

NINE PRACTICES TO MAKE ~~ATTENDERS~~ DISCIPLES

who reorient their lives
to be formed by Jesus,
together, for others.



Passion Creek
CHURCH

**Nine Practices to Make Attenders Disciples:
who reorient their lives to be formed by Jesus, together, for others.**

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INTRODUCTION: HOW WE'RE FORMED

FORMED BY JESUS INSTEAD OF THE WORLD

We live in a world obsessed with change. Every podcast, influencer, and app promises transformation, but rarely delivers it. The question at the heart of discipleship is the same one the world keeps asking: How do people actually change?

At the end of 2022, our church began a journey to answer that question, not through self-help strategies or quick fixes, but through the slow, sacred work of being formed by Jesus, together, for others.

This book is built and adapted from thirty-six messages we preached over three years at Passion Creek Church. Each section revisits a practice of Jesus: ancient rhythms like Sabbath, prayer, simplicity, and witness that shape who we become. Our hope is that these pages feel like a personal conversation about what it means to be formed by Jesus, not by trying harder but by training differently.

Formed by Jesus, Together, For Others

That vision series, Formed by Jesus, Together, For Others, became a three-year roadmap of nine practices that this book will review. The very first message in that series wrestled with the question that sits at the center of every disciple's life: How do people change?

It's a question worth wrestling with. We all want to grow, to become better versions of ourselves. But if we're honest, real transformation often feels elusive. We make resolutions, set goals, and promise ourselves we'll do better, yet somehow find ourselves stuck in the same patterns, the same struggles, the same sins.

So why does real transformation feel so rare? Part of the reason is that most of us are chasing change in all the wrong ways. The world disciplines us to believe that growth comes through achievement, image, and comparison. But those paths don't make us more like Jesus. They just make us more exhausted.

The Status Game: A False Path to Change

In his bestselling book *The Status Game*, Will Storr argues that throughout history, the primary method for motivating change has been getting people to strive for status. The basic premise? We don't just need connection. We need to know we're better than the people around us. We literally get sick if our chances for status begin to wane.

Storr identifies three ways we play the status game:

- **Dominant Status:** coerced by force or fear (think mafia or armies)
- **Success Status:** awarded for achievement in a skill (corporations, sports teams)
- **Virtue Status:** praised for being dutiful and moralistic (religions, institutions)

Marketers use these to get you to buy. Organizations use these to get you to join. Churches can even fall into this trap, using competitive language to convince people to come or presenting the gospel as merely giving you a new status rather than transformation from the inside out.

But here's the problem: **you're not actually changing.**

As Storr writes, "We're wired to love being above. We continually seek to rearrange the world such that our game is on top, all the while telling self-serving stories about the immaculate virtue of our behavior."

We've become experts in rationalizing our sin and rearranging our situation. We're still selfish, not sacrificial. Still hateful, not loving. Status needs a public, staged life but neglects a private, sage life. Status finds joy at the expense of another.

Surely there's a better way to grow and change.

Jesus' Better Way: The Invitation to an Easy Yoke

This was Jesus' chief complaint against the religious rulers of his day. They used status to prop themselves up and push others down. Jesus warred against a culture obsessed with status, opening his famous Sermon on the Mount by blessing the outcasts—the poor, the mourning, the humble. He was declaring that the kingdom doesn't play the status game.

In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus offers a radically different roadmap to change and abundance: "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your

* Will Storr, *The Status Game*

souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Notice what Jesus is saying here. To be human is to have a yoke and a burden. The question isn’t whether you’ll be formed by something—it’s who or what will form you. You are either intentionally formed by Jesus or unintentionally formed by the Enemy.

The Forces That Form Us

Without intentional formation, we stumble into destruction. Scripture describes three primary forces that shape us when we’re not being formed by Jesus:

- **The Devil uses Status to shape our sense of acceptance.** From Genesis 3 (“you can become like God!”) to Matthew 4 (“if you are the Son of God...”), he uses condemnation, comparison, and temptation to keep us striving.
- **The Flesh uses Habits to shape our desires.** Our habits are formed by Silicon Valley algorithms, leaving us rushed, anxious, and lonely. Yet we don’t change our habits, not realizing they poison us.
- **The World uses Narratives to shape our reality.** How we make sense of the story of life through songs, movies, social media. “Just pursue your truth” sounds nice, but it’s destructive.

The end result? Pride, fear, indulgence, and worse.

Following Jesus may sound difficult, but it’s easy and light compared to not following Jesus. As Dallas Willard powerfully wrote, “Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God’s overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil.”

The Rabbi-Disciple Model

To counter destruction, Jesus adopted the Rabbi-Disciple model that had been present in Jewish culture for hundreds of years. A Talmid (Hebrew for disciple, student, apprentice) would follow a Rabbi with complete devotion—living with him, mimicking him, seeking to become just like him. Your entire life revolved around being shaped by your Rabbi.

* Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*

If you followed a Rabbi, your life centered on three goals:

- **To be formed by your Rabbi's love.** Your existence predicated on his approval.
- **To be formed by your Rabbi's lifestyle.** Your behaviors and routines were carbon-copies of his.
- **To be formed by your Rabbi's leadership.** Your understanding of reality was shaped by his.

Jesus extends this same invitation to us:

- **“Come to me”** = be formed by His love
- **“Take up my yoke”** = be formed by His life
- **“Learn from me”** = be formed by His leadership

Three Keys to Transformation

1. Formed by the Love of Jesus: Identity Instead of Status

Starting each day by acknowledging our identity in Christ changes everything. In Christ, we are loved, approved, cared for, righteous.

We are fully human when we live from love—giving value without needing validation, grateful for who we are and thankful for who we're not. We are sinful and fragmented when we live to get love—only giving value to get validation, constantly changing who we are and hating who we've become. Your vision of God's love determines the version of your life. We're either living from approval or for approval.

We'll stay stingy in our relationships if we don't dwell on God's relationship to us. We'll stay stingy with our resources if we aren't sure God will care for us.

2. Formed by the Lifestyle of Jesus: Practices Instead of Habits

We are more than brains on a stick. We can't just think the right thoughts—we need to do what Jesus would do. As Jesus said, “Whoever does the will of my Father is my family” (Matthew 12:50).

Our biggest deception in discipleship is thinking the lifestyle of Jesus doesn't require effort. It takes work. But we don't try to earn God's grace; we train to burn God's grace. Like fuel

in a jet, grace is meant to be used.

For instance, we'll stay stuck in our addiction to lust without the practice of confession and fasting. We'll stay stuck in our rage without the practice of silence and service.

3. Formed by the Leadership of Jesus: Teachings Instead of Narratives

Jesus didn't just come to explain how we get to heaven. He came as a Teacher explaining reality here on earth. "You have heard it said... but I say to you." He challenges our culture and preconceived notions.

When we pick and choose what to follow, we have a faith that's fake and hollow. We must decide: Is Jesus really the smartest person to have ever lived? Is Jesus truly the Lord over reality?

We'll stay stubborn in our disobedience without submission to the Scriptures. We'll stay stubborn in our pain if we don't admit our truth isn't the truth.

The Journey Forward

Many of us struggle with patterns we can't seem to break: frustration that boils over, anxiety that won't quiet, habits we can't shake. We look to Jesus' love and leadership, trying harder to be patient or peaceful, but inevitably find ourselves falling back into the same responses. Often the breakthrough comes when we realize we need to be formed by Jesus' lifestyle—through practices like Sabbath and simplicity that train our hearts to slow down and release the need to control every situation.

There are areas where we're all stuck, stubborn, and stingy. But there's grace along the way. This transformation won't happen overnight, but we can celebrate every baby step together. What could the Lord do in your life if you fully submitted to His love, His life, and His leadership? That's the invitation.

The chapters that follow will walk through the nine practices that help us live this out. Each practice is a small but sacred way of saying "yes" to being formed by Him instead of by the world. Our prayer is that as you read, you don't just learn about these practices but you live into them, and discover the quiet, steady joy of a life that's truly being formed by Jesus, together, for others.

FORMED BY SABBATH

**The practice of Sabbath
is giving God 24 hours a
week to stop, rest,
delight, and worship.**

Recommended Reads:

Keeping the Sabbath Wholly by Marva J. Dawn

Sabbath as Resistance by Walter Brueggemann

The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry by John Mark Comer

SABBATH E1: STOP

REDISCOVERING THE RHYTHM OF REST IN OUR RESTLESS WORLD

A coffee cup once read, “I just need a day between Saturday and Sunday.” It was meant as a joke, yet it captures our cultural exhaustion with the relentless pace of modern life.

In a world obsessed with productivity and progress, what we often need isn’t another call to do more, but permission to do less. Not to become lazy people, but loving people. Those whose rest makes room for presence, compassion, and renewal.

The Connection Between Rest and Love

Dr. Richard Swenson, in his book *Margin*, makes a compelling observation: there’s a direct connection between broken relationships and our lack of rest. Almost every relational conflict can be traced back to some form of overload. When we’re running on empty, we simply don’t have the emotional resources for patience, gentleness, and awareness—the very things that genuine love requires.*

This creates a serious problem because the fundamental purpose of humanity is to love God and love others. But loving God takes time, effort, and an attention span that most of us lost years ago. Loving others demands emotional reserves that we’ve already depleted by Tuesday morning.

As Corrie Ten Boom famously observed, “If the devil cannot make us bad, he’ll make us busy.” Our worst moments with family and friends rarely come after a day of rest—they come when we’re operating beyond our limits.

The Cultural Shift Toward Rest

Even secular culture is beginning to recognize this problem. Just a decade ago, the most popular influencers were pushing “hustle culture” with mantras like “You’ll sleep when you’re dead!” and “Work even harder when your competition is on vacation!” Today’s thought leaders are getting more engagement when they promote sleeping 8-10 hours,

* Richard A. Swenson, *Margin*

taking ice baths, and practicing mindful morning routines.

Experts suggest we are the most emotionally exhausted, psychologically overworked, and spiritually malnourished people in history. If that's true, how can we expect to have the energy and clarity needed for the meaningful work of building relationships and contributing positively to the world around us?

God's Design for Rest

The good news is that rest is possible, even in our hyperconnected age. It's a gift available through understanding how God designed us to live, and one way we can embrace this gift is through the ancient practice of Sabbath.

Looking at Genesis 2:1-3, we see something remarkable: after six days of creative work, God stopped. Not because he was tired, but because he was establishing a rhythm. Four significant verbs describe what happened: God completed his work, rested (the Hebrew word *shabbat* literally means "stopped"), blessed this day, and declared it holy—set apart from the other six days.

Notice that God didn't make exceptions. He didn't say, "Well, I'm a high-capacity creator, so I'll skip the rest." He simply stopped. In doing so, he wove a rhythm of rest into the very fabric of creation itself.

The Consequences of Ignoring This Rhythm

When we ignore this built-in rhythm, we suffer predictable consequences. Wayne Muller offers a sobering observation: "If we do not allow for a rhythm of rest in our overly busy lives, illness becomes our Sabbath—our pneumonia, our cancer, our heart attack, our accidents create Sabbath for us."

History provides fascinating evidence for this principle. During the French Revolution in 1793, leaders attempted to change the seven-day week to ten days, thinking it would increase productivity. Instead, productivity plummeted and suicides rose exponentially. Similarly, when America began abandoning Sabbath practices in the 1960s, we saw increases in burnout, stress-related diseases, broken relationships, and spiritual disconnection.

The Rewards of Rhythmic Rest

Conversely, communities that maintain regular rest practices see remarkable benefits.

** Wayne Muller, Sabbath*

Researchers studying the world's healthiest communities found that Seventh-Day Adventists in Loma Linda, California, who observe a literal weekly Sabbath, live an average of 12 years longer than other Americans. Remarkably, when you calculate the total number of Sabbath days in an average lifetime, it equals roughly 12 years. For every day they rested, they seemed to get it back.

Dr. Matthew Sleeth, observing these findings, concluded: "Living 24/7 is life-draining; living 24/6 is life-giving."

Learning to Trust Rather Than Test

The first time God commanded Sabbath observance was in Exodus 16, when the Israelites were wandering in the desert. God provided manna, bread from heaven, but with specific instructions: gather what you need for each day, but on the sixth day, gather enough for two days so you can rest on the seventh.

This passage can be read two ways. First, as a test to pass: "Follow these rules perfectly and earn God's approval." But there's a deeper reading: this is about learning to trust. After centuries of slavery where they had to take care of themselves, the Israelites needed to learn how to let God take care of them in their newfound freedom.

When we refuse to stop, our blessings turn into burdens. The manna spoiled when they tried to hoard it, just as our achievements become sources of anxiety when we can't step away from them.

Your Vision Shapes Your Version

Here's a crucial insight: your vision of God shapes your version of Sabbath. If you see God as a taskmaster demanding more productivity, you'll work on your Sabbath. If you view God as a record-keeper focused on your failures, you'll spend Sabbath worrying. If you believe God is disappointed in your spiritual maturity, you'll use Sabbath to try to impress him.

But the inverse is equally true: your version of Sabbath shapes your vision of God.

How we approach rest either trains our hearts toward grace or away from it.

** Matthew Sleeth, 24/6*

The Simple Challenge: Just Stop

The challenge is beautifully simple: stop. For 24 hours, cease from whatever typically defines your productivity. This might mean stopping the endless cycle of impressing and improving. Or perhaps stopping the habits of working and worrying, coping and comparing.

The beauty of this practice is that we can stop without guilt or shame. The Creator of the universe has actually commanded us to stop. We're not being asked to do more, but to do less.

Sabbath can literally be translated as "stop-day." This is why it's essential to commit to specific times rather than waiting until we're "finished" with our work because there's always more laundry, more emails, more tasks demanding attention.

Success in Sabbath will look different for everyone. If you work with your hands all week, engaging your mind might be restful. If you work with your mind, engaging your hands could be restorative. The key is simply to stop the regular patterns that keep us perpetually productive.

Eugene Peterson captures why this matters: "If there is no Sabbath—no regular and commanded not-working, not-talking—we soon become totally absorbed in what we are doing and saying, and God's work is either forgotten or marginalized."*

In our culture of restlessness and hurry, setting aside an entire day to stop all work might sound anything but restful. But deep inside all of us is a yearning for true rest, and God offers this rest as a gift. When we align ourselves with the rhythm he established at creation, we're slowly transformed into people of genuine rest who are capable of authentic love.

* Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*

SABBATH E2: REST

WHY STOPPING WORK IS AN ACT OF REBELLION

In the fourth century, St. Augustine famously declared, “Our hearts are restless.” A biographer described him as someone who “travelled the wilderness of wants, trying desperately to map the geography of desire.” But Augustine discovered something unsettling: the wilderness never ends. It only offers another mirage leading to more disappointment.

After exploring everything under the sun, Augustine concluded that we’re restless because we’re strangers—both to ourselves and to the world. Strangers to ourselves because our desires shift the moment we get what we wanted. Strangers in the world because no matter how far we journey, nothing quite feels like home. Sixteen hundred years later, society still hasn’t figured out rest.

Rest As Comedy or Commodity

Today, rest exists in our culture as either comedy or commodity. We joke about it because we assume it’s out of reach: “I finally got 8 hours of sleep—it took me four days, but whatever.” We laugh so we won’t cry.

Or rest becomes something to purchase: every advertisement promises that this truck will put your heart at ease, this vacation will restore your soul, this product will finally bring peace. Come to the happiest place on earth... just sell your organs to afford it. Rest is always dangling just beyond our fingertips, so we keep joking and keep spending. But what if there’s another way?

Jesus’ Radical Promise

Jesus of Nazareth made a promise that we don’t have to keep wandering the wilderness of wants, coming up empty again and again. In Matthew 11, he declares: “Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Eugene Peterson paraphrased it this way: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.”

Rest is possible through the person of Jesus, and we experience his rest through the practice of Sabbath.

The Forgotten Commandment

Most of us can’t name all Ten Commandments, but even those who can often forget the fourth one. Ironically, it’s the only commandment God introduces by saying “Remember”: perhaps because he knew we’d all be prone to forget it.

If you charted the Ten Commandments by word count, the Sabbath command takes up 37% of the total. It also serves as a bridge: the first three commandments concern our relationship with God, the last six address our dealings with each other, and the fourth connects them both. As Matthew Sleeth notes, “The Fourth Commandment is the longest and most inclusive of all ten. Its placement is not by accident.”

Before going further, we need to address the elephant in the room: Should Christians still practice Sabbath? Many of us grew up believing Sabbath is legalistic—just another rule, and we’re about relationship, not rules. But here’s the problem: it’s in the Ten Commandments. If Jesus being our Savior doesn’t permit us to commit adultery, steal, or covet, why would it allow us to ignore Sabbath?

Even if we debate whether Sabbath remains a binding command, it’s undeniably a wise practice. Jesus himself constantly upheld the real purpose of Sabbath, using it to heal, restore, and liberate people. The lifestyle of Jesus provides our ultimate example for how to live.

Two Reasons for Rest

The Old Testament gives us two complementary reasons for Sabbath. In Exodus 20, given at Mount Sinai right after leaving Egypt, God points to the rhythm of creation—the pattern he established in Genesis where he worked six days and rested on the seventh.

But in Deuteronomy 5, given forty years later on the edge of the Promised Land, God adds another dimension: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt.” While Exodus emphasizes rhythm, Deuteronomy emphasizes resistance. This is the key idea: Sabbath rest is a form of resistance against the system of death.

The Spirit of Egypt Lives On

Egypt created a system of oppression for the sake of the few. Pharaoh was a cruel tyrant who always demanded more. When Moses asked to let the people rest, Pharaoh's response was revealing: "You are slackers! Get to work." Egypt was a cruel system that convinced you Pharaoh was right. Does this sound familiar? Pharaoh and Egypt are alive and well.

We work more than ever before. Americans work 137 more hours per year than the Japanese, 260 more hours than the British, and 499 more hours than the French. We've transitioned, as Michael Sandel argues, from a market economy to a market society where everything, including love and human value, is negotiated, bought, and sold. We also have more slaves than ever before, with an estimated 28 to 40 million people trapped in slave labor and sex trafficking globally.

As a result, we have more wealth and possessions than ever. America is the wealthiest country in the world. We have 2.3 billion square feet of self-storage space—7.3 square feet for every person. Egypt had supply cities, but we have storage units.

Yet we're unhappier than ever, with rising suicide rates, increasing depression, and declining friendships. Pharaoh and Egypt have been lying to us. On Sabbath, we say enough is enough.

Resisting the System of Death

Walter Brueggemann, in his book *Sabbath as Resistance*, describes how those who live by the death system are bound to dishonor non-productive family members, engage in killing violence, reduce relationships to exploitative commodities, usurp from others, engage in distortion for advantage, and commit to endless acquisitiveness.*

This system of death is robbing our joy and killing our neighbors. But it doesn't have to be this way. We resist by resting for 24 hours. Sabbath is an invitation to the way of rest in a world of hurry. Pharaoh wants us to hurry so we don't pause long enough to see what's really happening—to feel the ache in our hearts for something different, to see the pain of our neighbors being crushed by the system, to hear the invitation of grace from our loving Father.

Here's a profound truth: You block the Holy Spirit when you walk in a hurried spirit. We hurry when we've been duped into believing the answer is always more—work more hours, make more money, achieve more accolades, accumulate more things. But for 24 hours, we resist those lies by resting.

* Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*

What True Rest Looks Like

We rest from the burden of accomplishment. In Christ, we're not defined by what we produce. We rest from the burden of accumulation. In Christ, we're not defined by what we possess. The twin gods of accomplishment and accumulation were embedded in Egypt's way of life, and they're embedded in most of our hearts today.

Sabbath offers different dimensions of rest. Mental rest comes through hiking, walking, or working with your hands. Physical rest happens through reading, discussing scripture, or listening to music. Emotional rest arrives when we jam together, avoid rehashing problems, and simply love each other. Social rest emerges when we invite the widow and orphan, give food to the poor, and befriend those considered enemies.

Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "The Sabbath is an example of the world to come."* A.J. Swoboda notes that the Bible is silent on vacations—perhaps because if we kept a weekly Sabbath, we wouldn't need them.**

The Resistance of Rest

Rest is a form of resistance, but let's remember we're always resisting something. If we're not resisting envy, we're resisting contentment. If we're not resisting pride, we're resisting humility. If we're not resisting Pharaoh, we're resisting the Father.

A warning: this rest comes from not demanding that Sabbath be everything you want it to be. Most Western people are deeply pragmatic. We'll do something if the result happens immediately. We rarely do things simply because God has invited us. But Sabbath requires obedience, and the results come down the road. Instead of thinking in terms of production, the day becomes about presence.

When we rest, we resist accomplishment and receive his presence. We stop wandering the wilderness of wants and start resting in the streams of his grace. St. Augustine isn't famous just for stating the problem. After studying the person of Jesus, he discovered the solution: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you."

The practice of Sabbath is ultimately all about the person of Jesus—learning his unforced rhythms of grace, taking on his yoke of ease rather than Pharaoh's yoke of oppression, and discovering that true rest isn't something we earn or buy, but something we receive as a gift from the one who promises to give rest to the weary and burdened.

* Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*

** A.J. Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath*

SABBATH E3: DELIGHT

THE LOST ART OF SACRED JOY

G.K. Chesterton once wrote that “the saint is often a martyr; he is mistaken for a poison because he is an antidote.” Saints restore the world to sanity by exaggerating whatever the world neglects. “Therefore,” Chesterton concludes, “it is the paradox of history that each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most.”*

In our current practice on Sabbath, we’re exaggerating something the world is neglecting desperately: the practice of setting aside 24 hours to stop, rest, delight, and worship.

There’s perhaps nothing more contradictory to our modern culture than a community of people practicing Sabbath for 24 hours to the glory of God.

We no longer live in a world that stops. We’ve lost the art of rest, assuming it’s something to buy or laugh off. While some secular voices are calling people to practice mindfulness and “secular Sabbaths,” the last two elements of biblical Sabbath—delight and worship—are uniquely Christian and cannot be replicated into godless lookalikes.

If something is more neglected than rest, it’s delight. And for good reason.

Why Delight Feels Impossible

We’re still living in the wake of a post-pandemic world. Acts of violence create fear and uncertainty. Political unrest breeds anxiety. Friends and loved ones die too soon from disease. The list goes on. There doesn’t seem to be a single person who isn’t well-acquainted with grief.

We’re so depressed that choosing delight feels wrong, even inappropriate.

But the church has an antidote. And thankfully, this antidote comes from a command of God based on the character of God himself.

* G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*

God's Playful Nature

In Genesis 1:31-2:3, we see God completing creation and then stopping to rest. The Hebrew word translated “rested” literally means to stop and rest, but the imagery communicates something deeper: God delighting in all his work. This wasn’t about God needing a break—it was God taking time to enjoy the work of his creation. “Very good!”

Jewish scholars argue that God created one thing on the seventh day: menuha. For the Hebrew mind, menuha encompasses happiness, stillness, peace, and joy—the green pastures and quiet waters of Psalm 23 come to life.

Be honest: when you imagine God, do you think of him as happy? Joyful? Playful?

Chesterton captured God’s playful nature beautifully: “Children want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, ‘Do it again’; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony... It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.”*

God is playful, and we are not. Edwin Friedman, a brilliant rabbi who passed away in 1997, foresaw many of America’s current problems. He warned we were creating a society that doesn’t want leaders and eventually cannot produce them. His diagnosis? “A major criterion for judging the anxiety level of any society is the loss of its capacity to be playful.”**

The Pharisees’ Misunderstanding

If anyone in the Bible had zero idea what it means to be playful and live with delight, it would be the Pharisees. In Mark 2:23-28, we see them confronting Jesus’ disciples for plucking grain on the Sabbath. The culture of Jesus’ day was the exact opposite of ours regarding Sabbath—we need to hear “Sabbath was made for man,” while they needed to hear “man wasn’t made for Sabbath.”

The Jewish people were so intent on following Sabbath that they added layers of additional rules to avoid even getting close to breaking it. They built fences around the Torah, codifying these regulations into a collection of writings called the Mishnah. When the Pharisees accused the disciples of unlawful behavior, they were citing the Mishnah, not the Torah itself.

The Pharisees completely misunderstood the plotline. In Mark 3:1-6, when Jesus healed a

* G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

** Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*

man's withered hand on the Sabbath, instead of throwing a party, the Pharisees threw a fit.

Here's the key difference: The Pharisees thought Sabbath was about removal to get approval, but it's actually about making space to delight in God's grace. Literally, joy and delight are God's desire and design for your life.

Four Ways to Practice Sabbath Delight

1. Delight in God

First and foremost, Sabbath isn't a treat-yourself day—it's about God. Psalm 92 is subtitled "A Sabbath Day Song," and its emphasis is clear: rejoice in the Lord on the Sabbath! Philippians 4 echoes this: rejoice in the Lord always.

If we don't ground our delight in God, we'll settle for counterfeits that literally damage our mind, body, and soul. As Michel Hendricks writes in *The Other Half of Church*, when our brain looks for joy and doesn't find it, we become vulnerable to "pseudo-joys"—substances and experiences that temporarily shut off unpleasant emotions but are nonrelational and ultimately unsatisfying. Low-joy cultures see increases in these pseudo-joy addictions, from food and social media to alcohol, drugs, and pornography.*

There's a strong chance we haven't experienced the fullness of Sabbath because we've stacked our day with pseudo-joys that leave us empty.

How do we delight in God? Read Scripture. Sing praise songs. Direct your gratitude toward God. Remember his past faithfulness—look at your family and say, "Thank you, God." Think about past blessings and say, "Thank you, God."

2. Delight in Others

Sabbath is intensely communal and multigenerational. Visit a Hebrew home today and you'll find great-grandma feasting alongside a newborn baby. Consider forming "Sabbath communities"—three or four families enjoying a meal together, then taking turns watching kids while other couples go on dates.

Practice *dayenu* at dinner. This Hebrew word means "it would have been enough, but..." It's a practice of cascading gratitude: "It would have been enough to have dinner, but you gave us dessert." "It would have been enough to have friends, but you made them into family." "It would have been enough to survive this week, but you gave us peace."

* Michel Hendricks and Jim Wilder, *The Other Half of Church*

3. Delight in Creation

Go biking and raise your hands. Kayak in the river. Watch birds. Hike in the mountains. Enjoy the creation of food—treat Sabbath like a holiday, bringing out your best plates.

Here's a key principle: We cannot delight if we always indulge. Dessert loses its delight if you partake every night. Many Christians save special meals just for Sabbath. As Marva Dawn observes, "In general, Americans don't know how to feast because they don't know how to fast."^{*}

4. Delight in Ourselves

This one might sound sacrilegious. For too long, we've assumed it's faithful to call ourselves trash. But we're made in the image of God. Christ has redeemed and forgiven us. We are new creations. We can only delight in ourselves when we truly understand the gospel. Because of Christ's blood, God is pleased with you. He delights in you.

Your vision of God's delight in you shapes the version of your delight in God. We love because he first loved us—we delight because he first delighted in us. So much so that he died on the cross for our sins.

Once we understand the gospel, we can delight in where and who we are. People who practice Sabbath begin to discern their calling in life, seeing the gifts and desires embedded within them. They can reflect on where they've been and respond with gratitude, praising God for not being who or where they were outside of Christ.

Two Lies Stop Us From Understanding Delight

"I am too contaminated with sin." How can I be happy when I'm not holy yet? But in Christ, our sin is covered by Jesus' blood. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Romans 8:1).

"I am too inundated with suffering." How can I be happy when I'm hurting? In Christ, our sorrow is cared for by Jesus' love. He is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles (2 Corinthians 1:3).

The practice of Sabbath contradicts our society more than almost anything else. In a world acquainted with grief, we can be anointed with gratitude. In a culture of endless hustle, we can practice sacred rest. In an age of anxiety, we can choose delight.

^{*} Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*

SABBATH E4: WORSHIP

THE MISSING PIECE THAT MAKES SABBATH SACRED

What does your Sabbath actually look like?

For most modern Western Christians, it goes something like this: Stay up late Saturday night bingeing Netflix or watching a movie with your spouse. Overeat and possibly overdrink. Wake up Sunday completely exhausted but rush out the door to make it to church on time—if you go at all. After church, grab lunch out and maybe get some shopping done. Watch the big game, work around the house, clean up the yard, catch up on emails, prep meals for the week. Sit down for another movie and go to bed.

With a spirit of gentleness, let me clarify: that is not Sabbath.

Eugene Peterson called that version a “bastard sabbath”—a secular spin on a day designed to be set apart to the Lord. Without intentionality, community, and God’s grace, we will always veer toward a lesser version of Sabbath.*

How Entertainment Warped Our Rest

Rest feels foreign to us because of how we’ve been entertained our whole lives. Neil Postman’s book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* offers a scathing critique of Western culture, arguing that television’s focus on entertainment and superficiality has fundamentally altered our ability to think critically and engage in serious discourse. We’ve become so enamored with amusement and distraction that we’ve lost the capacity for meaningful, thoughtful conversation about important issues.**

But Postman’s critique goes beyond discourse—entertainment has also warped our delights. Formed into spectators, we now think bingeing is the same as resting. We confuse escapism with relaxation. Even as Christians, we can take the Sabbath invitation of rest and delight and assume it’s packaged as instant gratification and easy escapism.

* Eugene H. Peterson, “The Good-for-Nothing Sabbath,” *Christianity Today*

** Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

We've spent considerable time talking about resisting Pharaoh—the lie that work is god. But there's another side to this resistance: If we overcome the hurdle of being too productive on the Sabbath, we soon find the opposite struggle just as menacing—being too passive on the Sabbath. That's why today's movement of Sabbath is the most important of them all: worship.

God Made the Day Holy

Looking again at Genesis 2:1-3, notice God doing two things on Sabbath. First, God “blessed the seventh day”—he made it happy, life-giving rather than life-draining. Second, God “declared it holy.”

Most people equate holy with morality, but that's only part of its definition. The Hebrew word *qodesh* means “set aside for God's special purpose.” God made the seventh day holy—and remember, every other Ancient Near Eastern god made space holy (temples, mountains), not time. This shows our God can be accessed anywhere. He's the God of the cosmos. You just need to take the time to seek him.

God made it holy, and we're called to remember and keep it holy (Exodus 20:8). We can set aside the day for God's special purposes, or we can desecrate and dishonor it—mainly by making it about us.

When Sabbath Becomes Self-Serving

The book of Isaiah provides a perfect example of people who practiced Sabbath but didn't keep it holy. You may have been resting, but have you been worshipping? In Isaiah 58, God confronts his people about their spiritual disciplines. They were fasting in ways that desecrated God and dishonored others (verses 4-5). God calls them instead to fast in ways that honor him and serve others (verses 6-7), promising beautiful restoration to those who trust in him (verses 8-12).

The context is crucial: God's people were using spiritual disciplines for their own gain, not for God's glory. We're tempted to do the same with Sabbath. We want to practice it so we're more productive the other six days, so we improve our relationships, so we feel better about ourselves.

But those motivations dishonor and spoil the Sabbath. As Ruth Haley Barton writes, “Like all spiritual disciplines, sabbath-keeping is a means of grace—a way of opening to the transforming work of God beyond anything we can accomplish for ourselves.” Sabbath as worship keeps us from making it about us.

** Ruth Haley Barton, Sacred Rhythms*

Freedom and Power

Isaiah 58:13-14 continues: “If you keep from desecrating the Sabbath, from doing whatever you want on my holy day...” How do we desecrate what God has made holy? By doing “whatever we want.” Today we view freedom as permission—“I can do whatever I want.” But coming to Christ means realizing that “whatever you want” is rebellion that has led to destruction for yourself and others around you. In the Bible, freedom is about power—specifically, the power to not do what you want.

Here’s the contrast:

- **Dishonor:** Sabbath is permission to do whatever I want.
- **Worship:** Sabbath fills me with God’s power to do whatever he wants.

What are the two things we want to do most on a day of rest? One temptation is to be overly productive—the idol of efficiency. Another temptation is to be overly passive—the idol of escapism. As Matthew Sleeth says, “Deal with boredom: God is on the other side.”*

The two things we need to do on a day of worship are: give time for silence and solitude, and give time for community and fellowship. As Marva Dawn notes, “Both in the silences of solitude and in the true fellowship of community, God becomes more real to us.”**

Dishonor and Delight Cannot Coexist

Isaiah continues: “If you call the Sabbath a delight, and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, seeking your own pleasure, or talking business; then you will delight in the Lord...”

Notice the sequence: if you honor, then you’ll delight. But if you dishonor, you cannot delight. This is a spiritual principle: dishonor and delight can never coexist. This includes dishonoring God and dishonoring others. Some people choose not to shop on Sabbath because they don’t want to dishonor others by perpetuating a system where workers get no days off.

Consider making two lists: a dishonor list and a delight list. What is entertaining to you but would dishonor God? What is restful to you but would dishonor your neighbor? What is joyful to you and gives God glory? What is easy for you and blesses your neighbor?

* Matthew Sleeth, 24/6

** Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*

Five Final Insights

1. Notice the sequence: Stop, rest, delight, worship. Start with stopping (stop-day). Begin to enter rest. As your energy returns, step into delight. Delight leads to gratitude, and gratitude turns to worship.

2. Sabbath is a gateway discipline. Slowing down opens your eyes to the richness of the Bible. Feasting on Sabbath gives you more motivation to fast during the week. Worship on Sabbath transforms your heart toward loving those in need. Sabbath rearranges your schedule so you aren't anxious, confronts how many things you have and invites you to simplicity, and tends to release your heart to be more generous.

3. When you practice Sabbath, you're never more than six days from rest. Many people find tremendous energy the first three days after Sabbath, and gain energy by anticipating Sabbath the last three days.

4. Morality is a requirement, but maturity is a request. If you're stealing or committing adultery, church leadership has a responsibility to confront that. But if you aren't practicing Sabbath, we'll pray for you and paint a picture of how beautiful it is—but this is an invitation, not a mandate. Sabbath is a step toward becoming more mature in Christ.

5. Today, not someday, is the day for Sabbath. Hebrews 4:7 says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." We often excuse ourselves from Sabbath because of our stage of life—no kids means it's money-making season, little kids are too crazy, teens are too busy, empty nesters are too lonely. But it's a discipline for a reason. It's difficult, but there's so much grace on the other side.

Rest Is a Person

Sabbath rest is a day, but even more than that, it's a person. In Christ, we have a rest the world can never offer—but it takes us surrendering to him. If you've always lived life "doing whatever you wanted," today you can receive the gift of healing, salvation, and rest. Come to Jesus.

As Matthew 11:28-30 in the MSG paraphrase states: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

FORMED BY SCRIPTURE

**The practice of Scripture
is submitting to its
authority, entering its
story, learning to eat it,
and choosing to obey it.**

Recommended Reads:

Eat This Book by Eugene Peterson

Taking God at His Word by Kevin DeYoung

Shaped by the Word by M. Robert Mulholland Jr.

SCRIPTURE E1: AUTHORITY

LEARNING TO READ THE BIBLE AND LETTING IT READ YOU

We live in a world of lies, and it's getting harder to know who's telling the truth.

A few months ago, AI-generated images of a former president resisting arrest flooded social media. For about fifteen seconds, many of us thought they were real, bracing for what would come next. Then there's Deepfake Tom Cruise on TikTok—a lookalike with AI software so convincing you'd swear it was the real actor. Distinguishing truth from lies has never been more difficult.

This doesn't even account for the narratives we were sold in childhood: you must go to college (but don't think about the debt), you must be true to yourself no matter the cost (leading to broken marriages, depression, and worse). But this shouldn't shock us. After all, the devil didn't attack Adam and Eve with a stick, but with an idea. His key strategy has always been deception, and it comes in many forms.

The church carries a wonderful yet weighty responsibility to be loyal to the way of truth in a world of lies. This, we believe, is only achieved through submission to the Scriptures—an ancient library of writings that lead us to communion with Jesus.

The Problem with “The Bible Says It”

But that typically leads to phrases like, “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.”

For those who grew up in stable, Bible-believing homes without experiencing spiritual abuse, this phrase doesn't cause much concern. But it assumes something critical: that you have the correct interpretation. In the hands of false teachers, “the Bible says” has been used to justify slavery and polygamy, promise health and wealth, claim racial superiority, and impose countless man-made restrictions.

It's not hard to see how this has caused some to deconstruct their faith and detach from the truth claims of the Bible entirely.

The phrase “the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it” arises from a helpful Reformation doctrine called “Scripture Alone.” In the 1500s, reformers emphasized the Bible having the final word because the papacy and priests were claiming authority over Scripture—leading to false doctrines like paying your way out of purgatory. But the Reformers never meant you shouldn’t consult outside sources or use your mind.

Our interpretations are always influenced by four factors: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. To claim you only use Scripture is to be blind to your own preferences, upbringing, and cultural moment. The question isn’t whether these factors influence us—it’s how we prioritize them.

As modern people living in the twenty-first century, our tradition, reason, and experience heavily influence how we submit to Scripture as our final authority. The moment we open the Bible to read, powerful preconditioned dynamics go into operation. We’re victims of a lifelong learning mode that establishes us as the controlling power seeking to master a body of information that can be used to advance our own purposes.

That’s why this series isn’t called “informed by Scripture” but “formed by Scripture.” Our goal isn’t just to think about Scripture, but to think Scripture. That requires humility and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Following Jesus’ Example

We’re formed by Scripture because we’re apprentices of our Rabbi, Jesus. We seek to be with Jesus, become like Jesus, and do what Jesus did. One obvious way to imitate him is fidelity to the Bible.

Jesus—fully God, fully man—spent his life on earth fully submitting to Scripture, committing his brain to studying it, and humbling his heart to obey it. In John 10:34-36, he declares, “The Scriptures cannot be set aside,” quoting an obscure verse from Psalm 82. In Mark 12:36, he simultaneously acknowledges the humanity and divinity of the Bible. In his most trying moments, Jesus breathed out Scripture. In Matthew 4, he dueled with the devil by quoting Deuteronomy. In Matthew 27, while hanging on the cross, he uttered Psalm 22.

As John Stott writes, “The overriding reason for accepting the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture is plain loyalty to Jesus. Our understanding of everything is conditioned by what Jesus taught. And that includes his teaching about the Bible. We have no liberty to exclude anything from Jesus’ teaching and say, ‘I believe what he taught about this but not what he taught about that.’”*

* John Stott, *The Authority of the Bible*

Jesus' Radical Confidence in Scripture

In Matthew 5:17-19, Jesus expresses extraordinary confidence in Scripture: “Don’t think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass away from the law until all things are accomplished.”

Jesus clarifies that he’s not demolishing or deconstructing the Bible—he’s fulfilling it. One commentator suggests Jesus is illustrating that the Old Testament is a cup and he is the liquid that fills it up. The Bible only comes together in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

He goes further: “Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

The message is clear: the word of God will never perish, and it’s imperative we submit to all of it. As John Mark Comer notes, “For Jesus, there is a reciprocal relationship between how we approach the Bible and the level of our experience in the kingdom of God.”

Two Ways We Set Aside Scripture’s Authority

The Legalist Reader

Among Jesus’ audience were the Pharisees—the Sunday School all-stars everyone respected. But the legalist reader values tradition over Scripture, whether they admit it or not. The Pharisees added the Mishnah, a set of rules serving as a fence around Torah to ensure they wouldn’t even get close to breaking God’s commands.

When Jesus’ disciples picked grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28), the Pharisees accused them of breaking the law. But Jesus wasn’t abolishing the Sabbath—he was abolishing the added traditions they’d imposed on it.

The legalist reader subtly places man-made traditions on top of God-breathed instruction. They flip the equation: instead of keeping God’s commands turning us to God’s love, they think keeping commands earns God’s love.

Legalist readers are typically literal but not literary. They don’t account for genre, humanity, or hyperbole. They miss the forest for the trees. They put the emphasis on the wrong syllable. When tradition has higher authority than Scripture, you’ll develop a cold heart and an empty life.

** John Mark Comer, Practicing the Way*

The Ambiguous Reader

Among Jesus' audience were also the Sadducees—religious elites who craved government influence and were willing to budge on much of the Torah. The ambiguous reader values reason over Scripture, whether they admit it or not. In Matthew 22:23-29, the Sadducees posed a hypothetical question about resurrection—something they didn't believe in. Jesus responded, "You are mistaken, because you don't know the Scriptures or the power of God."

An ambiguous reader has the skill to talk themselves out of anything. If they like something, it's gospel. If they don't, it's a nice metaphor. They treat the Bible as an ancient document filled with great stories and literary devices, but hell is an antiquated idea, tithing is Old Covenant, and sexual ethics are cultural constructs.

As Robert Mulholland writes, "We often are not looking for a transforming encounter with God. We are more often seeking some tidbits of information that will enhance our self-protective understanding of the Christian faith without challenging or confronting the way we live in the world." Ambiguous readers are literary but not literal. The problem is that the Bible is a library of literature and is sometimes best interpreted literally. The work of studying Scripture is hard work.

The Heart of the Matter

Jesus gets to the heart in verse 20, speaking of righteousness—goodness from the inside out. If you're truly formed by Scripture, you're transformed from the inside out. As Scottish theologian Donald Macleod writes, "For Jesus, jot-and-tittle loyalty to Scripture is neither legalistic nor evasive. Jot-and-tittle fulfillment of the law means avoiding anger as well as homicide; lust as well as fornication; swearing as well as perjury. It means turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, and blowing no trumpets when we make donations to charity."*

The Pharisees and Sadducees knew how to read their Bible, but they never allowed the Bible to read them. The question isn't merely "Will you buy what the Bible says?" but "Does the Bible guide all you do?" Acts 20:35 says it's more blessed to give than receive—does that guide your reality? Hebrews 13:4 says to not have sex outside covenant marriage—does that guide your reality? Matthew 6:16 says when (not if) you fast—does that guide your reality?

Being formed by Scripture means surrendering control, setting aside our assumptions, and allowing God's Word to examine us as much as we examine it.

* M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word*

** Donald Macleod, *A Faith to Live By*

SCRIPTURE E2: STORY

THE LIFE YOU LIVE DEPENDS ON THE STORY YOU BELIEVE

“The story you live in is the story you live out.” —Pete Hughes*

As human beings, we don't just love stories—we live them. We aren't merely drawn to them; we're driven by them. A recent study demonstrated the profound impact children's stories have on us as adults. In the 1800s, stories centered on building new things, and patents rose 66 percent in the following forty years. The stories we absorb shape the futures we create.

Andrew Delbanco's fascinating book *The Real American Dream* argues that America's direction has always been driven by a story. Throughout history, Americans have lived out three dominant narratives:

- **God (until the Revolutionary War):** Puritans fled religious persecution and founded America with “hope chiefly expressed through a Christian story that gave meaning to suffering and pleasure alike and promised deliverance from death.”
- **Nation (until the 1960s):** The Constitution became a new Bible. American freedom became worth dying for. We took the biblical concept of kingdom expansion and applied it to America.
- **Self-Actualization (our current story):** We no longer sacrifice for God or country. We don't trust anyone in power. Our hope is in individual freedoms and self-defined purpose. As Sam Alberry observes: “The 80s: Serve yourself. The 90s: Find yourself. The 00s: Accept yourself. The 10s: Express yourself.” We might add: The 20s: Redefine yourself.**

This story of self-actualization has divided our country and destroyed our souls. It has no adequate answer for pain and evil. Life's purpose becomes simply maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, with no robust framework to explain why evil keeps happening. We didn't wake up one day and decide to become a nation obsessed with self-actualization. Slowly but surely, we reshaped our stories, and our stories reshaped us.

* Pete Hughes, *All Things New*

** Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream*

The Bible as a Lamp to Our Feet

In this moment of confusion and despair, the Bible can be a lamp to our feet and a light on our path—but not if we treat it as a cookbook offering five ways to get a better marriage, not as a rulebook with “basic instructions before leaving earth,” and not as a textbook to memorize. The word of God is living and active. The Bible can light our path when we read it as a story.

Three Essential Observations About Scripture

1. The Bible Is a Library, Not a Book

The Bible didn’t take the form we hold today until after the printing press in the fifteenth century. Instead, what we call the Bible was a carefully composed collection of scrolls and letters that the church recognized as inspired by God and authoritative for Christian life.

When you read the Bible, you’re not reading one single book of divine writings like the Quran or Lord of the Rings. We must learn to read it as a collection of books put together to tell one larger story, not like an encyclopedia assembled to give us information.

Each book fits into a genre—narrative, poetry, law. How we read Genesis differs from how we read Romans, and how we read Psalms differs from how we read the Gospels. We cannot approach every part of the Bible in the same way. We must learn to read the Bible literarily—like good literature. Think about it, meditate on it, study it, place it within its context and within the larger story it’s telling.

2. The Bible Is Both Human and Divine

Contrary to popular belief, the Bible did not drop from heaven as one book. Rather, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the writers of Scripture wrote down their stories, experiences, and instructions. These writings were later recognized (not selected) as divinely inspired.

The Bible contains human characteristics of each author. John writes differently than Paul, who writes differently from Moses, who writes differently from David. You wouldn’t read Lord of the Rings the same way you’d read Twilight. Each author emphasizes different things, telling their part of the story while leaving some things out and highlighting others.

But the Bible is also divine. It’s authoritative and trustworthy. We can believe what the authors tell us about truth—not because they’re intelligent people with an agenda, but because they’re empowered people writing through the Spirit. Consider a symphony: where is the music coming from? The player or the instrument? Both.

3. The Bible Tells a Story That Points to Jesus

In Luke 4:16-21, Jesus reads from Isaiah and declares, “Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled.” To Jesus, this Old Testament prophecy was part of a larger story that finds its ending in him.

Each book, genre, letter, narrative, and poem fit together to tell one larger story that culminates in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It’s a story God is telling about himself, about humanity, about the world, and about our place in it.

After his resurrection, Jesus walked with two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32). “Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted for them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures.” Later they said, “Weren’t our hearts burning within us while he was talking with us on the road and explaining the Scriptures to us?”

By understanding the story Scripture tells, we have an answer to why evil exists, where hope comes from, what meaning really looks like, and how to live in the midst of pain. But there’s a warning in John 5:39-40: “You pore over the Scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them, and yet they testify about me. But you are not willing to come to me so that you may have life.”

There’s a way to study Scripture intensely and completely miss the point. Information versus formation. Eternal life isn’t found in Scripture itself—it’s found in the one Scripture points us toward.

The Stories We’re Tempted to Believe

If we don’t see our Bible as a story to live in, it won’t be a story we live out. We’ll pick another story—a lesser and more deficient one.

Isaiah 8:11-13 speaks to a cultural moment of fear, confusion, and pain—much like our own. Like Isaiah’s audience, we desperately grab for stories and conspiracies to make sense of what’s happening.

We look to stories because they have the power to frame our fears and bring clarity to confusion. Every day we’re bombarded with narratives: marketers sell us deceptive stories tapping into our dreams and desires (we buy them subconsciously, but they never fulfill); politicians sell us deceptive stories tapping into our fears and nightmares (we believe them subconsciously, but they never fulfill).

When we run to conspiracies, we’re looking for peace and clarity. But what do they actually produce? Division, hatred, tribalism, hours of scrolling and watching online.

The sad truth is we'll orient our lives around memes with far less resistance than if someone gave us a Scripture that challenges our thinking. The ultimate truth isn't found in the latest conspiracy or political party. It's found in the person and work of Jesus as told in the story of Scripture.

As Bono put it: "At the center of all religions is the idea of Karma... It's clear to me that Karma is at the very heart of the universe. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that 'as you reap, so you will sow' stuff. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff."

This is the story we're called to live into—full of grace and full of truth.

What Could Happen If We Lived This Story?

Imagine if our community lived out the story of Scripture:

- **We could become people of rest in a world of hurry**—slowing down once a week to breathe in God's grace and breathe out his praise, no longer exhausted from people-pleasing.
- **We could become people of truth in a world of lies**—not imprisoned with shame but captured by grace, refusing to doom-scroll or stir hatred for political parties, knowing how it all ends and letting the cross shape how we live.
- **We could become people of contentment in a world of consumption**—our minds so saturated with the Bible that we believe less is more, and it's better to give than receive.
- **We could become people of hospitality in a world of hostility**—leading the way in meeting neighbors and serving those who oppose us, sharing meals across generations on Sabbath.

The only reason we wouldn't do these things is because we've been living in society's stories—stories that aren't full of Christ but full of karma, not full of grace but full of hate, not full of forgiveness but retribution, not full of love but full of lust.

When we become serious students of Scripture, we can be honest about our hurts without being imprisoned by them, honest about our failures without being defined by them, honest about our past without being condemned by it.

That's the story worth living in. That's the story of Scripture.

SCRIPTURE E3: EAT IT

WHY MEDITATING ON SCRIPTURE IS LIKE CHEWING ON A BONE

No other document in history has been twisted or tamed more than the Bible. We see this pattern repeatedly with the big three topics: money, sex, and power.

Jesus speaks more about money than prayer and faith combined, yet we either twist passages like Malachi 3 to promise tenfold returns and prosperity, or we tame them by claiming tithing is merely an Old Covenant command we can ignore.

The Bible presents a beautiful vision of sexuality, yet we either twist Romans 1 to claim only non-monogamous sex is forbidden, or we tame it by reducing sex to procreation alone, ignoring the Song of Solomon entirely.

Scripture addresses power extensively through the prophets and New Testament, yet we've twisted Ephesians 6 to justify slavery, or tamed passages about pastoral authority by claiming we don't need anyone to redirect us, conveniently overlooking Hebrews 13:17.

The examples are endless. But there's a key practice to keep us from falling into both errors: we don't twist Scripture, we don't tame Scripture—we taste Scripture.

The Path to True Happiness

Psalms 1 opens with a promise: "How happy is the one who does not walk in the advice of the wicked or stand in the pathway with sinners or sit in the company of mockers!" The Hebrew word for "happy" here means total fulfillment, complete well-being. Who wouldn't sign up for that?

But notice the progression of drift: from walking to standing to sitting. By default, we drift toward destruction. The wicked are those who love what God hates and hate what God loves. Sinners miss the target of loving God and others. Mockers become so jaded they can no longer appreciate goodness and beauty.

What exactly is "the advice of the wicked"? We tend to think of obvious sins—stealing,

cheating, hating. But Dallas Willard once observed, “The counsel of the ungodly is just the way most people talk.” John Ortberg offered more subtle examples:

- **Live as if it matters** what people think of you.
- **Live as if the outcomes of your life** are on your shoulders and you control them.
- **Live as if aging** is something to worry about.
- **Live as if satisfying your desires** and appetites is central to your well-being.*

This kind of advice usually goes under the radar, and we buy it completely. There’s only one way to detect that drift and choose another route.

Verse 2 tells us: the person’s delight — “the highest form of pleasure” — is in the Lord’s instruction. This happens like a runner’s high; it takes more than five minutes to develop and enjoy.

“He meditates on it day and night.” The Hebrew word is *hagah*, which means to chew it over with unhurried delight, to taste the Scripture. One Sunday school teacher put it memorably: “Eat like a cow!” Cows have four stomachs, and the food goes back and forth. That’s the image—ruminating, chewing, savoring.

When we meditate on God’s word, we become like a tree planted by streams of water, yielding fruit in season, with leaves that don’t wither. Whatever we do prospers.

A Pattern at Key Moments

This imagery appears almost word-for-word in Joshua 1:7-8, at another crucial moment in Scripture. In the Hebrew Bible, Joshua 1 and Psalm 1 serve as “canonical seams”—transitional points marking new sections. It’s as if the Bible is saying, “As you start this new section, make sure you meditate on it day and night so the Word can do its work!”

Joshua 1:8 promises: “For then you will prosper and succeed in whatever you do.” Not just any success, but biblical success—“doing what God has asked us to do, in His way and His timing.”

It’s difficult to shape a life around Jesus with only one hour of focused attention each week. For most people, that single hour competes with 167 others filled with the voices and values of the world. Even a daily rhythm of fifteen minutes in Scripture and prayer would be a significant step forward—but compared to the constant noise of our culture, the formation gap remains wide.

* Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ’s Presence*

At these key points in Scripture, God invites us to meditate day and night so we succeed in whatever we do. The way we do the Word is to chew the Word.

The Lion and His Prey

The word hagah appears throughout the Bible in various ways. In Isaiah 31:4, it describes a young lion that hags over his prey—like how a dog gnaws on a bone, a slow and satisfying process.

We encounter this eating imagery vividly in Revelation 10:9-10 (echoing Jeremiah 15:16 and Ezekiel 2:8-3:3): “So I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it. It was as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I ate it, my stomach became bitter.”

If you’ve chewed the Word long enough, you’ll find this describes your experience perfectly. The sweet parts: I am saved, forgiven, redeemed, loved, adopted, given purpose, never forsaken. The bitter parts: I must love my enemy, give until it hurts and then give more, share the gospel with neighbors, cut off lust, deny certain desires, turn the other cheek.

But the key to tasting Scripture is leaning into the bitterness. Coffee lovers will tell you that you’re not supposed to fill your cup with sugar—the bitterness is by design. You only experience the beauty of coffee on the other side of bitterness. This principle proves true in many areas of life, including Scripture.

The Unholy Trinity

When the Scriptures get bitter, we try to make them better by twisting them for our control or taming them for our convenience. We pile on sugar and get spiritually unhealthy as a result.

Why is Scripture so bitter to our stomachs? The Holy Trinity confronts what Eugene Peterson calls the Unholy Trinity. We twist or tame the Bible when it confronts our needs, wants, and feelings. “The new Trinity doesn’t get rid of God or the Bible, it merely puts them to the service of needs, wants, and feelings.” Peterson later says the only way to succeed is to eat this book—with spiritual antacid on hand. Without a submissive spirit, an understanding that it all points to Jesus, and a consistent practice of hagah-ing the Bible, it won’t prove transformative.

Happiness comes from tasting the Scriptures for Christlikeness. Letting the Word do its work.

** Eugene H. Peterson, Eat This Book*

A Case Study

Consider Matthew 13:44: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure buried in a field, which a man found and reburied. Then in his joy he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field.”

- **Twist it:** Yell at others to sacrifice more for Jesus. Make them feel bad and prop yourself up as superior.
- **Tame it:** This is hyperbole. We don’t actually have to sell everything.
- **Taste it:** What am I not willing to sell? Is that thing really better than Jesus? God, thank you for opening my eyes that all of this pales in comparison to you.
- **Taste it even more:** Wait—Jesus is the man who sold everything he had to buy the field. He left heaven and came as a baby. He endured the pains of humanity. He was despised and rejected. Yet he did it with joy because he was buying us back.

The Challenge

No one can taste the Scriptures for you. Have you chewed the Word long enough?

The practice for this week and the coming months is to eat this book. Which requires we stop eating other things. Just as a child who snacks all afternoon won’t want dinner, we can’t feast on Scripture if we’re constantly consuming lesser things.

We eat this book through listening, reading, and memorizing. We chew slowly with unhurried delight. We lean into the bitterness, trusting that transformation happens on the other side. We refuse to twist it for our control or tame it for our convenience.

We taste it and let it reshape us from the inside out.

SCRIPTURE E4: OBEY IT

BUILDING YOUR LIFE ON MORE THAN GOOD INTENTIONS

There's a story about a young pastor preaching in view of a call at a church. After a successful interview process, he needed to demonstrate his preaching ability. The search committee gave him three Sundays before the vote.

The first Sunday, he preached a wonderful sermon on forgiveness and reconciliation. The second Sunday, he preached the exact same sermon. The committee assumed he'd forgotten, so they said nothing. The third Sunday, he delivered the identical message again.

Finally, the head of the search committee approached him: "Son, we wanted to hire you, but it sounds like you only know one sermon. Why won't you preach something else?"

The young pastor looked him straight in the eye: "The moment this church starts to forgive and reconcile, I'll move on to the next one."

John Calvin once said, "All right knowledge of God is born out of obedience." It's very common to think the Christian life is just mental assent—agreeing with the right ideas. But to follow a Rabbi meant to be with him, become like him, and do what he did.

Two Houses, One Storm

At the close of the Sermon on the Mount—arguably the most important teaching of Jesus' earthly ministry—Jesus doesn't end with a sappy story or an inspiring poem set to music. He ends with a warning about what happens when we don't obey.

In Matthew 7:24-29, Jesus presents two builders. One builds his house on rock, the other on sand. When storms come—representing life's hardships or God's judgment—one house stands while the other collapses spectacularly.

Three observations about this illustration stand out:

** John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion*

1. Both heard the words of Jesus. Just being in the room doesn't make you wise. Wisdom comes from doing.

2. Both houses were hit with a storm. Many falsely assume following Jesus means avoiding hardship. It's quite the opposite—Jesus promises storms will come.

3. Both houses looked the same at a distance. Like the tree parable earlier in the chapter, the foundation doesn't reveal itself until a storm hits. Cultural Christianity often looks fine until life catches up.

The Mirror Test

James 1:19-25 reinforces this emphasis on obedience. James uses the same Greek word (poieo) that Jesus used in Matthew 7, contrasting “doers” with mere “hearers.” A doer sees what's in the mirror and takes immediate action.

James is saying you unlock the Scriptures when you walk the Scriptures. The Bible will stay confusing and confining when you don't put it into action. But the one who does it will “be blessed in what he does.” Deception and depression often stem from our disobedience.

If obedience is this important, why do we struggle with it so much?

1. It Takes Humility to Obey

Notice that James 1:19-21 precedes the famous “doers not hearers” passage. At first glance, these verses about being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger seem out of place. But how we treat other relationships reflects how we treat God. If we're quick to blow up when criticized or when we lose control, we bring that same energy to God's word.

A humble and gentle person can be formed by Scripture. That requires work.

2. Our Culture's Information-to-Action Ratio Is Broken

Neil Postman coined this concept in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. The tie between information and action has been severed. Information has become “disconnected from usefulness; we are glutted with information, drowning in information, have no control over it, don't know what to do with it.”

* Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

Not long ago, if you heard devastating news, you could do something about it. Joe's horse got out? Everyone runs to catch it. Now we hear about a hundred-year drought in Uruguay and... scroll to the next post. This severance has lasted so long we don't notice it anymore. When someone says "Your sermon moved me today," they simply mean they had good feelings. They didn't actually move.

3. We're Afraid of Earning Our Salvation

A few weeks ago, we established that "keeping God's commands doesn't earn me God's love, but it turns me to God's love." Yet one of Satan's brilliant deceptions is convincing us that obedience is too self-righteous and religious.

Dallas Willard captured this paradox: "If people in our Christian fellowship today were to announce that they had decided to keep God's law, we would probably be skeptical and alarmed... This leaves us caught in a strange inversion of the work of the Judaizing teachers who dogged the footsteps of Paul in New Testament days. As they wanted to add obedience to ritual law to faith in Christ, we want to subtract moral law from faith in Christ."*

How do we combine faith with obedience without earning our salvation?

The Source and the Course

Here's the main idea: The cross of Jesus is the source of the good life, and the commands of Jesus are the course of the good life. By faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross, we are forgiven, redeemed, made new, made clean, and forever in God's family. Without God's grace, we cannot change on our own power. We'll always have wrong motivations behind our actions without it.

But now his commands become an invitation to living out this kingdom life to the full. Don't mix up the two, but don't ignore one of the two.

The cross is the root of the tree, and his commands are the fruit. Fruit doesn't bring life to the root—the root brings life to the fruit. The source of our goodness is the cross, and the course of our goodness is his commands.

What This Looks Like in Practice

Consider Matthew 5:21-26, where Jesus teaches about anger and reconciliation. How is it possible to become people of love and reconciliation?

* Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*

Because of the cross, I am forgiven. My wrongdoings are washed away. My debt has been paid. Therefore, I am set free from being angry. Why would I be angry if I know I'm taken care of? Why would I insult others when I know how much of a fool I am without Christ? Jesus gives me everything I was looking for. The cross removes my need to get even.

Furthermore, because I'm set free from the chains of anger and bitterness, I can do my part in reconciliation. I drop all my activity and first make it right with my brother. Is this stressful? Sure. But I ask the Spirit to help, guide, and comfort me. I'm not at peace until I've finished the practice.

The cross of Christ empowers me to fulfill the commands of Christ. Just learning about reconciliation isn't the same as doing reconciliation. Some of us don't need a prayer—we need a practice.

Putting Words Into Action

Dallas Willard said the Christian life is “putting his words into action and finding them to be true.” We've somehow twisted this into “hearing his words and waiting for them to be true.”

If we're committed to the way of truth in a world of lies, we're committed to being good hearers of the Bible and even better doers of the Bible. Your house is your life. You're already building. The question isn't “Will you build a house?” The question is “What are you building your house on?”

When your source is the cross of Christ and your course is the commands of Christ, the storm will come and pound against your life—but you will not collapse.

We say it all the time: sin isn't bad because it's forbidden; it's forbidden because it's bad. In the same way, obedience isn't good because it's commanded—obedience is commanded because it's good. The life of Jesus is the source of the good life, and the way of Jesus is the course of the good life.

What is your next step of obedience? Maybe it's believing in Christ. Maybe it's baptism. Maybe it's reconciliation. Maybe it's reading the Word. Maybe it's giving sacrificially. Maybe it's forgiving your own shortcomings.

May we unlock the Scriptures by walking the Scriptures, together.

FORMED BY SIMPLICITY

The practice of simplicity is removing the number of digital distractions, material desires, and relational dishonesties that keep us from living a joyful life in the kingdom with Jesus.

Recommended Reads:

Abundant Simplicity by Jan Johnson

Freedom of Simplicity by Richard Foster

The Way of the Heart by Henri Nouwen

SIMPLICITY E1: DIGITAL

ESCAPING THE ATTENTION ECONOMY'S CHOKEHOLD

Formation is happening whether we like it or not.

We're either becoming the people we want to become through intentional formation, or we're allowing the world to deform us in ugly and damaging ways. Without any effort, we aren't formed by Jesus but by the world, the flesh, and the devil. We never drift toward godliness and contentment.

The scary part is this formation happens without us even noticing it. Henri Nouwen writes: "There is seldom a period in which we do not know what to do, and we move through life in such a distracted way that we do not even take the time and rest to wonder if any of the things we think, say, or do are worth thinking, saying, or doing."

Every few months, we pick up another practice from the life of Jesus to change the way we think, say, and do things. Because his way is better.

The Parable of the Crowded Heart

In Mark 4:1-20, Jesus tells the parable of the sower. Four types of soil represent four conditions of the heart: hard, shallow, crowded, and soft. The soft heart produces much fruit—a fulfilled life is a fruitful life, marked by character and competency.

But it's the crowded heart in verses 18-19 that demands our attention today. The NLT translation puts it this way: "The seed that fell among the thorns represents others who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things, so no fruit is produced."

This passage is terrifying and humbling because who among us isn't worried about this life? Who doesn't want more money? Who isn't constantly desiring other things? A crowded heart is our generation's biggest threat because nothing crowds our time and attention quite like the digital world. And that is by design.

** Henri Nouwen, The Way of the Heart*

Welcome to the Attention Economy

Experts describe our current moment as the “attention economy.” Social media and television are literally designed to do whatever it takes to keep your attention. That’s why fearmongering and hate-stirring dominate—they get the most clicks and generate the most conversations.

There was a day when the marketing industry saw readers as the customer. But starting as early as 1830, newspaper publisher Benjamin Day realized you make more money when readers become the product and advertisers become the customers. That’s why social media is free—you’re the product.

Tristan Harris, a former design ethicist for Google, calls social media a slot machine. “You pull a lever and immediately receive either an enticing reward (a match, a prize!) or nothing.” What makes slot machines so dangerous is that it’s just a few dollars at a time, yet the casino industry made \$60 billion off Americans last year alone. Similarly, digital consumption is just a few clicks or videos at a time.

Digital distraction isn’t limited to social media. It comes through games, audiobooks, podcasts, TV, news, and talk radio. Neil Postman argued in 1985 that our civilization started to decline when we introduced national news because it created a gap between information and action. It stirs enormous anxiety because there’s nothing we can do about the news.

Besides a slot machine, people are calling digital addiction our generation’s cigarette—we’re all hooked on it before we even know what it does. As Bill Maher put it: “Philip Morris just wanted your lungs. The App Store wants your soul.” Jesus asked, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?”

The Root of Our Dissatisfaction

The quickest way to corruption is to be careless with consumption. And the ones creating the digital world are counting on us to be careless about it.

We’ve been careless about our consumption for too long. As a result, we’ve suffered damage to our time, our attention, and our very souls. Our digital addiction is the root of so many dissatisfactions in life.

It’s why we love the idea of Sabbath but don’t have enough time for it. It’s why we’re drawn to reading our Bible, but our attention spans are so depleted that a chapter feels too long and boring.

As Pastor Caleb once texted: “To have our attention violently pulled in every direction (social media, news, Netflix) de-centers us and makes us anxious people easily swayed into fear and apathy. We become incapable of practicing the way of Jesus. Digital distractions pull our devotion away from God and back onto ourselves. They numb our minds with dopamine and make us chase our next ‘hit.’ We become slaves to entertainment, news, social media. Digitalism trains us for instant satisfaction and immediate results which is antithetical to how spiritual formation works.”

Is there a practice from the way of Jesus that could set us free from our digital addiction, distraction, and dissatisfaction? Is it possible to get our time, attention, and souls back? Yes. It’s the practice of simplicity.

What Is Simplicity?

For centuries, monks didn’t use the phrase “simplicity” but instead “frugality” —from the Latin frux, meaning fruit. It carries the idea of simplifying your life so you can have a fruitful life. Sadly, frugal is now associated with being stingy and joyless, which is why Christians more recently call it simplicity. Richard Foster defines simplicity as “the inward reality of single-hearted focus upon God and his kingdom, which results in an outward lifestyle of modesty, openness, and unpretentiousness and which disciplines our hunger for status, glamour, and luxury.”*

Our working definition: The practice of simplicity is removing the number of digital distractions, material desires, and relational dishonesties that keep us from living a joyful life in the kingdom with Jesus.

Jesus and the Desert

Is there a verse giving Jesus’ formula for using an iPhone? No. But we see Jesus removing distractions for the purpose of strength and vitality all over the Gospels. In Mark 1:32-35, Mark 6:30-32, and Luke 5:15-16, Jesus consistently withdraws to solitary places.

In Matthew 3:16-4:1, after being affirmed by the Father at his baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Many assume Jesus was brought to his weakest point and then had to fight the devil. But throughout the Bible, God uses the wilderness (eramos) to strengthen his people. Jesus went away so he would be at full strength to duel with the devil. At the end of his time in the desert, the devil tempts him three ways. Henri Nouwen describes these as the temptation to be relevant, the temptation to be spectacular, and the temptation to be powerful. Aren’t these the same temptations that keep us coming back to the digital world? To prove our abilities and worth, to win people’s applause, to be God rather than love God?

** Richard J. Foster, Freedom of Simplicity*

We can complain about the rat race all day, but Jesus has shown us the way out: The only way out of the chokehold is going to the desert. In the Bible, the desert is both literal and metaphorical, pointing to time away with God in solitude—to simplify what we think, say, and do, to get alone with God and deal with the wounds we’ve been avoiding, to reorder the “oughts” and “musts” that culture forces upon us.

Taking Practical Steps

This isn’t about becoming Luddites. GPS is essential, social media can reach people far from God, and many wouldn’t be in church without digital media teams. But like any other substance, we must recognize there’s a need for limits and restrictions.

The question to wrestle with is: What are ways we can remove digital distractions that are keeping us from living a joyful life in the kingdom with Jesus? This practice isn’t about doing more—it’s about doing less. Here’s a spectrum of options:

- **Very Easy:** Turn off all digital notifications.
- **Easy:** Nothing digital during dinner.
- **Moderate:** Delete social media from your phone; nothing digital before 10am and after 5pm.
- **Hard:** TV/digital entertainment fast; remove the TV from the living room.
- **Very Hard:** 30-day digital detox.

The Desert Isn’t Desertion

There’s a real possibility that the sound of the desert appeals to you, but you know you’d never go there yourself. You won’t go to the desert if you fear you’ll be deserted. Noise, for many of us, is a false tranquilizer we can’t live without. Because without it, we’re left with ourselves and our wounds. We’re reminded of our past. We don’t like what we see in the mirror.

Notice in Matthew 3 that Jesus gets affirmed by the Father and then is led into the desert. Before you do anything else, receive the love of the Father. Because of what Christ did on the cross and in the resurrection, we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. You can know with great confidence that you are his beloved son or daughter, with whom he is well pleased.

Only from that place of belovedness can we find the courage to face the silence.

SIMPLICITY E2: MATERIAL

BREAKING FREE FROM THE PROPAGANDA OF MORE

A key idea in becoming a disciple of Jesus is what Dallas Willard calls VIM: Vision (seeing a picture of a preferred future where you become like Jesus), Intention (deciding this is who you actually want to become), and Means (finding a plan and committing to practicing it so the vision comes true).*

As a pastor, I can paint the vision and plan out the means, but I'm helpless with the intention. At the end of the day, you must decide if this is worth doing.

The vision for this series is becoming a people of contentment in a world of consumption. The means? Digital, material, and relational simplicity. But I'll be honest—even if you enjoyed last week's message on digital simplicity, I have real doubts this week will have the same appeal.

Let me let Jesus himself paint the vision and plan out the means.

The Vision: A Life Without Worry

Matthew 6:25 offers an almost unbelievable promise: "Therefore I tell you: Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

Can you imagine becoming a person who actually never worries? It doesn't happen by accident—we live in the "age of anxiety." But most of us miss the "therefore" in verse 25. The vision comes in verse 25, but the previous verses provide the means.

In Matthew 6:22-24, Jesus argues that just as an eye affects our whole body, our attention affects our whole life. We need the gift of a single mind. "The double-minded are unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8). Jesus uses logic: we're designed for a single master. Any attempt to have more than one master leads to depression and dysfunction, even with the best intentions.

* Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*

Jesus is arguing that we are dis-eased from being double-minded and double-mastered. To put it positively, the easy yoke comes from a single mind set on a single master.

Last week we set out a plan for a single mind through a digital desert. How do we set ourselves free from a double master?

The Propaganda of More

Nothing spreads dis-ease like the propaganda of more.

In the mid-1900s, marketers made a breakthrough. During international conflict, everyone made money from propaganda of war. But during peacetime, they discovered they could make just as much money by making propaganda of more.

I use the word “propaganda” intentionally because that’s how they learned modern advertising—through skills acquired during their fight against the Germans. Edward Bernays, the father of modern advertising, writes in his book *Propaganda*: “Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, and our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of.”

These marketers are brilliant at what they do. For our entire lives, we’ve been formed to believe the answer is always more. Eric Weinstein, mathematician and physicist made popular from the Joe Rogan podcast, calls this dis-ease the EGO: Embedded Growth Obligations. If a company doesn’t make money quarter by quarter, the CEO is fired. We don’t want leaders who emulate character—just stimulate cash. Walt Disney once said, “We don’t make more movies to make more money. We make more money to make more movies.” But this philosophy has died.

This isn’t just at a company level—it’s our individual identities. We’ve begun to identify our worth with how much money we make or how many possessions we own. Our identity has changed from being American citizens to being American consumers. We produce very little for ourselves. We’ve become voracious consumers of not only goods but services, all in an attempt to increase our quality of life.

We shifted from citizens to consumers around the 1960s. The economy morphed from needs-based to wants-based and hasn’t looked back. Americans consume twice as many material goods as we did fifty years ago. Our homes have nearly tripled in size. The average home contains 300,000 items. But has it increased our quality of life? Every piece of data points to the 1950s as the last time we were generally happy. Research shows happiness increases as salary increases until people reach about \$70,000. Soon after, the inverse begins: more money, more misery.

Yet we're never told this obvious truth. Instead, we're assured we're one item away from happiness. On average, we see an ad to buy a product 100 times before 9am—5,000 times by the end of the day. Joshua Becker, author of *The More of Less*, argues: "Consumerism surrounds us like the air we breathe, and like air, it's invisible. We hardly even know how much we are influenced by the philosophy that we must buy, buy, buy if we are to be happy." But friends, we are sad, sad, sad.

Jesus said, "It is more blessed (happy) to give than to receive." Most of us believe Jesus, but the propaganda of more has been so successful that we're stuck in its chokehold.

As Richard Foster writes: "Think of the misery that comes into our lives by our restless, gnawing greed. We plunge ourselves into enormous debt and then take two and three jobs to stay afloat. We uproot our families with unnecessary moves just so we can have a more prestigious house. We grasp and grab and never have enough. And most destructive of all, greed has a way of severing the cords of compassion."*

Is there a way to get our compassion back? Can we be set free from the chokehold of consumerism and live lives filled with peace and contentment? Yes. Through Jesus' practice of material simplicity.

The Parable of the Rich Fool

Luke 12:13-21 tells a parable found only in Luke's gospel. When Jesus shares a parable without naming a character, it's a nod for the audience to put themselves into the narrative. A man approaches Jesus to mediate an inheritance dispute. Jesus denies what the man wants but gets to the heart of his problem: "Watch out and be on your guard against all greed, because one's life is not in the abundance of his possessions."

Jesus tells of a rich man whose land produced abundantly. The man thinks to himself (notice the ego—lots of "I, I, I"), "What should I do, since I don't have anywhere to store my crops?" He decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones to store all his grain and goods. Then he'll tell himself, "You have many goods stored up for many years. Take it easy; eat, drink, and enjoy yourself."

But God says, "You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you have prepared—whose will they be?" Jesus concludes: "That's how it is with the one who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

What is Jesus arguing? Staying in the posture of gain will keep you in the prison of pain. The good life is found in (1) limiting what we own and (2) increasing what we give.

* Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*

Three Things We Need

I know this sounds impossible. In fact, I think it is impossible without three things: the Holy Spirit to open our minds, a community to encourage us, and a plan we actually put into practice. Here's a framework for creating that plan:

1. Evaluate: What do you value most in life?

Minimalism is “the intentional promotion of the things we most value and the removal of anything that distracts us from them.” Some things are very useful—in 1 Timothy 6, Paul argues God gives us things to enjoy. But it's also a trap: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” Values help you define what needs to stay and what needs to go.

2. Experiment: I will live without _____ (possessions) for ____ days.

Try living without a cluttered vehicle for seven days. Or without a habitual daily purchase. Or without entertainment that isn't free. Or without any online purchases for thirty days. This experiment will teach you that you don't need as much as you think. Clutter is scientifically proven to distract your focus and disrupt your sleep. “We have to choose between our stuff and our serenity because physical clutter creates mental clutter.”**

3. Remember: Decluttering isn't removal to get God's approval but making space for God's grace.

This will look different for every person. Jesus doesn't give us a specific dollar amount or car to drive. We all have different capacities, and things like larger income or larger houses can contribute to God's kingdom in many ways.

But hear this: In a world that is constantly calling us to raise our standard of living, what would it look like if our community raised its standard of loving? There's no doubt most of us want to raise our standard of loving. But for too long, we've failed to make the correlation that we can only raise one: either our standard of living or our standard of loving.

G.K. Chesterton puts it beautifully: “There are two ways to get enough: one is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less.”

* Joshua Becker, *The More of Less*

** Jan Johnson, *Abundant Simplicity*

SIMPLICITY E3: RELATIONAL

WHEN YOUR WORDS UNLEASH HELL ON EARTH

If I were to repackage this series into a title that might attract the disinterested, it would be “The Christian’s Survival Guide to the Election Year of 20__.”

- **Step one: Remove digital distractions.** Marketers and politicians literally pay millions on ads that play to our fears or desires. They pour millions into it because they know it works. The truth is we can’t resist the propaganda—which is why we cut the cord.
- **Step two: Limit material possessions.** Politicians and marketers love making promises that play to our desire for security and possessions. Greed has a way of “cutting the cord of compassion.”*
- **Step three: Resist the need to win every argument.** What we do with our words matters.

Dallas Willard argues we ought to train much, much earlier than we think: “It is part of the misguided and whimsical condition of humankind that we so devoutly believe in the power of effort-at-the-moment-of-action alone to accomplish what we want and completely ignore the need for character change in our lives as a whole.”**

It’s as if we have to lift a 300-pound stone to free someone’s leg and we assume if we just lift five minutes before the incident, we will have gained the strength for the task. This series and every other one we do are training our hearts, minds, and bodies to live like Jesus lived.

The Tongue Sets the Whole Body on Fire

James 3:1-6 contains some of the Bible’s most intense language about speech. This isn’t “Hey! Try to be nicer with your words!” It’s more like “Without restraint, your words unleash hell on earth.”

* Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*

** Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*

James uses three illustrations to show the power of the tongue—a bit in a horse’s mouth, a small rudder on a ship, a tiny spark that sets a forest ablaze. Then he delivers the gut punch: “And the tongue is a fire. The tongue, a world of unrighteousness, is placed among our parts. It stains the whole body, sets the course of life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”

Words have immense power for good or for bad. Proverbs 18:20-21 confirms this: “Wise words satisfy like a good meal; the right words bring satisfaction. The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences.”

Studies about hospital environments show that patients who heard encouraging words from medical teams had far greater success rates of recovery. The same principle applies to plants in controlled experiments.

So is our tongue bringing death or life? As a society, it’s unleashing the fire of hell. We are dis-eased from being double-minded, double-mastered, and double-tongued.

The Disease of the Double Tongue

Double-tongue is a biblical idea of using words to your advantage, even when you don’t truly mean what you say.

It’s the use of flattery to take advantage of someone in a higher position. It’s the use of contempt to put down someone in a lower position. Jonathan Haidt argues this is why we love scandals so much: “Scandal is great entertainment because it allows people to feel contempt, a moral emotion that gives feelings of moral superiority while asking nothing in return.”*

It’s the use of tribalism to dismiss the other side’s argument. It’s the use of “complisaults” to make sure someone doesn’t get a big head. It’s the use of manipulation to control someone who follows you. As Jan Johnson writes, “We may not pressure someone at the point of a gun, but we do it with the point of our words, because words—think of talk radio, websites, TV advertisements, campaign speeches—are what persuade people.”**

It’s the use of exaggeration to impress someone you admire.

Is there a practice from the way of Jesus that can set us free from this fire of hell? Is it possible to use our words to build and honor instead of destroy and dishonor? Can we speak life and not death? Yes, and it’s found in the practice of relational simplicity.

* Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*

** Jan Johnson, *Abundant Simplicity*

Simplicity Includes Our Speech

When studying how the church used simplicity over the centuries, it's surprising to learn that speech was included. It makes sense to cut down distractions and possessions, but cutting down our words?

The heart of simplicity is to remove anything that crowds and chokes our heart from a fruitful and fulfilled life in Christ. Our working definition: The practice of simplicity is removing the number of digital distractions, material desires, and relational dishonesties that keep us from living a joyful life in the kingdom with Jesus.

We can go a long way by removing digital distractions and material desires, but there's a whole new level of freedom when we remove our relational dishonesties.

Richard Foster describes this freedom beautifully: "Do you know the wonderful new freedom this simplicity brings? No longer is there the stifling preoccupation with ourselves. Now there are new liberating graces to care deeply for the needs of others. And most wonderful of all, we can lay down the crushing burden of the opinions of others. We do not have to be liked. We do not have to succeed. We can enjoy obscurity as easily as fame."*

We see Jesus exhibit this freedom in the Gospels. He didn't have to answer every question. He cared for the least of these at the cost of his reputation. He spoke when it would have benefitted him to stay silent. He stayed silent when it would have benefitted him to speak.

Paul's Wardrobe Change

In Ephesians 4, Paul builds his case: we're saved by grace, not works. His grace not only unifies us back to God but also unifies us with each other. Then he gets practical about speech. In verses 17-19, Paul warns against walking in the "futility of their thoughts" — doing things without thinking, following the plausibility structures of our day. "More and more" naturally sounds like a wonderful idea, but Paul warns us about this type of unexamined belief.

In verses 20-24, Paul uses the metaphor of clothing: "take off" the old self and "put on" the new. You can't put on something new until you take off something old. That's what's beautiful about simplicity—it's not about doing more but doing less.

Then Paul gets specific about speech in verses 25-32: Speak the truth. Jesus puts it in Matthew 5:37: "But let your 'yes' mean 'yes,' and your 'no' mean 'no.' Anything more than this is from the evil one." Lying is hard to keep up with.

* Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*

Don't let anger turn into contempt or resentment that belittles people. "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up." Imagine if we lived by this principle. Because of our security in Christ, it's possible to remove bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice. Here are three practices to try this week:

1. Use secrecy in the place of gossip and exaggeration.

Proverbs 11:13 says, "A gossip goes around revealing a secret, but a trustworthy person keeps a confidence." We need to be a safe space where people can confess their wrongdoings. The Pharisees loved to display their generosity to crowds, but it's wiser to do good and tell nobody about it.

Ask yourself: Why can't I keep a secret? What am I looking for when I gossip or exaggerate?

2. Embrace silence in the place of rage and manipulation.

When angry, take a walk and pray with God about what's frustrating you. When things aren't going your way, don't fight to have the last word.

Ask yourself: Why can't I keep silent? What am I looking for when I rage or manipulate?

3. Speak honor in the place of flattery and contempt.

Flattery is a compliment not based in reality—you want someone to think favorably toward you. An honor culture in church speaks just as highly of the tech team as they do the pastor. Contempt uses words to bring someone else down, often through sarcasm.

Ask yourself: Why can't I honor someone? What am I looking for in flattery or contempt?

Henri Nouwen, writing to pastors, said: "Sometimes it seems that our many words are more an expression of our doubt than of our faith. It is as if we are not sure that God's Spirit can touch the hearts of people: we have to help him out, with many words, convince others of his power. As ministers our greatest temptation is toward too many words. They weaken our faith and make us lukewarm. Silence is a sacred discipline, a guard of the Holy Spirit."

Simplifying our speech is a major way we can make space for God's grace. Can you imagine the type of joy and witness we would have if we became a people who simplified their digital distractions, material desires, and relational dishonesties?

** Henri Nouwen, The Way of the Heart*

SIMPLICITY E4: GOSPEL

THE GOOD NEWS IS SIMPLE BUT NEVER SUPERFICIAL

For the last three weeks we've argued we're in the middle of a major problem: we are diseased from having a double mind, a double master, and a double tongue.

- **A double mind** is distracted and torn in many directions—nothing does that quite like the digital world. The quickest way to corruption is to be careless with consumption.
- **A double master** means trying to trust Jesus and money simultaneously. Jesus says this is logically impossible. Staying in the posture of gain keeps you in the prison of pain.
- **A double tongue** is the picture of a hypocrite who can't keep his words straight, using his tongue to tear down rather than build up.

Every week, we've said the solution is simplicity: cut down digital intake, limit what you own, embrace a new form of speech that speaks life or doesn't speak at all.

But all of this rises and falls on how we understand and apply gospel simplicity.

The Danger of Making It Too Easy

Richard Foster, in his introduction to *Freedom of Simplicity*, writes: "While simplicity provides an answer to the modern dilemma, it does not provide an easy answer. We must never confuse simplicity with simplism."^{*}

How often have we boiled down the gospel into three or four easy steps? "A—admit you're a sinner. B—believe Jesus died for your sins. C—confess Jesus as your Lord and Savior. As simple as ABC."

What's fascinating is this formula didn't become popular until after World War II. We began to feel the need to trim the gospel down to an elevator pitch: Your sin deserves hell, Christ died in your place, believe so you can go to heaven when you die.

^{*} Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*

This isn't wrong—it's just incomplete.

What about Jesus being born of a virgin, fully God and fully man? What about Jesus living the perfect life we were designed to live? What about Jesus as a Rabbi who calls us to be with him, become like him, and do what he did? What about Jesus rising again, defeating sin, Satan, and death once and for all? What about Jesus ascending to the Father's right hand, interceding for us? What about Jesus coming back again, ushering in the totality of the kingdom?

A three-step formula helps people make decisions, but it does a poor job of making disciples. You know we've missed the plotline when we start picking and choosing what to follow in the Sermon on the Mount. Turning the other cheek seems too weak. Equating lust with adultery feels too restrictive. Loving enemies sounds impractical.

John Ortberg, in his book *Eternity Is Now in Session*, laments how much we've stripped the gospel of its power: "Can you imagine Jesus himself teaching this? 'Believing all that I teach is true—that's optional. Believing that I can run your life and allowing me to do so—that's optional. Intending to actually obey me—that's optional. As long as you believe that my death paid for your sins, you don't need to worry about doing what I've said as far as heaven is concerned.'"

In an effort to make the gospel simple, we've made it superficial. And we're dealing with the consequences. In a recent Barna Research study, only 10% of Christian millennials qualify as "resilient disciples"—defined as those who attend church monthly, trust the authority of the Bible, affirm Jesus rose again to conquer sin and death, and express a desire to transform society.

Maybe we've watered it down too much.

A Gospel That's Simple But Not Superficial

The good news is there's a gospel that is simple but certainly not superficial. In Mark 10:13-16, Jesus welcomes children and says, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." The "kingdom of God" refers to God's rule and reign, interchangeable with "kingdom of heaven," "salvation," and "eternal life." Kingdom is a dominant theme throughout the New Testament.

Jesus is calling us to be childlike, not childish. Childlike means joyful, trusting, fully reliant, not worrying about tomorrow. Childish means immature, lacking self-control, refusing to take responsibility. Jesus is offering a gospel that is simple but not superficial.

* John Ortberg, *Eternity is Now in Session*

The Rich Young Ruler's One Problem

To help us see the difference, Mark transitions to an encounter Jesus has with a rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-22.

Many assume the worst of this man, but we need to give him credit. He runs and kneels before Jesus. He calls him “Good Teacher,” meaning Rabbi, showing willingness to be with Jesus, become like Jesus, and do what Jesus says. He’s probably kept more of the Ten Commandments than most of us. He wants eternal life—”a joyful life in the kingdom with Jesus.” Notice that Jesus “loved him.”

He literally lacks only one thing: over-trust in possessions. He thought he owned his things, but his things owned him. This guy is an all-star. Between the children and this guy, all of us would pick him.

Trust, Not Tests

What’s the key difference between the children and the young ruler? The young ruler was more useful—he could fund the ministry, he’d memorized the Torah. But the children were more trusting. They had nothing to boast in but to rely on the love of their Father.

Living a joyful life in the kingdom with Jesus is not about passing a test but about placing your trust.

This man knew his Bible and kept most of the commandments, but he missed the simplicity of the kingdom. He assumed there was one more thing he needed to add, but his only hope was in what he would subtract. Our own versions might sound like: “I have kept the Sabbath, I read the Bible every day, I got rid of my iPhone...” And Jesus may be saying to you, “You lack one thing.” If it were a test, you’d be passing. But that’s not the gospel. It’s about trust.

Trust often looks like letting go. Trust is not a one-time event. This is why the church used to be known for disciplines of abstinence—intentional acts of stopping or letting go of habits or mindsets.

As Jan Johnson writes: “If we don’t practice abstinence disciplines regularly, we find ourselves stuck. We become reliant on our own devices (yelling, manipulation) to get people to do things, or we turn to inappropriate sources of satisfaction (our job, Internet porn). We’re unable to experience transformation no matter how much we pray or meditate because there’s all this stuff in us that needs undoing.”

** Jan Johnson, Abundant Simplicity*

Impossibly Possible

Jesus acknowledges how hard it is to give up our trust structures in Mark 10:23-27. He compares it to a camel going through the eye of a needle—laughably impossible. It's only possible when we give up and surrender to God's power.

In Matthew 7:13, Jesus says the entrance into the kingdom is a narrow gate. You don't have to earn your way in, but you have to let go of whatever you're holding onto to get through. That's because whatever you're holding onto is really holding onto you.

Three Things to Let Go

Mark 10:28 reminds us that discipleship is leaving everything to follow Jesus. What are you called to let go of and surrender?

1. Let go of your past. Far too many of us carry around guilt that Jesus already paid for on the cross. There is no condemnation for those who put their trust in the finished work of the cross.

2. Let go of your future. Your need for security. Your worries for tomorrow. In Christ, we have an inheritance of the new heavens and new earth.

3. Let go of your present. Acknowledge you're not where you thought you would be. Let go of what you thought would happen by now. Self-image. Public image. Christ sees you, knows you, and loves you.

You can be set free from the dis-ease of a double mind, a double master, and a double tongue because Christ has given you a double portion. Isaiah 61:7 promises: "In place of your shame, you will have a double portion."

The practice of gospel simplicity challenges us to try all three practices we've learned in the span of 24 hours: abstain from the digital and material world, use that time to speak life into people around you, and use that time to let go of your past, present, and future into the hands of God.

We invite you to the joyful life in the kingdom with Jesus—simple but never superficial.

FORMED BY HOSPITALITY

**The practice of hospitality
is creating space over
a meal with saints,
strangers, and sinners
to experience the loving
grace of God.**

Recommended Reads:

The Gospel Comes with a House Key by Rosaria Butterfield

A Meal with Jesus by Tim Chester

The Meal Jesus Gave Us by N.T. Wright

HOSPITALITY E1: FEASTING ON THE SAVIOR

HOW WE LOST THE JOY OF COMMUNION

“The Jesus way wedded to the Jesus truth brings about the Jesus life.”

This is Eugene Peterson’s commentary on John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” The popular way to translate this verse is to think only in terms of how to get into heaven—which is true. The blood of Christ is the only way we can be reunited with God for eternity.

But a more comprehensive and compelling way to read this verse is to realize it’s also about how to get heaven into you. Jesus came as a Rabbi, giving us a specific roadmap to kingdom living, which he calls the Narrow Way. When we do the hard work of submitting to his teachings (the truth) and adopting his lifestyle (the way), we begin to experience his abundant life.

To that end, every three months we gather around a specific way of living and teaching that Jesus embodied 2,000 years ago and practice it in the modern age. This year, we’re focusing on lifestyle practices Jesus used to make friends and love other people.

One practice Jesus mastered was eating and drinking.

The Feasting Rabbi

Twice in Luke, Jesus states his mission by saying, “The Son of Man has come...” In Luke 19:10, he declares: “The Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost.” But in Luke 7:34, he offers a different description: “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”

When you read the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or just leaving a meal. In Luke 5, he dines with tax collectors and sinners—very taboo for the day. In Luke 7, he eats with Pharisees and a sinful woman. Luke 9 records him breaking bread at Bethsaida to feed 5,000 men. In Luke 10, he feasts with disciples at Martha’s house. Luke 11 shows him dining at the Pharisees’ house at noon. Luke 14 has him eating with Pharisees again, telling them to invite everyone to the banquet. Luke 19 records him eating

with Zacchaeus and his tax collector friends. Luke 22 gives us the Passover meal, the Last Supper. Luke 24 shows him breaking bread at Emmaus to open the eyes of two disciples, then having dinner with the eleven disciples before sending them out on mission.

Friends, we follow a Rabbi who loves to feast.

The Practice of Hospitality

For the next four weeks, we're teaching on the practice of hospitality. The Greek word is *philoxenia*—*philo* (family love) plus *xenia* (stranger/alien). Literally, to bring strangers into the family by welcoming them to the table.

Our working definition: The practice of hospitality is creating space over a meal with saints, strangers, and sinners to experience the loving grace of God.

But before we can be hospitable to others, we must grasp how God has been hospitable to us. As gospel people, we must remember that we were once enemies of God who were invited to his table because of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Romans 5:8-10 says: "But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us... For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life." We gather because we've been reconciled to God and to each other.

The Significance We've Lost

For centuries, the dominant symbol of reconciliation has been the table. During Jesus' time, the dinner table was the ultimate boundary marker. You only brought people to your table if they were considered family or righteous friends. That's why Jesus' eating and drinking was so taboo. The table was your way of knowing if you were in or out—even more effective than your top eight on MySpace.

Through the centuries, we've reduced the significance of table fellowship to our detriment. Leonard Sweet said, "An untabled faith is an unstable faith."* No wonder we're so unstable. There's one specific table fellowship we've drastically reduced, and it may be the root of many problems in the Western church: the Lord's Supper.

Five Names, Five Meanings

In 1 Corinthians 11:23-33, Paul addresses the church's practice of communion. When he says "in remembrance of me," we have a shallow way of defining remember. We think it's

* Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*

simple recall—a mental exercise. But consider the opposite: dismember, to pull off a finger or arm. To remember is to graft into your body, to take something from the past and drag it into the present.

When you take communion, you're remembering the teachings and lifestyle of Jesus to fully experience the abundance of Jesus. The Lord's Supper has five biblical names, each revealing a different aspect of God's grace at the table:

1. The Lord's Supper

Notice it's not the Lord's snack—it's a full meal. In 1 Corinthians 11, it's such a big meal that some members are getting drunk. This wasn't a Styrofoam thing labeled "bread."

The Last Supper was a Passover meal. In Exodus 12, the angel would take any firstborn son who didn't have the lamb's blood over their door. If the blood was over your doorpost, you were spared. Every year, Israel remembered how the Lamb saved them. Jesus fulfilled the Passover by providing wine and bread, but there was no lamb prepared—he's the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

2. Communion (Koinonia—Common Union)

In the Garden of Eden, they ate from the wrong tree and lost unity with God and each other. Communion is eating to signify reconciliation to both.

The Corinthian church was ignoring this common union. In the Greco-Roman world, the rich wouldn't have to work in the fields all day, so they ate without waiting for the poor. In Christ, there are no divisions of any kind. The meal reflects that unity.

3. Love Feast (Agape Feast)

Jude 12 references the love feast. The early church gained quite a reputation—news spread they met together for a love feast, eating the blood and body of a Jewish man from Nazareth. Agape means to seek the welfare of another ahead of your own.

This is a feast and a celebration. As John Mark Hicks notes: "As Greco-Roman culture invaded the Corinthian assembly, the Lord's supper became a moment of socio-economic stratification. Modern culture has invaded the contemporary church so that the Lord's supper has become an occasion for silent, individualistic piety."*

* John Mark Hicks, *Come to the Table*

Is your perception of communion anything like what we've learned? A full meal. Every class, age, and ethnicity at the same table. A feast filled with love, joy, and celebration.

4. Eucharist (The Thanksgiving Meal)

While there's a time for grief at the table, that examination should happen before (1 Corinthians 11:28). Largely, it's gratitude and joy. At the Passover meal, the family practiced "dayenu at dinner." The father would announce each element of God's deliverance from Egypt, pausing between events for the kids to say dayenu—"it would have been enough!"

At the cross, Jesus took away our guilt. Dayenu. At the cross, Jesus defeated all our enemies. Dayenu. Jesus promised us resurrected bodies. Dayenu.

As Philip Yancey writes: "This table is different. It isn't where sinners find Christ, but where sons and daughters celebrate being found. Maybe someday instead of solemnly making our way to the tables, we should dance for joy. Maybe we should sing every born-again song we know. Maybe we should tell our homecoming stories and laugh like people who no longer fear death."

5. Breaking Bread

Jesus chose bread for several reasons. It's common—even the poor had access to make this meal. Sharing bread requires tearing it apart. This tearing serves as a symbol of Jesus being torn apart for us.

Food reminds us that something must die so we can live. Animals and plants must be cut off to sustain us another day. It's in the fabric of creation: something must die so I can live. Jesus gave his body and blood so we can live. Jesus was broken apart so we could be put back together.

Grace Served, Not Earned

At the table, we're reminded: we don't make this food—it's just our job to enjoy it. We cannot make our own salvation. It was already prepared for us. So we celebrate. And we don't do it alone but in community.

The practice this week is to set the table—both in formal communion and in our everyday meals together, transforming them into occasions to remember, celebrate, and experience the loving grace of God who tore himself apart so we could be made whole.

** Philip Yancey, Church: Why Bother?*

HOSPITALITY E2: FEASTING WITH THE SAINTS

THE SHADOW SIDE OF COMMUNITY

We started this year with a dream: What if we became people who knew how to make friends and love other people?

Chronic loneliness is at an all-time high. Gen Z is the loneliest generation of all time. Loneliness is more damaging to your health than smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. Our national life expectancy is falling—not because of COVID or cancer, but from young suicides, drug overdoses, and alcoholism, all of which are much easier to fall into when you feel alone.

Loneliness isn't just a problem out in the world—it's also within the walls of the church. If anything, it can be worse here because we try to present the best versions of ourselves to look like good Christians, which is opposite of the grace we preach.

But when we intentionally put the way of Jesus at the center of our community, friendship isn't just common sense—it can become common practice. Our Formed by Hospitality series is a dream within a dream: to become a people who consistently create space over a meal with saints, strangers, and sinners to experience the loving grace of God.

Last week we looked at feasting on the Savior. This week: feasting with the saints—which is a lot harder than it sounds.

The Apostle's Recipe for Family Love

Romans 1-8 contains some of the most beautiful theology in the whole Bible: the depths of our sin, the magnitude of grace, and the depths of Christ's love. Romans 9-11 addresses the church and Gentiles being grafted into God's family. Now Romans 12-15 is about the church becoming a people of love. Specifically, verses 3-16 focus on love within the Christian community, while verses 17-21 address loving our enemies.

In Romans 12:3-8, Paul uses the metaphor of a body—reminding us we're all unified as a church while explaining we all have different parts to play.

Verses 9-16 have been labeled by some commentators as “the apostle’s recipe for family love.” Be enthusiastic about it. Don’t be lazy. Practice hospitality (philo—family love; xenia—stranger). Every emotion ought to be expressed in community. “Get along with each other; don’t be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don’t be the great somebody” (MSG).

Notice what Paul is painting: the community of Christ is a beautiful blessing we’re lucky to be part of, but it takes a lot of work and can easily get corrupted.

The Four Shadow Sides

In *Making Friends and Loving Other People*, we argued that deep, lasting, holy friendships are created from four movements: proximity, vulnerability, practice, and mission. When you start practicing hospitality, you’ll notice each step has a dark side that can blow up the entire operation.

We have an enemy who prowls around like a roaring lion seeking to devour and divide our congregation. When the enemy wants to divide a church, he starts at the top and at the table, trying to pervert what we intend for good. But Romans 12 ends by telling us, “Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.”

1. The Shadow Side of Proximity Is Familiarity

The first step to deep friendship is getting around people. Jeffrey Hall, a professor at the University of Kansas, researched the time needed for friendships to blossom: 50 hours to move from acquaintance to casual friend, 90 hours from casual friend to friend, and 200 hours to qualify as a best friend.

But once you’re in regular proximity, familiarity begins to creep in. We see this with Jesus’ hometown—they couldn’t honor him for who he was because they grew up with him (Matthew 13:54-58). As the saying started by Augustine goes, “Familiarity breeds contempt.”

Paul admonishes us to fight this drift: “Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters. Take the lead in honoring one another” (Romans 12:10). Two Greek words for love appear in this one verse—family love (like parent to child) and brotherly love (brother and sister). This is loyal love, but the shadow side is it becomes familiar love. We combat that with honor.

“Take the lead” can also be translated “outdo one another.” If there’s any competition in a relationship, let it be honoring. Honor is the root word for honorarium—literally paying

someone for their time, recognizing someone's value, contribution, and importance.

2. The Shadow Side of Vulnerability Is Codependency

Your relationships will never be valuable unless you're willing to get vulnerable. We connect more in our weakness than we ever could in our strengths. There's deep grace that forms when we get honest and broken before one another at the dinner table.

But vulnerability can morph from a tool into a weapon—no longer to connect with others but to control them. I'd call this control codependency. Jennie Allen writes: "How do you know if you are in a codependent relationship? One sign is that you constantly feel discouraged and disappointed by the person. When you have an extreme reaction to something, you need to pay attention because it's probably evidence of something or someone you've made into an idol. When you are unusually upset that a person didn't call or wasn't loving enough toward you or didn't invite you to something, ask yourself, Am I putting unfair expectations on this person to meet my needs?"

This happens when we get vulnerable—we worry they'll take this vulnerability and leave us in the cold, so they better not leave since we shared this part of ourselves. But the gospel of Jesus can set us free from this pain and misery.

That's why Paul's language of one body with many members matters (Romans 12:4-8). Recognize it takes a village. Allen argues we need all kinds of friends—foxhole friends, encouragers, sages, challengers. Vulnerability is an effort to connect with others, but the enemy wants you to use it to control others. Fight that drift with truth.

3. The Shadow Side of Practice Is Resentment

It gets really hard when you feel like you're doing the Jesus things and the community you're with isn't trying with the same intensity. It becomes less about what you're doing and more about what they're not doing. A self-righteous spirit generates a resenting spirit, which quickly divides and devours community.

Paul knows this tendency: "Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer" (Romans 12:12). Why would he tell you to be patient in affliction? Remember, the context of chapter 12 is doing life in community. Nothing will test your patience quite like other believers—because you expect more from them.

** Jennie Allen, Find Your People*

4. The Shadow Side of Mission Is Idealism

Feasting with the saints can be so idealistic. But genuine community requires endurance, patience, and humility (Romans 12:14-16). There are glimmers of joy where it does feel like perfect community, but being hospitable to the saints is much harder than it sounds.

Tim Chester writes: “Many people love the idea of the church as a community. But when we eat together, we encounter not some theoretical community, but real people with all their problems and quirks. The meal table is an opportunity to give up our proud ideals by which we judge others and accept in their place the real community created by the cross of Christ, with all its brokenness. It’s easy to love people in some abstract sense and preach the virtues of love. But we’re called to love the real individuals sitting around the table.”*

To put it another way: your dream of community can demean your community.

The Power of the Gospel

There are people in our church who have hurt us—become too familiar and given jabs that stuck for a while, or said things about us to someone else. Even worse, there are people we have deeply hurt—over-promising and under-delivering, being too idealistic in our expectations.

But what’s beautiful is we’re still in the same room. We’ve been in each other’s houses. That’s the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The love of Jesus has set us free from keeping record.

We take the hard step of inviting each other to the table again and again, embodying the love, forgiveness, and reconciliation given to us and through us by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Romans 12:13 tells us to “share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality.” Don’t overcomplicate it. Waffle Wednesdays. Taco Tuesdays. Falafel Fridays. The practice ranges from coming early to church for intentional conversations to having dinner with someone who has hurt you and practicing reconciliation.

The table is where we fight familiarity with honor, codependency with truth, resentment with patience, and idealism with reality—all in the power of the gospel that has made us family.

* Tim Chester, *A Meal With Jesus*

HOSPITALITY E3: FEASTING WITH THE STRANGER

WHY HOSPITALITY MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

When Jesus said that loving your neighbor as yourself was the second most important commandment, he wasn't suggesting it as an occasional activity. He meant it should shape our daily lives. Yet in our hyper-individualistic culture, most of us barely know the strangers we interact with every day—let alone the people living right next door.

Radical hospitality invites us to open our tables to those we do not know. In Luke 14:12–24, Jesus overturns the social norms of his day, teaching that God's kingdom welcomes those the world overlooks and that true fellowship begins where comfort ends.

The Heart and the Hard Part

Our church has been exploring hospitality through different lenses. Week one focused on feasting on the Savior—remembering Christ's sacrifice. Week two emphasized feasting with the saints—sharing meals with fellow believers. But this week transitions to what we call “the hard part of hospitality and the heart of hospitality”: feasting with strangers.

Two grounding texts frame this teaching. In Luke 19:10, after dining with Zacchaeus, Jesus declares: “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.” In Luke 7:34, he acknowledges the cost of his methodology: “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”

The mission is compelling. The methodology is where it gets tough.

It's much easier to give to the homeless than to eat with the homeless. It's simpler to post about caring for refugees than to open your home to them. We can wave to neighbors on our way into the garage and then quickly close the door behind us.

But Christians are called to do hard things.

Hospitality Means Loving the Stranger

The word hospitality comes from “philo” (love) and “xenos” (stranger, foreigner). It’s the opposite of xenophobia—fear of the stranger. As Ann Voskamp writes, “In these strange days, we must put on stranger love.”

Henri Nouwen defined hospitality as “the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy.” This definition captures something essential: People will always expect our hostility until they experience our hospitality.

False Hospitality Exposed

In Luke 14, Jesus attends a Sabbath meal at a Pharisee’s house, where he observes several troubling patterns. First, the religious leaders try to trap him with a sick man, creating a no-win scenario. Then guests jostle for the best seats at the table, revealing their pride. Finally, Jesus addresses the host directly about who he invites to his meals.

The text begins in Luke 14:12-14, where Jesus says something striking: Don’t just invite people who can repay you. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind—those who cannot return the favor.

Does this mean you can never have friends and family over? No. But if your table is exclusively reserved for family and friends, you’ve missed the entire point. At this table, Jesus flips our assumptions about what hospitality is really for:

- **Curiosity vs. Animosity.** Jesus commands us to love our neighbor, which certainly includes our actual neighbors. As one author noted, “God never gets the address wrong!” We should be curious about who God has placed around us and what their life stories are. But when we make the table about who is “in,” we simultaneously declare who is “out.” New Testament scholar Scott Bartchy explains that in first-century Mediterranean culture, table fellowship was richly symbolic of friendship, intimacy, and unity—which also made it the best way to communicate who wasn’t a friend.
- **Generosity vs. Reciprocity.** It isn’t generous if you’re only doing it to get something back. The Jews in Jesus’ time were always keeping score, and our modern competitive world hasn’t improved much. We easily become more concerned about profit and loss than sacrifice and service.

* Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*

The Parable That Reveals Our Identity

Jesus then tells a parable about a great banquet. The host sends invitations, but when the feast is ready, the guests make absurd excuses. One bought a field without seeing it first. Another purchased oxen without trying them. A third somehow forgot he got married when he accepted the invitation.

These guests wanted the feast only if it didn't interfere with their own agendas.

So what does the host do? He instructs his servants to go into the streets and invite everyone others have written off—the poor who can't afford oxen, the blind who can't examine real estate, the maimed and lame who weren't typically given in marriage.

Here's the stunning revelation: We are those servants.

God is the great host who has set a feast at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. All people are his desired guests, though some have agendas that get in the way. The church represents those who were once poor but now have the riches of his inheritance, who were maimed and lame but now have power to walk, who were blind but now see. Because of Jesus' saving grace, the church serves as the gathering servants—making room and inviting more people in.

Reaching a Hostile Culture

But how do we reach them? Jon Tyson's framework of three cultural attitudes toward Christianity is helpful here: Green Light (Christianity viewed positively), Yellow Light (church seen as weird but harmless), and Red Light (Christianity considered actively harmful).

We've reached a tipping point where door hangers and advertisements won't reach people in the streets and alleys. In a post-Christian culture, transformation happens through the dinner table.

Rosaria Butterfield's story illustrates the transforming power of radical hospitality. Once a lesbian feminist academic deeply opposed to Christianity, she encountered the love of Christ through years of genuine friendship and countless shared meals with a local pastor and his wife. In her book she writes: "Too many of us are sidelined by fears. We fear that people will hurt us. We fear that people will negatively influence our children... Our sentimentality makes us stupid. We need to snap ourselves out of this self-pitying reverie. The best days are ahead. Jesus advances from the front of the line."

* Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*

Practical Steps Forward

Five practical tips emerged for hosting strangers:

1. Hosting is not entertaining. You don't need a perfect house or elaborate plans. Just be present.

2. Take over with generous authority. Set the table, establish the tone, and lead with questions.

3. Don't shy away from small talk. Weather and origins help people get comfortable.

4. Don't shy away from deep talk. Ask about family origins, dreams, and aspirations.

5. End with honor. Speak life into who they are and thank them for their time.

Without Christ, we are helpless, poor, lame, and blind. But we've found life in abundance at the table with Jesus. Now it's our joy to be the gathering servants, setting the table for those we'd generally write off and avoid.

The question remains: What would happen if each of us actually took these steps?

HOSPITALITY E4: FEASTING WITH THE SINNER

CAN YOU LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR WITHOUT APPROVING THEIR LIFESTYLE?

Super Bowl 58 sparked an unexpected controversy among Christians—not over which quarterback to cheer for, but over a commercial. The “He Gets Us” campaign spent \$17.5 million on ads showing AI-generated images of people from different walks of life washing each other’s feet, ending with the tagline: “Jesus didn’t teach hate. He washed feet.”

One side was outraged over the expense. The other was outraged over what they perceived as a message equating disagreement with hate. But beneath the debate lies a question many Christians still struggle to answer in the 21st century: Can I love my neighbor without approving their lifestyle? Or to put it more bluntly: can I have dinner with those sinners?

This is the most challenging invitation yet: feasting with the sinners.

When Hospitality Gets Scandalous

The Gospel of Luke makes Jesus’ eating habits impossible to ignore. In Luke 5, he dines with tax collectors and sinners at Levi’s house. In Luke 7, a sinful woman anoints him while he eats at a Pharisee’s home. When he forgives Zacchaeus in Luke 19, he first invites himself over for a meal. Jesus’ proximity to those living counter to God’s way was scandalous to the self-righteous and life-giving to the self-rejecting.

In Luke 7:34, Jesus acknowledges his reputation: “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” If seeking and saving the lost was his mission, sharing meals was his method.

The story that follows in Luke 7:36-50 reveals everything about how Jesus navigated this tension. A Pharisee—one of the religious all-stars supposedly most favored by God—invites Jesus to dinner. While they’re eating, a woman known around town as a prostitute crashes the party. She weeps over Jesus’ feet, wipes them with her hair, and anoints them with expensive perfume.

If you grew up in church, you know how this story ends. But imagine experiencing it in real time. Most observers would have suspected the woman and granted more favor to the upstanding Pharisee. Jesus flips that assumption completely.

The Pharisee thinks to himself that if Jesus were really a prophet, he'd know what kind of woman this is and wouldn't let her touch him. Jesus, reading his thoughts, tells a parable about two debtors—one owing fifty denarii (about two months' wages) and another owing five hundred (nearly two years' wages). When both debts are forgiven, who will love the creditor more? The Pharisee correctly answers: the one who was forgiven more.

Then Jesus delivers the stunning reversal. He points out that the Pharisee provided no water for his feet, no kiss of greeting, no oil for his head—basic hospitality courtesies. But this woman hasn't stopped kissing his feet, has wet them with her tears, and anointed them with costly perfume. The sinful woman was more of a host than the actual host. Jesus concludes: "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."

There are four critical questions to help navigate the tension of being hospitable to sinners without compromising truth.

1. Was Jesus protective of His reputation?

From an outside perspective, dining with a prostitute would clearly damage someone's reputation more than dining with a respected religious leader. Yet Jesus built a reputation for exactly this kind of scandalous hospitality. Why wasn't he more protective?

The answer exposes a deeper truth: Worrying about your reputation reveals an identity not grounded in the love of God. Henri Nouwen identified three false identities we adopt outside of Christ: I am what I have, I am what I can do, and I am what others think of me. Each leads to pain and dysfunction.*

If we're overly concerned with what others think, we've forgotten what God thinks. We shouldn't intentionally sabotage our reputation, but we ultimately cannot control others' opinions. If we live for their acceptance, we die from their rejection.

2. Was it Jesus' tolerance that led to the woman's repentance?

The word "tolerance" has undergone a dramatic shift. It used to mean we can disagree with each other without dishonoring each other. Today it often means that disagreeing is

* Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*

not just dishonoring but dehumanizing—that saying a belief is wrong makes you a bigot.

Pastor and author Jeremy Treat distinguishes between pluralism and relativism: “We can acknowledge pluralism without becoming relativists. In other words, we can accept that everyone has the right to believe whatever they want, and we can still have distinct and firmly held convictions.”

Jesus never affirmed the woman’s sinful lifestyle. Look at his final words to her in verse 50: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” That word “peace”—shalom in Hebrew—means to walk in the design God created for you and flourish. This was a transforming moment. She was told to go and sin no more.

It wasn’t modern tolerance that led to her repentance. It was something better: kindness and patience. Romans 2:4 asks, “Do you despise the riches of his kindness, restraint, and patience, not recognizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?”

Repentance means a change of mind, a new mental map of reality, a recognition of sin and turning toward Christ. It means you’ll still struggle with your sin, but you no longer celebrate it.

3. Doesn’t bad company corrupt good character?

This question comes from 1 Corinthians 15:33, and the logic follows that since Jesus was perfect, only he could contact the unholy and walk away clean. While true that Jesus possessed divine power, this misses the deeper call on Christian life: theosis—the process of becoming more like Christ.

As followers of Jesus learn to surrender to His love, leadership, and way of life, they receive grace to navigate difficult situations and relationships for God’s glory. Spiritual maturity grows over time, and not everyone is ready to sit with sinners without compromising conviction or responding in anger.

In Luke 7, Jesus stays completely calm while reading the Pharisee’s thoughts and understanding the woman’s motives simultaneously. This is spiritual maturity. Richard Blackburn of the Mennonite Peace Center describes leadership as staying calm, staying connected, and staying the course.** The anxious response to difference is becoming outraged, storming off, or giving into falsehood. As believers are formed by Jesus, they slowly gain maturity to be in proximity with sinners while maintaining these qualities.

* Jeremy Treat, *Seek First*

** Richard Blackburn, *Mennonite Peace Center Training Materials*, cited in *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* by Peter L. Steinke

4. Is there ever a time to shun someone from the dinner table?

Yes, but probably not who you'd expect. First Corinthians 5:9-13 provides clarity. Paul says you can't avoid the immoral, greedy, swindlers, and idolaters of this world—they're lost, sheep without a shepherd, and Christians are called to reach them.

But believers should not eat with a professing Christian who has gone from struggling with their sin to celebrating it—a sexually immoral “Christian,” a greedy “Christian,” an idolatrous or abusive “Christian.” It's not about perfect people; it's about repentant people. Every community has boundary markers. This serves as a wake-up call, hopefully leading to repentance.

In the end, there are two statements that must be held together:

We are more effective in our mission when we stay true to our distinction.

The church is called to be a window—a glimpse into God's kingdom—not a mirror simply reflecting back what's already in the city. Hell is real. Sin is destructive. God is love and holy. There's only one way to God through Jesus Christ. You can't save the lost if you tell them they aren't lost. These views make Christians distinct.

We don't make demonstrations out of sinners; we make dinner for sinners.

Jesus ate with Pharisees, tax collectors, and sinners. He looked at crowds as sheep without a shepherd and had compassion. What if revival started one meal at a time?

Imagine becoming people who loved sinners while hating their own sin—people who didn't obsess over reputation because we're approved by God, who reflect the kindness that leads to repentance, who stay calm, connected, and gospel-focused.

This ability exists because believers have been redeemed. We too were once sinners, rescued by the same scandalous grace we're now called to extend around our dinner tables.

FORMED BY PEACEMAKING

The practice of peacemaking is doing the hard work of forgiving your past, forging new patterns, and framing your pain in order to fulfill your purpose of loving God and others.

Recommended Reads:

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality by Peter Scazzero
The Relational Soul by Richard Plass and James Cofield
The Connected Life by Todd W. Hall

PEACEMAKING E1: FORGIVING YOUR PAST

BREAKING CHAINS BEFORE THEY BREAK YOU

We recently spent \$100 on an unusual advertisement—telling people in a five-mile radius why they shouldn't visit. The message was simple: "If you want to be forgiven by Jesus, but not formed by Jesus, you would be very uncomfortable at Passion Creek."

Our church is committed to a radical idea: through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, anyone can be transformed into the image of Christ, one day at a time. Throughout the past year, our congregation has been learning practices designed to facilitate this transformation—becoming people of rest through Sabbath, truth through Scripture, contentment through simplicity, and friendship through hospitality.

Now comes perhaps the hardest practice yet: becoming people of peace in a world at war through the discipline of peacemaking.

The Crisis We're Ignoring

The statistics paint a grim picture. Between 2009 and 2021, the percentage of teens reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness jumped from 26% to 44%. Over half of mothers feel lonely all the time. In just one decade, the average time Americans spend with friends has plummeted from 6.5 hours per week to less than 3 hours.

David Brooks argues that modernity itself drives this isolation: "We live in an environment in which political animosities, technological dehumanization, and social breakdown undermine connection, strain friendships, erase intimacy, and foster distrust. We're living in the middle of some sort of vast emotional, relational, and spiritual crisis."^{*}

Most people desire friendship but lack the tools to maintain relationships. When conflict arises—when friendships fall out of peace—we simply peace out. The typical friendship lasts three to five years before someone moves on. We assume friendships shouldn't require work, yet we're appalled when others don't put in effort.

^{*} David Brooks, *How to Know a Person*

But humans weren't designed for isolation. Our purpose centers on loving God and others. Jesus offers a better way through the practice of peacemaking.

A Master Peacemaker

Jesus demonstrated extraordinary skill at making and keeping friends because he committed himself to peacemaking. The Gospels show his patience with disciples who constantly missed the point. When critics attacked, he remained calm, cool, and connected. Even on the cross, he prayed for those celebrating his crucifixion: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Is this attainable for ordinary believers? We insist it is. Jesus isn't just Lord and Savior—he's Rabbi. As his students, followers are called to do what he did. In Matthew 5:9, he promises: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

Our working definition frames the challenge: The practice of peacemaking is doing the hard work of forgiving our past, forging new patterns, and framing our pain in order to fulfill our purpose of loving God and others.

Like other practices, this builds progressively. The disclaimer is built into the definition—it's hard work. But everything good lies on the other side of hard.

You Are a Product of Your Past

In Genesis 12 and 26, there is a disturbing pattern. Abraham lied twice about Sarah being his sister rather than his wife to protect himself. His son Isaac told the exact same lie about Rebecca. Jacob, whose name means "deceiver," lied to nearly everyone. Ten of Jacob's children lied about Joseph's death, keeping the secret for over a decade.

The pattern extends beyond deception. Each generation showed favoritism—Abraham favored Ishmael, Isaac favored Esau, Jacob favored Joseph and Benjamin. Each generation experienced brother cutoffs—Isaac from Ishmael, Jacob from Esau, Joseph from his ten brothers for more than a decade.

Genesis asserts an obvious but uncomfortable truth: You are a product of your past.

Everything in your history has shaped who you are today. This can be positive—coming from a family line of Jesus followers might make faith feel natural. But it can also be destructive—childhood trauma influences how you relate to people, economic patterns repeat across generations, and self-sabotaging coping mechanisms get inherited from family members you've never met.

As the saying goes: “Jesus may be in your heart, but grandpa is still in your bones.” The warning from Genesis is clear: If generational sin doesn’t stop with you, it will spread through you.

Generational Accountability

Exodus 34:6-7, the most quoted verse in the Old Testament, presents both God’s mercy and justice. The passage promises faithful love to a thousand generations but warns of consequences to the third and fourth generation.

This isn’t about God punishing new generations for their ancestors’ sins. It’s about generational accountability. As the BibleProject explains: “God does not punish a new generation for the sins of a former generation. But God does hold children who don’t learn from their parents’ mistakes accountable... For Israel (and for us too), remembering the sins of our parents is the key to doing things differently.”** In other words, peacemakers must first become chainbreakers.

The Genogram Exercise

To remember and learn from family patterns, we encourage you to create a genogram—a chart mapping parents, grandparents, and further back, noting personality traits (self-absorbed, passive), major events (affairs, abandonment), relational patterns (codependent, absent), and family narratives (“it’s not okay for this family to make mistakes”).

Done properly, a genogram should generate two outcomes:

- **Caution.** Most people aren’t as self-aware as they think. It’s safe to assume a propensity to repeat family patterns. This awareness enables practical boundaries: shared bank accounts and passwords to guard against infidelity patterns, saying no to promotions to prevent absenteeism, serving in church to counter self-absorption.
- **Compassion.** Life changes when you realize your parents were also children who had parents. The pastor shared personally about initially thinking his family was perfect, only to discover flaws over time—fourth-generation pastor patterns of hiding in shame, performative faith, and slight exaggeration. After a period of cynicism and anger about childhood, he came to recognize that all families are dysfunctional to some degree. He found gratitude for the many sins his parents did stop rather than pass along.

* Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*

** BibleProject, “The Character of God: Slow to Anger,”

As Plass and Cofield write: “To blame our reactivity on the devil or on our parents or on anyone or anything else is to doom ourselves to relational failure with God and others.”^{*} Everyone is both victim and perpetrator, desperately needing God’s grace.

The Forgiveness Imperative

After learning the past comes the harder work of forgiving it. Matthew 18:21-22 shows the persistence required in forgiveness. Matthew 6:14-15 reveals its seriousness—both passages require forgiving others because believers have been forgiven of much. The synthesis of Genesis, Exodus, and Matthew yields this sobering truth: If you don’t forgive your past, you will relive it and regive it. Without forgiveness, you’ll emotionally abandon your children the same way you were abandoned. You’ll explode in anger at loved ones. You’ll make promises you can’t keep.

Many people feel stuck despite doing spiritual work—reading the Bible, attending church, practicing spiritual disciplines. The book “Boundaries for Your Soul” captures this ache: “You work hard, try to set boundaries with others, and then wonder why you still struggle with anger, fear, and guilt. You may even hurt the people you love the most as a result of these unwanted feelings.”^{**}

But there’s good news. Jesus has more than enough grace and power to set people free. Some sins wash away at conversion. Others require going deeper and taking more time. Experts distinguish between explicit knowledge (reciting verses about God’s love) and implicit knowledge (actually feeling loved rather than shame). Gospel truth often takes time to move from head to heart.

Two Key Ideas

- **Use mirrors, not microscopes.** Jesus taught removing the log from your own eye before examining specks in others. Forgiveness flows from reflecting on how much Christ has forgiven you. In Christ, you are clean, righteous, and free. Freedom comes from putting down the microscope and picking up the mirror.
- **God uses moments and marathons.** Forgiveness and freedom can happen instantly, but usually require endurance. Forgiveness is an action long before it becomes an affection.

Chainbreaking begins with forgiving your past: not to excuse it, but to stop transmitting it. The hard work of peacemaking starts by making peace with where you’ve come from.

^{*} Richard Plass and James Cofield, *The Relational Soul*

^{**} Alison Cook and Kimberly Miller, *Boundaries for Your Soul*

PEACEMAKING E2: FORGING NEW PATTERNS

ARE YOU A PEACE-BREAKER OR PEACE-FAKER?

When disappointment knocks on your door, where do you run? To drama, dopamine, or discipleship?

For many families, the answer is drama—gossip erupts, past grievances get excavated, and it's not a holiday without someone storming off. For others, dopamine provides the escape—sweep the pain under the rug, numb it, avoid the hard conversation for another day. By God's grace, some can genuinely say discipleship—they bring their pain before God, seek forgiveness and reconciliation when possible, and have hard, holy conversations for the sake of love.

How you answer this question reveals your relational patterns. And those patterns determine whether you're living as a peace-breaker, a peace-faker, or—through God's transforming work—a peacemaker.

From Forgiving to Forging

Week one emphasized forgiving your past. The bad news: you are a product of your past, repeating the sins of your fathers and mothers without realizing it. The good news: although shaped by your past, you don't have to be shackled to it. In Christ, you are forgiven and renewed.

But spiritual formation involves both moments and marathons. Some of Christ's saving work happens instantly. The deep work of peacemaking typically unfolds over time. Step one is forgiving your past. Step two is forging new patterns.

The word “pattern” describes actions or dispositions we repeatedly use to get by and relate with others. We don't stumble into healthy patterns. Most of us carry dysfunctional patterns that harm both ourselves and those we love.

A Dysfunctional Family Portrait

We return to Abraham's dysfunctional family tree, this time focusing on his grandsons Jacob and Esau. Their sibling rivalry began before birth—literally wrestling in the womb. Esau emerged first, red and hairy, followed immediately by Jacob grasping his heel. Their names forecast their futures: Esau meant “hairy,” while Jacob meant “deceiver.”

The brothers developed starkly different coping mechanisms. Esau loved drama. Jacob loved dopamine. Put another way: Esau was a peace-breaker, Jacob was a peace-faker.

- **Esau the Peace-Breaker.** When Jacob tricked him out of his birthright and then stole his father's blessing (a massive deal—essentially a forecast of your future and the final gift before death), Esau responded with murderous rage. He married a third wife just to spite his parents. He broke away before anyone could break his heart.
- **Jacob the Peace-Faker.** Jacob's very name meant deceiver. He pretended to be Esau to steal the blessing, wearing goatskin so his hair felt right. When drama erupted, he ran away. Problems followed him—his father-in-law Laban tricked the trickster. Jacob faked success so others wouldn't love him less. He hid to protect himself.

Which One Are You?

Peace-breakers break away before you can break their heart. Peace-fakers fake success so you won't love them less. Peace-breakers hurt others to protect themselves. Peace-fakers hide from others to protect themselves. Peace-breakers are afraid of love—you can never get too close. Peace-fakers are afraid to lose love—they'll do whatever it takes to keep it. Peace-breakers are angry and distrusting—you never know what mood they'll be in. Peace-fakers are anxious and deceiving—you never know the real them.

This dysfunction wasn't unique to Jacob and Esau. It lives in all of us. Genesis shows what happens when sin enters the picture—dysfunction compounds across generations. Jacob avoided Esau for twenty years, which meant not seeing his mother for two decades.

The Turning Point

Finally, God called Jacob home to make things right. Running provides temporary relief but not healing. As one saying goes: “True maturity is shown after spending three days with your family.” Jacob obeyed but still used deception as his exit strategy—a hint he wasn't yet transformed, though heading in the right direction. As he prepared to face Esau and his four hundred men, Jacob split his family into two groups (hedging his losses), prayed for rescue, and sent gifts ahead (either making restitution or buttering up his brother).

Jacob remained unsettled, living in fear, still faking the peace. But then, in Genesis 32:24-31, everything shifted. Jacob wrestled with a mysterious figure through the night—and that wrestling transformed him from peace-faker to peacemaker.

Wrestling with God, Not Man

Jacob discovered his real fight wasn't with Esau, but with God. All along, he'd been wrestling not just with Esau but with Isaac and Laban. He is never satisfied, always disappointed, never fully known or truly loved.

An ancient story captures this progression: A young man asked Father Makarios if he still wrestled with the devil. The elder replied that he no longer did—both had grown old and tired, leaving each other alone. “Then life is easy now?” the young man asked. “Oh no,” Father Makarios responded. “Life is much harder now. For now, I wrestle with God.” When asked if he hoped to win, Makarios said simply: “No. I wrestle with God and hope to lose.”

Early in discipleship, it makes sense to spend energy wrestling with the devil. But eventually, deeper transformation requires facing the hidden parts of your past, patterns, and soul. Breakthrough comes through wrestling with God.

Solitude and Confession

How do we wrestle with God? We get away and get honest. Biblically: we develop patterns of solitude and confession.

- **Solitude.** Jacob was left alone with no place to hide and nobody to fool. He had to reach a point where he couldn't deceive his way out. As one author writes: “When we are preoccupied with maintaining an image that the soul was not created to maintain, we grow emotionally weary. We become disillusioned and discouraged without knowing why.” In solitude, we finally bring God who we really are. Peace isn't powerful until it gets personal—you can't rely on your parents' or friends' faith.
- **Confession.** Jacob finally came to God as himself, not as someone else. The last time Jacob received a blessing, he claimed to be Esau. He was never satisfied because he knew that blessing wasn't meant for him. Now he had to say his name—deceiver, schemer. Peace comes from bringing God who you are, not who you aren't.

Peacemaking requires naming our secrets, weaknesses, and sins. The American church often fails here—not spending enough time naming our actual sin: self-absorbed, angry, lazy, deceitful, prideful, greedy, lustful, manipulative, gluttonous, envious. Pete Scazzero warns: “Our fear of bringing secrets and sin into the light drives many people to prefer

the illusion that if they don't think about it, it somehow goes away. It doesn't. Unhealed wounds open us up to habitual sin against God and others.”

From God to Man

Notice Genesis's progression: Chapter 31—go back to your family and be healed. Chapter 32—wrestle with God. Chapter 33—now you can reconcile with your brother. Without proper relational patterns with God, there's zero chance of dwelling in unity with brothers and sisters. But here's the good news: If you have the audacity to wrestle with almighty God, you'll gain the capacity to reconcile with any man. Genesis 33 shows Jacob and Esau meeting and reconciling. Jacob met Esau face-to-face only because he encountered God face-to-face. This transformation is possible for everyone.

Reconciling Love

First Corinthians 13:7 provides the pattern: “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Sadly, these verses get relegated to weddings when they're meant for every relationship.

- **Bears all things: WE FORGIVE.** We cover each other's offenses. You love when others would leave. It's moment and marathon, requiring us to absorb pain instead of lashing out.
- **Believes all things: WE RECONCILE.** We don't hold the past against people. It's a new day with new mercies. You right the wrong and invite people back into relationship.
- **Hopes all things: WE BLESS OTHERS.** We never count others out. Your failure isn't final. We need friends who root for us and whom we root for. We speak life into their future.
- **Endures all things: WE COMMIT.** We never give up on each other. We take the vow of stability. We're in this for the long haul, present in every season, through joy and sorrow.

Jacob was struck on the hip during his wrestling match, causing him to limp the rest of his life. The hip was a euphemism for descendants. Trace Jacob's line and you eventually reach Jesus—struck at the hip to encounter God's peace, pointing to his descendant Jesus being struck to give the nations God's peace.

The resurrection power that raised Jesus is alive and at work, enabling the miraculous—forgiving one another and forging new patterns of forgiveness, reconciliation, blessing, and commitment.

** Peter Scazzero, Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*

PEACEMAKING E3: FRAMING YOUR PAIN

HOW TO BECOME A HERO INSTEAD OF A VILLAIN

How you frame your pain is how you forecast your future.

This principle forms the foundation of every superhero story. Batman experiences the pain of losing his parents to senseless murder at an early age and transforms that experience into helping others. The Joker also lacked parents, enduring beatings from foster caregivers. He transmits that pain by hurting everyone around him.

A villain gets mean from the pain. A hero finds meaning from the pain.

This isn't just comic book philosophy. Researchers in health psychology have coined the term "post-traumatic growth" for people who endure terrible tragedies—cancer, heart disease, HIV, assault, paralysis—and yet emerge stronger, more peaceful, and filled with love. A key indicator that a victim will reach the other side is how they frame their pain.

In biblical language: Pain has the power to soften our souls or harden our hearts. It can make us more like Christ or more like the devil.

Another Step in Peacemaking

Week one emphasized forgiving your past—you're shaped by it but don't have to be shackled to it. Week two focused on forging new patterns—when disappointment knocks, do you run to drama, dopamine, or discipleship? If you have the audacity to wrestle with God, you gain the capacity to reconcile with others.

Now comes the culminating challenge: framing your pain. To be human is to be hurt. If we don't transform that hurt, we simply transmit it. The famous saying captures it: "Hurt people hurt people."

But that doesn't have to be anyone's story.

Four Types of Pain

There are four types of pain everyone must frame or be destroyed by:

1. Pain that comes from others. Friends or family belittle you, dishonor you, betray you, abuse you, or abandon you.

2. Pain that comes from ourselves. You sinned and face consequences physically, relationally, emotionally, spiritually, or socially.

3. Pain that comes from the unfairness of life. Born in the wrong zip code. Lost the genetic lottery. Evildoers get lucky while you keep experiencing misfortune. Life's tough.

4. Pain that comes from God. It appears God didn't intervene as you wanted. He hasn't opened your womb, healed your mother, saved your spouse, or changed your circumstance.

Everyone who lives long enough will experience all four types. But how you handle the hurt makes all the difference.

Cain's Cautionary Tale

Genesis 4 tells the story of Cain and Abel. Cain brings an offering to God, but God doesn't regard it favorably. Abel's offering is accepted. Cain experiences all three types of pain simultaneously: pain from others (Abel is better), pain from himself (failing to give his best offering), and pain from God (rejection of his sacrifice).

How Cain frames this pain will forecast his future. God warns him in Genesis 4:6-7: Take this disappointment to repent and do what's right, or sin—crouching like a beast at the door—will destroy you. Sin is never tame. It seeks to steal, kill, and destroy.

Cain stands at an impasse: will he resist bitterness or fully surrender to it?

There are two errors people make when dealing with emotions in contemporary culture. Some completely shut out emotion: "Facts over feelings. I'm not emotional." Others are completely ruled by emotions: "This is my truth because it feels right."

The reality: Emotions matter and they're terrible masters. God created humans to have emotions—they're a key part of the human experience. But when emotions run your life, you'll be torn in every direction. The New Testament constantly warns about being tossed around by desires.

Does Cain allow bitterness to master him? Genesis 4:8-12 provides the grim answer. He murders his brother.

Here's the warning: Dwelling on rejection is a damaging infection. It was sin for Cain not to give his best offering. But the greater sin was how he responded to rebuke and rejection. He didn't allow it to soften his soul—instead, he hardened his heart.

A key idea in peacemaking is how we respond to pain and rejection. As one author writes: "All of us will get hurt. That is a given. However, how we handle that hurt, with either bitterness or forgiveness, will color the rest of our lives and determine what kind of person we are going to be." Hurt people hurt people. Forgiven people forgive people.

Jesus in the Garden

Mark 14 shows Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, his humanity on full display. He knows he's about to endure the greatest pain and rejection of all time. How does he frame it? Jesus provides a four-step framework:

1. Name Your Pain

Jesus describes his pain: "Deeply distressed, troubled, deeply grieved to the point of death." Most people lack vocabulary to name what they're feeling. But if you can't name it, you can't tame it. Fred Rogers said: "Anything that is mentionable is manageable."

Emotions are like dashboard alerts—they point to deeper problems. But if you don't know what the light means, you can't fix the problem. Unlike Jesus, naming our pain often gets us closer to naming our sin, which frequently causes our pain.

We often feel pain because of pride. Resentment because we're holding grudges and refusing to forgive. Embarrassment because we were proven wrong and can't let it go. Anger because we didn't get our way and refuse to meet halfway.

It's not a sin to name your pain and emotion. But denying emotions opens you up to the sin crouching at the door.

2. Invite Others to Care for You in Your Pain

Jesus tells his disciples: "Sit here while I pray... Remain here and stay awake... Stay awake and pray." Fully God and fully man, Jesus leaned on his disciples during his pain. In Luke's account, he's in such distress that he sweats blood.

** Ronald Rolheiser, Sacred Fire*

Were they there for him? They kept failing. But he keeps urging them to be present.

Godly people are never isolated and independent. They're wise enough to know humans weren't designed to bear burdens alone. Plus, community is necessary because people are prone to self-deception.

3. Ask God to Remove Your Pain

Jesus prays: "Take this cup from me." The cup is a metaphor for all the sin and suffering he's about to take into himself—every past, present, and future sin from all of history. His purpose is to drink that cup filled with sin so others can drink the cup filled with righteousness at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Jesus' desire? To not have to go to the cross. He's asking if there's another way. "Can we give these people Easter Sunday's resurrection without Good Friday's crucifixion?"

Jesus wrestles with God the Father by getting honest with his emotions. Remember: Emotions matter and they're terrible masters. Jesus gives the Father all his emotions, wrestling with inner turmoil. It's not as simple as "facts over feelings." But he won't allow emotions to take the driver's seat. They're not the ultimate arbiter of truth.

4. Surrender Your Heart to Trust the Father's Love

"Not my will, but yours be done."

We think we'll be comforted once we understand God's plan. But transformation comes when we simply trust God's love.

How we frame pain will often forecast our future.

It can either destroy us or transform us. Transformation comes through grace—but grace rarely takes the easy route. It leads us through forgiveness: forgiving others, forgiving ourselves, and ultimately trusting God when we cannot understand Him.

Isaiah 26:3 reminds us: "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you." Freedom and peace don't come from understanding; they come from trusting.

God transforms people in three primary ways:

- 1. Through the Holy Spirit**, who gives new hearts, convicts, directs, and illuminates Scripture.
- 2. Through habitual practice**, because what we repeatedly do shapes who we become.
- 3. Through humiliating pain**, which strips away self-sufficiency and deepens our capacity to love.

Humiliating pain will take you deeper... either toward empathy, understanding, and forgiveness like Jesus, or toward resentment, bitterness, and vengeance like Cain. Every wound becomes an invitation to choose which deep end you'll swim toward.

Parker Palmer captures this paradox beautifully: "The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain its loss will bring... If we refuse to hold these tensions, hoping to live without doubt, despair, and pain, we also find ourselves living without faith, hope, and love."*

The Ultimate Test

How do you know you've trusted God with your pain? You've replaced bitterness with blessing. Pain from others—you now genuinely bless them. Pain from yourself—you bless yourself. Pain from life's unfairness—you speak blessing to those winning. Pain from God—you bless and thank him for it.

This is the greatest relational task we must endure. Without it, we can never make peace. "Every time we find ourselves ashamed, ignored, taken for granted, belittled, unjustly attacked, abused, or slandered we stand between resentment and forgiveness, bitterness and love. Which of these we choose will determine both our maturity and our happiness."**

Too many remain stuck in bondage to pain—from others, from ourselves, from life's unfairness, from God. Only grace can frame pain properly. Only grace can lead us deeper into love than resentment. Only grace can replace bitterness with blessing.

* Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*

** Ronald Rolheiser, *Sacred Fire*

PEACEMAKING E4: FULFILLING YOUR PURPOSE

THE JOSEPH JOURNEY FROM ARROGANCE TO PEACE

Dreams are the stories we tell ourselves. They're our way of making sense of the world and our place in it, giving us identity and purpose to hold onto through life's ups and downs.

But what happens when your dreams get shattered? When the story you told yourself about who you'd become collides with reality? At some point, our perspective shifts. We realize we aren't the hero of our story in the way we thought we'd be. We make mistakes, poor choices, and few experience life exactly as imagined.

The final week on peacemaking tackles this tension: fulfilling your purpose requires making peace with disappointment, failure, and regret. You cannot fulfill your purpose in life if you aren't committed to the hard work of peacemaking.

Purpose Beyond Pleasure and Power

This challenges contemporary assumptions about purpose. We've been drastically influenced by Freud, who argued life's purpose is found in pleasure—if it feels good, it must be good; morality is based on taste, not truth. Others like Alfred Adler teach that purpose is about gaining power—win every argument, beat every competitor, oppress the oppressors.

Genesis tells a different story. It chronicles people who should have pursued peace but instead chose pleasure and power to their detriment. Cain kills Abel, choosing power over peace. God floods the earth in Genesis 6 because humanity chose pleasure over peace, leading to ruin and decay. Genesis 11 shows people building a tower to be as powerful as God.

From Genesis 12 onward, the story zeroes in on Abraham's family—the family line that would one day bring peace to the world. But as the month-long series revealed, this family is deeply dysfunctional. Abraham lies and plays favorites yet has faith in God. Isaac lies and plays favorites yet remembers the covenant. Jacob deceives and runs from conflict yet wrestles with God.

All the patriarchs are mixed bags. Their family is clearly not at peace. Which brings us to Joseph.

The Arrogant Dreamer

Genesis 37 introduces Joseph as every young boy: arrogant, reckless, and unaware of what he doesn't know. He's a dreamer with visions of his brothers bowing down to him. He shares these dreams with insufferable pride, making himself the center of the story.

Young men dream of becoming four archetypes:

- **The King** (symbol of creativity: secure enough to affirm others, never threatened)
- **The Warrior** (symbol of courage: doubles efforts when exhausted)
- **The Prophet** (symbol of clarity: keeps the king honest, serves as elder and mentor)
- **The Lover** (symbol of contentment: delights in surroundings, inspires with beauty).

These are images we live into when our purpose is peace. But what if we're arrogant? What if we forsake peace for pleasure and power?

- **The King becomes a Tyrant:** insecure, threatened by others' success, keeping everyone inferior.
- **The Warrior becomes a Madman:** no longer guided by morality, hurting everyone in his path.
- **The Prophet becomes a Charlatan:** lying for dishonest gain, manipulating the weak.
- **The Lover becomes an Addict:** chasing artificial enjoyment and instant gratification.*

Joseph's dream was from God, but his interpretation came from an arrogant boy. So far, which was he more likely to become? A king or tyrant? A warrior or madman? A prophet or charlatan? A lover or addict?

The Descent

The exact opposite of Joseph's dream happens. His brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt. Eventually trusted to run Potiphar's house, he refuses advances from Potiphar's wife. Embarrassed by rejection, she frames him, claiming he tried to sleep with her. Joseph goes to prison.

** Adapted from King, Warrior, Magician, Lover by Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette*

But notice how he handles the hurt. Genesis 39:20-23 shows transformation beginning. God is with him. He gains favor even in prison. Remember the three ways God transforms people: through the Holy Spirit, habitual practice (consistent prayer), and humiliating pain.

The pain Joseph endures can take him deeper into bitterness, resentment, and revenge against his brothers—or deeper into forgiveness, empathy, and love. In prison, Joseph interprets dreams for fellow inmates, including the cupbearer. He asks to be remembered but is forgotten. Yet when Pharaoh struggles with a dream nobody can interpret, the cupbearer finally remembers. Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream: seven years of feast followed by seven years of famine.

Pharaoh recognizes wisdom and discernment in Joseph, promoting him to second-in-command over Egypt. Another shift has occurred. Joseph now gives credit to God for dreams. He thinks more about others than himself.

The Test of Reconciliation

You don't know how much you've truly healed until you return to your family of origin. In Genesis 42, Joseph's brothers come to Egypt seeking food. He doesn't reveal his identity immediately. They travel back and forth to their homeland. Finally, in Genesis 45, Joseph reveals himself. Will he be a tyrant to his murderous brothers? A madman to those who tried to kill him?

Genesis 45:1-11 records an incredible moment of mercy and forgiveness. But it seems too good to be true. After their father dies, the brothers worry Joseph will finally take revenge. Genesis 50:15-21 shows Joseph reassuring them again.

Notice his practice of peacemaking across both passages:

- **Joseph forgives the past.** "Don't be grieved or stressed out! Don't be mad at yourselves. I am not holding any of this against you!" He asks, "Am I in the place of God?" One of the biggest ways to assume God's role is by holding grudges. God alone judges sin. Who are we to hold grudges when we're also sinners needing mercy? If Joseph didn't forgive the past, he was bound to relive it and regive it.
- **Joseph forges new patterns.** He comes from a long line of peace-fakers and peace-breakers. That's why his brothers weren't sure he meant it while their father was alive. But Joseph breaks family patterns: "Come and stay in Egypt. I will provide for you and sustain you." He comforted them. He spoke kindly to them.
- **Joseph frames his pain.** "You didn't send me to Egypt, God did! This is God's providence." "You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people." He partners with God to restore his family, not bring revenge.

Joseph did the hard work of forgiving his past, forging new patterns, and framing his pain in order to fulfill his purpose of loving God and others.

Can This Become Your Story?

Raise your imagination from power hoarding or pleasure seeking to peacemaking.

Joseph fulfilled his purpose when he reinterpreted his dream. For twenty-two years, he was separated from his family—suffering, betrayed, forgotten. If his purpose was pleasure or power, those middle years were wasted. But if his purpose was peacemaking, those middle years were essential. They trained him to depend on God and forgive others. If our purpose isn't peacemaking, we'll never enjoy all God has for us. People are the source of great pain, but they also give us great purpose.

Joseph's story points to Jesus' story. The parallels are striking: Joseph's brothers conspired to kill him (Jesus' own people did the same). Joseph was betrayed for twenty silver coins (Jesus for thirty). Joseph was accused though innocent (so was Jesus). Joseph had two prisoners, one lived and one died (Jesus died between two thieves, one entering paradise). Joseph, the suffering servant, was raised to Pharaoh's right hand (Jesus, the suffering servant, was exalted at God's right hand).

We are more like Joseph's brothers—perpetuating injustice, seeking revenge, dying with bitterness apart from Christ. We only have peace because Jesus, the greater Joseph, made peace through his suffering on the cross. Like the brothers, we often don't believe the peace Jesus made for us. Like Joseph, Jesus weeps and assures us we've been forgiven and are in the kingdom.

Joseph's story can become your story. You can take the hand you were dealt and use it to glorify God. You can break generational chains and start new family legacies. You can do the hard work of transforming your pain rather than the easy work of transmitting it.

The Joseph Journey Exercise

We encourage you to map out your own stories in small groups, identifying five elements: successes, failures, disappointments, mentors, and God moments. Allow yourself to feel grief, sadness, and disappointment. After sitting with your story, it becomes easier to say, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."

Be sure to end with gratitude. Make it your goal to die with a warm heart, at peace with everyone as far as it depends on you. The Christian purpose isn't about accumulating pleasure or hoarding power. It's about loving God and loving others—which requires the hard, holy work of making peace.

FORMED BY GENEROSITY

**The practice of generosity
is living like disciples
who trust the God of
abundance by giving like
stewards who tithe to
God's Kingdom.**

Recommended Reads:

Gospel Patrons by John Rinehart

The Paradox of Generosity by Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson

The Treasure Principle by Randy Alcorn

GENEROSITY E1: DISCIPLES, NOT DONORS

WHY GREED IS AN INVISIBLE POISON

The driving force behind Passion Creek is making ~~attenders~~ disciples who reorient their lives to be formed by Jesus, together, for others. It's easy to skip over that phrase "reorient their lives." To reorient means acknowledging you were previously holding an ideology or practice that promised the good life but delivered death and destruction.

Through Sabbath, many admitted we were blocking the Holy Spirit by walking in a hurried spirit, so we reorientated our schedules. Through hospitality, people recognized we were making demonstrations out of sinners when we should have been making dinner for them, so we rearranged our dinner tables. Through peacemaking, we realized we run to drama or dopamine when disappointed instead of discipleship, so we rewired our relational habits.

This is what disciples of Jesus do. We don't get to pick and choose what to follow. We reorient and rearrange our lives, schedules, and priorities to align with the true, good, and beautiful way of Jesus. Which leads us to the next practice.

The Invisible Poison

Few sins are as deep-rooted and hard to detect as greed. Not many would admit to being greedy or materialistic, but greed lives inside everyone by default. Jesus made this clear in Luke 11 when confronting Pharisees who hid their greed from others while projecting generosity instead.

Luke 11:33-36 initially sounds confusing. Jesus talks about lamps and bodies filled with light or darkness. But to first-century Jews, the meaning was clear: a healthy, good eye meant generous; a bad, unhealthy eye meant stingy. Jesus explains the difference between abundance and scarcity mentalities. An abundance mentality says God is a gracious Father who gives good gifts to his children—if God takes care of flowers, of course he'll take care of us. A scarcity mentality says the future is terrifying, there's never enough to go around, and if someone succeeds near you, you certainly won't.

Those consumed with scarcity tend to look to money as the only way to calm their fears and create their future. Jesus says the whole body is affected by the health of your eye. A scarcity or abundance mentality even affects your central nervous system.

The story that follows in Luke 11:37-42 illustrates this teaching in action. A Pharisee invites Jesus to dinner and is shocked when Jesus doesn't follow all the meticulous hand-washing rules. First-century Pharisees had taken Levitical codes for priests eating at the temple and adapted them for daily home use—not because of hygiene, but to assure themselves of their own righteousness through purely external measures.

Jesus confronts the Pharisee with an unhealthy eye using a vivid word picture: a beautiful cup filled with mold and decay. The pastor shared about being invited to someone's house twelve years ago, grabbing a cup, and discovering rotten milk inside. He didn't do cups at their house for a decade. That's the image Jesus paints.

Jesus calls this man evil but mentions one specific sin: greed. Greed is sneaky, pervasive, and invisible. It appears very attractive on the outside. Everything can look perfect until opened up—out comes pride, entitlement, anger, and indifference to the needy.

Richard Foster shows just how sneaky greed is: “We really must understand that the lust for affluence in contemporary society is psychotic. We crave things we neither need nor enjoy... This psychosis permeates even our mythology. The modern hero is the poor boy who purposefully becomes rich rather than the rich boy who voluntarily becomes poor. Covetousness we call ambition. Hoarding we call prudence. Greed we call industry.”

An Impossible Position

Luke 16:13-14 reveals Jesus isn't just making a moral statement but a reality statement. It's literally impossible to love God and money at the same time.

Two major lessons on greed emerge from Jesus: In Luke 11, greed is invisible on the outside, so you can fool yourself into thinking you're loving God and others. In Luke 16, greed makes it literally impossible to love God and others. Put another way: Greed is an invisible poison that puts you in an impossible position to love God and others.

Greed is a rival god. Some translations use “mammon” in verse 13. Mammon is a false god that promises pleasure and blessing in return for sacrificing our time, priorities, and values. Both God and mammon require full allegiance and trust. Both require reorienting your life around them.

To faithfully follow Jesus, we must be honest. Which one has reoriented our lives more?

** Richard J. Foster, Celebration of Discipline*

Jesus or mammon? God or greed?

Foster continues: “Think of the misery that comes into our lives by our restless gnawing greed. We plunge ourselves into enormous debt and then take two or three jobs to stay afloat. We uproot our families so we can have a more prestigious job or house. We grab and never get enough. Our flashy cars and sports spectaculars and backyard pools have a way of crowding out much interest in civil rights or inner-city poverty or the starved masses of India. Greed has a way of severing the cords of compassion.”*

The Antidote

Is there a practice from the way of Jesus that can set people free from the love of money and the fear of scarcity? Is there an antidote to this invisible poison? Yes. The practice of generosity.

Our working definition: The practice of generosity is living like disciples who trust the God of abundance by giving like stewards who tithe to God’s kingdom.

Looking back at Luke 11:41-42, Jesus makes something crucial clear. He’s not pitting external versus internal. He’s not saying, “It’s not about giving, it’s about caring!” You should have cared about justice and love for God without neglecting tithing. Jesus doesn’t dismiss tithing—though we’ll address its New Covenant applicability in week four.

The only antidote to the invisible poison of greed is the visible practice of generosity. Not that generosity needs to be visible to others—Jesus warns against that in the Sermon on the Mount. But it should be visible to yourself and your family. You can’t be theoretically generous.

This is refreshing. In much of the Christian life, it’s hard to tell if there’s growth and progress. Being generous can be tracked on a spreadsheet.

Jesus isn’t interested in creating donors who give legalistically and stubbornly, but in making disciples who give cheerfully and sacrificially. The Pharisees were very rich and known for large donations. They were the type invited to all the fundraisers. They gave exactly ten percent but wouldn’t dare help someone in need. They were far from being disciples.

What’s the difference between a donor and a disciple? Is generosity something you do or someone you are? Donors attend fundraisers. Disciples attend faith-raisers. The goal is becoming people who are generous, giving cheerfully and sacrificially—not just from surplus or obligation.

** Richard J. Foster, Freedom of Simplicity*

A Journey Toward Generosity

For many followers of Jesus, the journey of generosity unfolds in stages.

- **At first, giving feels true**—something clearly taught in Scripture. God owns everything, so returning a portion is an act of acknowledgment and obedience. The tithe becomes a tangible way of saying, “Everything I have is Yours.”
- **Then, giving begins to feel good.** We see how our generosity meets real needs, strengthens the church, and opens doors for ministry. We recognize that our resources can make a genuine difference in the lives of others. But even then, giving often remains a duty—important, yes, but not always joyful.
- **Finally, through deeper reflection on Jesus’ words, many discover that giving is actually beautiful.** It’s not merely true or good—it’s desirable. Jesus taught, “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” and modern research agrees.

Science Confirms What Jesus Said

Sociologists confirm that: “Greater generosity is clearly, positively associated with many of the characteristics that most people consider essential to a good life: happiness, health, purpose, and growth... Generosity often triggers chemical systems in the brain and body that increase pleasure and experiences of reward, reduce stress, and suppress pain, which tend to lead to greater happiness and health.”*

The evidence is striking! Generous people are more joyful, more connected, and less anxious about the future. They experience what Jesus promised: the freedom that comes not from accumulation but from release.

Generosity isn’t something we master once; it’s a posture that matures over time. As we give cheerfully and sacrificially, our hearts are shaped into greater trust and contentment. What once felt like obligation becomes invitation. What once felt like loss becomes worship.

The question remains: Will you reorient your life around Jesus or mammon? The answer reveals itself not in what you say but in how you give.

* Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson, *The Paradox of Generosity*

GENEROSITY E2: ABUNDANCE, NOT SCARCITY

HOW YOUR MONEY STORY IS RUNNING YOUR LIFE

On October 30, 1938, CBS aired “War of the Worlds” to cities across America. Orson Welles made an adaptation of H.G. Wells’ sci-fi novel for Halloween. Most people missed the intro. The rest of the episode was presented as news—newscasters interrupting musical presentations to describe an alien invasion in Grover’s Mill, New Jersey. These Martians wielded heat rays and emitted poisonous gas. Panic and widespread hysteria erupted in cities everywhere. Legend says one woman drank poison so she wouldn’t die at the hands of aliens.

This story, and many like it, offers a humbling reminder to humanity: Your perception of reality is running—and often ruining—your life.

Changing perception of reality is a key theme in all of Jesus’ teachings. Those who humble themselves will be exalted; those who exalt themselves will be humbled. The last will be first and the first will be last. It’s happier to give than to receive. Changing perception of reality is priority number one in God’s work of transformation. But most assume it stops there. We’re just getting started.

The Triangle of Transformation

James Bryan Smith, author and theology professor, summarizes the strategy for change: “If we think the things he thought, do the things he did and spend time with like-minded people, we will become like him, and it will not be difficult... We begin with the triangle of transformation. It involves four basic elements: changing the stories in our minds, engaging in new practices, in reflection and dialogue with others who are on the same path, all under the leading of the Holy Spirit.”*

Passion Creek Church seeks formation by generosity with that formula: allowing God’s Word to reshape perception of reality (stories), partaking in actions to make it reality in bodies (practices), encouraging each other in groups (community), and trusting God is slowly doing his transformative work (Holy Spirit). When new ideas, new practices, and

* James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*

new social settings are adopted, change happens.

Four Money Stories

Like all beliefs, the attitudes and fears we have toward money are largely shaped by our past—family of origin, cultural background, and church experiences. This is why trusting the God of abundance proves so difficult. It's the biggest obstacle in becoming generous people.

The Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21)

Jesus tells of a man whose land was very productive—abundance from God's grace. But notice the ego: lots of "I," "my," "self." He's totally self-absorbed. When he asks, "What should I do?" he already knew. Biblical and social expectation was giving thanks to God by giving the margin to the poor. Instead, he plans early retirement, building bigger barns to hoard his surplus. "You fool!" Jesus responds. "This very night your life is demanded from you."

The Rich Fool's perception of reality: The good life is found in early retirement, in consuming rather than contributing. Blessing today doesn't guarantee blessing tomorrow, so hoard. This is a very common view on possessions today.

The Rich Young Ruler (Luke 18:18-25)

He seems wonderful—keeping commandments from youth. Jesus gets to the heart: "Sell all you have." You cannot love God and love money simultaneously. The young ruler counts the cost and realizes it's not worth it. The invisible poison put him in an impossible position to love God.

His perception: I need salvation for my soul, but you can't touch my stuff. Legend has it knights would hold their swords out of the water when getting baptized—surrendering everything to God except their need for violence.

The Older Brother (Luke 15:28-32)

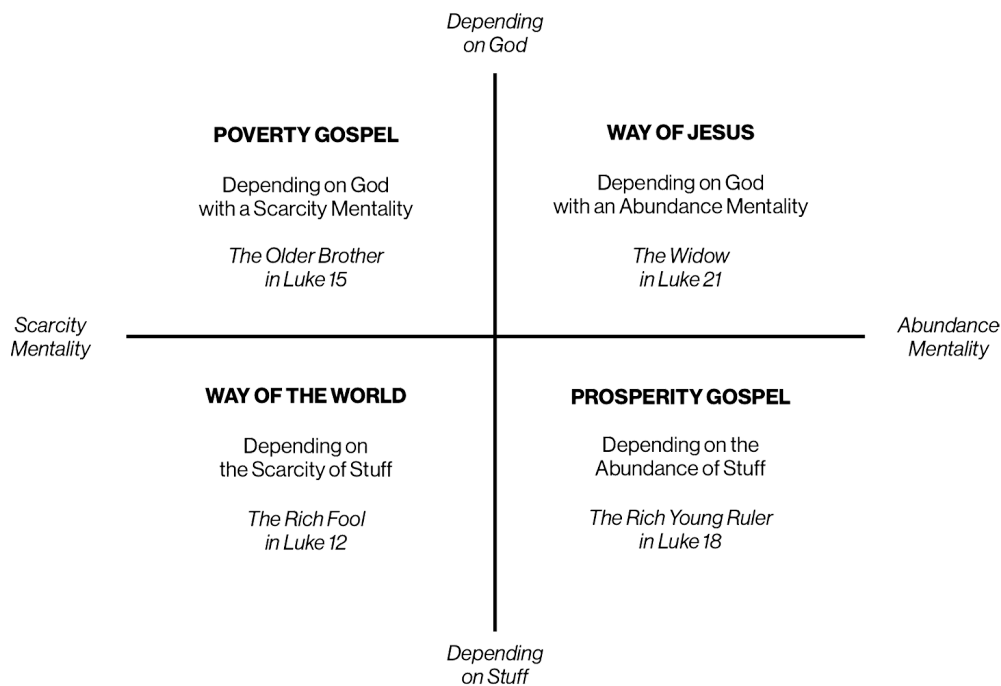
In the prodigal son story, the older brother could never imagine asking his dad for a party. He was angry at his father's generosity toward a wayward son.

His perception: God the Father isn't generous. How dare anyone ask for a feast—especially this wayward son!

The Widow (Luke 21:1-4)

This widow isn't applauded for wealth but for trust. The rich put in more cash, but the widow put in way more trust.

Her perception: Money and possessions are a gift from God (whereas the rich fool thought he earned it), cared for by God (the rich fool thought he had to preserve it himself), and available to others (as opposed to hoarding it).



Let's define the graph above and see where you honestly land.

First axis: Do you depend on God or depend on stuff? Biblical language: love God or love money. Of course, everyone needs money or they'd be living on the street. But where does your ultimate hope lie? What are you ultimately trusting to calm your fears and create your future? Proverbs 30:8-9 captures it: "Give me neither poverty nor wealth; feed me with the food I need. Otherwise, I might have too much and deny you, saying, 'Who is the Lord?' or I might have nothing and steal, profaning the name of my God."

Second axis: Do you view life with scarcity or abundance mentality? Biblical language: healthy eye or unhealthy eye. Scarcity says the future is terrifying and there's never enough to go around. Abundance says God took care of me before and he'll do it again and again.

We don't possess abundance mentality from wishful thinking but proper theology—a more robust understanding of God's attributes. Scripture shares a grand story of a God who isn't stingy. He causes rain to fall on just and unjust. God is beyond rich—he owns the cattle on a thousand hills, and the hills. He has so much he'll never run out, like the widow's jar of oil. He loves to feed five thousand and leave twelve baskets in surplus. God loves to give and rushes to forgive. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. When we're assured of his character, we live with abundance mentality. We seek first the Kingdom and trust the Lord will take care of us.

The best real-life example: Sea of Galilee versus the Dead Sea. Both receive water from the Jordan River. The Sea of Galilee bursts with life and all types of fish. The Dead Sea is forty times saltier than the ocean and nothing lives in it. The Sea of Galilee has an entrance and an exit—it doesn't hoard. The Dead Sea has an entrance but no exit. It hoards and never gives.

Four Quadrants

Way of the World (Rich Fool): Depending on the Scarcity of Stuff. God doesn't care for me, so I have to look out for myself. The good life is found when I hit the jackpot and live on my retirement. It makes zero sense to sacrifice my stuff to any cause. We all do this without new stories, practices, community, and Holy Spirit.

Prosperity Gospel (Rich Young Ruler): Depending on the Abundance of Stuff. They have abundance mentality—really believing there's more than enough—but with a caveat: I'll follow God as long as he multiplies, not divides or subtracts, my finances. Sadly, seventeen percent of Americans identify with prosperity theology, believing financial blessing and physical well-being are always God's will for them, and that faith and donations will increase material wealth.

Poverty Gospel (Older Brother): Depending on God with a Scarcity Mentality. God loves me enough to save me but doesn't delight in giving good gifts. I'll serve him and give him glory, but I don't think he's generous toward me. I'm a piece of trash that should just be happy I'm going to heaven.

Way of Jesus (Widow): Depending on God with an Abundance Mentality. He can do far more than I can ask, think, or imagine. If he tells me no, I know he's working all things together for my good to be conformed into his image. Ultimately, I hold everything with open hands and a generous spirit because God won't leave me nor forsake me. Wealth is uncertain but God is steadfast and immovable.

Jesus' Responses

- **How does Jesus respond to the Rich Fool?** “You fool! This very night your life is demanded from you.”
- **How does Jesus respond to the Rich Young Ruler?** “You missed it! Oh, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.”
- **How does Jesus respond to the Older Brother?** “You have not because you ask not! Ask me for a feast and I’ll throw you one!”
- **How does Jesus respond to the Widow?** “You of great faith! You’ve given far more than the rich!”

Your perception of reality is running, and often ruining, your practice of generosity.

So allow God to change your perception of reality. We must first acknowledge where we’re wrong. And allow God to do a deep work in our minds and hearts so we can fully trust in God with an abundance mentality.

The practice this week involves reflecting on the stories you’ve believed about money, whether from childhood, culture, or religious upbringings. Then practicing the act of trusting in the God of abundance by meditating on Psalm 23. Meditation takes powerful truths you believe in your head and embeds them into your whole body—you trust it in your bones.

The first line captures everything: “The Lord is my shepherd; I have what I need... I lack nothing.”

We can say we trust God all day, but the proof is in our hoarding or our giving.

GENEROSITY E3: STEWARDS, NOT OWNERS

THE DISHONEST MANAGER WHO UNDERSTOOD KINGDOM ECONOMICS

Throughout the year, followers of Jesus are invited to intentionally practice His way of life—embracing rhythms such as hospitality, peacemaking, and generosity. Yet it's essential to remember that these practices do not earn right standing with God; that comes only through faith in the finished work of Jesus. So why do them if they don't get you into heaven?

In many ways, they get heaven into you.

Pastor Trey explained: "Practicing the lifestyle of Jesus does not attain right standing with God but it does maintain light living with God." Union with Christ is forever secure—nothing can separate believers from God's love. But communion with Christ—that sense of joy when following him—comes and goes depending on the lifestyle chosen.

Adrian Rogers put it memorably: "The most miserable person on earth isn't the sinner, but the saint who is living in sin." Every practice at Passion Creek is an invitation, not coercion, to light living.

The Most Perplexing Parable

To grasp what it means to be a steward, we must dive into Luke 16:1-13. Craig Blomberg calls it the most perplexing of all Jesus' parables. On one hand, the steward seems terrible. On the other, Jesus commends him.

The story: A rich man's manager is accused of wasting possessions. About to be fired, the manager calls in his master's debtors and cuts incredible deals—reducing one debt by half, another by twenty percent. The master commends the dishonest manager for acting shrewdly.

Several phrases need unpacking. First, this parable is "to the disciples"—primarily for believers, though others including scoffing Pharisees were listening. Second, "manager"

in the King James Version is “steward.” This gets lost in translation. We’re in an era where managers are looked down on and leaders are the buzzword.

The Greek word is oikonomos—oikos (house) plus nomos (law). He was the law of the house, the number one slave in a great mansion. A steward is a slave toward the master but a king toward everyone else. Think of Joseph in Genesis—lots of authority and agency, but he sleeps well at night because none of it is technically his.

In Genesis, humans were given the opportunity to be stewards in the Garden, but sinned by wanting to be in charge and control of everyone, including God.

The deals this manager cuts were massive. A hundred measures of oil likely equals a thousand gallons—three years’ wages, the product of at least 150 olive trees. A hundred measures of wheat required a hundred acres to produce and eight to ten years of labor. These weren’t small discounts. In an honor culture, all these people would be indebted to this steward. He could cash in on favors for a while. What’s he doing? Making friends by being generous with his master’s wealth.

The Uncomfortable Commendation

Being generous with money is a huge way to make friends and love other people. Proverbs 19:6 says everyone is a friend of one who gives gifts.

But it’s still weird calling this guy a hero. Why would Jesus commend the steward? Luke 16:8 explains: the master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly. He had to give him his props—like watching LeBron, you’ve got to respect it. He leveraged his situation wisely.

Jesus isn’t commending the steward for robbing his master or being dishonest. Jesus commends him for leveraging his opportunities wisely. Even a broken clock is right twice a day.

Jesus makes everyone uncomfortable by finding a good lesson from a bad example: “Children of this age are more shrewd than the children of light.” Children of this age means pagans who only live for this life. Children of light means Christians rescued from darkness. What’s he saying? Disciples can learn a thing or two by how the world leverages money for more opportunities and success.

Sometimes, Christians are so confident their best life is the next one that they squander opportunities to make a real difference on earth. Pagans leverage every situation because they think this is all there is. Let’s not waste this life just because we know there’s a next one.

Eternal Friendships

Luke 16:9 provides the application: You can use money to make friends on earth, but that will fade away. Instead, use your money to make eternal friends in heaven. How? By investing in God's kingdom—giving to churches that make disciples and baptize people, giving to missionaries sharing the gospel with unreached people, giving to charities opening doors for the gospel. Give in such a way that people in heaven will greet you and thank you for your contribution so they could hear the gospel and be saved.

You can stew on your money, or you can steward your money.

The rich fool stewed on his money and lost it all with nothing to show in eternity. The rich young ruler stewed on his money and lost the opportunity to possibly become an apostle. The one-talent man in Matthew 25 stewed on his money by hiding it in the ground with nothing to show in eternity.

History is made by those who steward, not stew, on their money.

Gospel Patrons

The book “Gospel Patrons” collects stories of people who invested wealth for the kingdom. If you know church history, you know George Whitefield, who spearheaded the Great Awakening in America. He revolutionized how the gospel was preached in fields and preached more than five hundred sermons a year for thirty-four consecutive years. But did you know he was funded by a rich widow, Lady Huntingdon? At thirty-nine, she became a widow with four children and massive wealth. She saw revival spread to the poor but her elite friends remained far from God. She asked Whitefield to preach at a special dinner. George's text to a room of London's richest men and women? How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom. She covered the bill for him to preach eighteen thousand sermons to ten million people.*

This is how God works. Bold vision is met with generous provision. God used William Tyndale to provide six million English speakers their first English Bible translation. God used Humphrey Monmouth, a wealthy cloth merchant, to fund Tyndale, strategize with him, and smuggle Bibles into hostile England.

Even Jesus was bankrolled by generous stewards. Luke 8:1-3 names Joanna, Susanna, and many others who supported Jesus' ministry from their possessions.

* John Rinehart, *Gospel Patrons*

What if we raised our imagination of what God can do with our stuff? Pastor Jon Tyson in New York recently said: “We have been co-opted by the world if our vision of the good life is the same as our pagan neighbors. What if our vision boards became giving boards?” The world stews on money. The church stewards hers.

Fiscal and Spiritual Faithfulness

Luke 16:10-11 contains the most famous and misunderstood line of this passage. The typical thinking: if I can trust you with fifty thousand, I can trust you with five hundred thousand. On one level, that’s a faithful interpretation. But this doesn’t guarantee an increase in income.

A fuller interpretation: if you trust God with fiscal matters, he will entrust you with spiritual matters. Why? Giving money requires faith, death to self, and agape love. Fruitful ministry requires faith, death to self, and agape love. This principle always holds true: The vitality of your life and leadership is directly correlated to your mentality on money and possessions.

Consider Barnabas in Acts. How’s he described? Son of encouragement, full of faith and the Holy Spirit. In Acts 11, Barnabas set the foundation for the church in Antioch. He’s a major player in spreading the gospel. How did Barnabas get his start? We first read about him in Acts 4 selling his field and bringing all proceeds to the apostles’ feet. Is it coincidence God entrusted him to start the church at Antioch and play a crucial role in Paul’s development?

To faithfully lead people, you must be patient, humble, and trusting in God’s invisible work. You learn those principles when you sacrificially give. Some have been disappointed that giving hasn’t led to increased income. But what if it’s because he’s developing you to increase your impact? How you treat your money is how you’d treat your ministry. If you stew on your money, you’ll stew on your ministry. If you stew on your possessions, you’ll stew on people’s problems. If you stew on greed, you’ll stew on gossip.

The Freedom of Stewardship

Luke 16:12-13 concludes the parable: We are set free from the love of money when we realize we are stewards, not owners. Our attitude shifts when we realize God doesn’t just own ten percent. My body is not my own—I was bought with a price and will honor God with my body. My children are not my own—I’m just a steward called to raise them up and send them out.

There’s a world of difference between steward and owner mentalities. Stewards depend on God; owners depend on stuff. Stewards have abundance mentality; owners have scarcity mentality. Stewards invest their possessions; owners attach to their possessions.

An owner's mentality destroys our soul and the impact we can have on the world. Proverbs 11:24 says: "One person gives freely, yet gains more; another withholds what is right, only to become poor." The Message puts it: "The world of the generous gets larger and larger; the world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller."

Next Steps in Stewardship

The practice for the week involves two concrete steps.

- **First, learning principles of stewarding money,** including: buy things that will last rather than things you'll have to replace often, don't spend money you don't have, and nothing you buy is as good as you think.
- **Second, making margin for ministry.** What things do you own that are actually owning you? Is it impossible to create a giving board because you're drowning in debt from vacations, cars, and credit card purchases for things you don't need? Where could you free yourself to create more margin? The pastor's family sold their second car and cancelled most subscriptions.

This is all an invitation. But it's one thing to be inspired to give and another to create margin in your life so you can actually give.

The question remains: Will you stew on your money or steward it for the kingdom?

GENEROSITY E4: TITHING, NOT TIPPING

IS TEN PERCENT A STARTING POINT, STOPPING POINT OR STICKING POINT?

The series has established three key principles: Greed is an invisible poison that can ruin entire lives, but the antidote is generosity. Generosity requires depending on God, not stuff, with an abundance mentality rather than scarcity. History is shaped by those who steward their money, not stew on it.

As the practice closes, we reframed the definition into identity statements, since generosity isn't something we do as much as someone we become: "We are disciples, not donors, who trust in the God of abundance, not in the scarcity of stuff. We are stewards, not owners, who start with tithing, not stop with tipping."

Three Kinds of People

The data proves division exists in any room when the topic of tithing comes up. Tithing is a word seen in the Old Testament—only a couple times in the New Testament, sometimes negative, other times neutral. It means tenth: giving ten percent of your income or produce back to God. In the Old Testament, it supported the temple and priests serving it. Many have translated this as a way to support the local church.

With all that said, there are three kinds of people in the world regarding tithing.

For some, tithing is a sticking point. You grew up in a home that tithed but were mean, hateful hypocrites every other day of the week. Tithing is easily seen as legalistic and negative. Churches talk too much about money—they're clearly greedy. Or there isn't enough transparency around money.

For others, tithing is a stopping point. You went through a long journey learning to become generous. You finally hit the ten percent mark and are grateful you've become generous. In your understanding of Scripture, you don't see the tithe abolished in the New Testament.

If that's you, the data says you're in the minority in a good way. Thirty-seven percent of churchgoers don't give at all, even some very active in church. The average American churchgoer gives 2.3 percent of their income to church—lower than during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Many are concerned about missions in the next generation because the last generation to be overly generous with wealth is dying and leaving inheritance to a far stingier generation.

Nearly half of all Americans (44.8 percent) give away not one dollar by their own admission. Another 41.3 percent gives away some amount but less than two percent of income. Nine percent gives between two and five percent, 3.1 percent gives five to ten percent, and 2.7 percent gives ten percent or more.

Full disclosure: We would consider it a miracle if everyone gave ten percent. But does the New Testament clearly communicate that tithing is the stopping point? A look at several Luke passages raises questions.

Luke 19:1-10 shows Zacchaeus giving away half his possessions and repaying anyone he cheated four times over—clearly more than ten percent. Did Jesus stop him?

Luke 20:20-25 has the famous “give to Caesar” passage. Some assume it's only about paying taxes. But Jesus makes a bigger point: Give to Caesar what has his image on it, and give to God what has his image on it—our whole selves. God isn't after ten percent of your income. God is after one hundred percent of your soul, which supports the argument to be generous with everything, including time.

Luke 21:1-4 shows the widow giving out of her poverty, implying she went home to nothing. She didn't have a stockpile to last her. What was she doing? Her act of giving was an act of trust—trusting God to provide through miracles and her community.

Passages like these have led some to believe **tithing is a starting point**. Richard Foster arrives with his characteristic uncomfortable timing: “It is quite possible to obey the law of the tithe without ever dealing with our mammon lust.” Maybe tithing is just the beginning of freedom for the New Covenant believer.

Grace Giving in Macedonia

Second Corinthians 8-9 provides Paul's teaching on grace giving. Chapter eight, verses one through four, set the context: Macedonia is in northern Greece, known as a wealthy area. But Christians in Macedonia were being persecuted for their faith and cut off from the market, becoming poor. Yet they begged Paul to allow them to give to the poor in Jerusalem.

** Richard J. Foster, Freedom of Simplicity*

In human terms, this math equation makes no sense: Abundant Joy + Extreme Poverty = Wealth of Generosity.

Verse one reminds us none of this is possible without the grace of Jesus Christ. When we receive the grace of Christ purchased on the cross, we're given new hearts leading to new desires and new abilities. This is difficult to comprehend because we usually don't think of grace this way. Bonhoeffer called it cheap grace—where we don't think it does much except forgive us. But grace isn't just forgiveness; it's like jet fuel. Dallas Willard put it memorably: "The true saint burns grace like a 747 burns fuel on takeoff. Become the kind of person who routinely does what Jesus did and said. You will consume much more grace by leading a holy life than you will by sinning, because every holy act you do will have to be upheld by the grace of God."

Grace grants us permission to give less but also produces the power to give more.

- **Permission to give less:** We aren't children of God who inherit the kingdom because we gave a tithe or offering. It was fully purchased by Christ's blood. He gave the ultimate offering. Therefore, you don't have to give.
- **Power to give more:** A deeper understanding of the gospel leads to open hands. Why do people buy so much and cling to possessions? They're looking for hope, identity, security—all things already bought for us in Christ.

The grace of Jesus empowers us to do more, not earn more. That's the driving force behind all the practices at Passion Creek. A guilty heart asks, "How much do I need to give?" But a grace-filled heart asks, "How much do I need to keep?" This view on generosity only makes sense when you've been set free from sin, Satan, and death by the power of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. For some, a tithe never gets us to that grace-filled question.

Six Best Practices

1. Give as you can, not as you can't. This is an invitation. We want you to give because of grace, not guilt. Everyone is in their own financial situation. Campbell Morgan, a famous pastor of Westminster Chapel in the early 1900s, said: "I know men today who are Christian men in city churches and village chapels who have no business to give a tenth of their income to the work of God. They cannot afford it. I know other men who are giving one-tenth, and the nine-tenths they keep is doing harm to their souls."**

* Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*

** G. Campbell Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit*

2. Begin with the principles of first fruits. Old Testament believers gave God the first and best part of the harvest. Call pay-day “giving-day.” Give God the first portion, not leftovers. It’s easier to budget when you start with generosity. It teaches delayed gratification.

3. Give while you’re paying off your debt. It’s true you ought not be a slave to the lender, but neither should you be a slave to mammon.

4. Secret giving is the secret to living. Bless someone anonymously. Also, secret giving is giving to the General Fund—it’s a release of control.

5. Consistency is better than intensity. When training for a marathon, you don’t run twenty-six miles on day one. You’ll fizzle out. Instead, begin to give consistently.

6. Raise your standard of giving, not your standard of living. If and when the Lord increases your income, don’t automatically upgrade your possessions. Jesus says it’s more blessed—happy—to give than to receive.

Three Next Steps

- **From static to sporadic:** If you’ve never given before, take the next step of giving one time. Begin to follow the impulse when you feel God leading you to give.
- **From sporadic to systematic:** Begin practicing a regular rhythm of tithing or giving. Online giving has a recurring option. It’s the best way to consistently keep mammon from choking out your life and empower the church to make a reliable budget.
- **From systematic to sacrificial:** God is calling some to give until it hurts. This means some will tithe for the first time. Others will recognize God has blessed them to go beyond ten percent for the sake of investing in the kingdom.

The final encouragement: Don’t do nothing and don’t do it alone. The uncertainty of wealth chokes out far too many. We weren’t designed to fight greed alone. Learn from your community. Normalize conversations around major purchases and financial advice. The enemy loves to isolate and shame us in this area—may we not be unaware of Satan’s schemes.

We give our money away because Jesus gave his life for us. We do this in joy because our happiness is not in a practice, but in the person of Jesus.

FORMED BY FASTING

The practice of fasting is abstaining from food for a set period of time to say no to cheaper desires and yes to deeper union, to confess your need and contend for your neighbor.

Recommended Reads:

God's Chosen Fast by Arthur Wallis

A Hunger for God by John Piper

The Celebration of Discipline by Richard J. Foster

FASTING E1: SAYING NO TO CHEAPER DESIRES

WHY YOUR BODY MATTERS

A lot of us have the same experience when it comes to fasting—initial excitement, maybe a little apprehension followed by frustration, disappointment, and regret. Or we don't really have a category for it in our discipleship framework. Or it's confusing, or we only fast when we need something, or when the church is doing it. For most of us, a regular routine rhythm of fasting is only for pastors and monks or something.

But before recapturing the ancient practice of fasting, we have to answer that simple question: Why fast?

The Problem of Disembodied Discipleship

When most of us think of discipleship, we think of all the stuff that happens in our minds. As one pastor put it, "We can't fathom a mode of formation that comes through our stomach, not through our pre-frontal cortex."

When we think of growing in our spiritual maturity or growing in our relationship with Christ, we think of all the brain stuff: sermons, podcasts, books—all knowledge. None of that is bad, but it's incomplete. Most of us have no theological framework for how our bodies fit into our spiritual lives. To put it bluntly, Christians tend to have such a low view of our bodies along with the rest of the western world.

Author and historian Scot McKnight gives a helpful paradigm for how most of us tend to view our bodies. Here's a paraphrase:

A god to be worshipped. Some of us aim our lives at either physical pleasure, material desire, or bodily health as a means to make ourselves happy. The lie we believe about our bodies is that our deepest satisfaction happens with them. Either by increasing our beauty and attractiveness, indulging in sensual desires, or increasing our longevity and health, we will be happy. We'll sacrifice a lot for our bodies to make sure it stays happy, satisfied, and fulfilled. All body, no soul.

* John Mark Comer, interview at The Summit Church

An evil to be rejected. Opposite end of the spectrum, some of us view our bodies as a monster, an evil and wicked beast we must fight to keep in check. Physical pleasures, beauty, desires equal all bad. Only what's spiritual is good. Our goal is to make it to heaven where we'll escape our bodies and live together as disembodied spirits while the world is done away with beneath us. For these people, the body is meant to be ignored—taken care of enough, but ultimately arbitrary. It's just a shell that's wasting away until we get to our afterlife. All soul, no body.*

The Way of Jesus

But the way of Jesus gives a better alternative. In the opening pages of the Bible's story, God creates a physical world and calls it good. The culmination of God's creation isn't the beauty of the natural world or the incredible living plants and animals that fill it—it's his image. God places a physical bodily representation of himself in the middle of creation and calls it very good.

Adam and Eve are physical, created beings whose one job is to image or reflect God's presence and goodness to the rest of the created world with their bodies. Throughout the rest of Scripture, all sorts of words are used to describe humans: soul, flesh, spirit, heart, body, mind, will. For the authors of Scripture, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the soul was not an immaterial immortal thing within us—it was all of us. Spirit, heart, will, and body included. All work together to form what scholars call an “organic unity” that defines human beings.

To put it more bluntly: You don't have a body; you are a body. Dallas Willard wrote: “The new life in Christ simply is not an inner life of belief and imagination, even if spiritually inspired. It is a life of the whole embodied person in the social context.”**

In Luke's account of Jesus' resurrection, he includes a peculiar story of Jesus walking into a room, asking for fish, and then eating in front of everyone. The point isn't just to show that coming back from the dead is hard work. It's to show that Jesus came back in a body. Jesus could have come back in a spiritual form only, as a way to show that the ultimate goal of salvation was to get rid of our bodily shells—a second-century heresy called Docetism.

In 1 Corinthians 15, after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, Paul writes to the church in Corinth reminding them that on this side of the cross, they not only host the personal power and presence of God as a collective community but also as individuals with bodies.

And then, writing his letter to the Roman churches in Romans 12, Paul tells us to “offer

* Adapted from Scot McKnight, *Fasting*

** Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*

your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.” Notice—not offer our minds. Not our hearts. Our bodies. All of our selves, heart, mind, soul, and body included.

At the end of the biblical story, God isn’t grabbing our souls and bringing us away from the physical world into a disembodied heaven. The end of the story is Jesus coming back in the flesh to recreate a physical world as it was meant to be: heaven and earth united, like in the Garden. We, with glorified physical resurrected bodies, living forever in the new creation. All of this to say: What you do with your body matters. Not just in eternity—here today, now.

The Conflict Within

But we’re still in the middle of the story. Though our bodies are redeemed, they’re still broken. This is exactly what Paul illustrates in Romans 7:14-25, where he describes the war between wanting to do good but finding evil present with him. Notice what Paul is naming: There’s a combination and mixture of desires within all of us. We experience life in the middle of the story—there’s a conflict and inner turmoil we all experience and must acknowledge as we strive to become more like Jesus.

The problem isn’t our bodies; it’s the deep-rooted sin within our bodies. What Paul calls the “flesh” in this passage. James captures this as well: “But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire” (James 1:14). “What is the source of wars and fights among you? Don’t they come from your passions that wage war within you?” (James 4:1-3).

Turn My Heart, Turn My Eyes

The teaching text is Psalm 119, a psalm primarily about desire. Specifically, it’s about the desire and delight the psalmist has for the way of God. In the very middle of this passage is the main point: “Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to dishonest profit. Turn my eyes from looking at what is worthless; give me life in your ways” (Psalm 119:36-37).

Notice two competing desires in contrast: God’s decrees versus dishonest profit. Ways of God versus what is worthless. On one hand, the psalmist deeply desires to follow the way of God. He knows this is the way of life, deep joy, long-lasting satisfaction. But on the other hand, he has desires he’s praying against: temptation to make profit, to accumulate more no matter the cost, to waste his time, energy, and attention on worthless things—not sinful, just worthless.

How does the psalmist wrestle with these conflicting desires? Notice the pairing: heart and eyes. Will and body. Internal desire, external expression. What our hearts desire is what our bodies will naturally be aimed at. Show me how you live and I’ll show you what you

really care about. But the inverse is also true: What our bodies are aimed at will dictate the desires of our hearts. Want to change your heart? Change the posture of your body.

What the psalmist is doing is forcing his body into restraint. “Turn my eyes away from its sinful desires and towards you, God.”

The Practice of Fasting

How do we do this today? The practice of fasting. Fasting has a rich history in Scripture and throughout church history. The first mention is in Exodus when Moses goes forty days without food or water on Mount Sinai, then Israelites fast leading up to the Day of Atonement. Fasting has been a regular practice of the early church for centuries alongside prayer, scripture reading, and community as a way to control their appetites, turn their whole selves to God, and shape their inner desires.

Our working definition: Fasting is the practice of abstaining from food for a set period of time to say “no” to cheaper desires and “yes” to deeper union, to confess your need and contend for your neighbor.

Matthew 6:16-18 shows Jesus seemed to assume his disciples would fast. Why? If the life that Jesus called us to live is a life of cross-carrying and self-denial, fasting is one of the surest ways to cultivate our minds, hearts, and desires into a posture of self-denial. By fasting we learn to curate the appetites of our physical bodies and the appetites of our spirit. We forego food so we can feast on God.

When we fast, we aren’t crucifying or punishing our bodies. We’re fighting for our bodies by bringing our whole selves—our desires, impulses, and appetites—under the authority and will of God.

- **Cornelius Plantinga Jr. wrote:** “Self-indulgence is the enemy of gratitude, and self-discipline usually its friend and generator. That is why gluttony is a deadly sin. The early desert fathers believed that a person’s appetites are linked: full stomachs and jaded palates take the edge from our hunger and thirst for righteousness. They spoil the appetite for God.”*
- **Thomas à Kempis wrote:** “Refrain from gluttony and thou shalt the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh.”**
- **St. Augustine explained why fasting is important:** “Because it is sometimes necessary to check the delight of the flesh in respect to licit pleasures in order to keep it from yielding to illicit joys.”

* Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*

** Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*

Theologians throughout church history have noticed the connection between our appetites for food and for sex—indulgence in one tends to affect indulgence in the other. For those struggling to find freedom from addiction and repeated sin, one of the best things you can do is practice submitting your body to God through the practice of fasting.

Weaning Off the Pleasure Principle

Fasting cultivates our ability to say “no” to cheap, quick, simple indulgences. It’s like a muscle that’s severely underdeveloped for us in the West today. Our culture is one of excess and indulgence. From fast food, candy, and snacks to instant media, information, and even pornography, we live in an age where the answer to our impulses is just a walk, drive, or click away. But as we strengthen our ability to say “no” to our appetites, we strengthen our ability to say “no” to other cheaper disordered desires and impulses.

Fasting slowly weans us off of the pleasure principle: the impulse we all carry in our bodies to immediately satisfy any craving for quick and cheap pleasure. It makes us “holy.” Not self-righteous and judgmental, but set apart, consecrated, oriented and aimed at the things God wants us to be aimed at. It purifies us from the things we impulsively go to for comfort, escape, satisfaction. And slowly, over time, through habit and the work of the Holy Spirit, we change.

Fasting is an external expression that shapes our internal desires. Scot McKnight wrote: “Fasting is the body talking what the spirit yearns, what the soul longs for, and what the mind knows to be true. It is body talk—not the body simply talking for the spirit, for the mind, or for the soul in some symbolic way, but for the person, the whole person, to express herself or himself completely.”

The end goal at Passion Creek isn’t to become people who fast for the sake of fasting. It’s not about recapturing an ancient rhythm or adopting questionable ascetic practices. The end goal is to become disciples who reorient, recenter, and focus our lives on becoming more and more like Jesus—gracious and loving towards those around us, self-controlled over our impulses, victorious over the passions that wage war within us and what St. Augustine famously called our “disordered desires,” people wholly capable of loving God and loving others.

* Scot McKnight, *Fasting*

FASTING E2: SAYING YES TO DEEPER UNION

FASTING TO MAKE GOD MORE PRECIOUS TO US

Psalms 63 is one of the most beautiful prayers in Scripture. It's hard to tell from David's poetic language, but the heading of the chapter gives an important detail: David didn't write this joyful psalm at Disneyland, but in the desert.

The Wilderness of Judah points to when David was on the run from a coup. For over three decades, David ruled as king over Jerusalem. The people loved him, he ruled well, and he was a man after God's own heart. But one day, a man sought to usurp his kingship—and that man was his own son, Absalom. He would sit at the gate to whisper deceit and gain the favor of Israel. After some political maneuvering, he gained the throne by force. It was a betrayal of the worst kind. David had no choice but to run to the desert.

It is in this context we get one of the most profound prayers in all of Scripture: "Because your faithful love is better than life, my lips will glorify you!"

Week two of our fasting series tackled this beautiful paradox: David, a king stripped of wealth, power, and possessions, fleeing for his life while his own son tries to kill him, finds his deepest longings satisfied by God's presence.

Victims of Abundance

The teaching argued that little to none of us have experienced the depths of this prayer. Not because we aren't David. Not because this experience is reserved for the spiritual elite. But because we haven't ventured away from pleasure long enough to see what's on the other side.

Unlike David, who found joy in the wilderness, we live in a culture that does everything it can to avoid discomfort. Psychologists call this the pleasure principle. Simply put, we've been trained since birth to only choose what feels good. Logically, we all know pain is necessary to an abundant life. But emotionally, we run from anything remotely difficult or taxing.

Even if life circumstances are unavoidably painful, we medicate with pseudo-pleasures to take the edge off.

Our culture has been in a decades-long experiment of avoiding pain and maximizing pleasure, but where is that getting us? Anxiety is at an all-time high. Depression is more common than ever. Despite having endless entertainment at our fingertips, we're lonelier, more restless, and more dissatisfied.

Jay W. Richards puts it this way: "Our ancestors were victims of scarcity. We, in contrast, are victims of abundance." As an old monk once said, "The devil sits at the summit of the comfortable life."

In Psalm 63, David had everything a person could ever want—power, influence, wealth—yet in the wilderness, when all was stripped away, he found something better than life itself. Jesus later put it this way: "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Is there a way we can lose our life for his sake and thus find it? Is there a way we can voluntarily go to the desert? Is there a practice from the way of Jesus that weans us off the pleasure principle and ushers us into a deeper union with God? Yes, there are many, but chief among them is the practice of fasting.

What Is Fasting?

Fasting is abstaining from food for a set period of time. Your PlayStation, social media, or the news is not something to fast from—that's called abstaining, which is still a healthy practice. It's also from all food—you can't fast from In-N-Out and still go to Chick-fil-A. That's called a diet. You drink water or black coffee.

The "set period of time" contains all sorts of freedom: You can start at one meal. One-day fasts are common, from sunrise to sunset. There's the three-day fast in Esther (no food and no water—consult your doctor). Ten-day fasts, twenty-one days, and most famously forty-day fasts. Moses, who represents the law, fasted forty days and nights. Elijah, who represents the prophets, fasted forty days and nights. Jesus, who represents the New Covenant, fasted forty days and nights.

It's not just an Old Testament thing. Jesus, his disciples, and the church in Acts all fasted. But there isn't a chapter and verse in all of Scripture that gives the exact formula to fasting—which is beautiful. It means there is some freedom.

* Jay W. Richards, *Eat, Fast, Feast*

Reasons to Fast

From studies of the Bible and church history, there are basically four reasons we fast: to say no to cheaper desires, to say yes to deeper union, to confess your need, and to contend for your neighbor.

The first reason—saying no to cheaper desires—was already covered. Basically, our flesh is used to having its way like a spoiled child who needs discipline. We are mastered by our cravings and therefore have little to no self-control when it comes to anger, lust, jealousy, drunkenness, envy, and gossip. Saying no to food empowers us, by the Spirit, to say no to greater temptations. Put negatively: If you can't say no to food, it's likely you don't say no to many other temptations of the flesh.

Even if you only fasted to discipline the flesh, you'd see all sorts of benefits. From a health perspective, a few things start to happen when you fast. First four hours: your body is digesting and feeding on energy from food in your stomach. At sixteen hours, your body switches from burning glucose for energy to burning fat—this is called ketosis. At twenty-four hours, your body shifts into autophagy, a Greek term meaning “self-eating.” It cleanses your body from old, dead, or damaged cells. Research is showing how it kicks out the cells that, when left unchecked, lead to things like cancer and chronic illness.

Fasting as Cadence and Crisis

How often should we fast? This should fit in our calendars in two categories: fasting as cadence and fasting in crisis.

As cadence, the dream would be to make fasting a part of your weekly routine. During the time of Jesus, the Jews would fast twice a week, and so the early Christians kept up that tradition, but with a twist. The Didache, the earliest Christian writings outside of the New Testament, put it this way: “Do not let your fasting be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Monday and Thursday; but you should fast on Wednesday and Friday.” Wednesday: Judas betrayed Jesus. Friday: Jesus died for our sins.

This wasn't just the early church. We see this as an expectation even up to the 1700s. John Wesley asked: “I fear there are now thousands of Methodists, so called, both in England and Ireland, who, following the same bad example, have entirely left off fasting; who are so far from fasting twice in the week (as all the stricter Pharisees did) that they do not fast twice in the month... What excuse can there be for this?”

But there's also times where you do a more dramatic fast when crisis hits: When it feels like you have no idea what to do next or where to go: fast. When you are burdened about the salvation of your neighbors and loved ones: fast. When someone is sick or dying: fast.

The Father Is the Reward

Matthew 6:16-18 provides crucial instruction. A lot of people read this passage and the only takeaway is to fast in secret. But there's a deeper meaning. Jesus doesn't command that we fast but assumes we will. Don't look miserable, because you aren't. Yes, you'll want to eat your arm off in the beginning, but communing with God through fasting is one of the most profound blessings in all of life. The Father is the reward—it's to see and be seen by him.

It's not that people can never find out you're fasting. John Piper helps tremendously on this: "Being seen fasting and fasting to be seen are not the same." It's okay to talk about it, but check your motivations.

In Matthew 9, Jesus answers John's disciples when they ask why his disciples aren't fasting regularly like they are: "The time will come when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast." According to Jesus, why do we fast? To linger in God's presence. Or, in theological terms, to deepen your union with God.

Union with Christ

"Deeper union" alludes to the doctrine called "Union with Christ." This doctrine is foundational to all of theology. Like a diamond, it has many different facets and is stunningly beautiful.

First, union with Christ refers to right standing with God. When we confess and surrender to Jesus as Lord, we are united with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. He fully adopts us as his own and we gain his inheritance. His righteousness becomes our own. We are legally justified in Christ.

This union is once and for all. Fasting doesn't add or take away to this union. Other religions would say you need to fast to secure your salvation. It's how you appease God and make sure you're in right standing. We do see in Jonah that the Ninevites' faith was accompanied with fasting, but it's by grace we are saved through faith, not saved through fasting.

Hear this clearly: Fasting doesn't earn you God's love. Then why do it at all? Because the other element to union with Christ is light living with God. It's taking on his easy yoke and walking with him in joy. Right standing is getting into heaven. Light living is heaven getting into you.

Rosaria Butterfield writes: "Although all believers have this union, if you do not exercise your faith—build it up, make it strong, depend upon it, engage in all the means of grace as

often as possible—the blessings of it might not flourish as God intends. When union with Christ is not enjoyed, the cares of the world sneak up and steal our joy in the Lord and weaken our faith.”

Hesed Love

Look again at the light living David experiences in the desert in Psalm 63:1-5. What is the one thing that entirely transformed David's joy in life? It wasn't a new plan to regain his throne back. It wasn't food—he had no food. God was his food. The key word in this entire psalm is faithful love, the Hebrew word *hesed*.

There isn't one English word that best describes *hesed*: “loyal kindness,” “lovingkindness,” “steadfast love,” “mercies,” “faithful love.” Paul realized the Greeks didn't have one word that described *hesed* either, which is why he wrote 1 Corinthians 13.

To grasp *hesed*, we need to step into one of the most powerful love stories in Scripture—one that shows us the relentless, pursuing love of God. That's the story of Hosea and Gomer. Hosea is a prophet who is told to marry Gomer, a prostitute. Despite Hosea's undying faithfulness, Gomer cheats time and time again. Gomer can't wean herself off the pleasure principle to see what's on the other side.

In that story, you and I are not Hosea; we are Gomer. We aren't the ones chasing after God, hoping he loves us. That's the misunderstanding many of us have of fasting. No, we are the ones who find ways, time and time again, to run away, to get choked out by worries, deceitfulness, and desires. And yet, as David puts it in Psalm 23: “Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life.” He is the one who pursues us, which should totally transform how you fast.

We don't fast to make ourselves more precious to God. We fast to make God more precious to us.

Put another way, fasting doesn't earn you God's love, but it does turn you to God's love that was already yours in Christ Jesus. To adapt a line from Richard Foster: “Fasting isn't about gritting your teeth; it's about falling in love.”

The Sign of God's Presence

How do you know you're deepening your union with God? How do we know fasting is starting to actually work? Verse one gives the answer: When your thirst for God outweighs your thirst for food. When your body faints for the Father more than it faints for food.

* Rosaria Butterfield, *Five Lies of Our Anti-Christian Age*

A sense of God's absence is actually a sign of God's presence. How do you know you've been invited to God's presence? You miss him.

Do you miss him? The prayer is that we become a church that senses his absence. That we'd rather skip a meal than miss out on his presence. That we'd prioritize our Saturday prayer gathering to seek him together.

That kind of posture takes time, grace, and practice. The week's practice involves choosing one or two days to fast, during normal mealtime praying, memorizing John 15:5-8, and when a hunger pang comes up, using this breath prayer: "More than I want food, I want you."

In the beginning, you'll be more focused on your reunion with food than your union with the Father. Keep leaning in and setting your gaze on God. This doesn't happen overnight.

FASTING E3: CONFESS YOUR NEED

HOW FASTING REVEALS WHAT THE FLESH CONCEALS

St. Augustine of Hippo was a fourth-century theologian who wrote an autobiography called “Confessions,” detailing his journey of transformation in Christ. In one instance, Augustine describes a moment when he was with friends and they decided to steal pears from a neighbor’s garden. Upon reflection, he had no practical reason to steal the pears. He wasn’t out of pears—his garden had plenty. The pears weren’t good to the taste—his own were better. He also didn’t put the full blame on his friends for pressuring him. He confesses he did it because of his sheer sinful delight in breaking the law.

His view on sin represents Christian thought throughout the centuries. Yes, there is sin done to us and around us. Part of the issue was his friends pressuring him to do evil. But Augustine could not deny personal responsibility. It was his sin that put him there.

Contrast that story with Rousseau, who represents modern Western thought. Rousseau was an eighteenth-century philosopher who wrote an autobiography with the same name—“Confessions”—but detailed an “enlightened” view of the human condition. Rousseau never mentions Augustine outright, but it’s hard to miss the parody. Rousseau details a story of stealing asparagus because his friend pressured him to. In his reflection, he didn’t have greed in his heart when he stole it. He was just trying to help a friend. He did not do it because of his delight in breaking the law. Unlike Augustine, Rousseau puts all the blame on external pressures.

Carl Trueman summarizes the differences this way: “Augustine blames himself for his sin because he is basically wicked from birth; Rousseau blames society for his sin because he is basically good at birth and then perverted by external forces.”

The Cultural Shift

We live in a day and age where Rousseau is far more influential than Augustine. As a result, confession is not only seen as rare but viewed as wrong.

** Carl R Trueman, The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*

This cultural shift has reshaped how we think about the good life. Instead of confession and surrender, hope and purpose are now found in what Andrew Root describes as the pursuit of uncovering your inner genius and achieving heroic action.

- **Inner genius:** We don't confess our desires; we celebrate them. We respond in rage if the world doesn't applaud us for our actions and appetites. "Be true to yourself," however harmful that could be to you and others.
- **Heroic action:** We don't surrender to our human limits; we overcome them. We perform for the world's stage, always seeking to outperform others and outdo ourselves, never taking a break so the competition can't catch up.

Yet no matter how much we celebrate our sin or deny our limits, the haunting grip of condemnation never goes away. Maybe Augustine was right all along—freedom begins not in self-discovery but in surrender, not in proving ourselves but in confessing our need.

The Practice of Self-Denial

Is there a practice from the way of Jesus that empowers us to embrace this kind of freedom? One that leads us away from the illusion of self-sufficiency and into true dependence on God? Yes, it's through the practice of fasting.

The practice of fasting is abstaining from food for a set period of time to say no to cheaper desires and yes to deeper union, to confess your need and contend for your neighbor.

In a world fixated on self-expression and self-exertion, we fast to practice self-denial. This self-denial is not just denying ourselves food but the illusion of control. Psalm 69 provides a powerful window into this practice. We don't have much context other than that King David wrote it. We take for granted how humble and honest David was in the Psalms. In Ancient Near Eastern culture, kings were treated as gods. And yet, with a biblical worldview, David was quick to confess his own sin and shortcomings, knowing it was the path to the good life.

Fasting Defines Reality

Psalm 69 shows David fasting, but why? First of all, David isn't afraid of reality. He runs toward it head on. That's a major reason to fast: Fasting defines reality. It has a way of opening your eyes to the truth of your condition—both positive and negative, both present and future.

First, positive. Verse 16 shows David could easily slip into a pity party, but he remains focused on what is true: "I feel like I'm dying, but God's faithful love is good."

Even Jesus, when tempted in the wilderness by the Devil, was at his peak strength in the Spirit after forty days and nights of fasting because he had been feasting on the truths of God's word: "He answered, 'It is written: Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4). Fasting clears away the lies of the enemy and empowers you to define reality. At the same time, it clears your vision to see what's truly negative. Verse five shows David isn't calling on God because he is perfect. He sees his own condition as foolish and his acts as guilty.

Fast a few times and you'll quickly see the flaws in your character rise to the surface. Many have said they can't fast because they're unpleasant to be around. That's precisely the point. Fasting reveals what the flesh has concealed. It has a way of revealing what's deep down in us. If you struggle with bitterness, fasting will bring it to the surface. If you struggle with anger, fasting initially amplifies those frustrations.

Richard Foster put it this way: "More than any other single discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting, these things surface... Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first we will rationalize that our anger is due to our hunger; then we know that we are angry because the spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ."

Fasting reveals what the flesh conceals but what the Father can heal.

God can meet you right where you're at. Fasting makes room for that revealing and that healing. But that comes through confession. Fasting without confessing is just a diet.

Fasting also defines present reality. In 2 Chronicles 20, Judah was being invaded, and they weren't sure what was going on or how they should respond. So they all fasted together. God told them: "Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast number, for the battle is not yours, but God's."

Fasting also defines future reality. Acts 13:2-3 shows that as the early church was worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which he had called them. Any time we are stuck or wondering if God is calling us a certain direction, we fast to seek his face and seek his guidance. Sometimes the answer is almost immediate; other times, it takes years.

** Richard J. Foster, Celebration of Discipline*

Inviting God to Deliver

Fasting doesn't just help you see reality for what it is. Fasting defines your reality and invites God to deliver you through it. Look at David's plea in Psalm 69:13-14. David doesn't stop at describing his sinful and helpless condition. He calls on the name of the Lord to deliver him. This is the heart of fasting.

We can pray and ask God to deliver us without fasting, but there's something powerful about fasting that grabs the ear of heaven. Arthur Wallis writes: "Heaven is ready to bend its ear to listen when someone prays with fasting... When a person is willing to set aside the legitimate appetites of the body to concentrate on the work of praying, they are demonstrating that they mean business, that they are seeking with all their heart, and will not let God go unless he answers." Two things can be true at the same time: Fasting doesn't earn us God's love. Fasting does seem to make our prayers more effective.

Three Ways God Delivers

When we fast in genuine repentance, God delivers us in one of three ways: rescue, refinement, or resurrection.

- **Rescue.** David in Psalm 69 wants a rescue. Sometimes God completely removes the burden or the situation. The tumor disappears. The family reconciles. The pain goes away. We rejoice and give God glory.
- **Refinement.** We long for relief, yet God longs for transformation. We ask for an emotional high, but He desires emotional maturity. We crave easy relationships, but He invites us into forgiveness and grace. God's goal is not simply to remove us from the fire but to refine us through it, as Dallas Willard puts it, "The most important thing God gets out of your life is the person you become."
- **Resurrection.** Sometimes the answer isn't rescue or refinement but resurrection. When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, he pleaded with God: "If there's any other way, let this cup pass from me! Nevertheless, not my will, but your will be done." God didn't rescue his son from the cross. It wasn't to refine him either. All of us will die. When we pray and fast for healing, we plead for God to answer with rescue and even refinement. Even if we're healed, eventually we die. Our greatest hope is in the promise of the resurrection. We rejoice in the victories of this life, but our greatest aim is the next one.

If we are rescued, we give glory to God. If we are refined, we grieve and we give glory to God. If neither occurs, we grieve and we give glory to God for the resurrection. That's precisely what fasting invites us into.

** Dallas Willard, The Great Omission*

FASTING E4: CONTENDING FOR YOUR NEIGHBOR

THE MISSING PIECE OF FASTING

From the library of Scripture, we've learned that fasting empowers you to say no to cheaper desires (if you struggle with temptations like lust and anger, saying no to food empowers you to say no to other fleshly temptations), leads you to say yes to deeper union (fasting doesn't make us more precious to God, but it does make God more precious to us—it whets our appetite for God and makes us long for his presence), and opens you up to confess your need (fasting defines reality and then asks God to deliver you through it).

Sounds pretty complete. The problem is we see all three of these happening in Isaiah 58, and yet God is still rejecting them.

The Complaint

Looking at Isaiah 58:1-3, verse two shows “they seek me day after day”—they are saying yes to deeper union. “They ask me for righteous judgments”—confessing their need for God. Verse three shows “we have denied ourselves”—they are saying no to their cheaper desires.

But what's their complaint in verse three? “God has not seen... God hasn't noticed.” That's because God is rejecting their fast. So what went wrong? Why was their fasting rejected? What's the missing piece?

According to Isaiah 58, this final piece of fasting is so important that if you throw it out, you've missed the entire point. To put another way, if you take what the church learned the last three weeks to climb the ladder of fasting, you'll get to the top only to find it's been leaning against the wrong wall.

If fasting is only about self-denial, deepening our spiritual hunger, and personal confession, we've denied the power God seeks to release on his people. We'd become what Paul warned Timothy about: “having the appearance of godliness but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:5).

The Worst Offense

Isaiah 58:3b-5 calls God's people oppressors. If you know the story of Israel, being called oppressors is the worst offense. Their identity was that of slaves under Pharaoh of Egypt, and yet God rescued them from oppression to freedom. All throughout the Old Testament, God reminds them of this identity: They were slaves set free from captivity. They must extend that same freedom to the foreigner, widow, and orphan.

And yet in Isaiah, the people of God are ignoring the poor and needy while showing up to the temple every day asking for a breakthrough.

But this wasn't just a problem in Isaiah's time. The early church struggled with it too. One of the greatest preachers of the fourth century, John Chrysostom, warned his congregation about fasting that had no real power. He put it this way: "It is common for everyone to ask in Lent, how many weeks each has fasted; and some may be heard saying they have fasted two, others three, and others that they have fasted the whole of the weeks. But what advantage is it, if we have gone through the fast devoid of works? If another says, 'I have fasted the whole of Lent,' you should say, 'I had an enemy, but I was reconciled; I had a custom of evil-speaking, but I put a stop to it; I had a custom of swearing, but I have broken through this evil practice.'"^{*} If fasting doesn't change how you love your neighbor, you've missed it.

A Modern Problem

This isn't just an Old Testament problem, nor a fourth-century problem. It's our problem. Francis Schaeffer, one of the sharpest Christian minds in the twentieth century, warned that the American church would lose its power and influence in the twenty-first century—not because of persecution or opposition, but because we would be too attached to comfort and wealth, or what he labeled "Personal Peace and Affluence."

He predicted the American church would start asking God to show up in powerful ways while clinging to the ease of American life, chasing success, and prioritizing personal security. This is the biggest temptation at Passion Creek—many love the practices of Jesus that bring them closer to God and deepen their faith but hesitate to serve more than once a month for fear of burnout.

Notice how God doesn't leave Judah confused. He states the problem and solution in verses six and seven. Verse six is a poetic call to transformation. Verse seven is a practical way to do it now. Do you want to break the chains of wickedness and untie the ropes of the yoke? Start sharing your bread to the hungry, bring the poor and homeless into your house, clothe the naked, and don't ignore your family.

^{*} John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statues*

Breaking the Suburban Illusion

This is especially hard for us in suburban America because we've designed our cities to weed out the hungry, the poor, and the homeless. But let me break the illusion: we do have the needy among us. Just within the congregation alone, there have been so many illnesses and diseases, family heartbreak, people losing their main source of income, and that doesn't even mention the myriads of needs outside of those four walls. Do our hearts break for each other in prayer? Or just our own needs?

The key idea behind Isaiah 58 is for Judah (and you and me) to hear loud and clear: You're not actually loving God if you're not sacrificially loving your neighbor.

Four Approaches to Fasting

- **Dieting.** If you try to fast while loving yourself and loving the world, you're just dieting. It may improve your life a little bit, but it's not pleasing or powerful.
- **Pretending.** What does it look like if you fast to love your neighbor but not love God? Matthew 6:16-18 shows someone who properly fasted in the sense that he abstained from food for a set period of time, but he misses the reward because his love wasn't for God. He was pretending for his neighbor—fasting to be seen by others.
- **Condemning.** What about fasting because you love God, but not your neighbor? Luke 18:9-14 shows a man who fasted twice a week—what our church honestly hopes some people would adopt. And yet, look at his self-righteousness. His fasting was condemning his neighbor. He may have had all the practices down, but his heart couldn't be further from the kingdom. It didn't please God nor draw on his power.
- **Contending.** What is the right way? Our church calls it contending for your neighbor.

Jesus takes Isaiah 58 and uses it verbatim in Matthew 25:35-45. See what Jesus is doing? He's saying it's impossible to say you love God while not loving your neighbor. It's impossible to love your neighbor while not loving God. Not just any neighbor, but the least among us.

How to Contend

How do you fast in a way that connects with the heart of God and taps into the power of God? By contending for your neighbor. Contending means you've moved beyond just sympathy for those around you. It's to actively stand in the gap for the least of these. It's about becoming an agent of his justice and mercy in the world.

What does contending for your neighbor actually look like? It's not something we stumble into by accident. It takes intentionality, dependence on the Holy Spirit, and a willingness to be shaped by God's word. Here are three ways we can begin to contend for our neighbors:

Ask God to Move You From Sympathy to Agony

The first step toward renewal is often a simple prayer: "God, give us Your heart for the lost." Even the name Passion Creek reflects this calling. In Christianity, passion doesn't mean enthusiasm—it means suffering. To live with passion is to love deeply enough to sacrifice, to suffer, and do whatever it takes to see people move from death to life.

This is the call of the church: to be a people so moved by the heart of Christ that we willingly bear the weight of His mission for the sake of our community.

Share What You Have to Those in Need

St. Augustine is famous for saying, "Do you wish your prayer to reach God? Give it two wings, fasting and almsgiving." Almsgiving is being generous to the least of these.

An early Christian writing called *The Shepherd of Hermas* instructed the early Christians to fast twice a week and then "estimate the cost of the food you would have eaten on that day and give that amount to a widow or orphan or someone in need. Be humble in this way, that the one who receives something because of your humility may fill his own soul and pray to the Lord for you."^{*}

Consider using the money you would've spent and give it to the poor or organizations helping the poor, the needy, and the lost.

Pray the Promises of God

We don't just pray vague prayers like "God, bless them." We speak what he has already declared. If they are lost, we pray Luke 19:10 during our fast: "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. Save them, Lord!" If they are weary, we pray Matthew 11:28: "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Give them rest in you, Lord." If they are oppressed, we pray Isaiah 58:6: "To loose the chains of injustice and set the oppressed free. Set them free in you, Lord." If they are sick, we pray James 5:15: "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. Heal them now, Lord."

^{*} *The Shepherd of Hermas, Similitude 5.3*

The Power Released

The question for each person is: Who will you contend for this week? Will you begin to ask God for a bigger burden beyond yourself and your family? Will you search the Scriptures to pray the promises of God over those who need it?

Look one more time at what God will do when we begin to contend for our neighbors in Isaiah 58:8-10: “Then your light will appear like the dawn, and your recovery will come quickly. Your righteousness will go before you, and the Lord’s glory will be your rear guard. At that time, when you call, the Lord will answer; when you cry out, he will say, ‘Here I am.’”

That’s the kind of power and blessing worth being a part of. The challenge is simple: fast in a way that honors God by contending for those who are hurting and lost. Ask for names, faces, and specific burdens to carry. As we fast, let his power be released in our lives and in our community. May we see lives changed, chains broken, and people drawn to him.

FORMED BY PRAYER

Prayer is the sacred practice of delighting in God's presence, discerning God's heart, depending on God's power, and directing God's hand.

Recommended Reads:

A Praying Life by Paul E. Miller

Hearing God by Dallas Willard

Prayer by Timothy Keller

PRAYER E1: DELIGHTING IN GOD'S PRESENCE

WHY THE DISCIPLES ASKED JESUS TO TEACH THEM TO PRAY

Imagine Jesus walks into your living room this afternoon. He smiles, sits on your couch, and says, “You get one hour on one topic. I’ll teach you whatever you want. What’ll it be?”

What would you choose? Some would pick parenting—ten minutes on the baby stage, ten on toddlers, ten on tweens, and thirty on teenagers. Others would jump to marriage—how do I forgive the unforgivable? How do we move forward after decades of resentment? Many would honestly go straight to end times—is it the fourth quarter? Who is the Anti-Christ? What does Revelation actually mean?

The disciples had those kinds of afternoons with Jesus, day after day, year after year. But in all four Gospels, there’s only one recorded request where they ask Jesus to teach them on a specific topic: “Lord, teach us to pray.”

This should grab our attention because Jesus had already done so much before Luke 11. He dueled with the devil, drove out demons, healed lepers and the blind and paralyzed, raised a widow’s son from the dead, calmed storms, and fed five thousand. Yet the disciples never asked, “Teach us to heal... Teach us to cast out demons... Teach us to multiply bread... Teach us to preach.”

They knew his power and anointing didn’t come from what he did in public but from how he communed with the Father in private.

The Source of Jesus’ Power

Before every major miracle, Luke records that Jesus withdrew to pray. It was clear Jesus was drawing from a deep well not of this world. Prayer empowered Jesus to love his enemies, forgive freely, and bring peace to every room.

This is true for Jesus and for every person and church that bears fruit thirty, sixty, and one hundred-fold. When you’re around someone with a deep prayer life, you can feel it. There’s

a genuineness about them, a calm authority, a deep joy. There's a confidence and trust in God that can't be faked or manufactured.

That's the dream at Passion Creek Church—to be formed into a people of prayer, to become a house of prayer. The vision includes having a presence that brings peace to the restless, a prayer team ministering to the congregation at the end of every service, Saturday morning prayer gatherings as the most powerful hour, people praying in closets and kitchens and neighborhoods and workplaces every day throughout the East Valley, and boldly praying for healing, wisdom, and revival.

We must be honest: We aren't there yet. But by the grace of God, we can be. This prayer series will play a crucial role in that transformation—not overnight, but over the long haul.

The Lord's Prayer Line by Line

A great place to start is letting Jesus teach us how to pray. Darrell Bock, a New Testament scholar and expert in Luke's writings, outlines the Lord's Prayer as one address, two statements, and three requests.

The Address: Father

Many of us treat prayer like a transaction—as if saying the right words or starting the right way is what gets God's attention. But prayer isn't about getting the formula right; it's about fixing our minds on the One we're speaking to. Dallas Willard wrote: "When we pray we must take time to fix our minds upon God and orient our world around him."

Two Statements:

"Your name be honored as holy." Name refers to God's character and reputation. Honored or hallowed means responding to God's worth with affection and awe. Holy means "set apart"—morally pure but also breathtakingly beautiful. He's set apart in both morality and majesty. Essentially, it's treasuring and loving God more than anything the world offers.

"Your kingdom come." In man's kingdom, we get division, dysfunction, and destruction. But in God's kingdom, we get righteousness, peace, and joy. The promise of Scripture is that his kingdom will be established with no more tears or death. The miracle is our prayers participate in that promise. When we pray, we play a part in bringing heaven to earth.

Three Requests:

“Give us each day our daily bread” (provision). Like manna in the wilderness, it’s a call of daily dependence on God’s provision. It’s a daily request because joy comes from daily communion.

“Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone in debt to us” (pardon). This is both confession and commitment. A sign of being forgiven is the ability to forgive others. You can’t hold onto your grudge and God’s grace at the same time.

“Do not bring us into temptation” (protection). God does not tempt us—James 1 makes that clear. It’s asking for protection from tests and trials that would crush us.

Warren Wiersbe summarized the requests this way: “We can ask Him to provide our needs (not our greeds!) for today, to forgive us for what we have done yesterday, and to lead us in the future.”

Two important notes: First, the Lord’s Prayer isn’t a memory verse to rush through but a template to walk through. We should linger at each line with God and bring to him what comes to mind. Second, the order really matters. Most of us start with requests, but this should be halfway through our prayer. We fizzle out in prayer not because our needs are small but because our vision of God is small. That’s why Jesus teaches us to start with worship, not with worries.

The Working Definition

Passion Creek’s working definition: Prayer is the sacred practice of delighting in God’s presence, discerning God’s heart, depending on God’s power, and directing God’s hand. First on the docket is delighting in God’s presence. How?

A Proper Theology

When Jesus says to start with Father, he’s not just giving a polite opener. He’s showing something essential about who God is. Before anything else—before Creator, before Ruler—God is Father.

Michael Reeves shows why this matters: “If God’s very identity is to be The Creator, The Ruler, then he needs a creation to rule in order to be who he is. For all his cosmic power, then, this God turns out to be pitifully weak: he needs us.” He continues: “If God is The Ruler and the problem is that I have broken the rules, the only salvation he can offer is to

* Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*

forgive me and treat me as if I had kept the rules. But if that is how God is, my relationship with him can be little better than my relationship with any traffic cop.”*

God as primarily Ruler is cold, transactional, and distant. No wonder we view prayer like chatting with a traffic cop on the side of the road—checking in with the cosmic police to avoid paying penalties. But that’s not who God is and not how prayer works. In John 17, Jesus prays: “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they will see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the world’s foundation.” Before the world was made, God is eternally a Father. At his core, he is relational, outgoing, and life-giving. When we pray, we’re stepping into the warm embrace of a loving Father.

Your vision of God’s love determines the version of your life. That vision comes from a proper theology. A proper theology dramatically shifts the way we pray. It makes you realize: Prayer is not about marking off tallies for God but marking out time with God. It’s spending time with your dad. You don’t judge your time together based on efficiency or what you got done. The win was being in the same room for an extended period of time.

Many don’t have a good father, making this connection hard. John Ortberg describes three Father Facts that help reshape how we relate to God: God is here (closer than we think—he didn’t create and leave us), God is able (he delivered Israel from Pharaoh, Daniel from the lion’s den, David from Goliath, you and me from sin), and God is good (he doesn’t always give what we want, but always gives what we need—we can trust he desires our deepest happiness).**

If you doubt any of those, that’s normal. Study theology. Ask hard questions in community. Above all, pray your doubts and struggles to God.

A Patient Consistency

The quickest way to kill your prayer life is always expecting a euphoric experience. Consistency is far superior to intensity. We’re called to keep showing up.

Notice Jesus doesn’t say “if you pray”—he says “whenever you pray.” Prayer isn’t a one-time act but a long-term habit of the soul. Consistent prayer can sound intimidating until you realize we all already consistently pray. We just don’t involve God. Worry is talking about the future with yourself. Prayer is talking about the future with God.

Paul makes that comparison in Philippians 4:4-7. Worry is when you present your requests to yourself. Prayer is when you present your requests to God.

* Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*

** John Ortberg, *Steps*

Here's the good news: we can change. We can all become the type of people who consistently pray. Dallas Willard argues how this change is possible: "The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our minds... This is the fundamental secret of caring for our souls... A new, grace-filled habit will replace the former ones as we take intentional steps toward keeping God before us. Soon our minds will return to God as the needle of a compass constantly returns to the north."*

A Practicing Community

In Passion Creek's theory of change, none of these practices stick unless done together. In our hyper-individualistic age, we assume prayer is a solo sport. Scripture is filled with corporate prayers. By praying together, we encourage each other to press on.

To become a people of prayer, we must create a room for prayer to happen and a rhythm for prayer to continue. In that rhythm, we hold both the base practice that keeps us grounded and the reach practice that keeps us growing—ordinary habits that open us to an extraordinary God.

- **A room:** Every Saturday, we practice praying together. We emphasize "practice" because it's not a performance. We'll stumble along the way and extend a lot of grace.
- **A rhythm:** At formedbyjesus.com/prayer, we provide the rhythm we're calling people to establish every week, both for adults and children.
- **The base practice:** Establish a daily prayer rhythm based on Daniel 6. Decide when you'll pray (9 AM, noon, 3 PM), set a realistic goal (start with five minutes), and when it's time to pray, simply talk to God—focusing on grace, delayed gratification, and gratitude.
- **The reach practice:** Abiding prayer—being still and knowing he is God. The pastor's version is reading a Psalm, then slowly drawing attention to God and just spending time in his presence.

Essentially, delighting in God is beholding his beauty. But that's impossible if we're beholden to busyness. Both practices will challenge our busy culture, but they provide the foundation for becoming people who truly delight in God's presence.

* Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*

PRAYER E2: DISCERNING GOD'S HEART

LEARNING TO HEAR THE SHEPHERD'S WHISPER

"I'm on my own. No one looks out for me or protects me. I experience a continual sense of need. Nothing's quite right. I'm always restless. I'm easily frustrated and often disappointed. It's a jungle—I feel overwhelmed. It's a desert—I'm thirsty. My soul feels broken, twisted, and stuck. I can't fix myself. I stumble down some dark paths. Still, I insist: I want to do what I want, when I want, how I want. But life's confusing. Why don't things ever really work out? I'm haunted by emptiness and futility—shadows of death."*

These opening words of David Powlison's anti-Psalm 23 capture how many of us actually live. Even if we don't say it out loud, this is the quiet despair beneath our busyness and the ache behind our doomscrolling. We live overwhelmed, broken, and haunted by emptiness.

What makes things harder is that the world we live in doesn't help us find peace—it actually trains us to avoid it.

Casinos Without Windows

Prayer feels difficult, even impossible, because our modern age doesn't feel like green pastures and quiet waters. It's more like dark casinos with loud slot machines. Like a casino, our secular age is built without windows—no glimpse of anything beyond the now, no view of anything transcendent. Instead, our world is drowned out by noise and stimulation. And the whole time, it lies to you, whispering that your luck and good fortune will turn around soon, you just need to believe in yourself and start manifesting, all while your soul slowly withers away.

There are many practices from the way of Jesus to escape this anti-Psalm 23 world, but chief among them is prayer.

Last week focused on delighting in God's presence, which is exactly how David opens Psalm 23. But notice the shift starting in verse four. David moves from talking about God to talking with God—from consolation to conversation.

* David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*

This is a scary but necessary step in becoming a person of prayer. In the beginning, our prayers are mostly one-sided. We feel good and productive since we used a lot of words. But just like any deep relationship, prayer matures as we move from consolation to conversation, from talking to listening.

But whose voice are we listening to? How do we know it's the right one? Do we even need to hear anything if we already have the Word of God?

The Shepherd's Voice

Psalm 23 was foundational for the people Jesus was speaking to in John 10. They likely had it memorized, along with the chapters before and after. And in that deep tradition, Jesus makes a bold and personal claim in John 10:2-5 that he is the Good Shepherd whose sheep hear his voice.

This made some of the crowd very angry. After his teaching, some said, "He has a demon and he's crazy. Why do you listen to him?" Why such anger? Jesus was claiming Psalm 23 to be about himself: "The Lord Jesus is my Shepherd; I have what I need."

John 10 can also make some Christians uncomfortable today. It seems Jesus is claiming to speak to us. Some interpret this passage as being only about salvation—how to get into heaven. There's a time when Jesus calls you, and if you answer, you enter the sheep pen and have eternal life.

But the good news of Jesus isn't just about getting us into heaven—it's about getting heaven into us. It's the beginning of a lifelong obedience to the voice of the Shepherd. We don't just hear his voice to enter in; we hear his voice day-to-day.

How do we hear his voice day-to-day? God speaks primarily through the Bible, but he may also guide through promptings of the Holy Spirit, wise counsel of godly community, shifts in our desires that align with his will, and providential circumstances too significant to ignore. All of these are best discerned when we listen to God in prayer.

When we pray, we're not talking to the air or to a distant, disinterested God. We're talking to God the Father who loves us, and we're listening to Jesus the Shepherd who leads us.

The ABCs of Discernment

How can we know it's the Shepherd's voice? In John 10, Jesus says the sheep will know his voice, but how? Scripture warns that not every voice is trustworthy—the enemy disguises himself as an angel of light.

Pete Greig, author, pastor, and founder of 24-7 Prayer, gives the ABCs of discerning the Shepherd's voice.*

- **Affirming.** The enemy's favorite weapon is condemnation, but the Spirit's is conviction. God doesn't just point to a problem; he also shows you the solution. He doesn't just confront you with guilt; he comforts you with grace. As St. Ignatius wrote: "It is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul... (whereas) it is characteristic of the good spirit to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace."
- **Biblical.** The Shepherd's voice never contradicts Scripture. Our desires, even sincere ones, can deceive us. The world, flesh, and devil convince us that sin is good, true, and beautiful. But if the Scriptures say it's wrong, there's no way around it. To follow Jesus is to trust that his ways are higher than ours. Eventually, when you obey, your desires morph in that direction as well.
- **Christlike.** Does this match the character of Christ? Can you imagine Jesus saying this based on what you know of him in the Gospels and writings of Scripture? When thinking about Christ's character, notice the imagery Jesus uses in John 10: Jesus leads us as a Shepherd, not a sheepdog. A sheepdog drives from behind—barking, biting, intimidating. A Shepherd leads from the front—speaking, guiding, inviting. Since Jesus is a Shepherd, not a sheepdog, he whispers far more than he yells.

Elijah's ABC Masterclass

We see this mode of communication throughout the Bible. One of the greatest examples of God's whisper is in the story of Elijah. The climax comes in 1 Kings 19:11-12, where God appears not in the wind, earthquake, or fire, but in a still, small voice. How do you detect the still, small voice of God? Elijah's journey is a masterclass in listening to God. Three scenes from his life reveal how God whispers.

- **Listen for God's whispers to be ambiguous.** First Kings 17:2-4 shows Israel being ruled by a corrupt king negatively influenced by his corrupt wife, Jezebel. The people bowed down to false idols. It was the prophet's job to call out depravity and point people to God. So God says to go away from everyone to the wilderness to be fed by ravens. This seems entirely ineffective in fixing Israel's sins and idolatry. But Elijah listened and obeyed. We don't understand in order to obey; we obey in order to understand. John Ortberg notes about Abraham (but the same applies to Elijah and to us): "God was deliberately, repeatedly ambiguous with Abraham. Why? Because God was aiming at something far more glorious for Abraham than just someone who could follow rules. God wanted a friend."**

* Pete Greig, *How to Hear God*

** John Ortberg, *Steps*

- **Listen for God's whispers to be brief.** First Kings 18:1 shows that three years later, all God says to do is present himself to King Ahab—the very one who wants to kill him. No further explanation or plotline. But again, Elijah listened and obeyed. We have found the whisper of God to be like headlights in the night—it doesn't light up the full journey, but it gives enough to keep going. We often hear God but don't believe it's him because we assume he shows us the whole journey before we even start. That's not how it works.
- **Listen for God's whispers to be costly.** First Kings 19:1-2 shows that just before this, Elijah called down fire from heaven on Mount Carmel and exposed the emptiness and foolishness of Baal worship. But now, Elijah gets a death threat that puts him into a tailspin of fear, anxiety, and depression. Elijah listened and obeyed—and now he's paying a heavy price for it. There's a price to pay if you're willing to follow God's whispers. We see it throughout the Bible and church history. But there's an even higher cost if you don't listen and obey.

Mastery and Mystery

Discerning God's heart requires the humility to keep following his voice. Discernment involves mastery and mystery because it's both a practice and a gift. When the Bible speaks of discernment, sometimes it's written as a practice—something you do over and over again. Other times it's a gift imparted by the Spirit of God onto your life.

Mastery means it's something you work on. It requires leaning in, reading Scripture, asking wisdom from pastors and Christian friends. It works if you work it. Mystery means it's something God gifts you with. We are hopeless and helpless without God's presence and grace.

Our favorite example is Thomas Green's metaphor of floating, not swimming: "The floater is not passive; one who is passive will sink, not float. At the same time, the activity of the floater is quite unlike that of the swimmer. The swimmer is in control of his or her own direction and speed, whereas the floater responds to, cooperates with the wind and the current. The floater's activity is a dynamic receptivity: God is the sea in which he or she floats."^{*}

The Practice

This week, learn how to float. You can't control it, but you'll drown if you do nothing. It takes a lot of practice, but we can get there together.

The base practice is the Prayer of Examen: taking five to fifteen minutes at the end of the day to review your day with God, noting where God was present and where you

^{*} Thomas H. Green, *When the Well Runs Dry*

missed him. This practice trains you to see God in the present. As Tyler Staton puts it: “As we learn to recognize God in hindsight, the most amazing thing happens. Slowly but surely, we learn to recognize God in the present.”*

The reach practice is Listening Prayer: making ourselves available for God to speak to us and through us. Remember, his voice is affirming, biblical, and Christlike. His whispers are ambiguous, brief, and costly.

The Good Shepherd is speaking. The question is—will we slow down long enough to hear him? Will we humble ourselves to obey?

* Tyler Staton, *Familiar Stranger*

PRAYER E3: DEPENDING ON GOD'S POWER

THE MUNDANE, MESSY, AND MONUMENTAL

It's 7 AM in Bristol, England in the mid-1800s. Dozens of orphans shuffle into the dining room, rubbing their tired eyes, settling into their seats around a long wooden table. The usual chatter is quieter today. There's an unspoken question in the air. They don't smell anything cooking in the kitchen. Their plates are empty, and the cups are dry.

And yet George Müller, the founder of the orphanage, walks in calm and composed and says: "Lord, we thank you for what you are about to provide." He sits back down and patiently waits at a table full of empty plates and hungry orphans.

Minutes later, a knock at the door. It's the local baker. "I couldn't sleep last night," he says. "God told me to bake bread for the children."

Moments later, another knock. The milkman's cart broke down in front of the orphanage. "The milk will spoil," he says. "Could you use it?" And just like that, the empty table was a feast.

Radical Dependence

The Müllers lived like this every day—total dependence on God's power through prayer. Years earlier, George and Mary Müller felt a call from God to care for orphans. They started with thirty orphan girls in a rented house. By the end of their lives, they'd taken care of over ten thousand.

They were so confident in God's love for the orphans that they never took an offering, launched a campaign, or even mentioned their needs. Müller documented over fifty thousand direct answers to prayer in his lifetime.

He figured: I already asked God, and if God can't do it, how could anyone else? Or, as David says in Psalm 121: "I lift my eyes toward the mountains. Where will my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth."

We long to be the type of people who believe the same God who filled that breakfast table is the same God at work today—so they pray.

The working definition breaks prayer into four categories: Prayer is the sacred practice of delighting in God's presence, discerning God's heart, depending on God's power, and directing God's hand. Last week covered how prayers move from consolation to conversation. But it doesn't stop there. In fact, if your prayer stops there, your prayers will eventually stop.

The Full Gamut of Requests

Of all the topics the disciples could have asked Jesus to teach, the only recorded request is "Teach us to pray" in Luke 11:1-4. The teaching recapped key reminders: one address, two statements, and three requests. The Lord's Prayer isn't a memory verse to rush through but a template to walk through. The order really matters.

If you pay attention to the order, you'll see: Prayer starts with looking up to heaven, but it ends by looking around at earth. In Matthew's version of this prayer, the turning point is "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." If our prayers never move toward the world, they will stagnate and eventually disappear. That's why one of the pastor's favorite definitions of prayer is from Dallas Willard: "Prayer is simply talking to God about what we are doing together."

The more you step into the needs around you, the more dependent you become—and the more natural prayer becomes. In theology, these kinds of prayers are called petition and intercession. Petition is prayer for ourselves. Intercession is prayer for others. Both are essential if we're going to pray for the world around us.

Looking back at Luke 11:3-4, all three requests are petitionary prayers. Daily bread asks God for provision (daily since they couldn't store bread). Forgive asks God for pardon. Do not bring us asks God for protection. It's important not to stop here. Scholars note that Jesus uses a teaching device called chiasm structure. He goes from teaching on praying to the Father, to illustrating with a parable, to ending on God's character as Father—a brilliant way to capture the mind and drive the point home to the heart.

The parable in Luke 11:5-10 introduces a friend who shows "shameless boldness," "impudence," "shameless audacity." The Greek word suggests a persistence with zero social awareness. Just think about how bold children are—they don't even feel bad about it. The pastor noted it's been sad to see his daughter Faith grow up and not ask as much.

Jesus tells this comical story to make a serious point.

Unasked Prayers

Whenever we talk about prayer, we often focus on unanswered prayers—but Jesus seems far more interested in unasked prayers. Why don't we ask more often? What is there to lose? Some say it's because we're too busy. Some say it's our economy: why pray for it when I can pay for it? Those factors play a role. But often, we don't ask from God because our requests feel too mundane, too messy, or too monumental.

- **Our requests feel too mundane.** “Give us this day our daily bread.” Why would God care about blessing my lunch or getting the perfect parking spot when kids are suffering in ICUs and wars are breaking out across the world? Even the George Müller story seems exceptional—of course he can pray for daily bread since he's taking care of orphans, but I should just care for myself. Sounds logical, but Jesus tells us to pray the mundane—to ask for daily bread. Your God is too small if you don't ask for what's small.
- **Our requests feel too messy.** “Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone in debt to us.” To pray this means naming two things: First, the sins we're asking forgiveness for—forgive me for objectifying that person online, for exploding with rage and anger toward my wife and kids, for lying and exaggerating to boost my self-worth. Also, we must name the people we're being called to forgive—give me the power to forgive that family member who spoke harsh words over me, that coworker who ruined my chances at a raise, that friend who stabbed me in the back. This is messy and these prayers will make you blush. But as P.T. Forsyth put it: “Petitions that are less than pure can only be purified by petition.”
- **Our requests feel too monumental.** “Do not bring us into temptation” isn't just a prayer for power to avoid sin. It's a cry for rescue when the weight of life feels like too much. How do I stay faithful in a marriage that feels like it's falling apart? How do I keep trusting God when my body is breaking down? How do I keep asking for a child after every miscarriage?

If we can't pray prayers that are mundane, messy, or monumental, what else is there to even pray? Jesus gives us the full gamut of requests. Nothing is too mundane, messy, or monumental for God to hear and intervene.

Keep Asking, Keep Seeking, Keep Knocking

Again, unanswered prayer is real and painful, but Jesus is concerned with unasked prayer. Looking at Luke 11:9-10 again, ask, seek, knock is written in present, active, imperative. Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking. Each one requires more intensity and consistency.

What Jesus makes clear: Prayers of petition require a lot of repetition. Think about it. Nobody just knocks on the door once. In the same way, we're supposed to pray prayers over and over and over. twenty-four hours.

The same good God who provided salvation through the cross and resurrection is the same good God who provided breakfast for George Müller in the 1800s, the same good God who will provide for our church, the same good God who will provide for each believer.

And we get the joy of asking—over and over and over.

The Practice

The week's practices includes petitionary prayers for the base level: Get a list, put it on your mirror, in your car, on your phone. Pray the list with your family every day and every night. Ask for the mundane. Ask for the messy. Ask for the monumental.

The reach practice is healing prayers: healing for yourself, healing for others.

Ultimately, prayer is not rooted in our worthiness or even our persistence—it's rooted in God's goodness. He is the kind of Father who delights in giving good gifts to His children. The question is never whether God is powerful enough or willing enough, but whether we are humble enough to keep asking, seeking, and knocking.

PRAYER E4: DIRECTING GOD'S HAND

WHY PRAYER ACTUALLY CHANGES THINGS

Prayer works if you work it.

At the beginning of May 2025, Passion Creek Church started rallying around the idea that they could become a praying church—encountering the voice and power of God in their prayer room, lingering after service to pray with and for one another, filling closets, kitchens, and neighborhoods throughout the East Valley with the sound of prayer, boldly praying for healing, wisdom, and revival.

By the final week of the series, God had already been at work because we asked him to. Stories emerged all month of people seeking God's presence in the quiet place and encountering his peace, some discerning why God has them in this season while others gained clarity for what's next, multiple stories of partial healing and even medical miracles, and holy moments on Saturdays and in groups drenched in God's glory.

We aren't surprised: Prayer works if you work it.

And prayer gets even easier to put to work with a framework. Jesus gives that framework in Luke 11 and Matthew 6. From his prayer, the church created their working definition: Prayer is the sacred practice of delighting in God's presence, discerning God's heart, depending on God's power, and directing God's hand.

The final week focused on that last movement—stepping boldly and humbly into the role of directing God's hand, asking him to change the future for his glory and our joy.

The Progression of Prayer

Each week built on the previous one. It's not perfectly linear, but there is a progression. Hard to discern God's heart if you haven't spent time delighting in his presence. Nearly impossible to direct God's hand if you're not depending on his power.

But if prayer works when we work it, why don't we work it more often? Why do we so easily fall back into rhythms of self-reliance and anxiety? How is it possible to see God answer a prayer—and then stop praying?

Part of it is learning the framework. The series argued all month that the order matters. If we skip looking at heaven, we'll lose hope when we look at earth. But here's what struck us in studying Matthew's Gospel: Before Jesus teaches the framework of prayer, he addresses the faith work of prayer.

Two Ancient Poisons

Looking at Matthew 6:5-8, Jesus exposes two heart conditions that poison the purpose of prayer: hypocrisy (using prayer to be seen by others rather than to be seen by God) and babbling (treating prayer like a formula or performance, not a conversation with a loving Father).

In our modern age, we face additional assumptions that poison the purpose of prayer. These cultural ideologies discourage us from confidently praying, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Fatalism: "The Future Is Already Set"

The first assumption is fatalism—a distorted doctrine that says prayer won't change anything because the future is already determined.

Fatalism is deeply engrained into the American psyche. In the pastor's opinion, fatalism is our subconscious attempt to erase anxiety, but all it really does is erode our agency. It leaves us helpless, which ultimately leads to being hopeless. You hear it when people say, "Everything happens for a reason" or "It is what it is."

It sounds spiritual and faith-filled, but you won't see that attitude in Scripture. Yes, God works all things together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes (Romans 8:28). But that doesn't mean we're supposed to sit back and spectate—especially if sin or injustice is gaining ground.

God is looking for people who will intercede, who will stand in the gap and participate in changing the future. Exodus 32 provides a stunning example. Moses is on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments while the people at the bottom make a golden calf, falling into idolatry and debauchery.

Exodus 32:9-14 shows God ready to destroy the people. Does Moses reply, "God's going

to do what he's going to do"? No—he pleads with God. He appeals to God's covenant, his reputation, and his mercy. And God relents. When referring to humans, translators take that same word to mean repents. God changes his mind.

Now let's be clear: The immutability of God, that he does not change his character, nature, or ultimate purposes, is foundational to theology. We find great comfort in the sovereignty of God. But we've absorbed more from Aristotle than the Apostles when we treat God as the Unmoved Mover.

Our future is already secure for those who are in Christ Jesus. But if we believe the future is already set, what's the point of prayer? Dallas Willard puts it this way: "God's 'response' to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to anyway. Our requests really do make a difference to what God does or does not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a spectre that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. And of course God does not respond to this. You wouldn't either."

Prayer works if you work it. One reason we don't work it is because fatalism has seeped into our souls with the belief that the future is already set.

Naturalism: "The Present Is Fully Seen"

The second assumption is naturalism—the false belief that prayer is just wishful thinking because all we can trust is what we can observe.

If we can't see it, measure it, or explain it, it must not be real. You see this in phrases like "Be realistic" or "We don't need your prayers, we need action." Naturalism is the air we breathe in a modern, post-Enlightenment world. Naturalism paralyzes our prayers in two ways. First, we underestimate the problem: "That person seems happy—they probably don't need Jesus" or "My marriage isn't that bad—I don't need to pray about it." Second, we overestimate the problem: "Things are so broken and ruined, there's no point in praying anymore."

Prayer doesn't ignore reality—it sees through it. That's why the story in 2 Kings 6 is so powerful. It's a great example of how many of us live in fear today. 2 Kings 6:15-17 shows Elisha's servant panicking when he sees the army surrounding them. But Elisha prays, "Lord, open his eyes so that he may see." Suddenly the servant sees the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. That's what prayer does: It opens our eyes to the unseen reality of God's power and presence. It reminds us that what we see is not all there is. So we pray knowing he is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think.

** Dallas Willard, Hearing God*

This doesn't mean we're called to ignore reality. We don't pray instead of acting. We pray and act. The balance appears in Nehemiah 4:9: "So we prayed to our God and stationed a guard because of them day and night."

When Prayers Don't Work

Prayer works if you work it. But most of us never even try because we've been shaped by assumptions that quietly shut prayer down. But what about those times you did work it, and your prayers didn't work?

One resource that has helped tremendously is Pete Greig's book "God on Mute," which outlines fifteen reasons why some prayers go unanswered, grouped into three big categories: God's World, God's Will, God's War.*

- **God's World** includes common sense (some prayers aren't answered because they're plain stupid—a gas station can't magically appear because you forgot to plan ahead), contradiction (prayers that contradict other prayers, like a bride praying for sunshine while a neighboring farmer prays for rain), and the laws of nature (some prayers aren't answered because they would be detrimental to the world—constantly changing natural laws to answer prayers would lead to chaos).
- **God's Will** includes God's best (some aren't answered because God has something even better—P.T. Forsythe wrote, "We shall come one day to a heaven where we shall gratefully know that God's great refusals were sometimes the true answers to our truest prayers") and motive (some prayers aren't answered because they're selfishly motivated, as James 4:3 warns).
- **God's War** includes satanic opposition (some aren't answered because God's will is being directly contested by spiritual forces of evil) and faith (some prayers aren't answered because we just don't believe they will be, as Matthew 21:22 suggests).

Joining Jesus in Intercession

The challenge is to begin praying like Moses, Hezekiah, Elijah, Abraham, and many others—ordinary people who dared to believe their prayers could shape history. They didn't just accept the world as it was; they cried out for what it could be.

These heroes interceded for their people, but Jesus intercedes for us still. Hebrews 7:25 says he "always lives to intercede for them." Even now, the Son prays for you. Intercession isn't just something we do—it's something we join Jesus in. To humbly direct God's hand for his kingdom come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

* Pete Greig, *God on Mute*

The Practice

The base practice is intercessory prayers—praying for others. As Richard Foster writes: “If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer. Intercession is a way of loving others.” This isn’t just about personal growth but kingdom advancement. When we intercede, we’re joining God in pushing back darkness and pulling his future into our present.

The reach practice is prayer cards, based on Paul Miller’s “A Praying Life”: Write down the name of the person you’re praying for, write down a passage of Scripture, write their specific need, and carry your cards with you throughout the day.”

The Moravian Vision

A small church started to ache for more of God. On August 25, 1727, they started a twenty-four-hour prayer chain. Soon, they kindled a passion for the lost. Within ten years, they sent more missionaries than all of Protestantism did in the previous two hundred years. A mantra for the Moravian movement was: “Preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten.”

From 1732 to 1760, they sent 227 missionaries. From 1760 to 1930, they sent 3,000 missionaries. It was a small church, but they averaged one missionary for every twelve people.

That’s what happens when a church believes prayer actually changes things. When they work it, it works. The question is: Will we?

* Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

** Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life*

FORMED BY WITNESS

The practice of witness is leading from your witness to talk clearly about the gospel and leaning into your weakness to invite others into God's grace.

Recommended Reads:

Eternity is Now in Session by John Ortberg

How to Talk About Jesus by Sam Chan

Simply Good News by N.T. Wright

WITNESS E1: LEADING FROM YOUR WITH-NESS

WHY WITNESS REQUIRES PROXIMITY

In 2023, Passion Creek Church created FormedbyJesus.com: a discipleship pathway built around nine practices from the lifestyle of Jesus. And witness is the final practice.

Along the way, our church noticed not every practice was met with the same energy. Sabbath, hospitality, and generosity sparked immediate excitement and buy-in. We're busy, so we crave rest. We're lonely, so we long for feasting and friendship. We're tired of chasing mammon, so it feels liberating to give.

But other practices were met with resistance. Simplicity confronted addiction to more, more, more. Peacemaking forced people to deal with their past, confess their faults, and forgive.

And that's the point. Robert Mulholland once said: "Your false self will always choose disciplines that reinforce its values and protect its agenda."* In other words, being formed by Jesus isn't about preference—it's about full surrender to the love, lifestyle, and leadership of Jesus. Each practice invites us to lay down our ways and pick up his cross.

So the question hung in the air: Will this final practice be met with excitement or resistance?

The Baggage of Evangelism

For many believers, even the word evangelism can stir up feelings of fear, resistance, or inadequacy. We've inherited methods and mindsets that often reduce the gospel to a sales pitch or a quota to meet. Somewhere along the way, sharing good news started to feel like a guilt trip instead of a grace invitation.

To be clear, the urgency of the gospel still matters—hell is real, eternity is long, and Christ is King. The world still needs to hear the good news that Jesus became our substitute and that the Kingdom of God has come near. If that calling requires discomfort, so be it.

* M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey*

But some of what we've carried under the label evangelism hasn't always been helpful. For decades, the focus has drifted toward bare-minimum faith—just getting people to believe—rather than bearing maximum fruit as disciples. That's why this practice isn't framed as “evangelism” at all. The goal isn't to make attenders but to make disciples. Not to act from guilt, but to live out of grace.

The Practice of Witness

Instead, our church wants to focus on the practice of witness. Just before ascending to heaven, Jesus told his disciples in Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The word “witness” comes from the Greek word μάρτυς (martys), where we get “martyr.” A witness is simply someone who sees or experiences something important for others to know about, even at the cost of his or her life.

In Paul's letters to the Corinthians we learn what it means to be a witness for the gospel. From that study came our working definition: The practice of witness is leading from your with-ness to talk clearly about the gospel and leaning into your weakness to invite others into God's grace.

First, we must focus on leading from our with-ness. Yes, it's a made-up word. But it helps realize what witnessing is and isn't. We are witnesses, not lawyers, so our power comes from getting close, not from getting clever. This is a key theme for Paul in both 1 and 2 Corinthians—he dropped all eloquence and just preached Christ and him crucified. Many of us don't witness because we fear we aren't clever or smart enough.

We are witnesses, not salesmen, so our power comes from our presence, not from our pressure. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul calls us ambassadors. We don't force the faith; we just represent it and allow others to make their decision. The worst eras of church history have come when we forced the faith.

The Aroma of Christ

If witnessing isn't about pressure or performance, what is it about? Paul gives a striking image in 2 Corinthians 2. In 44 BC, Corinth was established as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar. Corinth was a mini-Rome filled with Roman architecture, Roman politics, Roman values, and Roman parades.

A triumphal procession was the highest honor a Roman general could receive after a

military victory. He'd ride through the streets in a golden chariot, leading his army, showing off the spoils of war, and dragging captives behind him. As they marched through the city, they would burn incense. This aroma would fill the marketplace to draw people in. Plus, the smell helped cement this victory into people's core memory.

Paul takes this common practice and uses it as a metaphor for the Christian life. As witnesses, we aren't announcing a plan for victory. It's a parade because Christ already secured the victory. The captives are sin, Satan, and death. Spoils are peace, love, joy, righteousness, the resurrected life.

Our job is to walk in that parade and draw close to people so they can encounter the aroma themselves. But the responses will vary. Second Corinthians 2:15-16 shows that when they'd march through the city, the smell would bring joy to Roman citizens. But if you were from another empire, the smell would represent defeat.

The same perfume will be met with different perspectives. Sadly, we think the problem is to change the perfume to make it appealing. But that's not our job. Paul is preparing us to understand what will happen when we witness: Some will be receptive and rejoice at the news of victory over sin, Satan, and death. Some will be resistant and mock the news.

We don't twist or tame the message. We present it with full sincerity. Second Corinthians 2:17 explains: We aren't salesmen doing this for profit. Full sincerity means no hidden motives or dishonesty. Since it's from God, we have no right to change the message. Since it's before God, we'll be held accountable for how we presented it.

Proximity With God, With the Church, With the Lost

Don't miss Paul's point: Our witness requires with-ness. You have to be close enough to smell the aroma. In fact, looking at Paul's letters to the Corinthians reveals that Paul knew our witness comes from our with-ness: with God, with the church, and with the lost.

With God. Paul makes this point in the very next chapter. When Moses encountered God at Mount Sinai, his face began to shine, evoking awe and causing people to draw in and listen. But Moses veiled his face because the glory would fade as he came down the mountain. He wanted to hide that it was fading (2 Corinthians 3:13).

Then Paul flips the script. In the New Covenant, we don't have to veil our faces. Through Christ, we have full access to God, and the glory doesn't have to fade. In fact, the more we behold him, the more we become like him (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we stay connected to the Vine, we radiate his light and carry his aroma. It's an attraction charisma can never give you—it's from being with God.

With the Church. It's a lie from the enemy to make you think witness is a solo sport. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul argues we are the body of Christ, and we all need each other to build and grow up into maturity. If someone has a nerdy apologetic question, they have Caleb. If someone has a past filled with violence, addiction, or broken families, they have people whose stories would connect. If someone grew up in another religion, they have those too. We need each other to serve and share the gospel to our city.

Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So, then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." As a church, our task is to show the gospel is plausible—it holds up intellectually, is coherent, credible, and rooted in reality. It's also our task to show the gospel is desirable—not just true, but beautiful. These two things happen by the power of God and the community of God.

Sam Chan argues that community is a non-negotiable in witnessing to friends: "Community is the most powerful force in determining belief. Community shapes the way we interpret our experiences. Community shapes the way we interpret facts, evidence, and data... One of the major reasons our friends aren't Christians is that they don't belong to a community of friends who also believe in Jesus."

With the Lost. Paul, the greatest missionary in the New Testament, details his strategy to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. He got closer to the culture. He avoided pork with the Jews and had BBQ with the Gentiles. He quoted the poets in Athens. He went where the people were at.

Theologian and historian Michael Green observed this of the early church: "80% or more of the evangelism in the early church was done by ordinary Christians just explaining their life to their friends and family."*** They couldn't invite friends to their church service—they could've been spies trying to kill Christians. So they just went into the world and lived the Jesus life among the lost. It made the lost beg the question: What must I do to inherit eternal life?

The First Step

Before giving strategies on how to share the gospel, they couldn't skip the first step: Our witness requires with-ness. To put another way, we are called to be perfumed by Jesus, together, for others. We get so formed by Jesus it causes people to beg the question. We rely on each other to love and serve people into the kingdom. We stay close to the lost so we can draw them into communion.

The week's practice involves taking one step of proximity: make a list of the lost people

* Sam Chan, *How to Talk About Jesus*

** Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*

already in your social circles, pray through each name intentionally, go to their things, and find ways to serve them. This is not just good strategy; it's good theology.

Restoration of With-Ness

In Genesis 1 and 2, we see God's original intent for humanity: We were created to be with God, walking in his presence; with each other, fully knowing and fully loving; and for the world, to rule and steward creation in love. It was all perfect union. But then came Genesis 3.

When sin entered the world, with-ness was shattered. Reformed theology emphasizes that post-Eden, we are all morally depraved—loving what God hates and hating what God loves. Our desires are disordered and we commit sin done by us, done to us, and all around us. As a result, we are separated from God and deserving of judgment.

Anabaptist traditions emphasize that post-Eden, we are all relationally deprived. We were created to find our strength from God, and yet now we are cut off. We blame-shift, hide, divide, and distance ourselves from one another.

We're guilty. And we're lonely. We're wicked. And we're wounded.

But friends, we have good news. Post-Resurrection, we are made right with God and brought near through Christ. In Christ, we are no longer morally depraved without hope—we are made righteous by grace alone through faith alone. In Christ, we are no longer relationally deprived—we are adopted into family.

And now, we carry that good news into the world. Our witness flows from the with-ness that Christ restored. We get close enough for people to smell the aroma and decide for themselves whether it represents victory or defeat—trusting that God gives the growth.

WITNESS E2: TALKING CLEARLY ABOUT THE GOSPEL

WHY TALKING CLEARLY ABOUT THE GOSPEL IS HARDER THAN YOU THINK

When the apostle Paul arrived in Corinth, he made a striking decision. Fresh off a mixed reception in Athens—where his eloquent philosophical arguments had fallen flat—Paul completely changed his approach. “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified,” he declared in 1 Corinthians 2:2.

Paul stopped getting clever and started getting clearer. This shift reveals something crucial for Christians today: while courage to share our faith comes with time and experience, clarity requires intentional effort. Most of us carry an incomplete gospel story, emphasizing certain parts while missing the depth and complexity of what salvation really means.

The Challenge of Our WEIRDER Culture

Talking clearly about the gospel today is particularly challenging because, as theologian Andrew Wilson explains, we live in a culture that is **Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic, Ex-Christian, and Romantic**—making us far “WEIRDER” than we realize. Each of these cultural factors creates specific obstacles to gospel clarity:

- **Our Western individualism** has reduced the gospel to merely personal salvation, making us wonder why church community and social justice seem optional rather than integral to the Christian life.
- **Our industrialized mindset** prizes speed over slow transformation. We’ve turned the gospel into a transaction—“say this prayer, get into heaven”—instead of understanding it as a lifelong transformation where heaven slowly gets into us.
- **Our ex-Christian society** assumes it knows what terms like “kingdom,” “salvation,” and “eternal life” mean, but our definitions often drift far from biblical truth.
- **Our romantic culture** prioritizes following our hearts over following Jesus, making self-denial seem oppressive and submission archaic. We’ll follow Christ only when it aligns with what we want in life.

* Andrew Wilson, *Remaking the World*

Beyond Slogans to Stories

“Jesus Christ and him crucified” remains a faithful gospel slogan—but only if we remember the full gospel story behind it. In our WEIRDER culture, we know the slogans but have forgotten the narrative that gives them meaning. Consider what we’ve lost in translation:

- **Jesus** isn’t just a good teacher; he’s God-who-saves in human flesh.
- **Christ** isn’t his last name; it’s his title as the Messiah promised throughout the Old Testament.
- **Crucified** isn’t just jewelry; it represents the actual event where he died for us (leading us back to God), with us (fully entering our human condition), and instead of us (taking our punishment and giving us his righteousness).

When we recover this full story, the gospel becomes more than a statement to agree with—it becomes a life to apprentice under. The test of gospel clarity isn’t our eloquence; it’s the disciples we produce. As Dallas Willard provocatively asked: “Does the gospel I preach and teach have a natural tendency to cause people who hear it to become full-time students of Jesus?”*

The Six-Part Gospel Story

Rather than settling for incomplete presentations, we need to share the complete biblical narrative through six interconnected elements: Kingdom, Sin, Salvation, Repentance, Eternal Life, and Formation. Three represent gifts we receive from God (Kingdom, Salvation, Eternal Life), while three describe ways we participate in the story (Sin, Repentance, Formation).

1. The Kingdom

The Bible begins with Kingdom—God creating a good world where humans share communion with him. In Eden, God shared his authority with Adam and Eve, calling them to rule under his ultimate authority while spreading his goodness throughout creation. We were designed to commune with God and represent him.

2. The Problem of Sin

Rather than submitting to God’s rule, humanity chose rebellion—what we call Sin. By breaking God’s command in the garden, Adam and Eve spread sin and death throughout creation. We’re all born with this sinful nature, a spiritual disease that makes us dead to

* Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*

God and enslaved to evil. Sin isn't just bad behavior; it's disobedience to God, participation in evil, and distortion of how we were meant to live.

3. The Gift of Salvation

But God doesn't abandon us in rebellion. Salvation means God stepped into our story—not just to save us from something, but to save us to something greater. Through Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, God defeats sin and brings his Kingdom to earth. We're forgiven, redeemed, chosen, and made new. Lives once marked by shame, fear, and guilt become characterized by love, joy, and peace.

4. The Response of Repentance

To receive this gift requires Repentance—confessing and turning from sin while choosing to follow Jesus. We admit our participation in creation's undoing and commit to living by God's standards rather than our own. Repentance completely changes how we see the world and ourselves, redefining reality based on God's rule and what he declares good, true, and beautiful.

5. Eternal Life Starts Now

God doesn't just forgive our past; he gives us an entirely new future through Eternal Life. When we align ourselves with King Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit and move from spiritual death to spiritual life. This isn't merely about avoiding hell—it's about abundant life beginning now and extending into eternity. Eternal life is best understood as life of the age to come, where God's Kingdom way of living invades the present through the Spirit's power.

6. The Process of Formation

Formation describes how we live in this new reality daily. Following Jesus means surrendering to his love, leadership, and lifestyle. As we reorient our lives around Christ, we're slowly formed into his image through the Holy Spirit's power. This isn't a solo project—we're being formed by Jesus, together, for others, working toward his Kingdom coming on earth as in heaven.

The Danger of Partial Gospels

The gospel loses power when we reduce it to just one slice of the story:

- **A salvation-only gospel** settles for bare minimum faith instead of maximum fruit, focusing on what we're saved from while neglecting what we're saved for. It celebrates the cross but rarely mentions the empty tomb.
- **An eternal-life-only gospel** concentrates on the afterlife while ignoring present transformation, turning faith into passing a test when you die rather than placing trust while you live.
- **A kingdom-only gospel** uses all its energy dismantling worldly powers while ignoring worldly pleasures, calling out systemic sin while turning a blind eye to personal repentance.

The Power Behind the Message

Ultimately, gospel effectiveness doesn't depend on our eloquence but on the Spirit's power. As Paul reminded the Corinthians, he came "in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling," preaching "not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power."

Still, we must steward this good news well by talking clearly about the gospel. The complete story is breathtakingly beautiful and worth giving our whole lives to—a narrative where the Kingdom dismantles worldly powers and denies worldly pleasures, where salvation addresses both what we're saved from and what we're saved to, where eternal life encompasses both life in the age to come and life of the age to come.

The hope of the world rests not in our clever presentations but in this complete gospel story, empowered by God's Spirit to transform hearts and make disciples. When we share the full narrative rather than settling for slogans, we give people the rich, life-changing truth they desperately need.

To explore your own story within God's larger narrative, consider reflecting on who you were before Christ, how Jesus has changed you, and what your life's mission now is as a result.

WITNESS E3: LEANING INTO YOUR WEAKNESS

WHY HONESTY IS YOUR GREATEST WITNESS

“Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears...”

These famous lines from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* were spoken by Marc Antony just moments after his friend Caesar had been betrayed and murdered. The scene is striking: Marcus Brutus, one of the lead conspirators, has just addressed a crowd of angry Romans with a logical, factual speech—no emotion, full of reason. He calmly explains the need for Caesar’s murder as a last-ditch effort to save Rome. By the time he finishes, the confused Romans more or less align with his side.

Then comes Marc Antony. He begs the conspirators to let him speak, and they agree—but only if he doesn’t stir up the crowd against them. His challenge: get the Roman crowd on his side to avenge Caesar’s death without actually calling out Brutus and the other conspirators.

His speech moves hearts as only Shakespeare’s words can. He finds commonality: “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears...” He plays humble: “I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.” He defers: “Noble Brutus hath told you Caesar was ambitious...I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke.” Yet by the end, Antony has won back the crowd, who then turn against Brutus and run the conspirators out of the city.

It’s Antony’s complete reversal of expectations, his subversive message, and his appeal to the emotional needs of the crowd that turn the tides of the play, the history of Rome, and—that’s basically what Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians.

Your witness is most effective when you’re honest about your weakness in front of God and others.

On a surface level, this is simple. You don’t actually save anyone. God does. All we do is make ourselves available to God, and God in his mercy uses our experience, personality, and shortcomings to bring others into the Kingdom. He takes our loaves and fish and

creates a full meal for others to feast on. God is the only one powerful enough to save the lost. We are utterly weak, powerless, and on our own incapable of obeying the last thing Jesus commanded before leaving earth for heaven: go and make disciples.

Stripped of its cliché usages and overfamiliarity, here's what that command really means: Get the people around you to completely abandon their current worldviews, hopes, dreams, meaning, purpose, and everything else they've built their lives on, and instead make them find new worldviews, hopes, dreams, meaning, and purpose in Jesus.

We're not just asking people to add church to their Sunday morning routines. We're asking them to completely dismantle and deconstruct everything they believe about reality, truth, and goodness, and instead aim their lives at a first-century Rabbi named Jesus. We know the value of knowing Jesus, but to others? This is insane.

The Cultural Waters

Not only that, but our culture is not exactly primed to abandon the quasi-secular narrative it's built itself on. Trust in institutionalized religion is decreasing rapidly across all generations. Though vague and non-defined spirituality is gaining popularity among Gen Z and Gen Alpha, it's a spirituality detached from accountability, discipline, and structure. Freedom is the new ethical standard, and morality is objective only in that our choices shouldn't cause intentional harm to others—everything else is fair game. Desire is the new north star of individual expression, communal identity is non-existent, and what's left of our God-given impulse to love and care for our neighbor has been replaced by political tribalism.

So if the mission is to get people out of the cultural waters of moralistic therapeutic deism and into the streams of living water that Jesus offers, of course we're weak. We just can't do it unless God takes what we offer him and does the rest for us.

But at some point, to become effective witnesses, we have to actually witness. We have to demonstrate and communicate to people around us that our ultimate hope in life is in a resurrected Rabbi from the first century who we believe is currently ruling over the cosmos right now. How on earth do we do that? That brings us back to Paul.

The Corinthian Context

Around 51 AD, just after making a bold stance against Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in Athens, Paul spends eighteen months starting a small house church in Corinth. There he meets Aquila and Priscilla, who own a tent-making shop just like he does. They believe the gospel and help Paul start the first church in the city.

By all accounts, Paul's church plant in Corinth is a success story. But to understand what made his witness so effective, we have to understand a few things about Corinth. Corinth was an intellectual and economic capital of the ancient Mediterranean. It was a port city where merchants from all over Greece and Rome would pass through, bringing goods, wealth, and religions. Corinth was overwhelmed by pagan rituals and religion, many involving temple prostitution. Sexual activity served as a major pastime and was arguably more publicly accepted and celebrated than it is today.

Like our cultural waters today, Corinth was a city swimming in individualism, sexuality, and pursuing one's own desires no matter the cost. So for Paul to walk into a new city and announce that a local Rabbi named Jesus from Nazareth had been publicly executed, then resurrected, and is now ruling the entire world from the spiritual space called heaven was insane. The message of the Christian gospel was just as crazy, foolish, and radical in Paul's day as it is in ours.

But here's the other thing about Corinth: it was a city whose highest values were social status, success, and wisdom.

The Sophist Movement

There was a movement spreading throughout Corinth at the exact time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. It was called sophistry, which comes from the Greek word Sophia, or "wisdom." Don't think wisdom in a good sense, like Proverbs. In this time, wisdom wasn't about being true or right or even good—it was just about being persuasive.

Sophists were intellectuals who would travel with a small band of disciples and debate other Sophists. People would attend these debates in forums as entertainment. They were basically the ancient Greco-Roman equivalent of social media influencers. People in Corinth were obsessed with sophistry, and it seems this obsession had seeped into the church. Disciples of sophists would debate and even fight disciples of other sophists to prove their sophist was smarter than the rest. Hence Paul's correction in 1 Corinthians.

What this meant was that the highest value in Corinth wasn't sexuality or indulgence. It was self-image. As Dr. Roy Ciampa notes: "Corinthian society in general was keenly conscious of social status... the church in Corinth was clearly in the thrall of human rhetoric, with its elevation of human brilliance and its tendency to feed competition and pride."

So when Paul opens his letter saying, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength," it's not just a witty way to talk about God's omniscience and sovereignty. It's an attack on the cultural foundation of the city of Corinth itself.

** Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, The First Letter to the Corinthians*

Like Antony in Shakespeare's play, Paul isn't playing by the same rules as his opponents—he's throwing the game out altogether. The gospel doesn't spread and the Kingdom doesn't expand based on our eloquence, ability, or power. It spreads based on God's strength.

The False Self

Like the Corinthians, we live in a culture that prizes sexuality, indulgence, and self-image. Our value, worth, and success are determined by our jobs, homes, and bank accounts. Though none of us would admit to this, it still seeps into the default way of living for most Americans. We naturally project the best, happiest, and most successful versions of ourselves to those around us.

This is what psychologists call the false self. It's the version of ourselves that looks better, appears more successful, or even comes off as more humble in order to hide the parts we're most ashamed and embarrassed of.

When it comes to the practice of witness, we can fall into the same ancient trap as the Corinthians—propping up and projecting the best possible version of ourselves so that others might be compelled to come to church not by the goodness of God but by the success stories of our lives. It's the modern-day equivalent of what Paul called "human wisdom" or what the ancient Corinthians called "sophistry"—being the most likable, intelligent, and persuasive people we can in order to "win people over to Christ."

Our greatest fear when it comes to witnessing isn't being rejected, ridiculed, or persecuted—it's being exposed. Witnessing isn't most scary because it might lose us some friends—unless you're doing it wrong, it likely won't. Witnessing is most scary because it could potentially expose us as frauds. At the deepest level, most of us feel inadequate. Maybe not in terms of our jobs, homes, or bank accounts. But in our spiritual lives, our experiences, and the places we currently find ourselves before God. To witness to others by talking about just how good Jesus is for us can feel inauthentic at best and a flat-out lie at worst.

What do we do with suffering? Unanswered prayer? Questions and doubts the Bible doesn't give us answers to? What do we do when sharing the gospel feels fake and reinforces our spiritual imposter syndrome?

Ever since humanity's rebellion against God in the Garden, our instinct has always been to hide our weakness from God, each other, and even from ourselves. Cities from Corinth to Queen Creek alike celebrate sexuality, success, and self-image not as signs of progression and modernity but as cultural fig leaves we sew together to hide our spiritual and relational nakedness.

Paul's Strategy

If anyone could have played and beaten the Corinthians at their own game, it was Paul. Highly educated in Jewish history and theology, well-versed in Greek philosophy and Roman mythology, Paul could have out-spoken the best sophists in the city, impressed the crowds with eloquent words and persuasive speech, made himself look so good that people would want to follow him and eventually Jesus.

But he doesn't do any of that. Instead, throughout both 1 and 2 Corinthians, and even throughout the rest of his New Testament letters, Paul is uncomfortably honest about his weakness. If human wisdom is on one end of the spectrum, honest weakness is on the complete opposite. Human wisdom depends on our ability. Human wisdom is what we create and present for ourselves. Human wisdom impresses people and wins them over. Human wisdom has all the answers to questions people will ask. And human wisdom is entirely incompatible with being an effective witness.

First Corinthians 2:3 says: "I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling." The teaching suggests this wasn't just nerves—it was a strategy. Over and over again we see Paul wearing his weaknesses on his sleeves to let the power of the gospel shine through clearly. Paul's life isn't a beautiful vase; it's a clay pot with a hidden treasure. His speech isn't brilliant and eloquent; it's reliant on the Spirit. His past as a successful Pharisee isn't impressive; it's worthless compared to what God has done for him since.

Second Corinthians 12:6-10 captures this perfectly: "Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself. Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.' Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me."

Again, like Marc Antony, Paul refuses to play the game that the crowd wants him to play. He won't boast about his accomplishments, his success, or even his spiritual maturity—that would actually rob the gospel of its power.

The gospel loses its power when it's buffered by our strengths, achievements, and attempts at covering our weaknesses. When we only show people the best versions of ourselves, we minimize the impact that the gospel actually has on our lives. Instead Paul exposed himself fully and truly to the Corinthians, allowing the power of the gospel to illuminate and outshine the darkness of his weakness, struggles, and past.

Three Areas of Honesty

To lean into our weakness means we must be honest about our sins, struggles, and hope.

- **Sins.** First Timothy 1:13-16 shows Paul calling himself “the worst” of sinners, a blasphemer, persecutor, and arrogant man who received mercy. When we begin to confess our sins to each other and then talk about them openly with others, we don’t make ourselves look bad. We make the gospel look beautiful.
- **Struggles.** Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” has been a topic of debate for centuries. The point isn’t the thorn; it’s that Paul is a man who experiences hardship, temptation, and struggle. Being honest about our experiences, both good and bad, is what allows the gospel to shine clearly. It’s precisely in Paul’s weakness, the things he can’t control, that he experiences divine power and love he wouldn’t otherwise experience.
- **Hope.** Paul is honest about where his hope really is. His weakness creates room for healing. His hope isn’t in a perfect future version of himself—it’s in Jesus’ transforming work in his life here and now.

The Practice of Conversation

In a world of hurry, power struggle, digital illusions, and false selves propagated by a cultural system that rewards achievement and success at the expense of humility and authenticity, we have an opportunity to swim against the current. To be so counter-culturally weak and vulnerable, open and honest with others around us, that the only way it makes sense to those around us is if we’re aiming our lives at something better and far more transcendent than anything this world can offer.

What if witnessing looks less like debating others into intellectual submission and more like loving others through self-sacrificial honesty? What if witnessing looks less like explaining a gospel tract to someone on a napkin and more like explaining how and why we have hope in the midst of tragedy, peace in a season of pain? What if witnessing just looks like explaining our lives to others with honesty, not covering up our doubts, insecurities, sins, and struggles, but sharing them? Meeting people in their weakness with ours?

The practice for the week is conversation. Conversation is how Jesus met and healed the lost. Conversation is how Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus and then planted churches and spread the gospel in hostile cultural waters. Conversation is how we close the gap between heaven and earth. It begins with honesty. When we bring our weakness before God and others, we encounter healing, love, and grace. And that same love moves us to reach out and say, “Come and see what I’ve seen.”

WITNESS E4: INVITING OTHERS INTO GOD'S GRACE

WHY WITNESS IS NOT OPTIONAL

It is the biggest regret of his life.

On the first full day on the Virgin Islands, the plan was simple: drive to the projects, make connections at the park. Everyone headed to the soccer field. I went to the basketball courts.

The Holy Spirit wasn't whispering that day—he was shouting.

As I began playing basketball with ten guys from the projects, I noticed the atmosphere changed when two more stepped onto the court. Right away, everyone gave up their spot for them. It was clear they had everyone's respect. They were definitely the leaders.

In prep for the trip, my youth pastor taught an important missional concept: identify the person of peace. It's this idea that God opens doors through people of influence. The rationality goes: if God saves their hearts, others will follow. It was clear both of these guys were the persons of peace we'd prayed for.

And that's when the Holy Spirit wouldn't stop talking. I began to debate with God while on the court. "Tell them about me—today." "Not today. I've got ten days. Plus, they haven't seen my hook shot." "Right now." "But if I push too soon, I'll ruin my chances later."

At one point, I started to strike up a conversation, but feelings of discomfort overcame the stirring of conviction. The first night ended with zero gospel conversations. To soothe my guilt, I assured God he would share the gospel to them this week. I just needed to build relationships with them first.

Fast-forward the trip—we never saw those two again. Months later, I confessed my guilt to my youth pastor. He took a long pause, and with tears in his eyes finally said, "They were shot and killed in gang violence that first night. I didn't tell you because I wanted you to be focused the rest of the trip. But that's why I made you all share the gospel at the mall a few days later. I had just found out... Trey, we can't waste the moments we have with people."

The Haunting Reality

According to Scripture, there's a very real chance they are eternally separated from the presence of God. In Ezekiel's words, I failed as a watchman. I stayed silent, and their blood is on my hands. Any time I think about that trip, I plead with God that another believer encountered them later that day and shared the good news that Jesus saves.

I don't share this to shock people. I share it to wake us up to reality: Witness is not an optional practice. We can't wait until we've perfected Sabbath or finished our Bible reading plan. We can't wait until our anxiety issues are resolved or our generosity is finally on par with the commands of the New Testament. As Paul writes, "Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation."

The working definition remains: The practice of witness is leading from your with-ness to talk clearly about the gospel and leaning into your weakness to invite others into God's grace. Leading from your with-ness is crucial since the gospel is incarnational—it happens in relationships. Talking clearly about the gospel is essential—at some point, if we get enough of the story wrong, we may be preaching a gospel, but not the gospel. Leaning into your weakness is super helpful—it points people to the Savior, not to ourselves. But inviting others into God's grace is not optional. At some point, we must make the ask. If you are a believer, someone made the ask to you.

Three Obstacles

Second Corinthians 5 is the perfect reminder that witness isn't optional. Paul seems to be answering the question: If the gospel really saves, why don't we make the ask? According to 2 Corinthians 5, it's because of fear, the flesh, and forgetting the task.

1. Fear

Second Corinthians 5:10-12 begins with the good kind of fear—the judgment seat of Christ. The Greek word is *bēma*, a courtroom where the judge's verdicts are rendered. Paul says one day every single one of us will stand before Jesus and give an account. Nothing hidden. Everything exposed. In Christ, you are forgiven and made right with God. And yet, the *bēma* reminds us, what we do here on earth still matters. Paul makes this a positive reality: "We understand our fearful responsibility to the Lord, we work hard to persuade others." Paul doesn't claim this will be easy or comfortable. It's hard work.

To be human is to fear. The only question is—who will you fear? Fear of man leads to silence, shame, compromise, anxiety, and inaction. Fear of God produces reverence, courage, conviction, purpose, and persuasion. But you cannot do both simultaneously.

Some in Corinth mocked Paul—said he was out of his mind, too intense, too weak. But Paul didn't fear their opinions. He'd already settled this matter in Galatians 1:10: "Obviously, I'm not trying to win the approval of people, but of God. If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ's servant." Since that issue was settled, he could write with clarity and conviction in 2 Corinthians 5:13-15. Paul isn't controlled by people's opinions or accusations. He has died to his ego, died to the slander, died to his sinful nature. What controls Paul now is the love of Christ.

You can't receive his love and live in fear at the same time. We only fear our fellow man when we fail to receive our Savior's love. Do you know why we fear others' opinions? Because we crave acceptance. In Christ, you have been accepted, welcomed, redeemed, made new. Do you know that Christ loves you? Not who you pretend to be. But who you are right now. In fact, while we were still his enemies, he died to reconcile us.

Matt Smethurst helps connect the dots: "The Devil is busy keeping sinners from opening their eyes, and he does so by keeping you from opening your mouth. He knows he can prevent sight if he can simply prevent speech."^{*} A key ingredient to getting bold in our faith is receiving his love. Love compels us to get uncomfortable. It empowers us to just make the ask. As the Apostle John tells us: "Perfect love casts out all fear." Maybe your courage problem is actually a love problem. Your vision of God's love determines the version of your life.

2. The Flesh

Fear isn't the only reason we stay quiet. Sometimes it's not our silence—it's our sight. We're still looking at people through a worldly lens—through the flesh. Second Corinthians 5:16-17 says: "So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!"

From a worldly perspective, we judge people based on appearance, status, reputation. But God doesn't see like we see. In 1 Samuel 16:7, the Lord told Samuel, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

That means the very person you and I are most likely to dismiss could be the exact person God has chosen to use. From the people who seem too well-off to the people who seem too far-gone. Honestly—the person you're most nervous about is where you should start first. When we nitpick, we miss out on God's pick. Before moving on, who have you written off?

^{*} Matt Smethurst, *Before You Share Your Faith*

3. Forgetting the Task

Second Corinthians 5:18-20 reminds us of the task: “And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ’s ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, ‘Come back to God!’”

Paul sums up our task with the title: Ambassador. In Paul’s day, an ambassador wasn’t just a fancy title—it was a role of honor and responsibility. An ambassador was a high-ranking representative sent by a king to represent the empire in foreign lands. Their words weren’t just their own opinions—they carried the authority of the ruler himself. To dishonor an ambassador was to dishonor the king.

Paul’s word choice is intentional. He doesn’t say “We’re advertisers.” Ambassadors deliver the words given to them by the King. And they embody the kingdom they represent with all their unique values, perspectives, habits, and worldview.

The gospel saves us from the pit and sends us out with purpose. We have been delivered from sin, Satan, and death. We are no longer morally depraved and spiritually deprived. We have been dignified for a purpose. We get the joy of bringing other people in. And the best part: God is the one at work, way before we talk. God is reconciling the world to himself. We plead.

Plead, beg, implore—to ask with urgency, but never with force. In “The Patient Ferment of the Early Church,” Alan Kreider defines the style and tone of evangelism in the first few centuries as “a combination of relaxation and urgency.” What would it look like to reorient our lives and conversations so that it would be relaxed and urgent? Relaxed: you have nothing to prove. You rest in the love and sovereignty of God. Urgent: eternity is real. Christ’s love controls you. You get uncomfortable for the sake of your neighbor so the lost are found.

We approach people without pressure, but never without passion. That’s why we simply call it invitation, not coercion or manipulation.

What We’re Inviting Them Into

Look at everything we are inviting people into, just in 2 Corinthians 5 alone: A new motivation (love and awe, not fear of man), a new identity (new creation, not old self), a new vision (seeing people differently), a new relationship (peace with God), a new record (sins no longer counted against us), a new calling (ambassadors of reconciliation), and a

new status (clothed in Christ's righteousness).

That's just 2 Corinthians 5. Read the Gospels: If you are burdened by guilt, Jesus says you can go home justified like the tax collector. If you carry shame, he will cleanse you and call you his child like the bleeding woman. If you feel far from God, the Father is running to welcome you home. If you are restless and exhausted, Jesus invites you to come and find rest. If you feel empty or outcast, he will give you living water. If you are afraid of death, remember he raised Lazarus. If you've let God down too many times, Jesus restores you as he restored Peter. And if you feel overlooked, know this: Jesus welcomes you as he welcomed the little children.

As witnesses, we invite others into God's grace. And his grace includes our community. Don't miss Paul's communal language. We are Christ's ambassadors. God is making his appeal through us. Witness isn't a solo sport. Jesus said to the church, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden." We aren't just inviting them into the faith—we are inviting them into the family.

The week's practice: **Invite someone to something.** Choose one person the Spirit has been bringing to mind during this practice. Invite them to something. Invite them to follow Jesus.

The invitation isn't to try harder or be a good person to make it into the club. Second Corinthians 5:21-6:2 makes this clear: "For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ. As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it. For God says, 'At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you.' Indeed, the 'right time' is now. Today is the day of salvation."

Now is the acceptable time. Today is the day of salvation. We can't waste the moments we have with people.

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