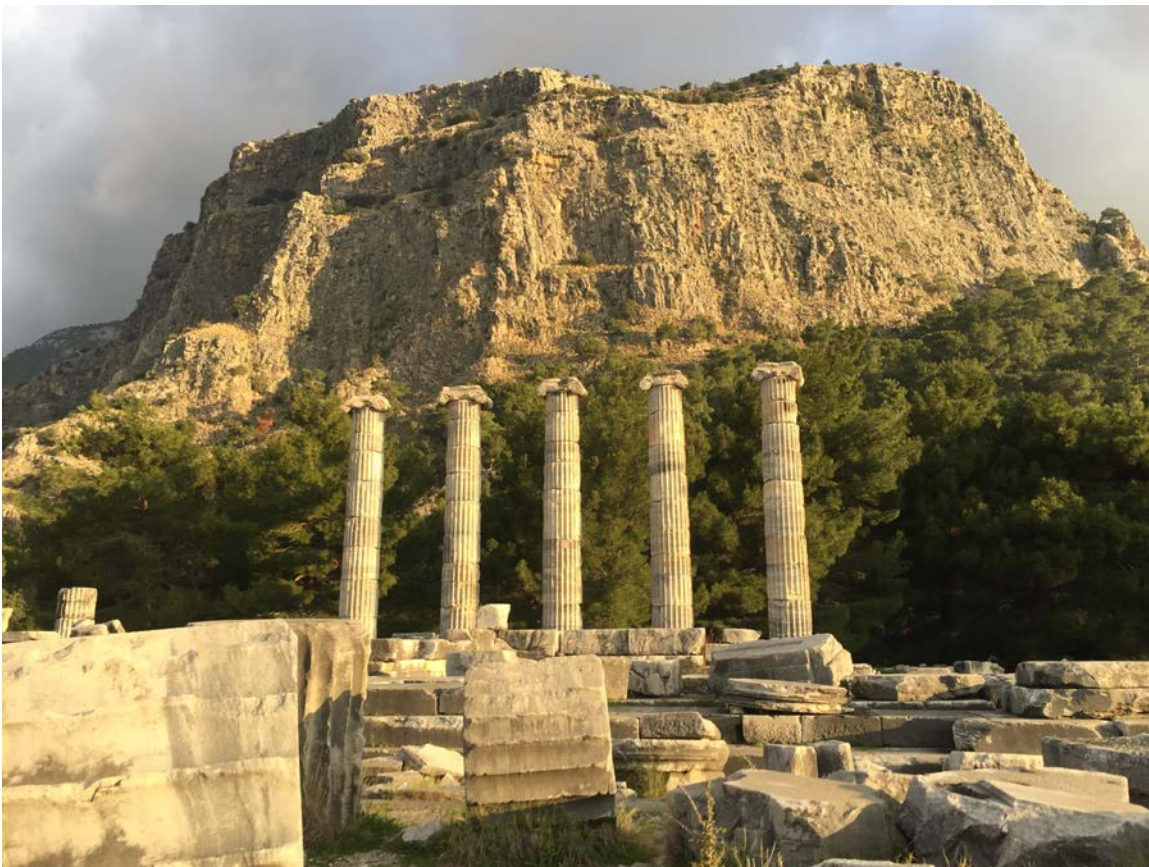


Foundations:

30 Days of God's Perspective on Relationship



Foundations: 30 days of God's perspective on Relationship

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Introduction

Thanks for taking a chance on this resource. I hope it is a blessing for you. Within this resource, you will find a series of conversations based on passages that the Relational Discipleship Network uses in order to lay a biblical foundation for why we believe that God has called us to not only make disciples, but to make disciples within the context of healthy, flourishing relationships.

Scripture after scripture points to the reality of our need for community and how we should engage within it. Jesus said that the most important commandment is to love God, and the second most important commandment is to love other people like you love yourself. It is within this framework that all other ministry must fall. If it doesn't, it can never be all that God intends for it to be.

It is with that mindset that this resource is created. My hope is that each day will cause a little pause in your spirit so that you can take time to evaluate your own relationships, help others evaluate theirs, and begin to operate amongst one another from a Godly, biblically aligned place in your own heart. Some of these topics are hard ones like forgiveness and generosity. As you begin this process, please pray for the Lord to be working in your own heart so that you can begin to take hold of God's biggest dreams for your life.

There are a few ways to use this resource. First, use it as a daily devotional and meet once a week with your accountability group to discuss what God is doing in your life as you read. Second, use each lesson as a weekly (or daily) chance to get together with someone and discuss the material. That would turn this into a 30-week study, but that is a way to use the resource if you choose. Third, take the person you are discipling and use it as a development resource for them as you meet together. Fourth, as long as it is serving you well, do whatever you would like to with this resource.

From the bottom of my heart, I long for God's people to experience the freedom and transformation that comes when we get into the kind of relationships God has called us to. May this book be a catalyst for you to experience that kind of relationship in your own life.

Devotional on Relationship

#1 – Genesis 2:18 – Connection

Genesis 2:18 English Standard Version (ESV)

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”

The first human crisis in all of the Scripture comes very early on in the story. God places man in the garden to “work it and keep it” (2:15). This is man’s most foundational task – the proper stewarding of creation. And God immediately recognizes something that is missing. Adam does not have a companion. And that is something that God must remedy.

It is important to recognize the timing of this reality. This is before sin. Genesis 2 happens before any separation from God has taken place. Adam walks and talks with God in the garden. Adam has connection with God in a way that we may never know this side of heaven.

And yet, there is something missing for Adam. Something isn’t “good” in what God made and God fully intends to remedy the situation. As God looks at the situation, He recognizes (or maybe this was His intent all along) that in order for us to be made fully in the image of God means that we need relationships around us. We are made for connection with others.

There is a notion in the modern church that we are “complete in Christ” – that all we need is Jesus. As God looked at the situation Adam was in, God Himself sees that this just isn’t accurate. And perhaps even that it is destructive.

As we see the story progress, God makes Adam an effective counterpart. We often read this passage at weddings. And that is an accurate place to apply this passage. But there is something deeper going on here than man’s relationship with woman.

This passage is about much more than marriage alone. It is about connection. Apparently, God thinks that we are not complete when all we have is Him. In the very beginning, God saw that in order for us to become everything that He created us to be, there must be connection with others who are like us.

This foundational truth must radically shape how we engage the world. We live in a world that values strength, independence and self-sufficiency. Yet the call of God from the beginning has been to be connected to other people. Perhaps the first thing that must be true of our lives in every facet is being connected to others. It was certainly true from God’s perspective that before Adam could do his job, he needed someone to be connected to even though Adam was fully connected to God.

This connection was designed to be more than simply good friends. This was about being “naked and unashamed” (2:25). This statement is not so much about how many clothes they were wearing, but much more about the absence of any other agenda. This

is a deep, abiding, and soul level connectedness to another human. And this is what we are designed for.

Questions:

- 1. How does this passage shape your understanding of relationship?**
- 2. Who do you have this level of connected with?**
- 3. Who do you know that needs this level of connectedness?**
- 4. How many people do you think you can have this level of relationship with?**

#2 – Exodus 20:1-17 – Commitment

Exodus 20:1-17 English Standard Version (ESV)

And God spoke all these words, saying,

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

“You shall not murder.

“You shall not commit adultery.

“You shall not steal.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

God marries His people at Sinai. This moment where God brings out a group of slaves from the land of Egypt, leads to a powerful change for a people who have absolutely no sense of themselves. And it is this very act that God will continue to appeal to as He addresses His people throughout the Old Testament.

If you read the text carefully you will notice that at Sinai, the pronoun used to describe the nation of Israel changes from “they” to “she.” And Israel becomes the bride of God. In the Jewish world, the moment of the giving of the 10 “words” (we say commandments, but the text says words) becomes a deeply personal moment for the nation of Israel to identify with the God who meets them at the mountain.

There are four parts to a Jewish wedding. They don't all happen in one day, but they are all parts of a man and a woman becoming one. All four parts can be found in the Exodus passage surrounding the Ten Commandments. God is inviting His people into a covenant.

In particular, there is a part of the wedding process that speaks to this moment of the giving of the ten words. And this idea may influence why they are called the ten words and not commandments at first. They are called commandments later, but this moment is no place for orders or forceful language.

When a young Jewish man wants to marry a young woman, he and his father go to meet with her and her father. He brings with him two things. First, he brings a cup of wine. Second, he brings what is called a “katubah” (pronounced ka-TU-vah). The katubah is a contract that basically outlines his general expectations of what a marriage is supposed to be. If she agrees to the terms of the deal she drinks the wine. If not, she passes.

This should at some level open up for us a conversation that Jesus has with His guys. During this part of the wedding ritual, the young man will say to his bride to be, “In my father's house are many rooms. But I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will return. No one knows the day of my return except my father...” Does this sound vaguely familiar? During what is known as the Last Supper, Jesus is inviting his guys into the same type of covenantal relationship.

The Ten Commandments are the katubah that God offers his people. And that matters to us because the foundational reality of being in covenant with God, according to His wedding contract, is that we are going to treat others in a certain kind of way. The first requirement that God makes of us is that if we are going to be called his, we are going to have to treat people correctly.

Have you ever read the Ten Commandments as a wedding contract?

I don't want you to have any other lovers.

I don't want you to even look at pictures of other lovers

Please don't agree to marry me if you are not serious

I expect a date night once a week (yes there is a little liberty here, God is always with us. But God calls the single day more sacred than the rest)

I am going to put people in your life to help you. Please respect them.

And treat everyone you meet well. Don't take people's life as if they don't matter to you. That is not what I am like.

Don't sleep with anyone else.

Don't take stuff that doesn't belong to you as if I can't provide you with everything that you need.

Don't lie to make someone else look bad. In our family, we want to pull for the good in people, not make others look bad.

And whatever you do, don't try to have someone else's life. The life I give you will be the very best life for you – I promise.

Not a bad guy to be married to. And when we treat people correctly, not a bad covenant to be a part of.

Questions:

- 1. What changes for you as you read this passage as a wedding contract?**
- 2. How does God expect His bride to treat those who are different than they are?**
- 3. How can we show our communities how God feels about them?**
- 4. Who do you need to show how God expects us to treat others? How can you show that person what He is like?**

#3 – Leviticus 19:18 – Forgiveness

Leviticus 19:18 English Standard Version (ESV)

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

It is so hard to think about letting go of some of the hurts we have endured at the hands of other people. If I forgive them, if I give up my right to be angry with someone, then they get off free. That is not fair. And fair is how the world should function. Or should it?

God has an appeal here that is actually a big one. He says that the reason we should not bear a grudge, or in other words, the reason we should be able to love others as we love ourselves is that He is the LORD.

Deuteronomy 32:35-36 (NIV)

It is mine to avenge, I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them. The LORD will judge His people and have compassion on His servants when He sees their strength is gone and no one is left, slave or free.

God's appeal to us for letting go of our grudges is that we can do that because He is faithful to deal with people in a right way. The big test of our faith is whether or not we trust that He will. And there is a big faith step in that.

I believe that God can do anything. I believe He can create the world "ex nihilo" which means from nothing. I believe that He can hold all things together. I believe He even sees my hurts and pains and can intervene to heal those pains with mighty acts of judgment just like the Scriptures teach. I am just not sure that He will. And therein lies the crux of loving my neighbor as myself.

Do I believe that God will do the best thing for everyone in every situation so that I do not have to worry about holding out for the day when someone will pay for what they have done? How I truly answer this foundational question opens up the very degree to which I can truly love others as myself.

Central to the message of Jesus is the call to forgive. In fact, He goes so far as to say that the measure of forgiveness we give others is the measure that will be given to us. So, let's talk about what forgiveness is and what it is not.

First, forgiveness is not taking the relationship back to what it was before the offense without concern for safe boundaries. In the case of abuse or abandonment or betrayal, simply running back into the relationship as it was does not make any sense at all and in many cases, this would be unsafe.

Forgiveness is not restoration of what the relationship was before the offense. While in many cases restoration might be possible, for some, it simply will not be. That does not mean that we don't work toward loving the person again. But putting them back into our lives without concern for our own safety is sometimes very dangerous.

Forgiveness is not letting them off of the hook. They are not “getting away with it” if I choose to forgive them. Forgiveness is allowing God to take care of the offense. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says that love doesn’t keep a record of wrong. What that means is that love doesn’t take up an offense. In choosing to love someone, I choose to let the offense be the Lord’s. I choose to let Him deal with it. And His promise according to Deuteronomy is that He will repay. Forgiveness is me trusting that truth to work itself out in the Lord’s timing.

Forgiveness is ultimately me giving up my right to be angry with the other person. Remember God’s appeal in Leviticus? Don’t hold a grudge and love your neighbor as yourself – I am the LORD. Perhaps the biggest part of understanding how to love my neighbor as myself is that I must love them the way the LORD loves me. He has every right to be angry with me. He has every reason to give up on me and walk away. I have blown it plenty of times. Maybe in part, loving my neighbor means showing the world what God has been like for me.

Questions:

- 1. How has forgiveness played a role in your life?**
- 2. Besides God, who has forgiven you the most in your life?**
- 3. Is there anyone you need to forgive at this point in your life?**
- 4. What is one thing that you can do this week to show your neighbor that you love them?**

Assignment: Draw on a piece of paper a tic-tac-toe grid. In the center, imagine your house. In the outside squares, write the names of the 8 neighbors you have in your neighborhood. Try to get to know 3 things about them. First, their names and the names of everyone in their house. Second, their age and occupation. Third, something that they believe is significant about them. This will go a long way in opening up understanding to love your neighbors well.

#4 – Leviticus 26:3-5; 14-17 – Obedience

Leviticus 26:3-5 English Standard Version (ESV)

If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last to the time of the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last to the time for sowing. And you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land securely.

Leviticus 26:14-17 English Standard Version (ESV)

But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will visit you with panic, with wasting disease and fever that consume the eyes and make the heart ache. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down before your enemies. Those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when none pursues you.

One of the realities of following God is failure. We all do it. And pretending that we don't isn't actually fooling anyone. We each know ourselves best, and that is sometimes difficult to deal with.

In this passage, God give us a clear invitation to not only belief, but also obedience. As we obey God we experience the blessings of obedience. Some of these blessings are obvious. Some of them are a little less obvious. But they are all blessings nonetheless.

As God works in and around us, we see His provision in everything we do. From this passage, He causes the rain to come and the crops to grow. These are things that only He can do. But there is another thing listed here that only God can do. And it is something that we should pay attention to.

God says that when we obey, we live in safety and when we don't obey, we run even when no one is chasing us. It makes me think about when the woman and then Adam eats the fruit. The immediate reaction to each one's wrong doing was to somehow find someone else to blame – even though no one else was chasing them.

It's the way sin works. Sin always promises what only God can deliver. And how we engage sin and holiness says a lot about how we will allow God to work in our own hearts. Don't get me wrong, God will work. But Hebrews 3 says we have a role to play as well.

Hebrews 3:12-13 English Standard Version (ESV)

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

We can easily allow ourselves to get caught up in chasing after things other than God's boundaries for our lives and wind up in a place far removed from where we ought to be. The Bible calls this sin. And, because sin and shame are intricately connected, the harder we work at chasing sinful things, the more we work at hiding that from other people.

The answer? First of all, obey God's commandments for your life. Second, place people around you who truly know you and will ask the hard questions of your heart before it becomes too hard to pursue the things of God.

Questions:

- 1. What is one command of God that you have a hard time following?**
- 2. Talk about a time when the deceitfulness of sin got the best of you.**
- 3. Who can you put in your life to help you “lie down in safety in the land?”**
- 4. How often should you check in with your group to make sure that each of you is doing okay?**

#5 – Isaiah 1:12-17; James 1:27 – Religiosity #1

Isaiah 1:12-17 English Standard Version (ESV)

When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

James 1:27 English Standard Version (ESV)

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

We all agree that “Religiosity” is not a healthy part of the life of any Jesus follower. But it is a subtle trap that we all struggle to stay out of. Religiosity is simply defined as a strong religious feeling or belief. Applied to life, that means going through religious motions, maybe even with conviction, but without the connected purposes attached to the action itself. In other words, it is the exaggerated embodiment of certain aspects of religious activity while having total neglect for other religious activities.

More simply, religiosity is getting the priority structure of our Christian life out of order and making minor or secondary issues the primary ones and perhaps even neglecting the primary ones. This is what is going on in Isaiah chapter one. Jesus picks up on this idea in Matthew 23.

Matthew 23:1-4 English Standard Version (ESV)

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

And again in verse 23...

Matthew 23:23 English Standard Version (ESV)

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

It seems that there is always a struggle to keep from disconnecting our religious practices from a faith that never loses sight of the original design of connectedness. I would submit that these religious leaders weren't bad people. They weren't evil or mean. I would go so far as to say that they were trying to figure out how to please God with their lives.

But God keeps drawing us back to the present reality of those who need someone to care for them. Following God will always lead us into community not away from it. We cannot avoid that truth. Trying to give our lives to God without being deeply invested in relationships is like trying to drive a car without an engine. It just doesn't work.

We must be invested in relationships, but within those relationships must be at least a few people who need someone to reach into their messy life and walk with them through it. It seems that God has a special place in His heart for widows, orphans, and the poor.

Caring for these kinds people is the kind of religiosity for which God Himself is looking. And perhaps real relationship is grounded in our capacity to see and respond to the needs of others – especially those who cannot help themselves.

Questions:

- 1. What are the religious practices in your life that can get in the way of serving others and loving them well?**
- 2. Who do you know that needs someone to walk alongside them right now? Who is the widow or the orphan that needs justice in your life right now?**
- 3. How can you help that person move forward in their life?**
- 4. How much does a person need to know about God, the Bible, and religious practice before they should begin serving others?**

#6 – Isaiah 58:1-5 – Religiosity #2

Isaiah 58:1-5 English Standard Version (ESV)

Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself. Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord?

In this passage, we see a passionate group of people. These people are passionate about their religious activity. They are fasting. They are living righteously in as much as they are keeping the rules. And they are praying – a lot.

And they are wondering where God is.

For all the religious activity they are involved in, somehow, they had missed the heart of God. Paul addresses this at length in the book of Romans. Our moral code and religious practice – no matter what these involve – will never earn the ear of God.

Isaiah makes some great statements in this passage about religiosity. The fact that they fast and pray but still fight and “hit with a wicked fist” means there is a disconnect somewhere. All religious practice is designed to give expression to our faith. It should always lead us closer to God which should always help us not only walk closer to Him, but also look more like Him in the way we walk out our lives.

If you have been in the church for a while, you have most likely heard stories about church leadership meetings that have turned into fistfights. Or perhaps you have heard about dysfunctional families that have control of churches and strong arm the whole church in order to get what they want. These kinds of circumstances point us to exactly what Isaiah is talking about in chapter 58.

In another place, Isaiah writes this:

Isaiah 29:13-14 English Standard Version (ESV)

And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder;

and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”

Jesus uses this same idea pulling from Isaiah 29:

Mark 7:5-7 English Standard Version (ESV)

And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”

It is not bad to have manmade traditions. This is ultimately what all religion is. Religion is a way man comes up with to give expression to his faith. And these expressions are important to all of us. Holidays, customs, celebrations, and much more help us wrap our minds around this Christian experience in a way that is hopefully useful.

But therein lies the rub. The downside to religion is that over time, the tradition becomes as important as the faith it was supposed to express. This is why we must always measure the validity of our religion, not against how long the practice has been happening, but against how well it helps us engage in healthy community with others. This call to proper relationships is always at the forefront of our religious expression no matter what it is or how long it has been in existence.

For many, there is a reaction to this kind of misguided religiosity. It is a rejection of religion entirely. The claim is that all religion is bad and therefore must be done away with. It is about “a relationship not a religion.” I almost agree with that. But there is a fatal flaw in this line of thinking.

Our faith will find ways to express itself. As we effectively walk out our faith in front of others, we begin to inspire and invite them to know the God we are serving and to follow Him with their whole heart, soul, and mind. As this reality plays out, more and more people begin to wonder about this amazing God that you serve. And eventually each of us will have to give an account for the kind of life that we live. Why do we do what we do?

We do what we do because it tells the world the story of who our God is. We are putting our God on display. Over time, those ways of putting God on display become traditions and religious practices. This is the reality of all of church history.

So the answer to lifeless religious practice isn’t to have no “religion.” That is impossible. The answer is to constantly be measuring the fruit of our religious practice to make sure that we have aligned with the heart of God. Does your religious practice lead to a feeling that you have earned the approval of God, but there is still a disconnect with

people? Or does it lead to you experiencing and being transformed by the heart of God? This would be fasting that the Lord chooses.

Questions:

- 1. Where in your life has your religious practice become lifeless?**
- 2. Talk about a time when you encountered God and it changed you...**
- 3. Who do you have in your life right now that you need to repair a relationship with? Are you willing to repair that relationship in order to hear more from God?**
- 4. How does the world see who our God is? Is it just by how we live? Or is it more about how we treat other?**

#7 – Isaiah 58:6-12 Part 2 – Religiosity #3

Isaiah 58:6-12 English Standard Version (ESV)

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.

As we said in the last section, all our spiritual disciplines – even fasting – ought to lead us to something significant in the way we deal with other people. This section unpacks that idea even further.

God is calling His people to reflect on what kind of fasting He approves of. The Hebrew phrase for “*I Choose*” in verse 6 is the phrase *ratzon la adonai* (respectfully, *adonai* is the term we will use for LORD). It literally means the favor of the LORD. I want to show you something that my friend Brad Gray pointed out to me. It opens up a lot about what is going on here.

There are only three places in Scripture where this phrase shows up, and that is particularly significant for Jesus followers. The earliest is here in Isaiah 58. The second is in Isaiah 61:1-2 in the messianic prophecy concerning what the messiah will do. The third is in Luke 4 when Jesus uses Isaiah 61:1-2 along with a verse stuck in the middle of it from Isaiah 58 to connect that His mission is to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor (*ratzon la adonai*). Jesus says that proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor is His mission. And He ties the only two passages in the Bible that use the phrase together. This is a powerful “two witness” connection that makes His point irrefutable (Luke 4:16-21; cf. Isaiah 61:1-2, Isaiah 58:6).

Now the question for our purposes – how do we proclaim the LORD’s favor to others? If this is Jesus’s self proclaimed mission, how do we look and act like Jesus? That question matters - a lot.

Look at the passage from Isaiah 58: undo the bonds of wickedness, loose the straps of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, share your bread, give shelter to the homeless, when you see the naked – clothe them.

Thought: any of that not relational?

If we are going to participate in fasting that displays the favor of the LORD, we are going to have to get involved in our community in some specific ways. Our religious practices will never replace the “street level” actions of how we care for those around us. How we engage in relationship is the very thing that shows that our religion is worth something. Otherwise, it is empty and lifeless.

When we let our religious disciplines become something that transforms us and how we treat and serve others, something happens that changes the world. Look at what Isaiah says. When we pour our lives out in the relational development of the community we live in, we are able to see God at work around us but more than that, in our own lives. We cry out to Him and He answers. It is as if when we are willing to get to know the people around us well enough to put Him on display to them, He shows us more and more of Himself so that we can continue to show the world more and more of Him.

This is not an appeal to a “social gospel.” It is an invitation to understand that unless our religion intentionally engages our community in a relational way that changes those around us for the better, it is worthless. God’s invitation to His people is be His hands and feet in helping those who can’t help themselves. To reiterate a passages from a couple of sections ago, this is religion that God accepts as pure.

Questions:

- 1. What is your church known for in the community? Is it known for serving the needs of the community or for something else?**
- 2. How can your church move from trying to be the best church “in” the community to trying to be the best church “for” the community?**
- 3. Do the education classes that your church offers its people help them understand doctrine and theology? Or do they help them understand how to and become a catalyst for your people serving others?**
- 4. What is the biggest need of your community that your church could meet right now?**

#8 – Micah 6:6-8 – Worship

Micah 6:6-8 English Standard Version (ESV)

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Worship is a big deal in the church right now. When I was a kid growing up in a preacher's home, I could maybe find one or two albums that were "worship" albums. The rest were more gospel or other things. Now, worship is its own section of the music selection.

And I am not so sure this is all bad. There are songs that we sing during church that give a voice to what I feel in my heart when I just haven't been able to place those feelings into words. We all agree that worship is bigger than just the song service or the church service as a whole, but there is something unique about the time of worship given to the Lord corporately on Sunday morning with my church family.

I have often wrestled with the same question that Micah is wrestling with here: How does God want me to worship Him? This is a big question, and it seems that Micah is willing to do whatever it takes to tell the Lord how Micah feels about his God. This heart in worship alone is amazing. But how Micah answers his own question is something that anyone who wants to take disciple making seriously should understand.

Micah asks the Lord, "How do you want me to worship you?" And it seems that Micah is willing to do anything – even sacrifice his first-born child! That is commitment. And quite frankly, in the ancient world, it wasn't all that uncommon. Many gods required child sacrifice as part of their worship. Micah is willing to do anything to worship the Lord.

I love his dedication to his God.

But I want to focus on his answer. This is why we are looking at this passage. Micah's answer to the question of how we worship God is profound.

"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Three ways that we can worship God that apparently, Micah believed God had already shared with His people. Act Justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Do we find it odd at this point that once again we see that all the ways that we worship God

according to Micah are 100% relational? God is not looking for a bunch of people who can recite 100 truths about His character. He is looking for a bunch of people who will act in ways consistent with His character as they engage their community.

So, what do these three pieces mean?

1. **Act Justly** – The word for “justly” or justice in this passage is the Hebrew word *Mishpat*. It means “Distributive justice.” There are two kinds of justice in Scripture: Retributive justice (the Hebrew word – *dyn*) and Distributive justice. And they are very different. Retributive justice essentially means that if you do the crime, you do the time. An eye for an eye is another way to put this. This does exist in Scripture. But according to Micah, this kind of justice is not how we worship God. Perhaps this kind of justice is necessary to keep people from running amuck. But it is not necessarily an act of worship.

The word being used here has a very different implication. *Mishpat* is fighting for those who have been taken advantage of. Distributive justice is built on the idea that everyone has a share of things that God has given them. To be clear, not everyone has the same share, but everyone has something. *Mishpat* fights to make sure that whatever God gives people is not taken away by those who would take advantage of others. This is an act of worship according to Micah. And, coincidentally, requires us to engage in real relationships with others

2. **Love Mercy** – the classic definition of mercy is not giving someone what they deserve. This works really well here. We all love a good vindication story. We love the moment in a movie where the bully “gets what is coming to them.” We even talk about eternal life this way. It is almost as if Christians are belligerently taunting the world with a “wait until your Father gets home” attitude.

This is not the attitude that brings worship to God. God does not want us to revel when people get the negative result of poor choices. God is not in the “see I told you so” business. Therefore, His followers should not be either.

3. **Walk humbly with God** – this may be the glue that holds the other two in place. What does it mean to walk humbly with our God? Simply put, it means that we carry our dogma with an open hand. Too many times Christians find themselves in the position of “truth bully.” Christians often talk about God as if they have Him figured out. This is very dangerous. Not that we shouldn’t have ideas about who He is and how He has worked in our lives. But the reality is that if we have God all figured out, then our God is probably too small. I think

that all of us would agree that at some level God is bigger than our understanding of Him. Which means that somewhere our theology is at least inadequate or perhaps even wrong. Can we be humble enough to be open to the possibility that there is more to God than what we know today? This is what it means to walk humbly with our God.

Questions:

- 1. How does this understanding of justice change your understanding of this passage?**
- 2. How can you show mercy to someone in your life right now?**
- 3. What would it look like for “the Church” to be serious about worshipping God this way?**
- 4. What new things has God been showing you about Himself recently?**

#9 – Matthew 18:15-17 – Conflict

Matthew 18:15-17 English Standard Version (ESV)

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

In relationships, conflict is inevitable. Avoiding conflict is not the way to deal with it. And pretending that it doesn't exist won't help either. People who are great at relationships are great at dealing with conflict. It is especially true when you are leading a group of people as they grow in relationships with others.

Two things will always surprise you as you enter into leading a church or other organization or even just a group of a few people through becoming more relational. First, who will get involved in conflict. Second, how they will choose to deal with it.

So, with Matthew 18 in mind, I want to throw out some basic boundaries to help us become better at conflict resolution.

- Confront them appropriately. When someone “sins” against you confront him or her. This is a big issue that is simply overlooked in the church. Matthew 18 is specifically dealing with sin, not the fact that you hurt my feelings. Hurt feelings can create conflict but they are not necessarily the result of sin. Always be careful to know the difference. Jesus’ call here is to dealing with sin. Hurt feelings can and should be addressed. But going through the whole process over hurt feelings is not what this is designed for.
- Be careful about your one or two others. This can backfire in a hurry. Hopefully, both you and the person you are confronting are walking humbly with your God enough that all you need is a conversation between the two of you. But in the case where you need to go to the next step, be sure that the two people you have chosen are spiritually mature (not just older, but with evidence of maturity) and have the best interest of both of you in mind.
- Tell it to the church. This is a hard one for us to even grapple with. First, Jesus didn't say church. The term didn't exist for Christians until several years later than when this was spoken. Second, even after the term began to be used to describe a group of Jesus followers, it wasn't until much later that it became synonymous with the organized church structure. So, before you go in front of the whole congregation on Sunday morning, it would probably be better understood as the tight knit community that you are both a part of. If you are not both a part of a tight knit community, then you would be wise to consider the level at which you are willing to confront their sin. Wrestle with that as you choose, but it is important that we keep in mind that we should love mercy, not love making someone pay for what they did wrong.

- Treat them like a gentile or a tax collector. This has been used to justify church discipline in some churches and even excommunication in others. I will argue neither for nor against these practices. Your church can land wherever you choose. And I would further espouse that if your church is doing relationship well, reaching this place in the process will be incredibly rare. However, I would offer one thought as we consider what this may look like. Jesus spent His entire ministry up to the point of saying this and even after modeling and teaching exactly how to treat gentiles and tax collectors. I wonder if He was looking right at Matthew when He made this statement.

Conflict resolution is an art, not a science. And it is hard. And as you engage in good, healthy conflict resolution, you will most likely need a long nap when you are done. But the determination to walk all the way through it will pay dividends for you and your church community and the reputation of God in your larger community that are well worth the effort.

Questions:

- 1. In your church, are there places where conflict is unresolved? How should you deal with that?**
- 2. When was the last time you were in conflict with someone else?**
- 3. How would you treat someone who refused to repent even after being brought in front of the church?**
- 4. What does the distinction between sin and hurt feelings do for you with this passage?**

#10 – Matthew 22:34-40 – Values

Matthew 22:34-40 English Standard Version (ESV)

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

This question is a really big deal in the time of Jesus. There were 613 commandments given in Torah. And it was impossible to follow all of them all the time. For example, The Law says we must not work on the Sabbath. The Law also says that if our neighbor’s donkey falls in a ditch, we must help him get it out. What if our neighbor’s donkey falls in a ditch on the Sabbath?

Because of this and many other dichotomies in the Law, the teachers began to prioritize which commands we should follow first and in what order. Ultimately, this would become known as the rabbi’s “yoke.” And the debates raged in the first century about which rabbi had the best yoke.

Jesus is giving us a piece of His yoke in this passage. And it is important that we pay attention to what He is saying. This prioritizing of the Law will open up all kinds of opportunities for us to understand the heart of God.

In modern terms, here is what I would propose Jesus is saying to the people who are listening to Him teach:

1. Protect God’s reputation at all costs. This is core to who we are as followers of Jesus. In how we talk, in how we act, in what we do and don’t do as a church, even in where we are willing to be wronged so that God’s name can go forward; these are all places where we choose to protect God’s reputation over being right or over our personal freedoms.
2. Protect God’s most prized creation – people. We must take up the cause of those who cannot fight for themselves. Whether they can’t fight because of status, influence, or fear; we are called to help the helpless. Be a father to the fatherless. Give a voice back to the voiceless. And in so doing, we stop those who would take advantage of others.
3. Deal with the issues that keep us from doing the first two. We will have to face down issues. It neither protects God’s reputation nor does it protect people to sweep issues under the carpet and move on. Dealing with issues in an honest and loving way is the key to healthy relationships.

In any number of ways, the Bible teaches this idea. To obey is better than sacrifice, and by obedience, we are talking about how we treat others. Not only is it important to do

all three of these things well, it is also important to do them in this order. Getting them out of line is dangerous and hurtful.

Dealing with people without protecting God's reputation leads to either over bearing rules or blind acceptance. Neither of these glorify God. Dealing with issues without concern for protecting people first can be an attempt to protect God's reputation, but in a callous way. That leads to hurt people and ultimately backfires in trying to protect the reputation of God.

We must have each of these three priorities in the right order. This, then, will open the door to how we should put relationships in perspective. It was Jesus' yoke, and it should be ours as well.

Questions:

- 1. How would you arrange these three values and why?**
- 2. Would others say you have arranged these values in the order listed here?**
- 3. How can we do a good job of treating people well while still protecting the reputation of God?**
- 4. Has there been any place in your life that you have gotten this out of order? What was the result?**

#11 – John 13:34-35 – Focus

John 13:34-35 English Standard Version (ESV)

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

We have all heard this verse before. We have read it, we have used it to teach, we are familiar with it for certain.

Allistar Begg says this, “Those of us who know the biblical story well can suffer from knowing it.”

David Fohrman calls this the lullaby affect. We have become so familiar with a passage that we stop asking questions of the passage and just assume that what we have always seen in the passage is all that there is to see.

This is one of those verses. We have read and re-read this verse so many times that we have developed a certain familiarity with it – to the detriment of the power of the statement itself. There is a simplistic depth to this verse that confounds me every time I read it. It haunts me and invites me to a deeper and yet simpler focus about where to spend my life’s energy. Is it really that simple? The whole world will know that we are Jesus’ disciples because of how we love each other? Is it our ability to exist in relationships well that is the catalyst for reaching the whole world for Christ?

Historically, we know that a majority percentage of the Roman world was Christian by the year 250 A.D. Depending on who you read, somewhere between 50%-80% of the Roman world was Christian by this time. Sounds like a great revival! But what makes it even more intriguing to me is what the early church was working with and what they were not working with.

In the modern church era, church growth books will tell you that solid children’s ministry, solid worship, and solid preaching will grow a solid church. I would never undo the power that these things provide. In fact, I would promote them as powerful tools to help advance the Kingdom. However, I would say that this was not what the early church was working with at any level.

The great orators of the faith were not really in existence yet. There were some great writers at the time, but paper being valuable and the vast majority of the world not knowing how to read made written communication minimally effective. Christianity was still illegal. There had been no councils. There was no systematic theology to draw from. Many of the churches still did not have copies of the letters that we would eventually call the New Testament. The Scriptures weren’t even canonized until later in the 300’s.

And yet, with every obstacle working against them, they found a way to influence the Roman Empire so greatly that the status of Christianity was changed so that it was legal. Then, it became the official religion of the Roman Empire itself. What gave Christianity its power?

The answer is very simple – much like this verse. The way they loved one another was vastly different than anything the people had ever experienced previously. These first followers of Jesus upended the Roman caste system and gave value to the slaves, allowed the lowly to be raised up, and gave purpose and meaning to the “dregs” of society.

They changed the world by the way they loved one another. Jesus said it, they did it, and it actually worked.

Equally important is what Jesus didn't say. He did not say that the world would know we are His disciples because of our great apologetic arguments. Nor will the world know because of our building, our children's ministry, our worship, or our preaching. None of these will convince the world that we belong to Jesus. The only thing that carries that promise is how we love one another. Maybe there is more to it than that, but let's start there and see what happens.

Questions:

- 1. On a scale from 1-10, how caught up in managing the church's organization have you become? What is your expectation of the church's programming to give people what they need?**
- 2. In your specific context, where has programming taken the place of loving people well? What can you do about that right now?**
- 3. What are the distractions to loving people well? Where does your time get placed that is a good thing, but maybe not the best thing?**
- 4. What does it look like for the church to show the community where you live that we are Jesus' disciples?**

#12 – John 15:12-13 – Sacrifice

John 15:12-13 English Standard Version (ESV)

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

How did Jesus love His disciples? Answering that question well is key to understanding how we should engage the world. For this section, I want to do an exercise that if you have been to the Discipleshift I, you are familiar with, but it is a good review for us.

First, write down on a piece of paper what you see in the character of Jesus. What does He act like? Next to each of these character traits, write the story from the Gospels where you see that portrayed. Always anchor it to a story. This is helpful in defining what exactly we mean when we use terms to define character.

Second, write down on the same piece of paper things that you see Jesus doing with his guys. Specifically, how do you see Jesus investing in his disciples? Again, anchor it to a story. We want to pay attention to what we see Jesus doing and how often. What is Jesus not adding into His life in order to be able to do that? These are all important questions.

Third, wrestle with this thought as a group (you should be working through this book with a group of people): What is in my life that keeps me from being able to act like Jesus with the character that Jesus displayed with His disciples? Am I willing to let go of some or all of that in order to be more like Jesus in how I make disciples? Be ready to share openly and transparently about where you are in terms of wanting to lay down your own life in order to truly love others. Wherever we find ourselves in the process, it is not evil to be there. It is just bad for us to choose to stay there over moving toward God's intent for our lives.

Questions:

- 1. What did you learn from this exercise?**
- 2. What would you want to be different about your life that would help you be more of a disciple maker?**
- 3. How can your group help you be more aligned with what you believe God is calling you to look and act like?**
- 4. Close by reading Luke 14. It is a powerful passage to unpack and apply.**

#13 – John 17:20-23 – Unity

John 17:20-23 English Standard Version (ESV)

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

This is a powerful moment in the life of Jesus. We do not know exactly where this prayer takes place. It seems to happen somewhere in the transition between the upper room and the garden. It could very well have happened in the garden. We are not directly told. But what we know is that while Jesus was facing what was without question the most difficult moment of His life, He was deeply focused on something more than Himself.

In chapter 17, Jesus spends the first four verses praying about Himself. That is a little deceiving because His prayer was obviously not versed out, but the proportion is still the same. Of the entire prayer, the first few sentences are for Himself. The rest of the prayer is for His disciples, then ultimately for all those who would believe because of the faithfulness of the disciples. In a very real sense, that is you and me. Which makes this prayer very important for us to understand. Jesus prayed for you. And this is His prayer.

His desire is that we become completely unified with one another. I wonder if we were to ask the average person on the average street in the average town in America how they viewed the church, would they describe the church as unified? Or would they use other terms?

We have got to find a way for our brothers and sisters to get along. It is the very way that Jesus said the world would know that God sent Him. Unfortunately, we get lost in doctrine and preferences and miss that the larger agenda of Christ – to reach the world – is being lost to our preferences and doctrines. Jesus always wanted us to work together, not against each other, to reach the world. And there is at least one major reason why.

There is no way that any of us can get along like Jesus is asking us to unless we have the Holy Spirit in our midst. Left to ourselves, we divide and fight over issues that don't matter. Left to ourselves, we lose focus and start giving energy to all the wrong things. Left to ourselves, we nit pick and demean others in destructive ways. This is not how Jesus wants things done.

When the Holy Spirit is in our midst, we can come together. When the Holy Spirit is in charge, we can see the other side without having to push our own ideas. When the

Holy Spirit is in charge, we stay in line with where God is going no matter where that is or where we have already been.

And there is something powerful about the presence of the Holy Spirit in a place. People are drawn to it without really understanding why. When we will let God be in charge and we fight to stay submitted to Him, not to be right over one another, there is a supernatural power that takes over in the church. It is scary and amazing all at the same time.

Jesus' prayer for each of us is that regardless of our opinions, we are able to dwell together in complete unity. Because that is how the world is going to know whom Jesus is. It is our part in opening up more of the power of God on earth and in each other's hearts.

Questions:

- 1. When does unity become a compromise and go too far?**
- 2. What is the difference between unity and uniformity? Is God expecting us to all be the same? Or simply to find ways to work together?**
- 3. How does leadership help us in maintaining unity?**
- 4. Is there any relationships that you need to repair because of pushing too hard on your own agenda?**

#14 – Acts 4:32-35 – Generosity

Acts 4:32-35 English Standard Version (ESV)

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving 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 were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

What a thing to be said of the church community!

I have heard many church leaders talk about wanting to see the church experience the things it experienced in the book of Acts. It is interesting to think about what that would look like if the church today actually took that challenge seriously.

There is a powerful statement in this passage that has always caused me to pause and reflect on something that I would like for us to think about in this section. It says, “And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was with them all.”

I wonder what made their testimony so powerful...

I grew up in church. And I experienced lots of “testimony nights” at church. Testimonies always move people. But I wonder what gave the testimony of the apostles such power. Was it the unique presence of the Holy Spirit there to give weight to the words? Was it the miracles that they were able to perform? Was it the persecution they were enduring? Were they just that great of speakers?

Maybe those all play a role. Although I would suggest that there is something much more tangible that we see in Scripture connected to the work of God changing lives whether through speaking, miracles, or anything else.

It seems to me that as I read the Bible, when God works there is often people acting in generous ways there. What if the thing that gave the testimony of the early church weight was that they were so generous with one another? I wonder if there isn't a connection there.

For the early church, meals would not be eaten until every person at the table had their needs met. This was foundational to the early church. And it rocked the Roman world as this kind of passionate generosity fueled people meeting the needs of people. The overwhelming response of the pagan world was that they were willing to lay their lives on the line for the chance to be loved like that.

We all believe in the power of generosity. We all know the call of Jesus and the rest of Scripture to be a generous people. But what we might not consider is the reality that

connected to a group of people who are willing to generously meet one another's needs is a power of God unleashed amongst us that is literally of biblical proportions.

We are often reluctant to talk about generosity, yet it is the foundation of a community that God works in. It is a great value for each of us to share the ways in which we are generous – with our money. Talking about time and talents is simply an avoidance of the issue. In Acts 4, these people are giving their money on top of everything else.

A big part of disciple making is helping those we disciple to understand what generosity looks like and how we can apply this principle in today's world. This will be a big piece of the discussion in the group time.

Questions:

- 1. How generous do you believe you are?**
- 2. Talk in the group about ways that you are generous. This is important. While we are often reluctant to talk about this, because we don't talk about specific ways we are generous, new believers never get the chance to learn how to be generous. Share in the group how much you give in tithe and to other things.**
- 3. How can each of you become more generous?**
- 4. What is holding you back from experiencing more of God in your life?**

#15 – Romans 13:8-10 – Everything

Romans 13:8-10 English Standard Version (ESV)

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Paul makes an amazing claim here. All these laws that are in Torah are summed up in one single command. That must be an important command to know – Love your neighbor as yourself. And it makes sense. Adultery, murder, stealing, coveting – these are all commands that are obviously connected to how we treat others. So, of course, Love your neighbor as yourself is going to encompass these commands.

But then Paul takes it a step further: “...and any other commandment...” Really? ANY other commandment? Does Paul actually expect me to believe that all the other commands are fulfilled on loving my neighbor as myself as well?

In Galatians, he puts it even more blunt:

Galatians 5:14 English Standard Version (ESV)

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

How does this work? How can commands like, “You shall have no other gods before me,” and “Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy,” and “Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain,” be summed up in “Love your neighbor as yourself?”

In order to understand that, we must understand why it is that God chose to give us the commands that He did in the first place. Have you ever stopped to wonder why we have the rules we do?

Think about it. God could have chosen to give us any commands that he wanted. He is God after all. Whatever He chose would have been our privilege and responsibility to uphold. He could have said, “You shall eliminate the weak.” He could have also said, “Take care of yourself. God helps those who help themselves.”

But He didn't. Why choose the commands that He chose?

Within the “rules” (and we often have a tendency to hate rules) we find pieces of God revealed to us. And it is that reality that makes following the rules so important.

Why not commit adultery? Because God is love.

Why not steal? Because God is generous.

Why not murder? Because God is life.

Why not covet? Because God gives us everything that we need to succeed already.

Do you see how this works? In living out the commands of the Law, we are learning whom God is and what He is like. Not only us, but those around us who are watching us live out these commands learn about our God as well.

When we are kind and forgive, we are revealing a piece of God's nature to ourselves. But we are also revealing a piece of God's nature to those that we exercise forgiveness towards. The same holds true for any of the other commands that are contained in the Bible.

Even commands like honoring the Sabbath can help us love our neighbor well. It works in a couple of ways. First, we rest. This gives us mental energy to treat others well. Second, we invite others into that same rest. While the rest of the world clamors 7 days a week to try to stay ahead, we can rest in the grace of a God that does the work for us. And that promotes peace. So, in honoring God, we actually love our neighbor.

The most important piece of this whole idea, and one of the greater themes of the book of Romans itself, is that we do not follow the rules to gain approval from God. God approves of you already. He cannot possibly love you more than He already does. This is the God that invites us to show the world what He is like by loving our neighbors well.

Questions:

- 1. What does it do for you to know that the rules God gives us are one way that God reveals what He is like to us?**
- 2. How have you viewed following the rules of God? Have you seen them as revealing God's nature or earning God's approval? How does that affect your ability to stay within God's boundaries?**
- 3. How could the church be more effective in your community at living out God's boundaries in front of others?**
- 4. Is there anyone in your life that you should perhaps make amends with because you lived out God's rules from an improper place? Asking for forgiveness can be as powerful of a way to show people what God is like as giving forgiveness to others.**

#16 – Galatians 5:22-23 – Evidence

Galatians 5:22-23 English Standard Version (ESV)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Let's get this out on the front end: any of these attributes not relational? The answer is: all of these attributes are relational – even self-control.

So, let's pull this apart and see what is going on here. First, there are nine attributes mentioned in this verse. Which isn't such an oddity except that the word "fruit" here is singular. One would assume that it should be the fruits of the Spirit. And if the word fruit is connected to the attributes, that would be accurate. But it isn't.

The reason the word is singular is that the word fruit is connected to Spirit. And this changes a lot about how we understand this passage.

Think about fruit on a tree. An apple sits out on the end of the branch ready to be picked and enjoyed. If we were to walk through an apple orchard and see that there were several trees with big, juicy fruit on them and then there were a couple which had no fruit, what would we assume? Would we assume that the fruit of the tree is bad? Or would we assume that there is a problem with other parts of the tree?

This question matters because when we see a tree without fruit, especially when other trees around it have fruit, we do not assume it is a fruit problem. We assume there is a problem within the core functions of the tree. Maybe it needs water. Maybe it has a disease. Maybe the trunk is damaged in some way.

The overarching truth here is that fruit is simply an extension of a healthy trunk. Whatever is out on the branches is the result of the work that is done in the trunk. A healthy trunk leads to lots of fruit.

So if we see a tree that is struggling to produce fruit, we would never call it a fruit problem. We would begin by watering the tree. The roots and the trunk would need to be examined. Is it getting enough sunlight? Does it need to be pruned? These are all important questions in a tree being able to produce good fruit. But good fruit being produced on a tree is not a fruit problem; it is the result of everything else being in place.

Which means that when a person is not producing fruit, it is not a fruit problem either. Fruit is simply the result of health. It just happens. You don't have to tell a healthy apple tree to make apples. It just happens. It is what the tree is made for.

Now, back to the passage. For those of us who have the Spirit living in our hearts, we should take note of how this process works. We do not get the fruit of the Spirit by pursuing fruit. We get the fruit of the Spirit by pursuing Christ. The fruit is simply the

result of the right things going on in our hearts. When the trunk is healthy, the fruit gets produced.

Many Christians try to work on becoming more loving or more joyful. This is a noble pursuit but unless it is rooted in a pursuit of Christ, it is going to be rooted squarely in my own will and my ability to exercise my will over a situation. In Colossians 2:20-23, Paul says this has the appearance of wisdom, but it lacks any value in restraining sensual indulgence. In other words, it looks like good fruit, but when you take a bite out of it, it is rotten.

The fruit of the Spirit is the evidence that the Spirit is at work in my heart. As I allow Him to work in my heart more and more, I produce fruit that looks like these 9 attributes in my life. I don't have to pursue the fruit. It becomes true of me as I pursue Christ in a healthy way. I don't have to force that any more than an apple tree has to force itself to produce apples.

Now, back to our original premise – any of the fruit of the Spirit not relational? The answer is: they are all relational. There is no escaping the hard truth that pursuing Christ in a healthy way will always lead me to becoming better in relationship. So, if I am struggling in a relationship, the place to begin would not be to try to be more loving. The place to begin is in how I pursue Christ. The fruit of that will take care of everything else.

Questions:

- 1. What does it mean to you that the very evidence of the Holy Spirit working in your heart is that you are able to function better in relationships?**
- 2. How does this affect how we deal with conflict? How does this affect how we disciple others?**
- 3. Relationships have roadblocks. Based on this reading, how should we begin to deal with these roadblocks in a healthy way?**
- 4. What would be different in your community if the churches started to become more like Christ in how they treated others?**

#17 – Galatians 6:1-3 – Restoration

Galatians 6:1-3 English Standard Version (ESV)

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

Be in relationship long enough and you will have at least one opportunity to deal with the very issue Paul is describing here in Galatians 6. This brings up an important part of relational discipleship that is a difference maker for many followers of Jesus – maybe even you.

What is the goal of confrontation?

We have to confront. That is part of every relationship. Pretending that a transgression didn't happen is not authentic and can never produce healthy fruit in my life or in the life of the person that made the mistake to begin with. But how we confront is perhaps even more important than the issues we choose to confront.

Paul words this very carefully. The goal of confrontation is not making sure someone pays for what they did wrong. The goal of confrontation is restoration. If we don't get that clear, we stand to do some real emotional damage to people in the name of Jesus, and miss His heart completely.

It is hard to think about confrontation without punishment. We live in a world of action and reaction – cause and effect. If you make a poor choice, you must pay the consequences of your poor choice. We are told that people won't learn any lessons if they don't pay for it.

We are even taught this in childhood. Bad choice equals punishment. Good choice equals reward. Success breeds reward as well. The winners are great and the losers are worse off with each loss. It is hard to think about parenting without this kind of a “teaching tool” in our parenting tool belt.

Don't get me wrong, there are certainly times where because of a choice that someone makes, they are removed from influence or lose privileges or lose the ability to use things that they have previously used (i.e. the kid breaks curfew and loses the privilege of driving). But the why of what we do is just as important and what we do. And that is where this conversation happens.

The big issue with confrontation is restoration not retribution. So, why then do we confront? Because we are a kingdom of priests! And as priests, we have a very special role in the world.

Exodus 19:5-6 English Standard Version (ESV)

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.

This is God’s invitation to the nation of Israel. They are to be His priests. This is not a new idea for the Israelites – at least in the sense that they understand the role of priest in culture. The new idea is that this God would even care to invite slaves into this kind of relationship.

The Priest serves four basic functions in the ancient world:

1. Distribute resources to the needy in the name of their god.
2. Become the mediator for the people to the god.
3. Become the mediator for the god to the people.
4. Take on the physical representation of what the god is like.

These are really important to us as followers of Jesus because Peter invites us into this same relationship with God.

I Peter 2:1-5 English Standard Version (ESV)

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

I Peter 2:9 English Standard Version (ESV)

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

We are called to live a certain kind of way because of whom we represent as our God. When we call ourselves “Christians,” we no longer get to choose to do whatever we want to do. We must take on the role and responsibility of priest. As we live in the world, we tell the world a particular story about whom our God is and what He is like.

So, it is critical that we live our lives consistent with how God would ask us to in order to give the world an accurate picture of what our God is like.

When we choose to live inconsistent with whom He is we give the world religious baggage. This is not helpful for them or the story of who God is in the world. God's people must intervene in this type of situation. Not to make them pay for their mistakes, but help them be able to tell an accurate story of who their God is.

Confrontation is always about helping people get back to the story that God wants to tell in the world. And right behavior isn't about reward or punishment. It is about giving the world an accurate picture of who God is and what He is like.

I believe with all my heart that if the world could see God for whom He really is, they would love Him. What is not to love? Maybe even confrontation is an opportunity to put God on display to others. And that makes confrontation not only critically important, but also sacred. May you confront others well!

Questions:

- 1. How well do you do at confronting others?**
- 2. What keeps you from confronting others more effectively?**
- 3. Who do you need to have a conversation with that you are nervous to have because the topic is difficult?**
- 4. What is the cost of not confronting others? What is the cost of confronting others? Which cost are you willing to pay?**

#18 – I Thessalonians 2:17-20 – Legacy

I Thessalonians 2:17-20 English Standard Version (ESV)

But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.

When you stand before the Lord, what will you boast in? I get that we probably won't be boasting, but bowing. But when your life is over, what will you look back on as a sign that you lived your life with purpose – or didn't?

I have a philosophy about the people in my life: "If we don't get there together, it doesn't matter where we go."

Who we journey through life with is far more important than where life winds up taking us. If we were honest, I think that many of us would say we spend far too much time worrying about where we are headed. And it is only the Lord who controls our path.

Proverbs 16:9 English Standard Version (ESV)

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.

God is the one who will always plan where we wind up. We give so much energy to trying to decide about the future and where we are headed. And yet, there are too many variables to count in how those plans play out and all that energy can all be taken away in an instant. The economy falls apart, a family member gets sick, I get a disease myself, or any other of myriads of surprises happen. None of them are surprising to God, but all of them are major interruptions to our plans.

There are 3 words for time in Greek. This is important for us as we think about what we should focus our attention towards. The first word is *Chronos*. This is linear time. We get our word "chronology" from this Greek word. We live our lives in *chronos* time. We make appointments, show up for work and know that we are late for church all because of *chronos* time. It is important, but it is limited.

The second word is *eon*. This is a span of time. Typically, but not always, it is a large span of time. Technically it could be a day or it could be a thousand years, but the word represents any span of time.

The third word for time in Greek is the word *Kairos*. This is a point in time that is pregnant with importance. Paul calls the time we are living in the "*Ha Nun Kairos*" – *The Present Evil Age*. This period of history is pregnant with importance.

So, why does that matter in a conversation about Legacy? Because we build our lives in chronos time with appointments and goals and plans. But God doesn't move in chronos time. He moves in Kairos time. God intervenes in the linear progression of life. He interrupts our schedules to invite us to something more.

Which would lead us to a side thought – if you are struggling to see God at work in your life, begin by looking at the interruptions. But I digress.

The interruptions to our lives are exactly where we see God at work most. And “interruption” is exactly how we see it when people step into our lives unplanned? They need this or want that or are upset about something else. And somehow they expect to take something from us to make their world function better even when we have no time, no energy, and no resources to make it happen. And to be honest, although we love people and want them to succeed, we just don't have the energy or ability to respond well.

And they take time away from the plan after all.

I have been so guilty of this. In walking toward my office to help someone with their issues I have found myself walking right past multiple people who also needed help. But it wasn't in my plan, and so I don't see the present reality where God is inviting me to be His hands and feet to run to an opportunity that I scheduled – and because I scheduled it, that person would have been there if I was a few minutes late.

Maybe the legacy of what we do as Christians is the people that we love and live with along the way. Maybe our ministries and buildings and sermons and all that comes with preparing and maintaining them is important, but will not be what we boast about when we stand before God.

According to Paul, his reality was that there was nothing else to even boast about except the people that he had loved and served along the way. May we have eyes to see and a heart that is keenly aware of God's interruptions in our lives.

Questions:

- 1. What do you spend most of your time doing?**
- 2. What makes it so hard to pay attention to the people around us?
What gets in the way?**
- 3. What can you do to be more aware of the kairos moments all around you?**
- 4. How do we balance planning and being present in the moment?**

#19 – 2 Timothy 4:1-2 – Patience

2 Timothy 4:1-2 English Standard Version (ESV)

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

To be honest, I do not like this one. But I want to wrestle with two ideas here. First, what role does teaching play in disciple making? Second, with what attitude do I approach teaching in the Christian community?

In the world of the disciple making conversation, we can tend to downplay the role of teaching in the Kingdom. And it makes sense. For years, the church has only taught, and this has led to some fairly disconnected truths. People have been familiar with the scripture, but have no connection to their day-to-day living. This has led to another group of people who don't even know the Scripture and are uninterested in sitting and listening to a boring preacher or teacher talk about irrelevant text from thousands of years ago.

Why is it irrelevant? For many reasons. One is they have not seen the scriptures lived out by those who have said it was so important. Another is that we have focused on information transfer not life application in our teaching styles. There are probably lots of other reasons why it could feel irrelevant to the rest of the world, but here is one thing I know for sure – I have never seen anyone who is in the game of serving, loving, building one another up, and making disciples that wasn't very interested in what the Bible has to say. There is something about actually walking out what we teach that makes us more hungry for God's Word.

According to this passage, there is no doubt that the charge to preach the Word with power and passion is paramount. And to always be ready to preach the Word, not just give good ideas or platitudes – preach the Word! This is central to leading in ministry. Therefore, it must be central to our approach to talking with other people about their lives as we disciple them toward spiritual maturity.

There are a couple of assumptions that are made in this passage that I feel like we have to address. First, in the world that Paul and Timothy are from, no one would ever study the scripture alone – ever. Bible study was always done in the context of a community. How could one ever understand what God was really saying unless he was in a community of believers so that he could hear all God's voice on the subject.

Second, and this matters a lot as well, we must make sure that we understand the passage correctly. This demands a life pursuit of studying the Word. It demands a deep passion for understanding the world that the Bible was written into and who wrote it and to whom and why. It is not enough for us to stop studying when we know “what I

was always taught” and move forward. That is a great place to begin, but this verse makes the preaching of the Word so much more than opinions and traditions. It is sacred. And our sacred task is to rightly divide the Word as it was intended to be divided, not as church tradition says it must be understood.

Our commitment as disciple makers is first and foremost to God and knowing Him and His Word given to us to guide, lead and help our decisions.

Paul then gives Timothy a list of things that the sacred privilege of teaching should accomplish: reprove, rebuke, and exhort. These seem like stiff words to use.

- Reprove – reprimand or censure
- Rebuke – express sharp disapproval of or dissatisfaction with (someone) because of their behavior or actions
- Exhort – strongly encourage or urge someone to do something

It seems as if Paul is charging Timothy to not mince any words with how he is communicating the Word of God. These word choices are direct and even perhaps abrupt. However, we cannot miss how Paul finishes this thought – and this is the part that I do not like.

“...with complete patience and teaching...”

It is as if Paul wants to make sure to tell Timothy that how we reprove, rebuke, and exhort is as important as the fact that we do it. One translation even says, “*great patience and careful instruction.*” The idea here is that the right thing done the wrong way becomes the wrong thing in a hurry.

And what makes it the right thing done the right way? The attitude with which we do it. Or in other words, how we treat others in the process of correction is just as important if not more important than the correction itself.

The church over the years has not been known for handling the teaching of the Word in a solid, relational way. Maybe the way to begin turning the ship back towards being effective at reaching and maturing people in their walks with Christ is by changing how we use the Word and the heart with which we address others concerning what the Word says.

Questions:

- 1. When do you tend to give up on others?**
- 2. How does it feel when you are trying hard at something but someone unfairly labels your motives and accuses you harshly? Do you have a story? How did it work out?**
- 3. What would be different in rather than constantly finding the flaws in people and ideas, we decided to find and celebrate the good?**
- 4. Why do you think Paul is so adamant about this specific issue?**

#20 – James 3:17-18 – Wisdom

James 3:17-18 English Standard Version (ESV)

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

To keep making the same point, are there any of the attributes of wisdom from above that are not relational?

You could make a case for pure, but even at that, our purity shows up in how we relate to the people around us, so while there is an internal, personal purity that comes with wisdom, that personal purity shows up in how we treat others, so even that becomes relational.

It seems as if every attribute that God invites us to develop in our lives is only understood in the context of relationships with other people. And that ought to heavily influence how we understand these qualities.

The Proverbs talk a lot about wisdom:

Proverbs 8:10-13 (New International Version)

Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her. "I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion. To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.

Wisdom = Knowledge + Prudence + Discretion

The Book of Proverbs gives us an equation to measure what wisdom is. There are three pieces that must be joined in cohesion in order for wisdom to function properly. And we must always ask the question – how do we know wisdom is functioning properly? We know that because how James describes wisdom is being played out through the relationships in which we are engaging.

- Knowledge – the accumulation of information.
- Prudence – understanding how to use the information I have accumulated well.
- Discretion – understanding when and where to share my thoughts and ideas and when and where to just be silent, even if I know the right answer.

Engaging relationships with wisdom that comes from above will always produce a harvest of righteousness. I know that for some people the natural rebuttal to this idea is that the other person must still respond appropriately or there is no peace or gentleness or mercy or good fruit.

I would invite us to consider the possibility that this is not true. Regardless of how anyone else responds in a situation, wisdom will respond appropriately. It is when we decide to not let wisdom govern our actions that we get into trouble.

For wise disciple makers in relationships, there is no point at which they decide to not be wise. There will never be an acceptable time to not use prudence or discretion. And these are the big pieces that separate wisdom from knowledge. Wisdom understands that it is even better to be wronged or wrongly accused than to lose discretion or prudence.

Wisdom changes people on both sides of the relationship. And this is how wisdom from above produces peace in people – both those who allow wisdom to rule their hearts and those who are the recipients of it. Wisdom invites God into the conversation in a way that He would otherwise be absent. It allows the focus to be taken off of people and onto the Lord.

Which is a good measuring rod during conflict or confrontation. Am I focusing on me or on the Lord? Am I inviting others to focus on themselves or the Lord?

Questions:

- 1. How does wisdom combine knowledge, prudence, and discretion?**
- 2. Where do you struggle to show wisdom in your relationships?**
- 3. How does wisdom illicit peace and righteousness in others?**
- 4. What can you do today to be a better peacemaker?**

#21 – I John 3:16-18 – Awareness

I John 3:16-18 English Standard Version (ESV)

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

Is God holding out on you? Or has He given you everything that you need to succeed? This question will show up in your life in many areas. It is foundational because it is at the heart of our ability to care for others.

Explore your thoughts on generosity very far and if you are honest, you will find that you are able to be generous at the level to which you trust God. It is that simple. Meeting the needs of others is not a matter of having enough extra. It is a matter of believing the story we are telling about a God who provides every thing we need and more. If I truly believe that, I have the freedom to give generously. If I don't believe that, I give the minimum because of concern that I might not have enough.

I have a family assignment for you. I will tell you a story about how this played out in my own family. My wife and I decided that we wanted to help our kids understand what it means to be generous. So we gave them each \$5. We have four kids and at the time they were 16, 14, 12, and 7.

Here were the guidelines:

- It is my money. It is not their money.
- They must find a way to spend the money on someone else.
- They cannot spend the money in any way to receive benefit from it.
- They must come back and report to me how they had spent the money.

It was interesting how each one responded. My oldest began with how little \$5 was and how easy it would be to just use for herself. I gave it to her after all. And what difference was \$5 really going to make anyway?

I told her I didn't really know how it was going to play out but that the rules were the rules and the money was mine not hers and that if she couldn't follow the rules, she could just give the money back to me – that was fine. She took the money and mumbled about how this was a dumb idea.

My 7 year old immediately knew what she was going to do with the money. She went to work making a card for her teacher and placed the \$5 in the card with the request that she take it and buy herself a coffee as a way to say thanks for all that she had done for being a great teacher. Her teacher wept when she got the card.

My 12 year old took his money and gave it to a friend whose family was struggling. He told his friend that he knew it wasn't much but that every little bit helps and that my son would do what he could to help his friend.

My 14 year old found someone else to help with a lunch bill. His was simple, direct, and unpretentious. It was also very kind.

A couple of months later, my 16 year old came back to me. She told me that she had spent her generosity money. I asked her to explain and she said that she had gone into the library at school to pay a bill and asked out of the blue who had the highest bill in the library system. When she got the name, she asked if they would apply this \$5 to the bill.

The librarian asked why she would do this. When she explained what we were doing as a family, the librarian said that this was one of the coolest things she had ever heard of. And the person who received the benefit never even knew that it had happened. Yet God was glorified that day.

This project did a couple of unexpected things for my children that I would love to see you have happen to your kids as well. First, it gave them a different lens to see the world through. They were no longer looking at the world with a perspective of how to get what they could from it. They were now looking at the world to find the needs of those around them and how they could help.

But second, it also empowered them to believe that they could actually do something about it. And they did. We are called in community to meet the needs of those around us. Not just pray and say kind things, but give of our worldly possessions to help others. This is how we are supposed to engage the world. But it is especially how we are supposed to engage our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In our family, we call this generosity money. I would challenge you to begin carrying generosity money with you as well. It is amazing how many chances you will have to meet needs in the name of our amazingly generous God.

Questions:

- 1. Who do you know that needs someone to help them out right now? What are you going to do about it?**
- 2. What are some ways that you can begin being randomly generous right now?**
- 3. There are lots of variations on this idea that I have heard since I began this with my family. What are some other ways that you can do this together as a group? Perhaps each of you can bring \$5-\$10 to the group and then give it to a rotating member of the group. Then that member is responsible to the group for using that money in generous ways.**
- 4. How else could we create awareness of the needs around us within our group of people?**

#22 – I John 3:19-23 – Faithfulness

I John 3:19-23 English Standard Version (ESV)

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

You can make a lot of mistakes in life – and if you are anything like me, you probably will. There is an internal wrestling match that happens every time I blow it. Maybe you can relate to this.

I know that it is bad theology, and I would never let anyone else believe this, but I wonder when I blow it if this is the time that God takes His blessing out of my life. Is this the moment that I went too far and I am going to be removed from influence? Again, I know it is wrong, but this is how I feel.

Maybe you don't feel that way. Maybe that is just my struggle. But according to John, we will all battle our heart condemning us at some level. How can we reassure our heart before God? How can we know that we are going to be okay?

Here are the two ways that God tells us we can have confidence: obey His commandments and love one another. I know it is almost too simple, but that is truly it.

Repentance is a funny thing. The New Testament idea of repentance is a turning away from sin. A 180-degree turn in the other direction is how we define repentance. In other words, you sin, you repent, you stop sinning. Repentance is to “un”sin.

The Old Testament idea of repentance is a bit different from that. The idea of the Hebrew word for repentance (t'shuvah) is to turn toward something. Repentance from an Old Testament perspective is not to turn away from something, but to turn towards something. This seems subtle, but it is huge.

In Jewish thought, if someone wants to know how you are doing, they will ask you how your walk is going, or, “How is your walking?” This is why the New Testament says that if anyone is in Christ, they must walk as Jesus walked. The idea here is all about how we are living, not just how we are walking, but it is wrapped up in how we are actually executing (walking/ action) our lives in conjunction with our values. And many modern translations will even translate it this way – they must live as Jesus lived.

The idea is that our life is like walking a path. God sets the path for us and sin is getting off of the path. Repentance, then, is getting back on the path and walking it again.

I have no way to count the number of times I have had someone tell me that they have messed up too big to be useful. The Biblical invitation is to simply get back on the path.

They say, “But I have really messed up!” Right! Just get back on the path.

They say, “But you don’t know how bad I have messed up!” Correct! Just get back on the path.

They say, “But it was way worse than you are thinking!” I am sure it was. But the invitation is to NEVER let your heart condemn you. Just get back on the path.

And what is the path? Obey God’s commands. And love one another. In one sense, you could say that love one another doesn’t need to be stated because we have already made it clear that this is a command of God. But it is so central to how we walk the path of God, that He makes it distinctly its own.

Maybe when my heart condemns me, rather than running and hiding, the way to deal with a condemning heart is to intentionally love others well. Remember that idea from Leviticus that when we don’t obey God, we are afraid even when no one is chasing us? Maybe the way to face down that fear is to be determined to love others well even when it is most difficult. Maybe that key unlocks all the rest.

Questions:

- 1. What does this idea of repentance do for you?**
- 2. Who do you know that has made excuses for not serving the Lord because of past mistakes? Where have you done that in your life?**
- 3. How does walking the path look for you today?**
- 4. Who do you need to love well right now? How?**

#23 – I John 1:5-7 - Fellowship

I John 1:5-7 English Standard Version (ESV)

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

God has absolutely no darkness in Him. He is completely light. This light means that He is totally righteous, totally holy, totally good. He is all the characteristics that we ascribe to Him and so much more. He is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. At the end of Ephesians 3, Paul gives a brief doxology that is powerful in this regard. He says, “To Him who is able to do immeasurably more than we could ever ask or imagine, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory...” (verse 20 & 21a).

The metaphor of the light of God in this passage is a reminder of the power that He possesses. It is immeasurably more than I could ever imagine. That is a powerful reality. I have some pretty big, pretty crazy dreams and ideas. God’s power is able to do so much more than I can ever dream up that it is beyond our ability to measure how much more. It is more than 10 times more or 100 times more or 1000 times more. It is immeasurably more than I can ever dream up.

And that power is at work in those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus. That is a crazy thought. It seems as if we should be able to feel a little electricity or tingling or something when that power is working. But the proof that this amazing power is at work in us is a little more subtle than that – and yet also more tangible.

John says that the way we know that God’s amazing power and light is in us and that we are walking in that light is in the way we interact with one another. He says that if we are walking in the light (there is that idea of walking the path again) then we have “fellowship” with one another.

I don’t want to miss this reality that God’s power at work in us also means that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. But that is not something that we can see. What we can see is how this idea of fellowship plays out in our lives.

We should probably understand what this fellowship is then, if we are going to get an awareness of how we can know that God’s light is at work in each of us. The Greek word is “*koinonia*.” That is not such a new idea. There has been a lot of discussion about this word in the church world over the years.

But I would like to call us back to the kind of fellowship we are supposed to be having with one another if God's light is in us and we are walking in the light.

Koinonia is more than kindness. It is more than handshaking and saying hello. This is deep, real, heavy, authentic, and transparent. This kind of fellowship is vulnerable. It exposes the truth about one another as a means to become more authentically who God has made each of us to be. When you think of what relationship is supposed to be like, koinonia is the ideal version of that.

Think about it this way: when you get to heaven, what will your relationships with others look like? Maybe characteristics like transparent, honest, compassion, and truthful might come to mind. Now take it a step further. Of the list you made, what is not supposed to be true of your relationships today?

I think that one of the reasons why relationships in the church are so critical is that the church is supposed to be a picture of what heaven is going to be like one day. And without a doubt, God's power is present in heaven.

The evidence that we know God and that we are walking as He would have us walk is directly connected to how we engage relationships with each other. This relationship thing is really a big deal.

Questions:

- 1. How does this idea of fellowship change your perspective on how you should engage with others?**
- 2. When you think about heaven and your relationships there, what keeps you from experiencing this kind of community now? P.S. you cannot say, "Other people."**
- 3. What are the dreams that you have for yourself and for God's Kingdom in your community? Share that with the group and begin praying for God to show each of you how to execute on those dreams.**
- 4. How would explain the difference between biblical fellowship and the world's definition of fellowship?**

#24 – I John 4:7-9; 18 – Fearless

I John 4:7-9 English Standard Version (ESV)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

I John 4:18 English Standard Version (ESV)

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

When we talk about loving others, it goes without saying that we would all agree it is important. We all know that we should love others well.

The sticky part comes when we start to talk about what that actually looks like. For some Christians, the notion that love must show others where they are wrong has led to all kinds of damaging conversations.

There is a running joke in the church that criticism is not a spiritual gift, even if some think it is. And that is true. For many followers of Jesus, they believe that the way they show the world that they love it is to point out where they are wrong.

Loving people well is vastly more complex than that. And while each situation is different and there are times when people need to understand that they have made an error in judgment or that their actions are not in line with God's clearly laid out biblical standard, how that gets done makes all the difference in whether or not we are honoring God's call to engage in relationship well.

A primary measuring rod for whether we love people well is tied into this passage. In the process of building relationships with others, did we help them become less fearful? This principle rings true regardless of the situation.

And it also rings true of our relationship with God. We are not supposed to be afraid of God. Perfect love casts out fear. He does not say that perfect actions cast out fear. He says that perfect love does. And God loves us perfectly – always. Paul illustrates this idea in Romans when he says that because of Christ we cry out to God, “Daddy!”

Even when we mess up, we should not be afraid of God or others. In fact, the shame of the mistake will many times try to get us to believe that we should be afraid and run away from any relationship that will hold us accountable or who could disapprove of

our actions. But it is the perfect love of God that will always cast out fear and draw us back into His community.

For many who have said no to God or who have walked away from the Lord, the issue that they have used to justify walking away boils down to some version of the same story. They felt pushed aside, attacked, and/or marginalized. This kind of treatment will never bring about a harvest of righteousness even if the issue that was being confronted needed to be confronted.

Once again: the right thing done the wrong way becomes the wrong thing.

I realize that ultimately it is on each person to decide to walk with the Lord or not regardless of how others treat them. But the bigger question is whether or not the church as a whole and Christians in general are known as a group of loving people who help others not be afraid. Or is the church known for other things. This is foundational to our ability to make disciples in relational environments.

Questions:

- 1. When you make a mistake, how do you want to be confronted?**
- 2. How well have you done at confronting others the way you would want to be confronted? Maybe each of you could share stories of successful times and unsuccessful times so that we can all learn how to be better at loving others well.**
- 3. Who is the person in your life that has influenced you most (you cannot say God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit)? What made them so influential to you?**
- 4. Do you have anyone right now that you need to apologize to because you chose to act in a way that promoted fear and/or control rather than put fear to death? Do that this week!**

#25 – Philemon 1:4-7 – Encouragement

Philemon 4-7 English Standard Version (ESV)

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

My dad had a funny saying he used often when I was a kid. It goes something like this: “Some people brighten a room by leaving it.”

Apparently, the thing that Paul loved about Philemon so much was that this was not true of him. Paul celebrated Philemon and his heart for the saints. Philemon loved the saints and Paul could see that love played out in the lives of those same people.

Now the question is – how? How does Paul see Philemon’s love for others?

We often try to “love” people by telling them where they are wrong. And in some instances, that is the best course of action. But these instances are the exception not the rule. And often the things we feel like we have to point out are simply opinion, not direct biblical mandate.

To make the waters even muddier, we have treated cultural norms as biblical rules and lost the distinction between “thus says the LORD,” and “thus says the ‘me.’”

I will give you some examples:

- Should I wear a hat in church, or especially on stage in worship? This issue is a cultural decision from top to bottom. And while the western, Catholic and Protestant churches adopted a policy of not allowing hats inside a building at all, in the eastern world, it is required for men to cover their heads during worship. This has been thrown at me as a requirement of God, not a cultural politeness.
- Dancing, playing cards, and any number of other cultural issues have been presented by the American church as less than honoring to God and therefore not to be indulged in at any level. Let me be clear, if these are activities you are convicted about, you are free to not engage in them at any level. That is totally fine. The concern is when we make God’s opinions conform to our opinions and over time, our opinions take on a dogma that they should never have had.

Trying to enforce our opinions on others is not how we love others. And that is not how Philemon helped those around him either. Paul celebrates Philemon because he has chosen to encourage the saints by refreshing their hearts. Philemon has apparently worked at helping others around him feel better about whatever their situation is.

This is at the heart of relational disciple making. It isn't so much about pointing out where everyone is wrong so that they can fix it. Nor is it about making people think like me about every debatable topic. Relational disciple making is about inspiring those to whom we are relationally connected. We want to inspire them to walk closer to Jesus, to look more like Him, and to help them believe that they can become what God is calling them to be.

I wonder what would happen if the church stopped working so hard to be right and started giving itself to refreshing the hearts of the discouraged and sharing the burden of the weighted down. What would it be like if the church became known for caring for one another and not trying to point out where the rest of the world has missed it. I think that would be a pretty amazing group of people to be a part of.

Questions:

- 1. How do you encourage the people around you? Are you intentional and regular about that or more opportunistic?**
- 2. If Paul were writing a letter to you, what would he be encouraged by in your life?**
- 3. Who do you know that needs to be encouraged this week? What will you do to encourage them?**
- 4. How could your church tell the community that you love it?**

#26 – Philemon 1:8-9 – Motivation

Philemon 8-9 English Standard Version (ESV)

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—

Paul does something pretty amazing here. And I think it is worth breaking out as we think about what it means to love someone and still hold the line on values and convictions.

The issue of the book of Philemon is slavery. Philemon's slave Onesimus has apparently run off. And somehow, Paul gets connected with Onesimus and he becomes a Jesus follower.

What does Paul do? Roman law required that a slave that ran away should be forced to return home in order to be put to death by his owner. Does Paul fight for the slave to set him free? Or does Paul make Onesimus go home? Is Paul concerned with the marginalized? The answer is yes... and no.

Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter. Paul is taking a risk here. Philemon has the right to have Onesimus put to death as a runaway slave. And apparently, Paul feels that he needs to address this issue as Onesimus returns home.

So, first, Paul addresses the letter to Philemon and to Apphia, Archippus, and the entire church that meets in the home of Philemon. Notice that Philemon has some degree of influence if this church meets in his home. But notice also that the letter is to be read to everyone in the congregation. So, whatever Philemon decides to do with Onesimus, the whole group is going to know what Paul said in the letter. Is Philemon going to listen to Paul or not? This would be the same as if I wrote an email to someone over an issue and tagged their small group and the entire church in the email. We are all going to know if this person is going to respond and how.

Second, let's talk about rights and privileges. Philemon has the right to deal with Onesimus abruptly. But is this what God would want? This one idea alone is huge in Christian relationships and especially in disciple making relationships. When does a person lay down their rights for the good of the Kingdom? Paul does not tell Philemon to drop his rights as a Roman.

What Paul says here is significant. *"...though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you..."*

Paul's approach is to call Philemon to a better life principle from which to make decisions. And this is at the crux of how we help ourselves and others make more Kingdom focused decisions. What are the guiding life principles that would motivate the decisions we make? Paul's appeal to Philemon is simple – If we call ourselves Christians and the fundamental premise of Christianity is forgiveness and being brought from death

to life, not life to death, then how can you treat your slave poorly, especially a slave that has become a fellow brother in Christ.

Does Paul condemn slavery? Yes – but not on the basis of slavery being right or wrong. Paul appeals to a guiding life principle that when lived out correctly would never allow one person to dominate over another person regardless of their status in life. Love lifts up, empowers, encourages and forgives. Real love could never put someone else under its thumb.

Recently, my son was having a difficult time making a decision. The decision centered on taking a day of rest (and he was tired and had been pushing hard) or going to support a friend in a very important moment in his friend's life. He asked my opinion and I felt like this was one of those simple opportunities to teach a good life lesson.

I asked him what his guiding principle should be. What value does he want to uphold by making this decision? Does he want to show that he values himself and his own comfort first? Or does he want to show his friend that he loves his friend more than taking it easy? In other words, I have never seen anyone regret choosing to love others even at the expense of their own comfort. He chose to go support his friend.

This is a simple example. But this kind of thinking allows us begin to define the principles that we want to be known for. What do we want our lives to stand for? This intentional conversation will help each of us as we make disciples.

Questions:

- 1. What are the life principles that you want to be known for?**
- 2. How do you choose to express those principles in your life?**
- 3. Where do your life principles come into conflict with God's principles for your life?**
- 4. How could you use this idea to begin helping your family and friends walk closer to the Lord today?**

#27 – Ephesians 4:1-3 – Humility

Ephesians 4:1-3 English Standard Version (ESV)

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Walking in a manner worthy of our calling looks like some specific things here. Humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, and eager to maintain unity – This is how Paul describes what it means to live a life worthy of our calling. Here comes our mantra again: Any of those things not relational?

How do we do this? It would just be easier to either stay away from people altogether, or to simply stand back and critique why I am right and everyone else is wrong. This is exactly what we often see in our culture and unfortunately it creeps its way into the church. The good news is that while this certainly shows up in the church, it isn't a Christian problem. It is a culture problem.

Brene Brown's work on shame and vulnerability is ground breaking in this area. We cannot walk in humility until we deal with the issues that keep us stuck in our inability to become and stay vulnerable with others. I would highly recommend anything by Brene Brown, but especially the book *Daring Greatly*.

Here is why community is so important in this regard. For many of the tenets of our faith, we can ascend to the truth of them without actually having to do anything with them. However, anything done in relationship forces us to actually have to deal with the issues that keep us stuck. That means that believing that something is true or important and actually walking that truth out are very different things.

Sanctification can only happen in relationship. Otherwise we will never be forced to deal with the issues that are keeping us from getting where we want to go in our Christian lives. Humility is especially refined in community. If we are going to commit to staying connected to others long term, we have to be willing to deal with the stuff in our hearts that is keeping us from moving forward. Relationship forces that reality in our lives. Or, the issues in our lives force us to run away from relationship so that we can stay broken. But either way, we cannot escape making a decision about what is really in our hearts, regardless of what we say we believe.

Walking humbly with others means that we have to commit to being in relationship with others even when it gets tough. In our world we call this "fighting for relationship." Here is what that means: when there is a conflict, we must fight not just to stay together, but to make sure that even in the process of the conflict, the other person is okay. We will be forced to make sure that we are truly listening and understanding what others are saying.

But it means some other things as well. Be the first to give compliments and pass out praise. Be the first person in the relationship to admit wrongdoing and to acknowledge the other's point of view. Initiate time spent together. Admit what others mean to you. Not just about them to other people but face to face with the person who means so much. They are precious and they need to know that they mean something and have made a difference to you.

These are a few of the ways that you can show someone that you are fighting for the relationship. I would suggest that being willing to do this is rooted in humility, which ultimately will help you fully live out the life God has called you to.

Questions:

- 1. How do you fight for relationship?**
- 2. Is there something that has gone on in your life that you have not told others about? How is that controlling you? How do you regain control?**
- 3. What has God called you to? What do you dream of doing for the Lord?**
- 4. What is standing in the way of you taking hold of the calling God has placed in your life?**

#28 – Ephesians 4:31-32 – Status

Ephesians 4:31-32 English Standard Version (ESV)

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

I was recently in a room with someone who is very famous. I imagine that if I mentioned the name, everyone who reads this would know whom I am talking about. What I found interesting was how people treated this person. The clamoring for attention was crazy. The whole “notice me” group that surrounded this person was fascinating to me. I struggled with how to respond to it all.

But what was even more interesting was how they treated each other. The looks, the attitude, and the words spoken about one another were less than gracious to say the least. It always amazes me when I see something like this.

I think many of us treat our relationship with God this way. We treat God as if we are jockeying for His attention and the way we get His attention is by making others look bad or reminding them of why they don’t quite measure up or calling out every time they make a mistake. I make myself look good by making others look bad. I make myself look big by making others look small.

This is not how the community of God is supposed to act. And I often find myself on the guilty end of this conversation. Even in writing this post it is so easy to come at it from the perspective of pointing out how everyone else is failing but I have it all figured out. It is a slippery slope to say the least and trying to not be mean or say mean or derogatory things is not how we get passed this tendency.

You can’t “un” something. In psychological terms, you cannot take something away without putting something back. This principle is a truism of life. It is true in how we steward the environment, each other, and even ourselves. The key to choosing to not tear others down is never going to be that we decide to stop being unkind. It will come from the fact that we choose to be kind.

The way to begin to become truly kind and tenderhearted toward one another is to begin to look for the potential (the good things) in others and start celebrating and honoring that, rather than focusing on where they failed and pointing out their mistakes. The way to stop is to start something new – replace bad habits with good habits. Instead of pointing out wrong, call out good in others – and in yourself.

What we must understand in relational disciple making is that the best use of our energy is to build one another up, not make sure that everyone around us knows where they blew it. We will unpack this more in another post.

At this point, I will close with a short story:

I had a wonderful lady come to me and ask to make an appointment to see me. I was happy to oblige and asked her what it was concerning. She proceeded to tell me that her friend had a son that had come out as gay and she needed me to help her figure out how to tell her son that he was wrong.

Now, I love this gal. Both of these ladies are dear to me. But I was taken aback by this statement – I need to help her figure out how to tell her son that he is wrong. So, I asked this question: “If you sat him down and said nothing about his sexual orientation at all, do you think that he would still believe that you thought he was wrong?”

She replied with a yes. My follow up was: “Then why do you think you need to tell him what he already knows?” I think the bigger conversation is about community and loving Jesus and how we are going to navigate this situation – not whether I (or anyone else for that matter) think he is right or wrong.

Her reply grabbed me: “But, then, what else would we talk about with him?”

That is a good question.

Questions:

- 1. How hard do you work to intentionally call out the good in others? Would people say that they are inspired by you?**
- 2. In this section of Scripture, what is Paul’s appeal for us to remember so that we can be reminded to be kind and tenderhearted to one another? How does that affect things?**
- 3. How would you handle the situation described in the story? What would you have told this lady?**
- 4. Where do you need to begin being tenderhearted and kind? Who have you taken for granted or who makes being kind hard?**

#29 – Philippians 2:3-7 – Attitude

Philippians 2:3-7 English Standard Version (ESV)

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

I want to go back and pull apart Genesis 2:25 – they were naked and unashamed. As we mentioned in Day 1, this is more than dealing with how many clothes they had on. Unfortunately, when we get lost in the physical part of being naked we miss entirely what this passage is driving at. There is so much more going on here than we give it credit for.

Within this naked and unashamed state, there is no other agenda. There are no other voices. Especially not that internal voice that plays the broken record in your mind of all the lies that sin tries to tell you about who you are and what you are capable of. None of that is there. They can simply exist in full transparency because there is no desire to push my own interests before yours.

Now, on the surface, it would seem in order to have this kind of community we must give in to the other person's voice. What that means is when we have a conflict it is about who is right and who is wrong and we have to decide which voice wins. That also means that we must decide which voice loses. This is at the crux of the problem with this kind of thinking. I once heard a preacher tell a joke that when two people get married, they commit to becoming one flesh. They go home to decide which one.

Community – real relationship – is not about winning and losing. It is about bringing about the very best version of what God has placed in all of us and giving that version of those around us places to express itself in the world.

If we look carefully at the passage, we learn something very interesting. Whose voice is the one calling the shots? It is neither Adam nor Eve. And that one reality changes everything about how we engage in relationship.

The goal of Adam and Eve's relationship was never to decide who was right and who was wrong. It was to decide what God's voice was on the subject – whatever that subject may be. And in this truth we learn the secret to a great marriage, and for that matter a great relationship. Only God's voice matters. When we know God's voice, everything works out best for both sides of the relationship.

This seems simple on the surface but it is deeply profound if we want to make disciples. There is an interesting story in the book of Joshua that has always given me pause.

Joshua 5:13-15 New International Version (NIV)

Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

"Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?"

The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.

I have always worked hard to be right. I have always wanted to know that the Lord was on my side, so I work at being moral and smart and "righteous" so that I can guarantee this. There is the problem when I act this way. When I try to leverage God like that, it becomes a habit that I do in other relationships as well. I try to manipulate, distort, hide my true self, and present a false version of me so that I can leverage others towards my ideas.

I try to make my own voice matter in the situation. And it doesn't. At least not like I want it to. I am free to express my opinion. I am free to voice concern or fear or disagreement. I am free to do any of those things, but those truths about my own position don't change anything about how God sees the situation.

Only God's voice matters. This is the only way to have real relationship. I love the fact that even in the midst of the Children of Israel taking the land, it wasn't about the Children of Israel. It was about God and His agenda for putting the world back together. Even the conquest was about God and His renown.

So, anytime that I act in my own self-interest, I am interrupting the way that God has designed the world to function. And before you get lost in thinking that we all need fundamental things and that only giving isn't healthy emotionally and that we should be able to receive as well, please read the last chapter of this book. You are right, and we must live in a tension here that we will unpack tomorrow.

We must be willing to empty ourselves knowing that this is the attitude of Christ. Then whatever God puts back into our hearts will be more valuable than anything else we could ever imagine. The way of Jesus is an emptying of our own agenda, our own voice, so that God's voice can be heard more and more clearly in our own hearts and in the hearts of those around us.

Questions:

- I. When was the last time that you laid down your own ideas for the good of a group of people? Be specific**

- 2. Psalm 37:4 says, "Take delight in the LORD and He will give you the desires of your heart." In light of this discussion, what does that mean? Who gives you the desires of your heart to begin with?**
- 3. Do you have a situation right now where you are trying to be right, but it isn't changing anything? What can you learn about that situation?**
- 4. Where in your life have you tried to be right before being Godly? Do you have anyone that you need to apologize to right now?**

#30 – Hebrews 10:24-25 – Inspire

Hebrews 10:24-25 English Standard Version (ESV)

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

What is the ideal community? This is what we have been talking about really. It is not a new conversation. People have been talking about utopia or some other version of perfect community since the fall of man.

Regardless of how you define it, there are a few consistent themes that emerge in the conversation about the perfect community. People would value the same things. People would treat each other properly. No one would have any needs. Everyone would be happy together. These and others are part of the elements we bring to the table in this conversation.

None of these are bad. In fact, I would love to live in such a place. But the fatal flaw of all utopian conversations is that they fail to take into account human nature. And therein all perfect worlds fall apart.

We are by nature preservationists. That means that we are very concerned with how we are able to survive right now. This can lead us to greed and withholding things from others very quickly if we believe that we need to take care of ourselves. But as soon as we do that, we interrupt this perfect world we are looking for. At least, we interrupt it for everyone else. This world becomes reliant on each decision that everyone makes as to whether or not each one will protect self and what self cares about first, or will each one sacrifice for the well being of the community?

We often look at these types of decisions and say something to the affect of, “Well, I would do that but they won’t, so I will just get taken advantage of.” You can see that from the very beginning, this premise is self-focus, and therefore will ultimately protect self over others every time.

The only way to truly have some version of utopia is that each of us determines that we will sacrifice for the best interest of those around us regardless of whether or not it is reciprocated. If each of us did that, we would all have our needs met. This sounds so much like the Jesus message!

Maybe the Kingdom of God is about bringing people together in a healthy, self-sacrificial way. Maybe the key to actually pulling off real relationships is about being willing to lay our lives down rather than trying to find people who “meet my needs.” We would be so fortunate to search for churches from the perspective of how we can give and serve rather than how we get our needs met there.

If you go back and review the themes that we have talked about in this book: Sacrifice, Justice, Forgiveness, Generosity, Encouragement; these are all rooted in our capacity to

lay our lives down for one another. This is at the heart of what God calls us to. It is not just a good idea, it is the central idea to better relationships.

There is an old rabbinic saying that is spoken when someone serves another person. The person who is being served will say, "May you have a thousand more opportunities to serve someone." Why? Because in your service, I see God meet my need.

So, I would close down this day and this whole journey with a blessing.

May you find around you a thousand opportunities to serve others. May you know that in serving, you make your God look great. May you open yourself up to the chance to love and be loved by others. May you not get lost in details of doctrine and forget the sacred privilege of relationships. And may you always put your God on display in a way the truly brings glory to him.

Amen

Questions:

- 1. What has this journey taught you about relationships?**
- 2. How have you applied those thoughts?**
- 3. How will you consider and give energy toward inspiring others toward love and good deeds?**
- 4. Where has God been pulling at you to serve and you have been reluctant?**