



The Normal Christian Life

A Topical Study on Christ-likeness

This is a topical study of ten key Christian subjects of importance to college students. The studies cover the topics in a broad and general manner. Mixes of contemporary and classic authors are quoted from various denominational backgrounds. This is also a discussion-based study. This study is primarily designed for believers. However, Non-Christians will find it a truthful account of what Christianity is about and will be well informed as to whether they want to make a decision for Christ. The study is meant to foster prayer in the small group, scripture discussion, Bible verse memory, and community outside of the small group in weekly assignment 1-on-1 meals, member to member, and member to leader.

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Recommended Schedule

As you plan with your co-leader(s), we recommend anticipating on reading the study article during your Core Group meeting. This can be done silently or out loud depending on the needs of your group. At the end of this document are all of the articles together to print out for your group. Follow by answering the Discussion Questions, praying for one another, and going over the assignments for the following week.





Week One: Grace

Opening Questions

1. What comes to mind when you think of the word “grace”?

Study Article

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” – Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

“Under law the formula is, ‘If you do good, I will bless you.’ Under grace it’s, ‘I have blessed you; now do good.’” --Charles Spurgeon

“‘I will love them freely,’ is a condensation of the glorious message of salvation which was delivered to us in Christ Jesus our Redeemer. The sense hinges upon the word ‘freely.’ ‘I will love them freely.’ Here is the glorious, the suitable, the divine way by which love streams from heaven to earth. It is, indeed, the only way in which God can love such as we are. It may be that he can love angels because of their goodness; but he could not love us for that reason; the only manner in which love can come from God to fallen creatures is expressed in the word ‘freely.’ Here we have spontaneous love flowing forth to those who neither deserved it, purchased it, nor sought after it.” --Charles Spurgeon

Grace. In the Christian tradition, grace is a commonly used word meaning undeserved mercy, favor, or good will that is freely given. Yet, if asked, many Christians struggle with what undeserved grace tangibly looks like in their own world. The thought of something *undeserved* in our society is difficult to grasp or comprehend. Isn't it true that we “get what we deserve”, both good and bad? If you work hard, you expect to be paid what you deserve. If you commit a crime or take a life, you will ultimately get what you deserve. And yet, here is this word *grace* that has absolutely nothing to do with what we deserve, but contains the very essence and foundation of our relationships with Christ. It is no wonder that in our culture, Christians often have a difficult time understanding the practical implications of grace in their lives.

In the Old Testament, God gave the Law to the Israelites as the way to know and please him through acts of obedience. It was generous and kind, but if left with only the Law, salvation could only come through perfection and sacrifice. We would have to be perfect in order to experience intimacy with God and be in right relationship with him. But thankfully, John 1:17 says, “For the Law was given through Moses; [but] grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Jesus united grace and the Law for us. He made the way for us to be in right relationship with God by fulfilling the requirements of the law through his own perfect life of obedience and sacrificial death. He was the Perfect Sacrifice for sins. We no longer need to perform sacrifices on our own; we can simply receive his pure, spotless sacrifice in our place. We are able to come to God, not with sacrifices in an attempt to make ourselves presentable in our own strength, but as we are – sinful and in need of mercy. The blood of Jesus alone enables us to stand in the presence of God Almighty and come to his throne of grace.



We must realize that it is not because of anything we do or do not do that God loves us. His love is unearned and freely given. He loves you because you are his creation, made in his image, and he desires you. There is nothing that you can do to make Him love you less. But this reality – the truth that God loves us because he is love and can do no less – can be hard to grasp at deep, life-changing levels. It is easy to say and believe in our heads; it is not so easy to know and receive in our hearts. We love to work hard and feel we have accomplished something. We naturally lean towards entitlement and earning favor. Yet these are the very things that will keep us from receiving God's grace. Grace can only be accepted by the lowly and broken who understand they do not deserve it and cannot earn it. It is only when we realize we need a Savior and humble ourselves that we will be able to accept God's lavish grace with a joyful heart. Philip Yancey writes,

“Our wounds and defects are the very fissures through which grace might pass. It is our human destiny on earth to be imperfect, incomplete, weak and mortal, and only by accepting that destiny can we escape the force of gravity and receive grace. Only then can we grow close to God.”

Only in Christianity – only through Christ – can we be our messed-up selves and find perfect love. This great gift of grace demonstrates the character of God; he is not a monstrous, unknowable God. Rather, he desires that we know him intimately, his hand of invitation stretched out to us in the form of his Son on the cross. In Jesus and the grace made available through him, God gives us himself.

But God does not pour out his unmerited favor on us simply to save us. His plans are much bigger, his desires much greater. He extends his grace to us in order that we might become co-heirs with his son, Jesus. Romans 8:15- says, “...but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba Father.’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” God’s graciousness has not simply made us better servants or more upstanding citizens – *that* we could attempt on our own – but it has made us heirs of a holy kingdom, brothers and sisters of the King, and sons and daughters of God.

So... we are left with this divine and eternal gift that we do not deserve, and yet freely have through faith and confession in Jesus Christ as Lord. As we are overwhelmed with the grace of God and see it at work in our own lives, we begin to see differently in the light of it. We are able to see the people around us as individuals in desperate need of grace, and we realize that we are to extend grace to those around us, just as it has been extended to us.

Sometimes this feels easy; other times it is ever so difficult. Others do not necessarily deserve it, nor have they earned it by merit. But we did not deserve or earn it either, and in extending our own, small examples of grace, we really extend God's immeasurable grace and unending love. In doing this, we demonstrate that there is a God who sees us in our sin, desperation, and selfishness, and extends His hand. He then lifts us up, cleanses our hearts with the blood of His Son, and calls us His own.

Additional Reading

- Romans 6:14
- 2 Corinthians 12:8-9
- 2 Timothy 2:1
- Hebrews 4:16



Text Questions

1. What do you think are the differences between the world's concept of grace and a Christian's concept of grace? How is that demonstrated?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 12:8-9. What does this show us about grace?
3. How was grace shown in the Old Testament?

Application Questions

1. If God is truly gracious, what are the implications for your relationship with Him?
2. What are some ways that God's grace has impacted you, and can still impact you now?
3. Are there any areas of your life that you need God's grace in?
4. What has been your biggest misconception of grace?

Lastly, take some time to personally and prayerfully consider these Scriptures in your life. Let God really show you the depth and power of His grace.

Think about assigning lunch buddies or prayer partners for the week to discuss Romans 5:12-21.

Memory Verse

Memorize Ephesians 2:8-9 as a Core Group.





Week Two: Intimacy

Opening Question

1. What comes to mind when you think of the word “intimacy”?

Study Article

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us...that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one...” – John 17: 20-23 (NKJV)

“I am my beloved’s and his desire is toward me.” – Song of Solomon 7:10 (NKJV)

“A young Jewish boy name Mordecai was dedicated to the Lord by his parents. Mordecai grew in age and wisdom and grace but...he loved the world, gulping down the days and dreaming through the nights. His parents sat him down and told him how important the Word of God was. But when it came time for him to go to the synagogue and learn the Word of God, he would not leave the lakes he loved to swim in and the trees he loved to climb. Nothing could persuade him. But one day the Great Rabbi visited the village and asked to be left alone with the boy... He picked up the boy and held him silently against his heart. The next day the boy began going to the synagogue before going to the woods and lakes and trees. And the Word of God became one with the words of Mordecai and the trees and the lake. Mordecai grew up to become a great man who helped many people. And when they came to him he said, ‘I first learned the Word of God when the Great Rabbi held me silently against his heart.’”

Jesus. We are so used to hearing this one Name, so used to saying it, that our hearts are often left unmoved, despite the weight of glory it carries. It is not until we draw away from the noise and distractions of life, quiet ourselves, and whisper His Name, that our hearts become sensitive enough to hear His own whisper to us.

This still and small voice that speaks to each of us by name is often what causes us to respond to Christ’s call in the first place. We experience His tangible presence, or a revelation of His holiness convicts and leads us to repentance. We know in a moment that we must respond and that our lives will never be the same. Knowing this personable God in a personal way and hearing His voice by His indwelling Spirit is the deepest, purest, and most fulfilling form of intimacy we can ever encounter. And this relationship is the very reason we were created.

“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...’ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them,” (Gen. 2:26a-27, NKJV). God, who is Three Persons in One, lives in continual, uninterrupted, perfect communion with Himself. The nature of love is to give and to sacrifice and the sacrificial fellowship of the Trinity is what makes God love – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, perpetually giving to, sharing with and fulfilling One



Another. Out of the overflow of this perfect love that exists in the Godhead, man was created: another being that God could share this perfect love – His Perfect Self – with.

Not only did God create man to experience a perfect relationship with Him, but He also created man *in His image*. Reflecting the likeness of God explains the deep longing we all have to know and be known; to love and be loved. God experiences perfect fellowship and He desires to share this fellowship with us. If *this* is the image we reflect, then it follows that anything less than perfect, holy, love from Him and supernatural, eternal communion with Him will never meet our expectations, for the standard of intimacy printed on our hearts is the mark imprinted by God Himself.

No other relationship will ever satisfy us like this one. Nothing else in life will ever fulfill us as only God can. The depth of love that God desires to share with us through Christ is as great as the expanse of eternity. God's Word reveals to us the type of relationship Christ desires to have with us, His bride. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father says, "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours," (Luke 15:31, NKJV), mirroring the heart of Song of Solomon 7:10. We are the Lord's beloved and His desire is for us. He is *for* us. He is always with us. And the fullness of perfect, passionate, holy love in His heart is ours.

But the only way for such intimacy to be our experience – the only way for this love to truly be our heart's treasure and not just plastic tokens in our pocket – is for us to spend time with God. In earthly relationships, it is as we spend time with others that we grow closer to them, come to trust them, know what they are like, and know how they feel about us. It is no different with God. Time alone with the Lord fills us anew with the experiential knowledge that He loves us, has accepted us, and calls us His own.

Without continuous intimacy, even our sincerest efforts and desires to 'live for God' will eventually prove hollow, frustrating, and burdensome. We are called to be light in the world and light cannot be sustained without a source of fuel. It is only as we store up oil in our hearts through time with God that our efforts to share this same love can be sustained. If we are not deliberate in seeking Him with our whole hearts, the sweetness of His voice and the tenderness with which we respond can become a fading memory instead of our daily experience with Him.

So how do we deliberately seek God? By walking in practical diligence with a sensitive spirit. We cannot rely on oodles of free time or let sensing His presence decide whether and when we will close the door on the world and turn our gaze toward God. When life gets hectic and God seems distant, it is only by consistently meeting with Him in His word and in prayer that we do not burn out or get discouraged. We cannot rely on our emotions, for we will not always 'feel' God, or 'feel like' He is speaking to us, but He is always available to us in His word. And His word is "living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword...and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart," (Hebrews 4:12, NKJV). As we read God's word, He reads us. Even more, He writes His words on our hearts, transforming us into His image, and drawing us ever closer to His heart.

With that said, practical diligence cannot blaze a trail straight to God's heart without a sensitive spirit. A plan of action is helpful; it is not the point. The point is to experience God's love. We must be attentive to the moments when His Spirit tugs at ours, calling us to simply be still and know He is God. "Failure to recognize the value of mere being with God, as the beloved, without doing anything, is to gouge the heart out of Christianity." Sometimes, we cannot begin to do this until we throw all the action plans, Bible studies, and memory verse goals up in the air, let them fall where they may, and run instead straight into



God's arms, climb into His lap, and rest for awhile. Only then – only here, in His embrace – can we hear Him say, 'Stay here, My child. Stay here as long as you like.'

Additional Reading

- Matthew 25:1-13
- Matthew 26:6-13
- Luke 7:36-50
- Luke 10:38-42
- John 15:1-8
- John 17:24-26

Text Questions

1. Do you believe that God desires deep fellowship with you, or do you believe there are limits on His love for you? What are some reasons for this that you can recognize?
2. Please share one of the first times you experienced and believed that God loves you. God often speaks in a 'still, small voice' (1 Kings 19:11-12). Can you recall a moment when you knew God was speaking to you?
3. Read Luke 10:38-42. What is the 'one thing' that Jesus tells Martha is needed? What does Jesus say is the reward for choosing this one thing?
4. Read John 15:1-8. What does it mean to 'abide in Christ'? What does Jesus say will be one of the results of abiding in Him?

Application Questions

1. The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins is contained in Matthew 25 and is Jesus' commentary on the importance of storing up oil through intimacy with Him, for both a life of service and in preparation of His coming. All the virgins slept, but five were prepared with extra oil. In the 21st century what are some common distractions that use up our time?
2. Does the way you spend time with the Lord resemble the wise or foolish virgins? What changes can you make in your daily life to make sure you are storing up oil?

Memory Verse

As a Core Group, memorize John 17:20-23.

Think about recommending the following exercises for your Core Group to discuss in lunch buddies this week.

Pray-reading involves reading through a passage of scripture and praying it back to God. First, read the verses to yourself and then turn them into a prayer. If the scripture is a command, ask God to enable you to obey by the power of His Spirit. If the verse reveals a truth about the Lord, thank Him for this truth and ask Him to make you more aware of it in your life. You can do this with a few verses or a whole passage. If focusing on a whole passage, go slowly enough so that you can sense if the Spirit is highlighting a



particular verse to you and stay there for as long as you like. Read it silently, sing it out loud, or commit it to memory.

Helpful Hint: If you read five chapters a day, you can read through the entire New Testament in two months – that's six times in a year! Consider pray-reading five chapters a day, as it might be a manageable goal.

Journaling is a type of contemplative prayer that helps you remain focused. At the top of a page, write out one verse. Then write out what the verse is saying. This could be a few sentences or multiple paragraphs. After this, write out what the verse is saying *to you* - what stands out to you, what feels personal about it, etc. If other verses come to mind, jot them down as you go to reference later. Then turn the verse into a prayer and listen for the Holy Spirit. Write out your prayer and write down anything you feel the Spirit might also be saying to you about this.

(The Holy Spirit does speak to us but learning to discern His voice can take some time. Pray for wisdom and discernment and, double check what you believe He is saying to you against His word – if it is Spirit-inspired it will ALWAYS line up with the Bible.)

Helpful Hint: While journaling any verse is great; journaling on one topic for an extended period of time can prove very revelatory as well. Consider going through a particular chapter or doing a verse search and journaling on a specific topic – like God's love.

Helpful Hint: Keep a separate notepad with you when you spend time with the Lord to jot down things that come to mind that you might need to do later. Then you can continue with the Lord, free of distractions.





Week Three: Community

Opening Questions

1. What comes to mind when you think of the word “community”?
2. When has community been important in your life?

Study Article

“God’s aim in human history is the creation of an inclusive community of loving persons, with himself included as it’s primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.”- Dallas Willard

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”- John 13:34-35

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.” - Psalm 133

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. He created night and day, light and dark, sky and land, animals of all kinds, and more. And then quite mysteriously and unbelievably, man was created in the image of the Triune God. This last act was incredible enough, but after all that was created, God took a step further, and created a helpmate, a companion, for that man. And it was good. Very good.

Since the beginning, God has created us for relationship. Relationship with Him and relationship with others. And yet we often find ourselves lonely, fearful, and living selfish lives.

In the New Testament, Jesus tells us again and again to love God and love people. He says in Mt 22:37-40, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Why are the two of these so intimately related? Because God wanted them to be. We are the objects of God’s great love. Love so deep, so passionate, so generous that God gave His only son Jesus to demonstrate holiness and redemption in a tangible way for us. That sacrifice led to even more sacrifice for our sakes as Jesus took the weight of our sin upon Himself and was crucified and resurrected. Through this act, Jesus paved the way for us to be in a right relationship with God again. He made atonement for our sins.

In the midst of this, Jesus set the ultimate example for us. He showed us how to love well. How to sacrifice for your friends, live without selfish gain, and depend on others. Love is not just flattering words but living life together. There is nothing more powerful and life giving than people living life together,



sharing one another's burdens, and walking side by side. In fact, we see this clearly in Acts 2:42-47 where Jesus' disciples have just experienced the tremendous loss of Jesus. In love and obedience, they dedicate themselves to each other, the Apostles' teachings, and to prayer. The Greek word utilized for the word "fellowship" is *koinonia*. *Koinonia* was a word for deep intimacy, communion, and sharing. That same word is used in 1 Corinthians 10:16 for describing our communion with Christ. Essentially we are to share our lives with each other, just as we share our lives with Christ.

Jesus also knew that we couldn't do life alone. Because we were created in the image of the Trinity (who in essence is relational), we simply cannot do life alone. We can certainly try, and many have. But what do we have left that has eternal consequence? Do we have money? Achievement? Success? Scripture tells us that money will never satisfy, and it will all prove meaningless. But people have real value. Our relationships are meaningful and glorifying to God. When we love people the way that God does, we bring glory to His name.

Our greatest witness of who God truly is is through our relationships. People are open and hungry for a community to be a part of. The world needs to see the Church in deep relationship with each other, always encouraging, always serving, always comforting, and even confessing to each other. It demonstrates that there is something different about Christianity. We genuinely care about each other. We are different because Christ impacted us and showed us how to live.

Theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once wrote, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity' - this is the Scripture's praise for life together under the Word. But now we can rightly interpret the words 'in unity' and say, 'for brethren to dwell together *through Christ*.' For Jesus Christ alone is our unity, 'He is our peace.' Through him alone do we have access to one another, joy in one another, and fellowship with one another." May we enjoy life together through the power of Jesus Christ.

Additional Reading

- 1 John 1:7
- Galatians 6:2
- Ephesians 4:2-6
- Ephesians 5:1-2
- Colossians 3:12-14
- John 17:22-23

Text Questions

1. When you think of community, what do you normally think of?
2. What are some ways that Jesus lived in community? (have some examples ready)
3. Why do you think the Lord loves believers living in unity so much?
4. What role has Christian community played in your life?

Application Questions

1. Have your ideas of community changed or been confirmed while reading this? Why or why not?
2. What role should Christian community play in your life?



3. How can you and the community of Christ reach or influence more people in your life?

Encourage your Core Group to pray this week about the implications of this study in your life. Assign lunch buddies to give them the chance to talk through more personal applications!

Memory Verses

Memorize John 13:34-35 and Romans 15:5-7.





Week Four: Obedience

Opening Question

1. What comes to mind when you think of the word “obedience”?

Study Article

“When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’”

– Matthew 19:25-26 (NIV)

“Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’ Why do you ask me about what is good,’ Jesus replied. ‘There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.’ ‘Which ones?’ the man inquired. Jesus replied, ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.’ ‘All these I have kept,’ the young man said. ‘What do I still lack?’ Jesus answered, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’ When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.” - Matthew 19:16-22 (NIV)

When we read the story of the rich young ruler, we often think, ‘Well, I am not rich. Thank goodness this story does not apply to me. I can move past it with ease.’ But this thinking misses the larger application of the passage entirely. We are called to ask Christ the same question as the rich young ruler: “What do I still lack?” And, when faced with the Lord’s response, we cannot help but realize that the commands of God require a level of faith and act of perfection that is beyond our capabilities. In his own strength the rich young ruler was able to “keep” the ten commandments of the Pentateuch. But when he was asked to sell his riches to the poor and follow Christ, he could not obey, and his own will and desires proved too strong.

In order to be obedient and live a holy life, we must first ask God, ‘What do I lack?’ Often what Christ reveals and then requests seems unimaginable to attain, and rightly so, for Christianity is a call to perfection. “...The Lord wants those who follow him to follow him perfectly, not lacking in anything. People cannot follow God if they have solved 99 of their problems but have yet one problem unsolved. To follow God demands the whole being. It must be all or not at all.” Jesus Christ was perfect because He listened to His Father and obeyed His commands – and he asks no less of us. We might say, ‘That is impossible,’ and we would not be alone in our assumption. The disciples felt this same weight of impossibility when they heard what Christ asked. But He comforted them, “With man, this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26).

We cannot be perfect like Christ, or achieve perfection, without something greater than our own willpower at work in us. The obedience and holy living that God requires can only be accomplished by God Himself, who speaks to us and lives within us, empowering us by His Spirit every step of the way. This is one of the greatest joys of Christianity. It is not a religion of works to be done in our own strength. It is a



living relationship of total dependence on God who will do the works through us as we surrender and follow Him.

While sometimes the issue is knowing that we *cannot* obey in our own strength, more often than not the real issue is whether or not we *want* to obey. “Many people begin coming to God once they stop being religious, because there is only one master of the human heart – Jesus Christ, not religion. But ‘woe is me’ if after seeing Him *I still will not obey.*” In light of immediate gratification, it can be difficult to remember – or heed – the Lord’s warnings that the cost of sin always outweighs the benefits. In God’s kingdom, rewards are often delayed until eternity and our faith in what is unseen is greatly challenged when faced with tangible and in-the-moment temptations. But Jesus told His disciples that by choosing to forsake the world they would not only receive eternal life, but also gain back hundredfold of all they left to follow Him. We must always remember that our life is a breath and we are like vapors, here and then gone. The best life is one lived for the next.

Our obedience in choosing to follow Christ and do what He asks of us has eternal significance and consequences. Dietrich Bonhoeffer states, “When he (the rich young ruler) was challenged by Jesus to accept a life of voluntary poverty, the rich young man knew he was faced with a simple alternative of obedience or disobedience... Only one thing was required...to rely on Christ’s word and cling to it as offering greater security than all the securities in the world.”³ Obeying God offers a life of peace and security that is not of this world. As we follow Christ by obeying Him, we grow closer to Him and continually grow in our assurance of eternal salvation. Such a reward provides comfort and can never be taken away.

God not only gives us His Spirit, making it possible to obey, but as we obey, we also inherit His peace and joy. In John 14:27, Jesus promises to give us *His peace* and in John 15:11, he promises us *His joy*. Theologian D.A Carson states, “Lest the constraints of the unqualified obedience mandated by verses 9-10 seem grey and joyless, Jesus insists that His own obedience to the Father is the ground of His joy; and He promises that those who obey Him will share the same joy – indeed, that His very purpose in laying down such demands is that their joy may be complete.”

Additional Reading

- Matthew 7:24-27
- Matthew 19:16-30
- John 14:21
- Romans 6:17-19
- 1 John 2:3-6

Text Questions

1. Why is it sometimes difficult to obey God?
2. Read and discuss any observations you make about Matthew 19:16-30.



Application Questions

1. Little acts of obedience make a big difference in our lives. What are some small ways we can choose righteousness instead of apathy that will strengthen our walk with God? (For example – the things we watch on television.)
2. Is there currently an area of your life that requires an act of obedience that feels overwhelming or discouraging? How can the small group help encourage or pray for you in this area?

Meet with your prayer partner from this week for a meal and look up the additional verses on obedience to discuss together. Pray for one another before you leave. Consider John 15:9-11 and 1 Peter 2:9-12.

Memory Verses

Memorize John 15:9-11.





Week Five: Discipline

Opening Question

1. What comes to mind when you think of the word “discipline”?

Study Article

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” – 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

“As a boy growing up in Cincinnati, Ohio, my scariest moment happened when a fierce tornado ripped through our little suburban neighborhood... The wind howled and the rain poured down... The rain was so heavy it caused flooding in the streets everywhere. It was the worst natural disaster that little town had seen in decades.

Over the next week, rescue workers were everywhere attempting to restore what had been demolished. One particular scene sticks in my memory. It was a building that had caved in, and desperately needed repair. However, the rain had flooded the property – making it impossible for workers to get to it on foot. Interestingly, they built a bridge to the damaged building in order to repair it. I remember seeing scores of little bridges in these disaster areas. The bridges enabled the workers to get from where they were to where they wanted to go, and fix the damage.

...Discipline is like those bridges that help me get to where I need to go. In order to repair the damage, I need to build a bridge of discipline to get me there... Here’s what I know about the discipline bridge: it takes time and effort to build it, but once this bridge is in place, it actually makes the journey easy. I can get back and forth with ease.”¹

If you were told to leave campus today and run a marathon, how would you do? Would you finish or would you pass out? It is common knowledge that a person cannot simply “try” to run a marathon and expect great results. He must train diligently over an extended period of time. Simply trying will not suffice. It is similar in the Christian life. As the apostle Paul states, we are called to run the race that Christ has set before us – and not only run it, but win it. The Christian life is no 5k race; it is a marathon and those who diligently train run well and finish strong.

We are all destined for great things in God, but we have to be willing to enter into a life of training verses trying. There is a difference. John Ortberg states, “Trying hard can accomplish only so much. If you are serious about seizing the chance of a lifetime, you will have to enter into a life of training. You must arrange your life around certain practices that will enable you to do what you cannot do now by willpower alone...spiritual transformation is not a matter of trying harder, but of training wisely.”



So what does wise training look like for a Christian? It is not a matter of “running aimlessly or boxing in thin air,” as Paul puts it. Wise training requires knowing the race that lies ahead of you and what it will take to complete the course. Our race requires spiritual training, diligence, and discipline. We must be willing to intentionally practice the spiritual disciplines in order to keep our goal and our prize, Jesus Christ, in focus, and so that others who witness us in the arena of life will long to run with us. The spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, giving, and celebration are not meant to discourage us or bog us down. They are meant to empower and liberate us, making our race a steady one and our finish assured. These disciplines are a bridge that once in place, helps us to obtain our full potential in Christ our Lord.

In the midst of our course, the Holy Spirit acts as our personal trainer. Once we commit our lives to Jesus Christ, we receive a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:7). The Spirit of God living in us gives us His power, love, and self-discipline, making it possible for us to will and to do the things we cannot accomplish in our own strength. The race is not impossible when the Holy Spirit is running beside us, helping, comforting and guiding us along the way.

Don't dread the discipline it takes to run the race marked out for you. Stay focused, for our prize is worth it. As Paul states, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1). Throw off the things that are hindering your walk with God and make the decision today to run with resolve and train wisely for the race. “Do you see yourself as someone who is running the spiritual Olympic event of his or her life? Or are you simply ‘jogging for Jesus?’ If you're serious about fulfilling God's plan for your life, it's time to shift into high gear and to start putting all your spiritual, mental, and physical energies into getting the job done. You have to remove all distractions and commit yourself to a life of discipline, balance, and devotion.”

Additional Reading

Disciplines of Engagement

Study: Memorize Scripture and expand your universe of biblical study. (Col. 3:16, 2 Tim. 3:16)

Worship: Engage in corporate worship and include worship in your own prayer time. (John 4:24, Rev. 4:11)

Celebration: Practice being grateful and thankful both in your own relationship with Christ and with other believers. Express encouragement and thankfulness to others. (Ps. 139:14, Ps. 16:7,9,11)

Service: Give your time to the church and/or to others. Ponder tithing your time. (Isa. 58:6-7, John 12:26)

Prayer: Take deliberate steps to pray regularly and with purpose. Praying through the Psalms is a good way to increase your “prayer vocabulary.” (Luke 11:1-13, 1 Thess. 5:16-18)

Fellowship: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”
(Heb. 10:25, Acts 2:42-47)

Confession: Practice confessing your sins to trusted people who will pray with you and be spiritual allies.
(James 5:16, Ps. 139:23-24)



Disciplines of Abstinence

Solitude: The practice of spending time without any others or any distractions. (Luke 4)

Silence: No noise or conversation. Just you and God. (Hab. 2:20, 1 Kings 19:12)

Fasting: Abstain from food, media, entertainment, or anything else that occupies your time. (Matt. 6:16-18)

Frugality: Use your money for purposes outside your own needs for a time. (Ex. 36:6-7)

Secrecy: Do not allow anyone to know of the deeds you do or the money you give in order to avoid doing them for the wrong motivations. Only God needs to know. (Matt. 6:5-6)

Sacrifice: Stretch your sense of what you can do without for the sake of those who have less. (Luke 21:1-4)

Text Questions

1. Before reading this study, what has been your understanding of discipline in context of your relationship with God?
2. Read and discuss any observations you may have about 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and Hebrews 12:1. What is the prize we are running the race of life for? How are we to obtain the prize?
3. "Discipline: Any activity I can do by direct effort that will help me to do what I cannot now do by direct effort... Spiritual discipline: Any activity that can help me gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it," (Ortberg, 51,52). Read and discuss these verses on the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and solitude. Matthew 6:5-18, Mark 2:18-20, Luke 5:15-16. How do these disciplines empower and strengthen our Christian walk?

Application Questions

1. "God changes lives in response to faith. But just as there is no faith that does not act, so there is no act without some plan. Faith grows from the experience of acting on plans and discovering... It is time to take what you have learned and make your own specific plan for your life with them. This will come down to what you do on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday." What are some practical steps we can take to implement the spiritual disciplines in our lives on a daily basis?
2. Which of the spiritual disciplines would be the most difficult for you to incorporate into your life? How can the community of Chi Alpha help you enter into a life of training with the spiritual disciplines?

Memory Verses

Memorize 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Along with these verses, encourage your Core Group to meet up in smaller groups this week and discuss the disciplines of engagement and abstinence, and make a plan to do one of each.





Week Six: Joy

Opening Questions

1. Is there a season of your life you remember having a sense of Joy?
2. What kind of things surrounded this season? (time in the word? closeness to the Lord?)

Study Article

“...Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking until Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” – Hebrews 12:1b-2 (NKJV)

“May you be filled with all joy, always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to His people, who live in the light.” – Colossians 1:12 (NKJV)

“All joy, (as distinct from mere pleasure, still more, amusement), emphasizes our pilgrim status; always reminds, beckons, awakens desire. Our best havings are wanting.”

Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him, and, as His followers, we are called to do likewise. But if we mistake joy for a mere emotion we can conjure up in our own strength, we will quickly fall short. Instead of being filled with unspeakable joy, we will find ourselves smiling through gritted teeth, singing worship songs with our fists clenched by our sides.

Joy is a fruit of the indwelling Spirit – something that can be produced in our lives only by the power of Christ at work in us. However, while He is the one who works in us, the more we cooperate with Him, the more fruit He will produce. So how do we cooperate to experience the joy that the Lord promises can and should be ours? Through a thankful heart, an obedient life, and an eternal perspective.

Our profession of thanksgiving to God, in all circumstances and for all things, transforms our hearts. “The root of joy is gratefulness...It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.” As we thank Him – despite our emotions – our eyes are lifted off of ourselves and He becomes our focus. We stop examining our own troubles as we gaze upon God, who holds us in the palm of His hand. Our thanksgiving is a declaration that we put our hope in God and believe He is faithful to those who trust in Him. The more we express our trust through thanks to Him, the more we see as He sees and not as the world sees. By praising Him, our worry and fear falls to the wayside as we are lifted out of our circumstances and brought closer to Him. And it is there, in His presence that we experience, “the fullness of joy ...[and] pleasures forevermore,” (Ps. 16:11, NKJV).

But lest we fall into the trap of giving insincere platitudes to God and wearing a thin mask of shallow happiness before the world, we must understand that our thankfulness is not simply expressed through our words, but through our lives. Obedience to the Lord is necessary if we want to experience the joy of the Lord in our lives. The reason is two-fold:



First, Jesus, who was fully human, understands our weaknesses. Sometimes, in the throws of difficulty or heartache, we are unable to even think the words 'thank you,' much less speak them. To do so would not only be false, it would be to deny experiencing grief, pain, and even anger. We must let these responses and emotions run their course if we are going to experience full healing. Jesus knows this. Author Brennan Manning says, "To be grateful for an unanswered prayer, to give thanks in a state of interior desolation, to trust in the love of God in the face of the marvels, cruel circumstances, obscenities, and commonplaces of life is to whisper a doxology in darkness." And when we are unable to utter the softest whisper of a thank you, our obedience to Him expresses these same, unspoken words.

Secondly, this same obedience expressed – not just in difficult times but in the mundane and often repetitive actions of our daily lives – continues to express our trust in Him, and thereby our thankfulness. Choosing to follow Him when we feel abandoned, choosing to do the right thing when nobody else is, choosing to live a life of integrity even when no one else sees our actions are all ways in which we display our trust. We are following Him with each of these decisions – no matter how small or great. And each step we take after Him is an expression of belief and thanks for that which He has given us.

While our literal, verbal thanksgiving and praise is commanded by God and integral to experiencing the tangible joy of the Lord, living lives of obedience is just as pivotal to being filled with the joy the Spirit offers. And the only way we will daily desire to obey the Lord is if we know the hope of our calling. It was for the *joy* set before Him that Jesus endured the cross. And so it must be with us.

What is the joy that was set before Him, and thereby us? What is the hope of our calling and inheritance? A Kingdom where God the Father dwells with men. The Eternal One who is both Beginning and End, the Creator who holds all things together in Himself, is going to make His home on Earth with us. Not Earth as we know it now, but a restored Earth – Earth as it was always meant to be. And we will rule and reign over it with Christ, *co-heirs* with Him in this, His eternal inheritance. *This* is our inheritance, our hope, and that which has the ability to fill us with all joy in all things. Hudson Taylor, renown Chinese missionary, said, "...All throughout the New Testament the coming of the Lord was the great hope of His people, and was always appealed to as the strongest motive for consecration and service, and as the greatest comfort in trial and affliction."

It was not just for the internal peace that salvation provides for each of us as individuals that Christ endured the cross. He willingly suffered knowing He would inherit an eternal Kingdom. A literal Kingdom that will fill time and space forever, where He will be surrounded by brothers and sisters – His Father's sons and daughters. Not just followers and disciples, but friends...and a family. And we, who seek to follow Him, are that family. It was for *this* joy that Jesus endured the cross. And it is the knowledge of such a hope that will fill us with thanksgiving and strengthen us to obey in every circumstance.

It is as we fill our minds and hearts with this hope that we will experience true joy. Not just a sense of happy feelings and warm fuzzies. But the very joy of God that is so deeply rooted in eternity that joy itself will be our strength.

Additional Reading

- Psalm 30:11-12
- Psalm 51:12
- Hebrews 12:22-24, 28



- Revelation 21-22:5

Text Questions

1. Read John 15:10-11 and Hebrews 12:1-2 and discuss.
2. How will 'fixing our eyes on Jesus' enable us to live joyfully, even when we do not sense His presence or feel happy? (Heb. 12:2)
3. How has God "enabled us to share in the inheritance that belongs to His people"? (Col. 1:12)

Application Questions

1. What are some areas in your own life that you currently consider trials, hardships, or frustrations that you have not considered or wanted to thank God for?
2. Do you believe that it is in God's presence that we can experience true joy and eternal pleasures? Why or why not?
3. What can you do in your own life to more fully realize and understand the tangible and eternal hope we have, in order to experience joy? (John 15:10-11, Hebrews 12:2)
4. How can we walk in joy honestly and share it with others compassionately in the midst of trying and difficult circumstances?

This week, think about God's joy and how you can experience it in different seasons of your life.

Memory Verses

Memorize Hebrews 12:1-2 with your Core Group.





Week Seven: Mission

Opening Questions

1. How would you describe your heart for reaching unbelievers? Why would you describe yourself this way?
2. What do you believe are the attitudes your non-Christian friends have towards Christianity? What are their questions? What offends them?

Study Article

"I think of an unassuming sixteen-year-old girl who attended our church a couple of times. I'll call her Amy. Amy hung herself in her bedroom. I was called upon to serve at her funeral. I'll never forget that day.

Amy's suicide haunted me because I realized in looking back that our congregation probably did not do enough when she came into our midst to really reach her. We had hundreds of people. Amy had been a calm face in a crowd. We didn't sense her despair.

...The church cannot be passive about the lost. Look at the Parable of the Good Shepherd. Ask yourself what church wouldn't be satisfied if 99 percent of its community were in the fold. But the Good Sheppard drops everything to go after the 1 percent that is not in the fold. And the reality is, what church wouldn't be satisfied if 50 percent of the community were in the fold, or even 10 percent? If we as a church don't share that passion Christ has for the lost, we have missed our reason for being. The lost are why Jesus came to this world. And we must remember that each of us is a beneficiary of His passion for lost souls. He came, seeking to save the lost. Those of us who have been rescued must in turn, by word and deed, proclaim the saving gospel to dying souls around us."

Word and deed. This world will not be won by what we say; they must see our hands and feet at work. Lost people do not want to *hear* that we care, they want to see it. The days of unbelievers visiting our churches, meetings, or home-groups by their own will, cultural morality, or personal desire are long gone. We cannot do 'church as usual' and expect people to come to us. We must go to them. This is mission and everyone is called to it – not simply our campus pastors and church leaders. We are all called to be missionaries wherever we are. We are all called to participate in the mission that God sent His only Son to die for over 2,000 years ago. We are all called to win the lost.

Unfortunately, many Christians relegate missions and ministry to Sundays, while functioning as engineers, doctors, students, teachers, or athletes *only* the rest of the week. But our mission field is *wherever we are* and we are called to be missionaries *all of the time*. To think – we spend eight (or more) hours a day, five days a week, in locations filled with people destined to spend an eternity separated from God, and we often don't think twice about sharing our faith and putting the teachings of Jesus into practice.



We let opportunities to share the gospel with people at work and in our classes pass us by because of absent-mindedness, yet we jump at the chance to go overseas and share the gospel. We idealize ministering to orphans in other countries, forgetting the countless children who need to see Jesus through our love and in our homes right here in America. We often think of the mission field as 'somewhere far away' and mistake our call to be missionaries as a job we fulfill in the timeframes we determine. 'If only we can just get through the work week or school week, then we can be missionaries, then we can minister.'

But the truth is, if we don't learn to be missional on campus, when there is more time available and community is built in around us, how will we ever be missional in the marketplace when our time is no longer our own and connecting with people is not such a given? How will we be focused and effective in overseas missions when spending time with our lost roommate or group partner is the farthest thing from our mind? We must become fervent in our prayers that God would give us eyes to see the lost people all around us: living next door; sitting beside us in class; working one cubicle away. And, that once our eyes are opened, we would not hesitate to reach out and let Jesus speak and minister to them through us – no matter when it is, regardless of where we are, and in the midst of whatever we may doing.

"It is not that evangelism is 100 percent God's activity and 0 percent ours. It's not even a fifty-fifty deal. Evangelism is 100 percent both: 100 percent God and 100 percent us. That is the mystery of the incarnation, how God came to us in Jesus. Jesus was 100 percent God and 100 percent human. That is the way God works through his church. He fills 100 percent human beings with his 100 percent divine Holy Spirit. That is the way God's work and witness in the world goes forward."

Knowing we must be missionaries to those directly around us, we must then ask, 'How do we reach the lost of the 21st century western world?' Two words Jesus used in the gospel of Luke help our efforts take shape: fishing and seeking. While speaking to Simon, Jesus said, "*Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people,*" (Luke 5:10 TNIV). He went onto say, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost,*" (Luke 19:10 TNIV). A fisherman does not set out to sea without the right equipment, nor does an explorer set out to find something without properly preparing himself. So it is with us. We must be properly equipped and prepared to be able to see and meet head-on the challenges that come with ministering to those around us. It requires a willingness to make an effort, knowledge of the truth we possess in Christ, real relationship so as to be able to reach out sincerely, prayer, and faith for divine grace and intervention. The work of seeking and saving the lost in both this day and age and in our culture is not easy, may take time and, in most cases, happens through authentic, sustained relationships where trust has been established.

"People today are looking for truth that is experiential, for communities in which faith is lived out and for spiritual experiences that are tangible and real. *So experience comes before explanation.* Second, people today are looking for a safe and accepting community in which to work out their identity. *So belonging comes before believing.* Third, the battle for allegiance today is a battle for people's spiritual and moral imagination. *So image comes before word.*"

We were made to be in relationship with God – He is our true home. And each and every human being on the planet is lost until they find their way back to Him. Having been brought home ourselves, how can we not point out the way to those who move in and out of our lives on a daily basis? We must be attentive to the people around us, make ourselves available to them, and share Christ – not just through



our words, but by investing in genuine relationships and honest acts of love. As we do, we will find that the mission field – and our place in it – is not quite as far off as we once imagined it to be.

Additional Reading

- Proverbs 11:30
- Matthew 9:35-38
- Mark 16:15
- Luke 19:1-10
- Acts 2:42-47
- Acts 13:47
- 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Text Questions

1. How would you describe your heart for reaching unbelievers? Why would you describe yourself this way?
2. What do you believe are the attitudes your non-Christian friends have towards Christianity? What are their questions? What offends them?
3. Read Matthew 9:35-38. What strikes you about Jesus' heart for the crowds of people surrounding him? What does Jesus say about the harvest? What does He desire to use in order to harvest souls?
4. Read Matthew 18:10-14. What does this verse reveal about Jesus' heart for lost people? Our culture often measures success by numbers. How does this verse keep us grounded in the power and worth of one person to God?

Application Questions

1. What are some practical steps we can take in becoming people who have a greater heart for the lost? How can we hold each other accountable in this small group for being people who grow in love and action for and toward non-Christians?
2. What are some important questions we should be prepared to answer and what are some scriptures and extra resources we can study in order to be prepared to witness for Christ?
3. How can we be more missional in our study groups, to our roommates, hall mates, or co-workers? What are some Chi Alpha events that are potential outreach opportunities?

Memory Verse

Memorize Luke 5:10 and encourage your Core Group to think about their non-Christian friends this week. How can they build trust and community with them? How can they share the gospel this week?





Week Eight: Justice

Opening Question

1. Think about your concept of justice. How does it differ from other things like mercy, kindness, or grace? How is it similar?

Study Article

“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to me.’” – Matthew 25: 34-36, 40 (NKJV)

“A 17th century Jesuit priest, Peter Claver spent the majority of his life in what is now modern-day Columbia. This area of Central America was a hub for the growing slave trade and Peter would spend his days at the docks and in the slave quarters, caring for Africans who had been sold into slavery. Called ‘the slave of the slaves,’ he would provide for their physical needs, give them medical attention, and share the gospel, focusing on God’s love for all people and restoration of human dignity through Christ. One account recalls, “One night Peter recruited a couple of volunteers to help minister to a dying man whose suppurating flesh had been eaten away because of years in chains. When the volunteers saw the oozing flesh and smelled the putrid odor, they ran panic-stricken from the room. Peter cried out, ‘You mustn’t go. You can’t leave him – it is Christ.’” - Brennan Manning

It is Christ. The old man on the street with a tobacco-stained beard pandering for money...whether you believe he is really homeless or not, this is Christ. Little babies in faraway countries who have been orphaned by disaster and disease...they are Christ. The woman raising three kids on her own...whether she’s a widow of war or a strung out drug addict living on welfare, she is Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “God wanders among us in human form, speaking to us in those who cross our paths, be they stranger, beggar, sick, or even in those nearest to us in everyday life, becoming Christ’s demand on our faith in Him.” God desires – even more – He demands that we be the ones to meet those needs. And it is as we meet the need right in front of us that God’s perfect justice will begin to cover the entire earth.

In our instant-information, slogan-saturated culture, the word ‘justice’ can immediately bring to mind specific images that center around popular campaigns, hot-topic issues, and go-to guys who seem to have all the answers concerning how we can bring justice to a needy world. While this isn’t necessarily wrong, it can be problematic because the justice of God does not look like the justice of men. In part, yes. But not in full. Justice must begin with compassion; justice must not be detached from righteousness; and justice cannot exclude the gospel. Short of these, it is not the full work of justice that God desires to extend to those in need.

Great justice begins with small compassion. Not all of us are called to the slums like Mother Theresa – but we are all called to love our neighbor. Idealistic notions of establishing justice in remote, ‘really needy’



places are fanciful at best and egotistical at worst if I cannot help the lady next door when she calls on the phone in need of assistance. Brennan Manning says, “A profound mystery: God becomes a slave. This implies very specifically that God wants to be known through servanthood.” And we can serve anyone. Anywhere. The ways God provides for us to serve those around us may feel very small. They might also lack the stereotypical appearance of justice. Offering to lead a study group in a class where you excel; letting your roommate borrow your car; cleaning the bathroom in your apartment when it’s not your turn; taking the time to ask a student you don’t really know to lunch simply because he looks lonely.

“That’s not justice. That’s just kindness,” you say. But being kind is being loving and we can establish justice not simply by abolishing injustice, but by implementing love. The call to love the ‘normal’ people around us interrupts our daily lives by asking us to meet their small and perhaps paltry needs. Heeding the call of Christ here is often much more difficult than willingly traversing the globe for the sake of more obvious, and often more emotionally compelling matters. But little that is great is easy, and so justice must begin here – in our daily lives.

Complete justice must not be detached from righteousness. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of God’s throne (Ps. 89:14, 97:2). God judges with them hand in hand (Ps. 72:2, 103:6). Justice is the process of bringing about that which is fair in light of the truth. Righteousness is the state of right living and right doing. And true, undefiled religion is living a life filled with both (James 1:27). A justice that promotes altruistic actions apart from or regardless of personal obedience to God is not fully justice. Humanitarian efforts are good and right, there is no question of that, but God desires that every aspect of our lives be submitted to Him. All of our good doings don’t make up for sins we choose not to give up or areas of our hearts we refuse to surrender.

The whole of our lives are to serve as a witness to Christ – not just bits and pieces. Actions on behalf of others cannot make up for actions that defy the Lord: in the eyes of God, who considers our obedience the tangible evidence of our worship and love for Him; and in the eyes of the watching world, who believes in the love and power of God based on our desire to obey Him.

True justice cannot exclude the gospel. The hungry can be fed, the sick can be treated, the poor can be clothed and housed, but if they do not hear the message of eternal salvation through belief in Jesus Christ, they are still dead in their sins and destined to spend an eternity apart from God. A pivotal part of God’s description of true justice involves bringing freedom (Isa. 58:6, Ps. 82:4). Through Christ alone we are freed from the bondage of sin and the fear of death (Heb. 2:15, 12:1, Gal. 5:1). This is the only freedom that endures forever. If people do not hear of it, their freedom is not eternal and their justice is not truly realized. Justice for justice’s sake is simply humanitarian – good deeds done in human strength for this age alone. But justice for Jesus’ sake is supernatural – wrongs righted by God’s grace for this age and the age to come.

We cannot offer the gospel without meeting people’s needs. “The Christian commitment is not an abstraction. It is a concrete, visible, courageous, and formidable way of being in the world forged by daily choices consistent with inner truth. A commitment that is not visible in humble service, suffering discipleship, and creative love is an illusion.”³ But we cannot fully meet people’s needs unless we offer them the gospel. We cannot fully feed the hungry unless we give them the Bread of Life; we cannot truly relieve the thirsty unless we offer them Living Water; we cannot fully clothe the naked unless we tell them Christ desires to cover them in robes of righteousness; and we cannot completely shelter the homeless



unless we tell them God's banner over them is love. Catherine Booth, co-founder of The Salvation Army, understood this when she said,

“Oh, precious Savior! Save us from maligning your Gospel and your name...and forgetting the dignity which crowned your sacred brow as you hung upon the cross! That is the dignity for us, and it will never suffer by any gentleman here carrying the Gospel into the back slums or alleys of any town or city in which he lives...that will be a dignity which shall be crowned in heaven, crowned with everlasting glory...that is the dignity of the Gospel – the dignity of love.”

Regardless of our perception of a person's state in life or our opinion of the authenticity of their plight, Christ makes Himself known to us through the people all around us. “Just as Jesus appeared at his birth as a helpless child that the world was free to care for or destroy, so now he appears in his resurrection as the pauper, the prisoner, the stranger: appears in every form of human need that the world is free to serve or ignore.” (Frederick Buechner)

We can go to the other side of the globe or we can go to the grocery store: either place we will encounter lonely, broken people with both physical and spiritual needs. We can go on our way; or we can stop, look them in the eyes and see the face of Jesus looking back at us as He whispers, ‘Will you love me here?’ Justice demands that we cannot leave and love requires that we say yes – for this is Christ.

Additional Reading

- Psalm 72:7
- Psalm 89:14
- Psalm 97:2
- Psalm 103:6
- Isaiah 58
- Matthew 20:25-28
- Matthew 23:1-28
- Matthew 25:31-46

Text Questions

1. Are you compelled or motivated by the topic of justice? Why or why not? If so, what about it is important to you?
2. What are some messages of ‘justice’ that you are familiar with that don't actually line up with the Lord's definition of justice? What's missing?
3. Read Matthew 23:1-28. In this passage, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of performing empty actions in the name of religion without actually loving people and helping them see God. What are some of the specific things he accuses them of? How does this passage parallel our own day and age? What traps must we guard against falling into ourselves, lest we become like the Pharisees?
4. Discuss the verses from Psalms listed in the additional reading. What do they reveal about what is important to God and how He reigns?



Application Questions

1. What are some ways in your daily life and normal routine that God could be challenging you to bring about justice by loving those around you?
2. If you are resistant to meeting these needs, why is that? What will help you to adjust your heart's attitude?
3. What are some attitudes and actions that your Chi Alpha small group could take to implement acts of justice on campus and in the surrounding community?

Creative Implementation for the Week/Spiritual Exercise

Meet with your prayer partner from this week for a meal. Read Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25:31-46 together and discuss. What do these passages reveal about what is important to God?

Memory Verses

Memorize Isaiah 58:6-7 and James 1:27





Week Nine: Cost

Opening Questions:

1. When you think of the “cost” of following Jesus, what first comes to your mind?
2. What do you think is the “cost” for Christians, especially those living in the U.S.?

Study Article:

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” – Matthew 7: 13-14 (NKJV)

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul.’” – Matthew 16: 24-26 (NKJV)

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense... The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.” - C.S. Lewis

Anything of great value is always worth a great price. We have heard this before. But it is not the way we live. Culturally, personally, even spiritually, we often define that which is good as that which is easy – and this is a lie. Christ promises us rest; He does not promise us ease. He promises us a yoke that is light, but it is a yoke nonetheless. We share it with Him and it therefore resembles His own: it takes the form of a cross. Author Joseph Stowell writes, “Cross-bearing is a willing predisposition to the inevitability of suffering with Christ and for Christ as I follow him. A cross is any tension or trial that is a direct result of following.”

Jesus was very clear. Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way that leads to the life He offers. Few find it. And those few who do will lose their own life in the process. We cannot skim these words, uncomfortable with their weight. Let’s think about what defines ‘life’ for a moment. Fulfilling relationships; family togetherness; physically, emotionally, and mentally enriching experiences; our dreams and desires being actualized; satisfying work; a place we belong and feel significant – even if just in our own little corner of the globe. Every person is striving towards the realization of these issues in some capacity. Attaining them is considered that mark of a successful life and the lack of them is considered injustice. None of these things are evil and desiring them is not sinful. And yet... Christ tells us we must lose them all. He tells us the only way to save our life is to lose it. If these are the things that life is made of, then we must let go of every single one.



And He doesn't stop there. Not only does He tells us we must fling off every single aspect of life in order to make it through the narrow gate, but, in their place, we must pick up a cross. A cross. An instrument of torture and death. Twice our size, it is heavy and unmanageable. Even our Lord could not manage the one He bore. Picking up our cross assures us our blood will be shed and we will die. And yet Christ tells us to follow Him down this road of death to self if it is true life we desire. It is not a suggestion, and His message cannot be skewed. Joseph Stowell says, "...Christ calls us to come after Him...to count ourselves singularly, wholly, and without compromise fully devoted followers of Him – not as a part-time expression of, or add- on to, our Christianity, but as the all-consuming center point of our existence."

Staggering at the other end of this weighty and seemingly unbearable call, we can't help but ask, 'How does dying lead to life? Why must it be so difficult?' God's intent is not that it be difficult for difficulty's sake. He is not out to beat us into submission and He does not desire that we live lives of sour-faced asceticism. But He does desire our holiness more than our happiness. And His vision for our lives is that we be filled with His life. This process of transforming us into holy saints and filling us with His divine nature takes place in a fallen world where we struggle with sin and temptation at every turn. It is a process of filling darkness with light; replacing death with life. How could we think that such an extreme, total, supernatural transformation would be free of difficulties and without demands? In Christ, we are new creations and no creation is ever brought forth without a certain amount of struggle, labor and pain.

God is about the business of building His kingdom in us and through us. As C. S. Lewis said, God intends to come and live in us Himself. He wants us to know Him intimately and reflect the image of His Son. This process of sanctification happens daily and it is often painful as we battle to put off the old self and abide in Christ. But every battle conquered is glory gained as God dwells in us more fully. And the greater His light within us, the greater we reflect Him to the watching world. The temple that He is in the process of creating in each of us is complete with doors and windows, so that His glory and love might spill out of our hearts through our words and actions into the lives of those around us.

"The command Be ye perfect is not idealist gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were 'gods' and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him – for we can prevent Him, if we choose – He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said." (C.S. Lewis)

The cost is very great: it is everything. But the reward is beyond anything we have ever seen or could ever imagine (1 Cor. 2:9). Through Christ, we have become sons and daughters of God. If we follow Him, the way will be narrow and difficult and the death of our self as we know it is certain. But we will emerge with a new self, filled with His life, prepared to rule and reign as co-heirs with Him forever.

Additional Reading:

- Proverbs 4:10-19
- Matthew 10:37-39
- Matthew 13:44-46



- Luke 14:25-33
- 1 John 5:11-13

Text Questions:

1. What is your reaction to the Lord's call to 'pick up your cross and follow Me'?
2. Read and discuss Matthew 7:13-14. Jesus said narrow is the way that leads to life and few find it. What does this reveal about the normal Christian life?
3. Read and discuss Luke 14:25-33. What are some characteristics this passage indicates are key to being a disciple of Christ?

Application Questions:

1. In our culture, what are two or three areas of life in which it is most difficult to go the 'narrow way'?
2. What are some ways you feel God might be challenging you to 'count the cost'?

Creative Implementation for the Week/Spiritual Exercise:

1. In prayer, ask Jesus to reveal to you ways in which you might not have fully counted the cost of following Him. Journal about the areas of your life that you have not yet submitted to the Lord and ask Him to give you the grace to let them go and trust Him more fully. If these are current strongholds or worries in your life, make this your daily prayer each morning.
2. Meet with your prayer partner from this week for a meal. Read and discuss the additional readings listed for counting the cost of following Christ.

Memory Verses:

Memorize Matthew 7:13-14 and Matthew 16:24-26.





Week Ten: Power

Opening Question

1. What do you think of when you think of God's power?

Study Article

"Very truly I tell you, all who have faith in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." – John 14:12 (TNIV)

"Six people went into the house of a sick man to pray for him. He was a leader in the Episcopal Church, and he lay in his bed utterly helpless. He had read a little tract about healing and had heard about people praying for the sick. So he sent for these friends, who, he thought, could pray "the prayer of faith" (James 5:15). He was anointed with oil according to James 5:14, but because he had no immediate manifestation of healing, he wept bitterly. The six people walked out of the room, somewhat crestfallen to see the man lying there in an unchanged condition.

When they were outside, one of the six said, 'There is one thing we could have done. I wish you would all go back with me and try it.' They all went back and got together in a group. This brother said, 'Let us whisper the name of Jesus. At first, when they whispered this worthy name, nothing seemed to happen. As they continued to whisper, 'Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!' the power began to fall. As they saw that God was beginning to work, their faith and joy increased, and they whispered the name louder and louder. As they did so, the man rose from his bed and dressed himself. The secret was just this: those six people had gotten their eyes off the sick man and were taken up with the Lord Jesus Himself. Their faith grasped the power in His name. Oh, if people would only appreciate the power in this name, there is no telling what would happen.' - Smith Wigglesworth

What an awesome God we serve that at the very mention of His name miracles happen! It is undeniable – when we read the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, we see that He was an extraordinary miracle worker. He turned water into wine, multiplied loaves of bread and fish, and even commanded the wind and the waves to be still. Jesus walked in power. About one third of his ministry consisted of casting out demons and healing the sick. He was filled with discernment, giving people words of wisdom and knowledge and prophesying over them. Yes, Jesus preached a message of repentance and salvation in order to enter the coming Kingdom of God. But often before He shared His message, He ministered to people by meeting their physical needs through healings and miracles.

Imagine walking and talking with Jesus as one of His first disciples and hearing Him say, "You will do the works I have been doing and even greater works." Awestruck and slightly bewildered, it is natural that our first question would be, "But how? How can we do these things?" Gratefully, Jesus does not leave us wondering. In this same passage of scripture, He told His disciples that when He returned to His Father above, He would send them His Spirit, His inner life, His very own nature. In John 14:16-17, He used a special word to describe the Holy Spirit: "Helper," which also translates into Comforter or Advocate. Biblical scholar N.T Wright states,



“As a result of this promised spirit, the spirit of Jesus himself, Christians now, remarkable though it may seem, are in a better situation even than the followers of Jesus during his lifetime...now, by the spirit, they (Christians) will be able to do all kinds of things. When Jesus ‘goes to the father’ - in other words, when he defeats the power of death through his own death and resurrection - then all sorts of new possibilities will be opened in front of them. The ‘works’ he has been doing, as he says again and again, are the evidence that the father is at work in him. Now he says that the disciples will do even greater works than these!”

The normal Christian life is a life filled with Christ. If we have the Spirit of Christ living inside of us, we cannot isolate and focus on the particular facets of His nature we are comfortable with and ignore those with which we are not. We cannot continue to choose only certain aspects of who Jesus is to study, teach, and practice because we are familiar with them and disregard those with which we are not. Healing, miracles, casting out demons, prophesy, discernment, words of wisdom and knowledge, and tongues were a part of the life and ministry of Jesus and of the disciples and apostles who followed in His footsteps. Since we are filled with the same Holy Spirit that filled them, it follows that our lives should be filled with such signs and wonders too. Being unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and consequently failing to study or desire them, causes us to miss not only practicing but also enjoying a very important aspect of the nature of Christ in us. We should all long to live our lives with Christ as our role model.

Christ came with a message He declared was from none other than God Himself. The power displayed in and through His life was the testimony that affirmed His message was true. The normal Christian life is a life that mirrors the life of Christ and is, therefore, a life filled with power. In a day and age where our words often seem insufficient, we should all desire and seek to walk in the power of the Spirit of God. Trent Sheppard says, “One of the most urgent needs of our generation, is a deeper and healthier, more holistic and more powerful relationship with the Holy Spirit: a relationship rooted in biblical understanding of God, a relationship not afraid of using common sense when seeking for and operating in the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit, a relationship truly impassioned in its pursuit of being continually filled with the living and powerful presence of Jesus.”

Additional Reading:

- 1 Samuel 16:13
- Acts 4:33
- 1 Corinthians 1:18-27
- 2 Corinthians 12:8-10
- Colossians 1:9-12
- 2 Peter 1:2-4

Text Questions:

1. What keeps us from desiring to do greater works in His name?
2. Read and discuss John 14:12. What does Jesus say it takes to do the works he has been doing?
3. What is the purpose of the works we will do in his name for those who do not know Christ? Read Mark 16:17 and John 2:11, 6:14, and 11:47.



4. Read Luke 24:49, Acts 1:3-8, and Acts 2:1-12. When the Holy Spirit comes upon believers, they are clothed with what according to these scriptures?
5. Please read first 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, Ephesians 4:11-12, and Romans 12:4-8. What is the purpose of the gifts the Holy Spirit gives to believers?

Application Questions:

1. Would you be willing to allow the Holy Spirit to use you in any way he sees fit, even if you felt it would be foolish? Why or why not?
2. After doing this study, are you eager to experience and practice the power of Christ within you? According to Matthew 7:7-11, where is the best place to begin?

Creative Implementation for the Week/Spiritual Exercise:

Meet with your prayer partner from this week for a meal. Discuss your thoughts on this study and discuss some of the additional scripture below. Pray for one another before you leave.

Memory Verses:

John 14:12 and 1 Corinthians 2:4-5.





Week One: Grace

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” – Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

“Under law the formula is, ‘If you do good, I will bless you.’ Under grace it’s, ‘I have blessed you; now do good.’” --Charles Spurgeon

“‘I will love them freely,’ is a condensation of the glorious message of salvation which was delivered to us in Christ Jesus our Redeemer. The sense hinges upon the word ‘freely.’ ‘I will love them freely.’ Here is the glorious, the suitable, the divine way by which love streams from heaven to earth. It is, indeed, the only way in which God can love such as we are. It may be that he can love angels because of their goodness; but he could not love us for that reason; the only manner in which love can come from God to fallen creatures is expressed in the word ‘freely.’ Here we have spontaneous love flowing forth to those who neither deserved it, purchased it, nor sought after it.” --Charles Spurgeon

Grace. In the Christian tradition, grace is a commonly used word meaning undeserved mercy, favor, or good will that is freely given. Yet, if asked, many Christians struggle with what undeserved grace tangibly looks like in their own world. The thought of something *undeserved* in our society is difficult to grasp or comprehend. Isn't it true that we “get what we deserve”, both good and bad? If you work hard, you expect to be paid what you deserve. If you commit a crime or take a life, you will ultimately get what you deserve. And yet, here is this word *grace* that has absolutely nothing to do with what we deserve, but contains the very essence and foundation of our relationships with Christ. It is no wonder that in our culture, Christians often have a difficult time understanding the practical implications of grace in their lives.

In the Old Testament, God gave the Law to the Israelites as the way to know and please him through acts of obedience. It was generous and kind, but if left with only the Law, salvation could only come through perfection and sacrifice. We would have to be perfect in order to experience intimacy with God and be in right relationship with him. But thankfully, John 1:17 says, “For the Law was given through Moses; [but] grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Jesus united grace and the Law for us. He made the way for us to be in right relationship with God by fulfilling the requirements of the law through his own perfect life of obedience and sacrificial death. He was the Perfect Sacrifice for sins. We no longer need to perform sacrifices on our own; we can simply receive his pure, spotless sacrifice in our place. We are able to come to God, not with sacrifices in an attempt to make ourselves presentable in our own strength, but as we are – sinful and in need of mercy. The blood of Jesus alone enables us to stand in the presence of God Almighty and come to his throne of grace.

We must realize that it is not because of anything we do or do not do that God loves us. His love is unearned and freely given. He loves you because you are his creation, made in his image, and he desires you. There is nothing that you can do to make Him love you less. But this reality – the truth that God loves us because he is love and can do no less – can be hard to grasp at deep, life-changing levels. It is easy to say and believe in our heads; it is not so easy to know and receive in our hearts. We love to work hard and feel we have accomplished something. We naturally lean towards entitlement and earning



favor. Yet these are the very things that will keep us from receiving God's grace. Grace can only be accepted by the lowly and broken who understand they do not deserve it and cannot earn it. It is only when we realize we need a Savior and humble ourselves that we will be able to accept God's lavish grace with a joyful heart. Philip Yancey writes,

“Our wounds and defects are the very fissures through which grace might pass. It is our human destiny on earth to be imperfect, incomplete, weak and mortal, and only by accepting that destiny can we escape the force of gravity and receive grace. Only then can we grow close to God.”

Only in Christianity – only through Christ – can we be our messed-up selves and find perfect love. This great gift of grace demonstrates the character of God; he is not a monstrous, unknowable God. Rather, he desires that we know him intimately, his hand of invitation stretched out to us in the form of his Son on the cross. In Jesus and the grace made available through him, God gives us himself.

But God does not pour out his unmerited favor on us simply to save us. His plans are much bigger, his desires much greater. He extends his grace to us in order that we might become co-heirs with his son, Jesus. Romans 8:15- says, “...but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba Father.’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” God's graciousness has not simply made us better servants or more upstanding citizens – *that* we could attempt on our own – but it has made us heirs of a holy kingdom, brothers and sisters of the King, and sons and daughters of God.

So... we are left with this divine and eternal gift that we do not deserve, and yet freely have through faith and confession in Jesus Christ as Lord. As we are overwhelmed with the grace of God and see it at work in our own lives, we begin to see differently in the light of it. We are able to see the people around us as individuals in desperate need of grace, and we realize that we are to extend grace to those around us, just as it has been extended to us.

Sometimes this feels easy; other times it is ever so difficult. Others do not necessarily deserve it, nor have they earned it by merit. But we did not deserve or earn it either, and in extending our own, small examples of grace, we really extend God's immeasurable grace and unending love. In doing this, we demonstrate that there is a God who sees us in our sin, desperation, and selfishness, and extends His hand. He then lifts us up, cleanses our hearts with the blood of His Son, and calls us His own.





Week Two: Intimacy

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us...that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one...” – John 17: 20-23 (NKJV)

“I am my beloved’s and his desire is toward me.” – Song of Solomon 7:10 (NKJV)

“A young Jewish boy name Mordecai was dedicated to the Lord by his parents. Mordecai grew in age and wisdom and grace but...he loved the world, gulping down the days and dreaming through the nights. His parents sat him down and told him how important the Word of God was. But when it came time for him to go to the synagogue and learn the Word of God, he would not leave the lakes he loved to swim in and the trees he loved to climb. Nothing could persuade him. But one day the Great Rabbi visited the village and asked to be left alone with the boy... He picked up the boy and held him silently against his heart. The next day the boy began going to the synagogue before going to the woods and lakes and trees. And the Word of God became one with the words of Mordecai and the trees and the lake. Mordecai grew up to become a great man who helped many people. And when they came to him he said, ‘I first learned the Word of God when the Great Rabbi held me silently against his heart.’”

Jesus. We are so used to hearing this one Name, so used to saying it, that our hearts are often left unmoved, despite the weight of glory it carries. It is not until we draw away from the noise and distractions of life, quiet ourselves, and whisper His Name, that our hearts become sensitive enough to hear His own whisper to us.

This still and small voice that speaks to each of us by name is often what causes us to respond to Christ’s call in the first place. We experience His tangible presence, or a revelation of His holiness convicts and leads us to repentance. We know in a moment that we must respond and that our lives will never be the same. Knowing this personable God in a personal way and hearing His voice by His indwelling Spirit is the deepest, purest, and most fulfilling form of intimacy we can ever encounter. And this relationship is the very reason we were created.

“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...’ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them,” (Gen. 2:26a-27, NKJV). God, who is Three Persons in One, lives in continual, uninterrupted, perfect communion with Himself. The nature of love is to give and to sacrifice and the sacrificial fellowship of the Trinity is what makes God love – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, perpetually giving to, sharing with and fulfilling One Another. Out of the overflow of this perfect love that exists in the Godhead, man was created: another being that God could share this perfect love – His Perfect Self – with.

Not only did God create man to experience a perfect relationship with Him, but He also created man *in His image*. Reflecting the likeness of God explains the deep longing we all have to know and be known; to love and be loved. God experiences perfect fellowship and He desires to share this fellowship with us. If *this* is the image we reflect, then it follows that anything less than perfect, holy, love from Him and



supernatural, eternal communion with Him will never meet our expectations, for the standard of intimacy printed on our hearts is the mark imprinted by God Himself.

No other relationship will ever satisfy us like this one. Nothing else in life will ever fulfill us as only God can. The depth of love that God desires to share with us through Christ is as great as the expanse of eternity. God's Word reveals to us the type of relationship Christ desires to have with us, His bride. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father says, "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours," (Luke 15:31, NKJV), mirroring the heart of Song of Solomon 7:10. We are the Lord's beloved and His desire is for us. He is *for* us. He is always with us. And the fullness of perfect, passionate, holy love in His heart is ours.

But the only way for such intimacy to be our experience – the only way for this love to truly be our heart's treasure and not just plastic tokens in our pocket – is for us to spend time with God. In earthly relationships, it is as we spend time with others that we grow closer to them, come to trust them, know what they are like, and know how they feel about us. It is no different with God. Time alone with the Lord fills us anew with the experiential knowledge that He loves us, has accepted us, and calls us His own.

Without continuous intimacy, even our sincerest efforts and desires to 'live for God' will eventually prove hollow, frustrating, and burdensome. We are called to be light in the world and light cannot be sustained without a source of fuel. It is only as we store up oil in our hearts through time with God that our efforts to share this same love can be sustained. If we are not deliberate in seeking Him with our whole hearts, the sweetness of His voice and the tenderness with which we respond can become a fading memory instead of our daily experience with Him.

So how do we deliberately seek God? By walking in practical diligence with a sensitive spirit. We cannot rely on oodles of free time or let sensing His presence decide whether and when we will close the door on the world and turn our gaze toward God. When life gets hectic and God seems distant, it is only by consistently meeting with Him in His word and in prayer that we do not burn out or get discouraged. We cannot rely on our emotions, for we will not always 'feel' God, or 'feel like' He is speaking to us, but He is always available to us in His word. And His word is "living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword...and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart," (Hebrews 4:12, NKJV). As we read God's word, He reads us. Even more, He writes His words on our hearts, transforming us into His image, and drawing us ever closer to His heart.

With that said, practical diligence cannot blaze a trail straight to God's heart without a sensitive spirit. A plan of action is helpful; it is not the point. The point is to experience God's love. We must be attentive to the moments when His Spirit tugs at ours, calling us to simply be still and know He is God. "Failure to recognize the value of mere being with God, as the beloved, without doing anything, is to gouge the heart out of Christianity." Sometimes, we cannot begin to do this until we throw all the action plans, Bible studies, and memory verse goals up in the air, let them fall where they may, and run instead straight into God's arms, climb into His lap, and rest for awhile. Only then – only here, in His embrace – can we hear Him say, 'Stay here, My child. Stay here as long as you like.'





Week Three: Community

“God’s aim in human history is the creation of an inclusive community of loving persons, with himself included as it’s primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.”- Dallas Willard

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”- John 13:34-35

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.” - Psalm 133

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. He created night and day, light and dark, sky and land, animals of all kinds, and more. And then quite mysteriously and unbelievably, man was created in the image of the Triune God. This last act was incredible enough, but after all that was created, God took a step further, and created a helpmate, a companion, for that man. And it was good. Very good.

Since the beginning, God has created us for relationship. Relationship with Him and relationship with others. And yet we often find ourselves lonely, fearful, and living selfish lives.

In the New Testament, Jesus tells us again and again to love God and love people. He says in Mt 22:37-40, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Why are the two of these so intimately related? Because God wanted them to be. We are the objects of God’s great love. Love so deep, so passionate, so generous that God gave His only son Jesus to demonstrate holiness and redemption in a tangible way for us. That sacrifice led to even more sacrifice for our sakes as Jesus took the weight of our sin upon Himself and was crucified and resurrected. Through this act, Jesus paved the way for us to be in a right relationship with God again. He made atonement for our sins.

In the midst of this, Jesus set the ultimate example for us. He showed us how to love well. How to sacrifice for your friends, live without selfish gain, and depend on others. Love is not just flattering words but living life together. There is nothing more powerful and life giving than people living life together, sharing one another’s burdens, and walking side by side. In fact, we see this clearly in Acts 2:42-47 where Jesus’ disciples have just experienced the tremendous loss of Jesus. In love and obedience, they dedicate themselves to each other, the Apostles’ teachings, and to prayer. The Greek word utilized for the word “fellowship” is *koinonia*. *Koinonia* was a word for deep intimacy, communion, and sharing. That same word is used in 1 Corinthians 10:16 for describing our communion with Christ. Essentially we are to share our lives with each other, just as we share our lives with Christ.



Jesus also knew that we couldn't do life alone. Because we were created in the image of the Trinity (who in essence is relational), we simply cannot do life alone. We can certainly try, and many have. But what do we have left that has eternal consequence? Do we have money? Achievement? Success? Scripture tells us that money will never satisfy, and it will all prove meaningless. But people have real value. Our relationships are meaningful and glorifying to God. When we love people the way that God does, we bring glory to His name.

Our greatest witness of who God truly is is through our relationships. People are open and hungry for a community to be a part of. The world needs to see the Church in deep relationship with each other, always encouraging, always serving, always comforting, and even confessing to each other. It demonstrates that there is something different about Christianity. We genuinely care about each other. We are different because Christ impacted us and showed us how to live.

Theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once wrote, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity'- this is the Scripture's praise for life together under the Word. But now we can rightly interpret the words 'in unity' and say, 'for brethren to dwell together *through Christ.*' For Jesus Christ alone is our unity, 'He is our peace.' Through him alone do we have access to one another, joy in one another, and fellowship with one another." May we enjoy life together through the power of Jesus Christ.





Week Four: Obedience

“When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’” – Matthew 19:25-26 (NIV)

“Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’ Why do you ask me about what is good,’ Jesus replied. ‘There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.’ ‘Which ones?’ the man inquired. Jesus replied, ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.’ ‘All these I have kept,’ the young man said. ‘What do I still lack?’ Jesus answered, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’ When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.” - Matthew 19:16-22 (NIV)

When we read the story of the rich young ruler, we often think, ‘Well, I am not rich. Thank goodness this story does not apply to me. I can move past it with ease.’ But this thinking misses the larger application of the passage entirely. We are called to ask Christ the same question as the rich young ruler: “What do I still lack?” And, when faced with the Lord’s response, we cannot help but realize that the commands of God require a level of faith and act of perfection that is beyond our capabilities. In his own strength the rich young ruler was able to “keep” the ten commandments of the Pentateuch. But when he was asked to sell his riches to the poor and follow Christ, he could not obey, and his own will and desires proved too strong.

In order to be obedient and live a holy life, we must first ask God, ‘What do I lack?’ Often what Christ reveals and then requests seems unimaginable to attain, and rightly so, for Christianity is a call to perfection. “...The Lord wants those who follow him to follow him perfectly, not lacking in anything. People cannot follow God if they have solved 99 of their problems but have yet one problem unsolved. To follow God demands the whole being. It must be all or not at all.” Jesus Christ was perfect because He listened to His Father and obeyed His commands – and he asks no less of us. We might say, ‘That is impossible,’ and we would not be alone in our assumption. The disciples felt this same weight of impossibility when they heard what Christ asked. But He comforted them, “With man, this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26).

We cannot be perfect like Christ, or achieve perfection, without something greater than our own willpower at work in us. The obedience and holy living that God requires can only be accomplished by God Himself, who speaks to us and lives within us, empowering us by His Spirit every step of the way. This is one of the greatest joys of Christianity. It is not a religion of works to be done in our own strength. It is a living relationship of total dependence on God who will do the works through us as we surrender and follow Him.

While sometimes the issue is knowing that we *cannot* obey in our own strength, more often than not the real issue is whether or not we *want* to obey. “Many people begin coming to God once they stop being religious, because there is only one master of the human heart – Jesus Christ, not religion. But ‘woe is



me' if after seeing Him *I still will not obey.*" In light of immediate gratification, it can be difficult to remember – or heed – the Lord's warnings that the cost of sin always outweighs the benefits. In God's kingdom, rewards are often delayed until eternity and our faith in what is unseen is greatly challenged when faced with tangible and in-the-moment temptations. But Jesus told His disciples that by choosing to forsake the world they would not only receive eternal life, but also gain back hundredfold of all they left to follow Him. We must always remember that our life is a breath and we are like vapors, here and then gone. The best life is one lived for the next.

Our obedience in choosing to follow Christ and do what He asks of us has eternal significance and consequences. Dietrich Bonhoeffer states, "When he (the rich young ruler) was challenged by Jesus to accept a life of voluntary poverty, the rich young man knew he was faced with a simple alternative of obedience or disobedience... Only one thing was required...to rely on Christ's word and cling to it as offering greater security than all the securities in the world."³ Obeying God offers a life of peace and security that is not of this world. As we follow Christ by obeying Him, we grow closer to Him and continually grow in our assurance of eternal salvation. Such a reward provides comfort and can never be taken away.

God not only gives us His Spirit, making it possible to obey, but as we obey, we also inherit His peace and joy. In John 14:27, Jesus promises to give us *His peace* and in John 15:11, he promises us *His joy*. Theologian D.A Carson states, "Lest the constraints of the unqualified obedience mandated by verses 9-10 seem grey and joyless, Jesus insists that His own obedience to the Father is the ground of His joy; and He promises that those who obey Him will share the same joy – indeed, that His very purpose in laying down such demands is that their joy may be complete."





Week Five: Discipline

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” – 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

“As a boy growing up in Cincinnati, Ohio, my scariest moment happened when a fierce tornado ripped through our little suburban neighborhood... The wind howled and the rain poured down... The rain was so heavy it caused flooding in the streets everywhere. It was the worst natural disaster that little town had seen in decades.

Over the next week, rescue workers were everywhere attempting to restore what had been demolished. One particular scene sticks in my memory. It was a building that had caved in, and desperately needed repair. However, the rain had flooded the property – making it impossible for workers to get to it on foot. Interestingly, they built a bridge to the damaged building in order to repair it. I remember seeing scores of little bridges in these disaster areas. The bridges enabled the workers to get from where they were to where they wanted to go, and fix the damage.

...Discipline is like those bridges that help me get to where I need to go. In order to repair the damage, I need to build a bridge of discipline to get me there... Here’s what I know about the discipline bridge: it takes time and effort to build it, but once this bridge is in place, it actually makes the journey easy. I can get back and forth with ease.”¹

If you were told to leave campus today and run a marathon, how would you do? Would you finish or would you pass out? It is common knowledge that a person cannot simply “try” to run a marathon and expect great results. He must train diligently over an extended period of time. Simply trying will not suffice. It is similar in the Christian life. As the apostle Paul states, we are called to run the race that Christ has set before us – and not only run it, but win it. The Christian life is no 5k race; it is a marathon and those who diligently train run well and finish strong.

We are all destined for great things in God, but we have to be willing to enter into a life of training verses trying. There is a difference. John Ortberg states, “Trying hard can accomplish only so much. If you are serious about seizing the chance of a lifetime, you will have to enter into a life of training. You must arrange your life around certain practices that will enable you to do what you cannot do now by willpower alone...spiritual transformation is not a matter of trying harder, but of training wisely.”

So what does wise training look like for a Christian? It is not a matter of “running aimlessly or boxing in thin air,” as Paul puts it. Wise training requires knowing the race that lies ahead of you and what it will take to complete the course. Our race requires spiritual training, diligence, and discipline. We must be willing to intentionally practice the spiritual disciplines in order to keep our goal and our prize, Jesus Christ, in focus, and so that others who witness us in the arena of life will long to run with us. The spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, giving, and celebration are not meant to discourage us or bog



us down. They are meant to empower and liberate us, making our race a steady one and our finish assured. These disciplines are a bridge that once in place, helps us to obtain our full potential in Christ our Lord.

In the midst of our course, the Holy Spirit acts as our personal trainer. Once we commit our lives to Jesus Christ, we receive a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:7). The Spirit of God living in us gives us His power, love, and self-discipline, making it possible for us to will and to do the things we cannot accomplish in our own strength. The race is not impossible when the Holy Spirit is running beside us, helping, comforting and guiding us along the way.

Don't dread the discipline it takes to run the race marked out for you. Stay focused, for our prize is worth it. As Paul states, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1). Throw off the things that are hindering your walk with God and make the decision today to run with resolve and train wisely for the race. "Do you see yourself as someone who is running the spiritual Olympic event of his or her life? Or are you simply 'jogging for Jesus?' If you're serious about fulfilling God's plan for your life, it's time to shift into high gear and to start putting all your spiritual, mental, and physical energies into getting the job done. You have to remove all distractions and commit yourself to a life of discipline, balance, and devotion."





Week Six: Joy

“...Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking until Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” – Hebrews 12:1b-2 (NKJV)

“May you be filled with all joy, always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to His people, who live in the light.” – Colossians 1:12 (NKJV)

“All joy, (as distinct from mere pleasure, still more, amusement), emphasizes our pilgrim status; always reminds, beckons, awakens desire. Our best havings are wanting.”

Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him, and, as His followers, we are called to do likewise. But if we mistake joy for a mere emotion we can conjure up in our own strength, we will quickly fall short. Instead of being filled with unspeakable joy, we will find ourselves smiling through gritted teeth, singing worship songs with our fists clenched by our sides.

Joy is a fruit of the indwelling Spirit – something that can be produced in our lives only by the power of Christ at work in us. However, while He is the one who works in us, the more we cooperate with Him, the more fruit He will produce. So how do we cooperate to experience the joy that the Lord promises can and should be ours? Through a thankful heart, an obedient life, and an eternal perspective.

Our profession of thanksgiving to God, in all circumstances and for all things, transforms our hearts. “The root of joy is gratefulness...It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.” As we thank Him – despite our emotions – our eyes are lifted off of ourselves and He becomes our focus. We stop examining our own troubles as we gaze upon God, who holds us in the palm of His hand. Our thanksgiving is a declaration that we put our hope in God and believe He is faithful to those who trust in Him. The more we express our trust through thanks to Him, the more we see as He sees and not as the world sees. By praising Him, our worry and fear falls to the wayside as we are lifted out of our circumstances and brought closer to Him. And it is there, in His presence that we experience, “the fullness of joy ...[and] pleasures forevermore,” (Ps. 16:11, NKJV).

But lest we fall into the trap of giving insincere platitudes to God and wearing a thin mask of shallow happiness before the world, we must understand that our thankfulness is not simply expressed through our words, but through our lives. Obedience to the Lord is necessary if we want to experience the joy of the Lord in our lives. The reason is two-fold:

First, Jesus, who was fully human, understands our weaknesses. Sometimes, in the throws of difficulty or heartache, we are unable to even think the words ‘thank you,’ much less speak them. To do so would not only be false, it would be to deny experiencing grief, pain, and even anger. We must let these responses and emotions run their course if we are going to experience full healing. Jesus knows this. Author Brennan Manning says, “To be grateful for an unanswered prayer, to give thanks in a state of interior desolation, to trust in the love of God in the face of the marvels, cruel circumstances, obscenities, and



commonplaces of life is to whisper a doxology in darkness.” And when we are unable to utter the softest whisper of a thank you, our obedience to Him expresses these same, unspoken words.

Secondly, this same obedience expressed – not just in difficult times but in the mundane and often repetitive actions of our daily lives – continues to express our trust in Him, and thereby our thankfulness. Choosing to follow Him when we feel abandoned, choosing to do the right thing when nobody else is, choosing to live a life of integrity even when no one else sees our actions are all ways in which we display our trust. We are following Him with each of these decisions – no matter how small or great. And each step we take after Him is an expression of belief and thanks for that which He has given us.

While our literal, verbal thanksgiving and praise is commanded by God and integral to experiencing the tangible joy of the Lord, living lives of obedience is just as pivotal to being filled with the joy the Spirit offers. And the only way we will daily desire to obey the Lord is if we know the hope of our calling. It was for the *joy* set before Him that Jesus endured the cross. And so it must be with us.

What is the joy that was set before Him, and thereby us? What is the hope of our calling and inheritance? A Kingdom where God the Father dwells with men. The Eternal One who is both Beginning and End, the Creator who holds all things together in Himself, is going to make His home on Earth with us. Not Earth as we know it now, but a restored Earth – Earth as it was always meant to be. And we will rule and reign over it with Christ, *co-heirs* with Him in this, His eternal inheritance. *This* is our inheritance, our hope, and that which has the ability to fill us with all joy in all things. Hudson Taylor, renown Chinese missionary, said, “...All throughout the New Testament the coming of the Lord was the great hope of His people, and was always appealed to as the strongest motive for consecration and service, and as the greatest comfort in trial and affliction.”

It was not just for the internal peace that salvation provides for each of us as individuals that Christ endured the cross. He willingly suffered knowing He would inherit an eternal Kingdom. A literal Kingdom that will fill time and space forever, where He will be surrounded by brothers and sisters – His Father’s sons and daughters. Not just followers and disciples, but friends...and a family. And we, who seek to follow Him, are that family. It was for *this* joy that Jesus endured the cross. And it is the knowledge of such a hope that will fill us with thanksgiving and strengthen us to obey in every circumstance.

It is as we fill our minds and hearts with this hope that we will experience true joy. Not just a sense of happy feelings and warm fuzzies. But the very joy of God that is so deeply rooted in eternity that joy itself will be our strength.





Week Seven: Mission

"I think of an unassuming sixteen-year-old girl who attended our church a couple of times. I'll call her Amy. Amy hung herself in her bedroom. I was called upon to serve at her funeral. I'll never forget that day.

Amy's suicide haunted me because I realized in looking back that our congregation probably did not do enough when she came into our midst to really reach her. We had hundreds of people. Amy had been a calm face in a crowd. We didn't sense her despair.

...The church cannot be passive about the lost. Look at the Parable of the Good Shepherd. Ask yourself what church wouldn't be satisfied if 99 percent of its community were in the fold. But the Good Sheppard drops everything to go after the 1 percent that is not in the fold. And the reality is, what church wouldn't be satisfied if 50 percent of the community were in the fold, or even 10 percent? If we as a church don't share that passion Christ has for the lost, we have missed our reason for being. The lost are why Jesus came to this world. And we must remember that each of us is a beneficiary of His passion for lost souls. He came, seeking to save the lost. Those of us who have been rescued must in turn, by word and deed, proclaim the saving gospel to dying souls around us."

Word and deed. This world will not be won by what we say; they must see our hands and feet at work. Lost people do not want to *hear* that we care, they want to see it. The days of unbelievers visiting our churches, meetings, or home-groups by their own will, cultural morality, or personal desire are long gone. We cannot do 'church as usual' and expect people to come to us. We must go to them. This is mission and everyone is called to it – not simply our campus pastors and church leaders. We are all called to be missionaries wherever we are. We are all called to participate in the mission that God sent His only Son to die for over 2,000 years ago. We are all called to win the lost.

Unfortunately, many Christians relegate missions and ministry to Sundays, while functioning as engineers, doctors, students, teachers, or athletes *only* the rest of the week. But our mission field is *wherever we are* and we are called to be missionaries *all of the time*. To think – we spend eight (or more) hours a day, five days a week, in locations filled with people destined to spend an eternity separated from God, and we often don't think twice about sharing our faith and putting the teachings of Jesus into practice.

We let opportunities to share the gospel with people at work and in our classes pass us by because of absent-mindedness, yet we jump at the chance to go overseas and share the gospel. We idealize ministering to orphans in other countries, forgetting the countless children who need to see Jesus through our love and in our homes right here in America. We often think of the mission field as 'somewhere far away' and mistake our call to be missionaries as a job we fulfill in the timeframes we determine. 'If only we can just get through the work week or school week, then we can be missionaries, then we can minister.'

But the truth is, if we don't learn to be missional on campus, when there is more time available and community is built in around us, how will we ever be missional in the marketplace when our time is no



longer our own and connecting with people is not such a given? How will we be focused and effective in overseas missions when spending time with our lost roommate or group partner is the farthest thing from our mind? We must become fervent in our prayers that God would give us eyes to see the lost people all around us: living next door; sitting beside us in class; working one cubicle away. And, that once our eyes are opened, we would not hesitate to reach out and let Jesus speak and minister to them through us – no matter when it is, regardless of where we are, and in the midst of whatever we may doing.

“It is not that evangelism is 100 percent God’s activity and 0 percent ours. It’s not even a fifty-fifty deal. Evangelism is 100 percent both: 100 percent God and 100 percent us. That is the mystery of the incarnation, how God came to us in Jesus. Jesus was 100 percent God and 100 percent human. That is the way God works through his church. He fills 100 percent human beings with his 100 percent divine Holy Spirit. That is the way God’s work and witness in the world goes forward.”

Knowing we must be missionaries to those directly around us, we must then ask, ‘How do we reach the lost of the 21st century western world?’ Two words Jesus used in the gospel of Luke help our efforts take shape: fishing and seeking. While speaking to Simon, Jesus said, “*Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people,*” (Luke 5:10 TNIV). He went onto say, “*For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost,*” (Luke 19:10 TNIV). A fisherman does not set out to sea without the right equipment, nor does an explorer set out to find something without properly preparing himself. So it is with us. We must be properly equipped and prepared to be able to see and meet head-on the challenges that come with ministering to those around us. It requires a willingness to make an effort, knowledge of the truth we possess in Christ, real relationship so as to be able to reach out sincerely, prayer, and faith for divine grace and intervention. The work of seeking and saving the lost in both this day and age and in our culture is not easy, may take time and, in most cases, happens through authentic, sustained relationships where trust has been established.

“People today are looking for truth that is experiential, for communities in which faith is lived out and for spiritual experiences that are tangible and real. *So experience comes before explanation.* Second, people today are looking for a safe and accepting community in which to work out their identity. *So belonging comes before believing.* Third, the battle for allegiance today is a battle for people’s spiritual and moral imagination. *So image comes before word.*”

We were made to be in relationship with God – He is our true home. And each and every human being on the planet is lost until they find their way back to Him. Having been brought home ourselves, how can we not point out the way to those who move in and out of our lives on a daily basis? We must be attentive to the people around us, make ourselves available to them, and share Christ – not just through our words, but by investing in genuine relationships and honest acts of love. As we do, we will find that the mission field – and our place in it – is not quite as far off as we once imagined it to be.





Week Eight: Justice

“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to me.’” – Matthew 25: 34-36, 40 (NKJV)

“A 17th century Jesuit priest, Peter Claver spent the majority of his life in what is now modern-day Columbia. This area of Central America was a hub for the growing slave trade and Peter would spend his days at the docks and in the slave quarters, caring for Africans who had been sold into slavery. Called ‘the slave of the slaves,’ he would provide for their physical needs, give them medical attention, and share the gospel, focusing on God’s love for all people and restoration of human dignity through Christ. One account recalls, “One night Peter recruited a couple of volunteers to help minister to a dying man whose suppurating flesh had been eaten away because of years in chains. When the volunteers saw the oozing flesh and smelled the putrid odor, they ran panic-stricken from the room. Peter cried out, ‘You mustn’t go. You can’t leave him – it is Christ.’” - Brennan Manning

It is Christ. The old man on the street with a tobacco-stained beard pandering for money...whether you believe he is really homeless or not, this is Christ. Little babies in faraway countries who have been orphaned by disaster and disease...they are Christ. The woman raising three kids on her own...whether she’s a widow of war or a strung out drug addict living on welfare, she is Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “God wanders among us in human form, speaking to us in those who cross our paths, be they stranger, beggar, sick, or even in those nearest to us in everyday life, becoming Christ’s demand on our faith in Him.” God desires – even more – He demands that we be the ones to meet those needs. And it is as we meet the need right in front of us that God’s perfect justice will begin to cover the entire earth.

In our instant-information, slogan-saturated culture, the word ‘justice’ can immediately bring to mind specific images that center around popular campaigns, hot-topic issues, and go-to guys who seem to have all the answers concerning how we can bring justice to a needy world. While this isn’t necessarily wrong, it can be problematic because the justice of God does not look like the justice of men. In part, yes. But not in full. Justice must begin with compassion; justice must not be detached from righteousness; and justice cannot exclude the gospel. Short of these, it is not the full work of justice that God desires to extend to those in need.

Great justice begins with small compassion. Not all of us are called to the slums like Mother Theresa – but we are all called to love our neighbor. Idealistic notions of establishing justice in remote, ‘really needy’ places are fanciful at best and egotistical at worst if I cannot help the lady next door when she calls on the phone in need of assistance. Brennan Manning says, “A profound mystery: God becomes a slave. This implies very specifically that God wants to be known through servanthood.” And we can serve anyone. Anywhere. The ways God provides for us to serve those around us may feel very small. They might also lack the stereotypical appearance of justice. Offering to lead a study group in a class where you excel; letting your roommate borrow your car; cleaning the bathroom in your apartment when it’s not your turn; taking the time to ask a student you don’t really know to lunch simply because he looks lonely.



“That’s not justice. That’s just kindness,” you say. But being kind is being loving and we can establish justice not simply by abolishing injustice, but by implementing love. The call to love the ‘normal’ people around us interrupts our daily lives by asking us to meet their small and perhaps paltry needs. Heeding the call of Christ here is often much more difficult than willingly traversing the globe for the sake of more obvious, and often more emotionally compelling matters. But little that is great is easy, and so justice must begin here – in our daily lives.

Complete justice must not be detached from righteousness. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of God’s throne (Ps. 89:14, 97:2). God judges with them hand in hand (Ps. 72:2, 103:6). Justice is the process of bringing about that which is fair in light of the truth. Righteousness is the state of right living and right doing. And true, undefiled religion is living a life filled with both (James 1:27). A justice that promotes altruistic actions apart from or regardless of personal obedience to God is not fully justice. Humanitarian efforts are good and right, there is no question of that, but God desires that every aspect of our lives be submitted to Him. All of our good doings don’t make up for sins we choose not to give up or areas of our hearts we refuse to surrender.

The whole of our lives are to serve as a witness to Christ – not just bits and pieces. Actions on behalf of others cannot make up for actions that defy the Lord: in the eyes of God, who considers our obedience the tangible evidence of our worship and love for Him; and in the eyes of the watching world, who believes in the love and power of God based on our desire to obey Him.

True justice cannot exclude the gospel. The hungry can be fed, the sick can be treated, the poor can be clothed and housed, but if they do not hear the message of eternal salvation through belief in Jesus Christ, they are still dead in their sins and destined to spend an eternity apart from God. A pivotal part of God’s description of true justice involves bringing freedom (Isa. 58:6, Ps. 82:4). Through Christ alone we are freed from the bondage of sin and the fear of death (Heb. 2:15, 12:1, Gal. 5:1). This is the only freedom that endures forever. If people do not hear of it, their freedom is not eternal and their justice is not truly realized. Justice for justice’s sake is simply humanitarian – good deeds done in human strength for this age alone. But justice for Jesus’ sake is supernatural – wrongs righted by God’s grace for this age and the age to come.

We cannot offer the gospel without meeting people’s needs. “The Christian commitment is not an abstraction. It is a concrete, visible, courageous, and formidable way of being in the world forged by daily choices consistent with inner truth. A commitment that is not visible in humble service, suffering discipleship, and creative love is an illusion.”³ But we cannot fully meet people’s needs unless we offer them the gospel. We cannot fully feed the hungry unless we give them the Bread of Life; we cannot truly relieve the thirsty unless we offer them Living Water; we cannot fully clothe the naked unless we tell them Christ desires to cover them in robes of righteousness; and we cannot completely shelter the homeless unless we tell them God’s banner over them is love. Catherine Booth, co-founder of The Salvation Army, understood this when she said,

“Oh, precious Savior! Save us from maligning your Gospel and your name...and forgetting the dignity which crowned your sacred brow as you hung upon the cross! That is the dignity for us, and it will never suffer by any gentleman here carrying the Gospel into the back slums or alleys of any town or city in which he lives...that will be a dignity which shall be crowned in heaven, crowned with everlasting glory...that is the dignity of the Gospel – the dignity of love.”



Regardless of our perception of a person's state in life or our opinion of the authenticity of their plight, Christ makes Himself known to us through the people all around us. "Just as Jesus appeared at his birth as a helpless child that the world was free to care for or destroy, so now he appears in his resurrection as the pauper, the prisoner, the stranger: appears in every form of human need that the world is free to serve or ignore." (Frederick Buechner)

We can go to the other side of the globe or we can go to the grocery store: either place we will encounter lonely, broken people with both physical and spiritual needs. We can go on our way; or we can stop, look them in the eyes and see the face of Jesus looking back at us as He whispers, 'Will you love me here?' Justice demands that we cannot leave and love requires that we say yes – for this is Christ.





Week Nine: Cost

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” – Matthew 7: 13-14 (NKJV)

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul.’” – Matthew 16: 24-26 (NKJV)

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense... The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.” - C.S. Lewis

Anything of great value is always worth a great price. We have heard this before. But it is not the way we live. Culturally, personally, even spiritually, we often define that which is good as that which is easy – and this is a lie. Christ promises us rest; He does not promise us ease. He promises us a yoke that is light, but it is a yoke nonetheless. We share it with Him and it therefore resembles His own: it takes the form of a cross. Author Joseph Stowell writes, “Cross-bearing is a willing predisposition to the inevitability of suffering with Christ and for Christ as I follow him. A cross is any tension or trial that is a direct result of following.”

Jesus was very clear. Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way that leads to the life He offers. Few find it. And those few who do will lose their own life in the process. We cannot skim these words, uncomfortable with their weight. Let’s think about what defines ‘life’ for a moment. Fulfilling relationships; family togetherness; physically, emotionally, and mentally enriching experiences; our dreams and desires being actualized; satisfying work; a place we belong and feel significant – even if just in our own little corner of the globe. Every person is striving towards the realization of these issues in some capacity. Attaining them is considered that mark of a successful life and the lack of them is considered injustice. None of these things are evil and desiring them is not sinful. And yet... Christ tells us we must lose them all. He tells us the only way to save our life is to lose it. If these are the things that life is made of, then we must let go of every single one.

And He doesn’t stop there. Not only does He tell us we must fling off every single aspect of life in order to make it through the narrow gate, but, in their place, we must pick up a cross. A cross. An instrument of torture and death. Twice our size, it is heavy and unmanageable. Even our Lord could not manage the one He bore. Picking up our cross assures us our blood will be shed and we will die. And yet Christ tells us to follow Him down this road of death to self if it is true life we desire. It is not a suggestion, and His message cannot be skewed. Joseph Stowell says, “...Christ calls us to come after Him...to count



ourselves singularly, wholly, and without compromise fully devoted followers of Him – not as a part-time expression of, or add- on to, our Christianity, but as the all-consuming center point of our existence.”

Staggering at the other end of this weighty and seemingly unbearable call, we can't help but ask, 'How does dying lead to life? Why must it be so difficult?' God's intent is not that it be difficult for difficulty's sake. He is not out to beat us into submission and He does not desire that we live lives of sour-faced asceticism. But He does desire our holiness more than our happiness. And His vision for our lives is that we be filled with His life. This process of transforming us into holy saints and filling us with His divine nature takes place in a fallen world where we struggle with sin and temptation at every turn. It is a process of filling darkness with light; replacing death with life. How could we think that such an extreme, total, supernatural transformation would be free of difficulties and without demands? In Christ, we are new creations and no creation is ever brought forth without a certain amount of struggle, labor and pain.

God is about the business of building His kingdom in us and through us. As C. S. Lewis said, God intends to come and live in us Himself. He wants us to know Him intimately and reflect the image of His Son. This process of sanctification happens daily and it is often painful as we battle to put off the old self and abide in Christ. But every battle conquered is glory gained as God dwells in us more fully. And the greater His light within us, the greater we reflect Him to the watching world. The temple that He is in the process of creating in each of us is complete with doors and windows, so that His glory and love might spill out of our hearts through our words and actions into the lives of those around us.

“The command Be ye perfect is not idealist gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were 'gods' and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him – for we can prevent Him, if we choose – He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said.” (C.S. Lewis)

The cost is very great: it is everything. But the reward is beyond anything we have ever seen or could ever imagine (1 Cor. 2:9). Through Christ, we have become sons and daughters of God. If we follow Him, the way will be narrow and difficult and the death of our self as we know it is certain. But we will emerge with a new self, filled with His life, prepared to rule and reign as co-heirs with Him forever.





Week Ten: Power

“Very truly I tell you, all who have faith in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.” – John 14:12 (TNIV)

“Six people went into the house of a sick man to pray for him. He was a leader in the Episcopal Church, and he lay in his bed utterly helpless. He had read a little tract about healing and had heard about people praying for the sick. So he sent for these friends, who, he thought, could pray “the prayer of faith” (James 5:15). He was anointed with oil according to James 5:14, but because he had no immediate manifestation of healing, he wept bitterly. The six people walked out of the room, somewhat crestfallen to see the man lying there in an unchanged condition.

When they were outside, one of the six said, ‘There is one thing we could have done. I wish you would all go back with me and try it.’ They all went back and got together in a group. This brother said, ‘Let us whisper the name of Jesus. At first, when they whispered this worthy name, nothing seemed to happen. As they continued to whisper, ‘Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!’ the power began to fall. As they saw that God was beginning to work, their faith and joy increased, and they whispered the name louder and louder. As they did so, the man rose from his bed and dressed himself. The secret was just this: those six people had gotten their eyes off the sick man and were taken up with the Lord Jesus Himself. Their faith grasped the power in His name. Oh, if people would only appreciate the power in this name, there is no telling what would happen.” - Smith Wigglesworth

What an awesome God we serve that at the very mention of His name miracles happen! It is undeniable – when we read the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, we see that He was an extraordinary miracle worker. He turned water into wine, multiplied loaves of bread and fish, and even commanded the wind and the waves to be still. Jesus walked in power. About one third of his ministry consisted of casting out demons and healing the sick. He was filled with discernment, giving people words of wisdom and knowledge and prophesying over them. Yes, Jesus preached a message of repentance and salvation in order to enter the coming Kingdom of God. But often before He shared His message, He ministered to people by meeting their physical needs through healings and miracles.

Imagine walking and talking with Jesus as one of His first disciples and hearing Him say, “You will do the works I have been doing and even greater works.” Awestruck and slightly bewildered, it is natural that our first question would be, “But how? How can we do these things?” Gratefully, Jesus does not leave us wondering. In this same passage of scripture, He told His disciples that when He returned to His Father above, He would send them His Spirit, His inner life, His very own nature. In John 14:16-17, He used a special word to describe the Holy Spirit: “Helper,” which also translates into Comforter or Advocate. Biblical scholar N.T Wright states,

“As a result of this promised spirit, the spirit of Jesus himself, Christians now, remarkable though it may seem, are in a better situation even than the followers of Jesus during his lifetime...now, by the spirit, they (Christians) will be able to do all kinds of things. When Jesus ‘goes to the father’- in other words, when he defeats the power of death through his own death and resurrection - then all sorts of new possibilities will be opened in front of them. The ‘works’ he has been doing, as he says again and



again, are the evidence that the father is at work in him. Now he says that the disciples will do even greater works than these!”

The normal Christian life is a life filled with Christ. If we have the Spirit of Christ living inside of us, we cannot isolate and focus on the particular facets of His nature we are comfortable with and ignore those with which we are not. We cannot continue to choose only certain aspects of who Jesus is to study, teach, and practice because we are familiar with them and disregard those with which we are not. Healing, miracles, casting out demons, prophesy, discernment, words of wisdom and knowledge, and tongues were a part of the life and ministry of Jesus and of the disciples and apostles who followed in His footsteps. Since we are filled with the same Holy Spirit that filled them, it follows that our lives should be filled with such signs and wonders too. Being unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and consequently failing to study or desire them, causes us to miss not only practicing but also enjoying a very important aspect of the nature of Christ in us. We should all long to live our lives with Christ as our role model.

Christ came with a message He declared was from none other than God Himself. The power displayed in and through His life was the testimony that affirmed His message was true. The normal Christian life is a life that mirrors the life of Christ and is, therefore, a life filled with power. In a day and age where our words often seem insufficient, we should all desire and seek to walk in the power of the Spirit of God. Trent Sheppard says, “One of the most urgent needs of our generation, is a deeper and healthier, more holistic and more powerful relationship with the Holy Spirit: a relationship rooted in biblical understanding of God, a relationship not afraid of using common sense when seeking for and operating in the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit, a relationship truly impassioned in its pursuit of being continually filled with the living and powerful presence of Jesus.”

