

One day in Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesareth, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and let down the net for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the net." When he had done so, there were a large number of fish but the

**HOW
TO USE
THIS
CURRICULUM**

This curriculum has five days of devotions for each week, with each day related to a particular question. You will read the devotion and answer the prompts that are provided at the end of each day.

DAY ONE: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

This is the day where a new concept for the week will be explained.

DAY TWO: WHAT ELSE DOES SCRIPTURE HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THIS?

We want you to dig deep into Scripture and see where else we find these same concepts.

DAY THREE: HOW DOES THIS CHANGE MY LIFE?

We want you to look inward and see how this directly impacts the way you live.

DAY FOUR: HOW DO I LIVE THIS OUT?

Now that you know what needs to change, this day will help prompt you with practical ways to implement those changes.

DAY FIVE: WHAT FROM THIS WEEK DO I NEED TO RETURN TO?

This day is an opportunity to go back to days 1-4 and see what you need to sit with a little longer.

If you are doing this study with your group, your group leader will have questions based on the different days of the devotions for you to all unpack together. We hope you find these tools helpful as we learn about The Greats together!

WEEK ONE

**THE
GREAT
COMMANDMENT**

NOTES:

DAY 1: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

The Great Commission is an invitation to us from God. It is not an invitation for us to be the stars of the show, but rather an invitation for us to join the work that God is already doing on the earth. Over the next few weeks, as we discover more about the Great Commission (Jesus' call to go and make disciples), we will look at a Great Commandment, the Great Commission, and an invitation to a Great Collaboration. But all of that starts here with God's command to love our neighbors and an understanding of who our neighbor is.

Luke 10:25-37 tells the story of a man trying to understand how to inherit eternal life. Luke 10:25 - 29 says:

On one occasion, an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this, and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

At the heart of how to live life with God is a call to love. It is a call to love God in all areas of our lives, a call to love ourselves as God created us, and in turn, to love others as God created them. It's interesting when Jesus tells this man that he is correct about the law and the way to live with God, that the man just can't help but justify his perspective with "but who really is my neighbor?". If we're honest with ourselves, don't we do that sometimes? We know that God's Kingdom way of living is an invitation for all people to walk with Jesus, we know cognitively that God's love is for everyone, but when the rubber meets the road, we are often left looking at Jesus going, "Are you sure you meant... everyone!?"

Jesus replies with a story that we will dive deeper into tomorrow, but we need to address this tension within ourselves as we start the week. God's call is an invitation to everyone, yet our response is often limited to particular people who are like us. We extend God's care and grace to all people. However, "all" often seems to mean extending his love to people who are like us – people who vote like us, look like us, have the same theological beliefs that we do. Without care and intention to our internal thinking patterns, we can easily veer towards exclusion and judgment rather than hospitality and love.

Take some time to think about who you are most gracious towards.

Who are the people in your personal life who feel hard to love?

Spend time today in prayer specifically for those people; write a prayer of blessing over them as a way to soften your heart towards others.

DAY 2: WHAT ELSE DOES SCRIPTURE SAY ABOUT THIS?

Yesterday we learned about Jesus' conversation with a religious man about how to inherit eternal life and wrestled with some of our own internal prejudices when it comes to extending God's loving-kindness towards all people. Today we will take a deeper look at the exchange Jesus had with the man to help us understand how to love people well.

We looked at the setup of Luke 10:30-37 yesterday when Jesus presses the religious man to love his neighbor as himself. The religious man replies to Jesus by asking, "Who is my neighbor?" Let's read Jesus' reply to that question:

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

This story is striking. In it, we see the embodiment of the "everyone...really!?" mentality being realized in a devastating way. However, in it, we also know

the goodness of God and a deep love and care for people who are entirely different from you. Let's first look at the start of this story – a man is beaten up and robbed, left for dead on the side of the road. Several people are going to pass by looking on; our hope as the reader is that any one of these folks would surely see a person in need and step in to save a life, but what we unfortunately find is folks (two religious folks, mind you) who keep passing by. Why? History suggests that the priest and the Levite probably kept walking because they had to get to a religious meeting. The purity laws of the time would have been such that if the priest or the Levite touched this bloodied man they would then become impure and would have had to go through purity rituals to go into the temple for worship – meaning these religious people literally didn't want to get blood on their hands.

Could it be that they were too busy trying to be about the "things of God" that they actually missed a God moment? Could it be that there was a sense of superiority that these men had as they turned their eyes from an opportunity to be the hands and feet of Jesus to a person in need? Whether historians are correct, or there was some other reason, what we do know is that these folks missed the moment, a moment where they could have stepped in to extend love but instead averted their eyes.

Are there people in your life/world that are crying out in pain? Take a moment to consider who those individuals or groups of people are.

What has your response been to that person or those people?

The religious folks in this story averted their eyes from the pain of the world. We want to be followers of Jesus who step into people's suffering and extend love.

Whose pain have you averted your eyes from, and how might you turn towards them?

DAY 3: HOW DOES THIS CHANGE MY LIFE?

As we continue to look at the story of the man asking Jesus about eternal life, it's not all sad characters in the story. In fact, there is one surprising hero in the narrative that changes the course of their day. He does so by caring for someone completely different from him. Jesus continues the story to tell us that a Samaritan was the one who would come and help the man. This Samaritan went above and beyond to extend care, kindness, hospitality, and mercy to the man in need. This story is striking because the Samaritan is painted as a hero. For the folks who Luke was writing to, Samaritans would never have been the heroes in any of their stories. Samaritans and Jewish folks had a long history of racialized hatred and violence towards one another. Yet Jesus, knowing this, makes the Samaritan the compassionate caregiver to the person in need. What does this have to teach us? It's a strong command to allow nothing to stop us from loving others.

Let's look again at Luke 10:33-37:

But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

This story is a call for us to change our lives, to change the way we live, to change the way we love, to change the way we engage with people who are different from us. Let's look at this Samaritan; what does he do when he sees

someone hurting? He took pity; he went to him, he bandaged him. First, we see that the Samaritan draws near. No pain, suffering, or otherness of the man in need stops him from coming close. Second, we see him putting the man “on his own donkey” and bringing him to a safe space to stay, and paying for all of that. We see the Samaritan using his own resources, time, and finances to bring healing and love to a man who needs it.

In the Samaritan, we see the embodiment of “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.” We see someone being a good neighbor, and we see that good neighbor (the Samaritan) embodying the love of God in action. This story shows us how loving people who are different from us is more than just thinking good thoughts towards them, but that love is an action that steps in, draws near, and helps out.

In our divided conversations and rhetoric today, who do you find it hard to be around?

How might God be asking you to see them as he sees them?

What resources can you use to help those not like you?

DAY 4: HOW DO I LIVE THIS OUT?

Let's bring it back to Luke 10:27: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*" The call to love God and love others moves beyond simply what we think about others, but it extends to how we act towards others. As followers of Jesus, our call is to love everyone, regardless of whether they are like us or not.

Loving people who are different than we are can be challenging at times. That's why this week, we were challenged to consider how we love the people who are not like us by evaluating our internal biases and encouraging us to acknowledge those we avert our eyes from. When we begin to really love our neighbors as ourselves, we see an invitation to see ourselves as beloved children of God, and in turn, see others as beloved children of God. Genesis 1:27 says, *"So God created mankind in His own Image."* God stamps his divine imprint on all people in the moment of creation, placing value and worth over every person on earth. Though people are different than we are, we all share one thing in common: we are highly valued and valuable to God; we all have worth and dignity. If that message wasn't clear at creation, it is evident on the cross when Jesus dies and extends an invitation to all people to be a part of the family of God. Loving others means we give value, worth, and dignity. It means we act as the good Samaritan did and come close to people's lives, believe their stories, and see their pain, and it means we show care and compassion.

So how do you live out this love? It can start in a lot of different ways and places, but consider the prompts below to help you.

Consider how you live, the ways you think about other people and the things you say about other people. Are there things you do that take value and dignity away from other people? If so, take some time to ask God's forgiveness, and, if necessary, seek forgiveness from the person you may have wronged.

In what ways have you seen love for people who are different from one another in action in the last year?

Who do you know that loves people who are different from them well? What do you admire about them? Ask that person to coffee, or call them. Let them know what you see in them and ask them how they have learned to love well.

DAY 5: WHAT FROM THIS WEEK DO I NEED TO RETURN TO?

Today, spend some time reviewing your notes from the past week.

What did God teach you?

What have you learned about loving others?

Are there any "Aha!" moments you don't want to forget?

Was there a day you skimmed through and "phoned it in?"

What do you want to be sure to discuss with your small group or a friend?

Take time to write those things down or revisit a day you want to spend more time with. Then write an honest prayer to God, thanking him for meeting you as you spent time seeking him this week.

WEEK TWO

THE

GREAT

COMMISSION

NOTES:

DAY 1: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

The Great Commission. In its most basic form, it calls us to share the good news of Jesus with others who are not like us. Maybe you haven't heard of that term, and you wouldn't be alone in that. Still, it's a term used to describe the instruction of the resurrected Jesus to his disciples — to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that the Lord had commanded. This commission is recorded in every gospel account and in the book of Acts, Luke's second book that picks up right where he left off in the book bearing his name.

The Great Commission has a way of making us feel squirmy and uncomfortable. Maybe it's because we'd rather leave that work for missionaries or pastors who've been "called" to go to the ends of the earth than figure out how we need to take responsibility for the places we've been called to within our family systems, our neighborhoods, our schools, our places of employment, and our spheres of influence. Maybe it's because there's a lot we don't have figured out, and to allow a Kingdom outsider into our lives would expose the areas we've kept away from Jesus' light. Maybe it's because we're more comfortable building a wall around ourselves to stay hidden from the world and its painful struggles. Perhaps it's because we know that the good news of Jesus calls us to exchange what we want for what He wants and that an unpopular message might mean rejection. Maybe it's because evangelism isn't our "gifting." Maybe it's because we associate the word evangelism with someone shouting about Jesus but never taking the time to listen, know and love the person or group being shouted at. At one point or another, these "maybes" simply become justifications for silence when it comes to sharing Jesus with others who are not like us. But the more we read his word and get to know his heart, the clearer it becomes that we are all meant to share the good news of Jesus, how it has changed our lives, and

the reason for our hope with people who haven't yet believed in him with their lives.

When we consider what it means to obey Jesus' commission, doubts and fears naturally tend to creep in. We begin to worry that we don't know enough to answer all the questions people have. We worry about our ability to communicate effectively, and we tell ourselves we aren't qualified. But a little kindergartner modeled it for me once.

He'd only been in public school a few months, and it was time for that first parent-teacher conference. All reports were good! As the meeting wrapped up, his teachers shared one last thing: he was extremely talkative, especially about Jesus and church. We exchanged a few laughs, talked about his honest love for God, and said our "thank yous" and "goodbyes." That day, as we celebrated him for accruing two months of school under his belt, we asked him why he liked talking about Jesus so much, and he said, "Well, someone needs to share the good news!"

"And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere-in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
- Acts 1:8b

This kindergartner with limited Biblical knowledge, a tiny influential platform, and all the eloquence a 5-year-old has to offer, understood and obeyed the Great Commission. He shared what he knew. He shared it as he went about his daily business. He shared it with people who were not like him in age, gender, ethnicity, and faith. He shared Jesus because he loved him.

Who did God use to lead you to Jesus? If possible, can you find out who led them to Jesus, and so on? Who do you regularly interact with; who might God call you to lead to Himself?

Where's your heart as you consider God's mission? What are you currently thinking? What's motivating you? What scares you? How is God moving in you?

Ultimately, we cannot change others, BUT the Holy Spirit can! Think about those in your world who need to know Jesus and pray for the Holy Spirit to show Jesus to them. Then, pray that He gives you the words and ways to speak to their hearts.

DAY 2: WHAT ELSE DOES SCRIPTURE SAY ABOUT THIS?

Yesterday, we talked about how Jesus commissioned us to share him with people who are not like us because his heart is for everyone. Jesus said, “And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

When Jesus spoke these words, he and his disciples were in Jerusalem, and they needed to stay there until the Father sent the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5). Once the Spirit came, he empowered them to authenticate the good news of Jesus right where they were, and past their borders, past the familiar, past the known. This must have been uncomfortable for them, as the new is always uncomfortable at first. So don’t be discouraged if this feels uncomfortable; lean into God in that discomfort. After all, if the disciples can break through generations of ethnic wars, tensions, and even bloodshed to reach those not like them, so can we. We just can’t do it without following Jesus’ example.

There is a story about Jesus in John 4:4-42, where he encounters a Samaritan woman with a broken heart. Jewish people would intentionally travel around Samaria to avoid interaction with Samaritan territory and people, but Jesus modeled how to purposefully pursue people who are not like him. Where others see walls and divisions, Jesus moves in God’s love and power to break down barriers that divide.

There is so much to uncover in this passage, but take a look at just the following verses.

Verses 13-14 — *Jesus replied, “Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. **But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty***

again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life."

Verses 28-30 — *The woman left her water jar beside the well and ran back to the village, **telling everyone, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?" So the people came streaming from the village to see him.***

Verses 39-42 — ***Many Samaritans from the village believed in Jesus because the woman had said, "He told me everything I ever did!"** When they came out to see him, they begged him to stay in their village. So he stayed for two days, long enough for many more to hear his message and believe. **Then they said to the woman, "Now we believe, not just because of what you told us, but because we have heard him ourselves. Now we know that he is indeed the Savior of the world."***

Jesus is a Jew. He is also the son of God. How does he hold himself? How does he exercise his authority and power? How does he speak to a culturally "lesser" person than him in gender, in ethnicity, in power?

Describe the impact this woman's story has on the people of her village.

What are some specific ways you'd be willing to stretch — or leave — your comfort zone for the sake of going onto their turf (whoever "their" is for you)?

Who is that person at the well with whom you need to build a relationship?

Stories get deeper, trust is built, and needs are expressed only as relationships get more substantial. Make time, ask questions, and visit often. Share your story and remember as they share theirs.

DAY 3: HOW DOES THIS CHANGE MY LIFE?

Our call isn't only to believe the gospel and live a life set apart for God, but also to the mission and ministry of sharing the good news as we go about our lives. Our mission field is found at school, at work, and at home, and it includes our literal neighbors and the marginalized in society. Without Jesus, each of us is left to figure things out on our own, which will not go well. But by his grace, we are given a new identity that shapes our lives. In him, we are children of light; a new creation, alive in him, transformed by the renewing of our minds. Our hearts of stone have been removed. Our new identities lead us to demonstrate the gospel wherever we walk. Our change in identity impacts our roles and changes our actions. This all sounds great on paper, but living it out requires us to deny ourselves daily, and to sacrifice to obey, which is hard.

Four years ago, I'd had enough of my workplace and was going to resign. I loved the job itself, but I found the culture complex as a follower of Christ. No one was mistreating me – I was just exhausted from being a Christian in an un-Christian environment. I'd worked there for eight years, and while I wanted to be a witness for Jesus, I honestly didn't know how to do it in a place that made no room for him and in a way that didn't end in rejection for me. The thought of sharing Jesus with them scared me. I told myself I didn't want to hurt them by wielding Jesus' words like a sword, lopping ears off in well-intentioned but unneeded defense of Jesus, and adding to the wounds he'd have to heal. But mostly, I didn't want to lose their love. I loved them, but I loved myself more. I loved Jesus, but I loved human praise more than the praise of God (John 12:42). And without fail, the Holy Spirit was constantly reminding me, and convicting me, that if I loved him, I would obey the things he had asked me to do (John 14:22-26). So instead of addressing this enormous discrepancy in my faith, I was making plans to exit and decline God's call to share him with "those" people. I envisioned surrounding myself with something a little more wholesome, a little less toxic, and a bit more comfortable — people like me.

We desire to talk about God and grow in our walk with him, but often, only as long as it's safe and doesn't cost us too much. It's easier and less dissonant to hide away from the unbelieving world and hunker down with all our same-believing friends. Yes, we talk to that parent at our kid's school, or we chat here and there with that neighbor, or we get lunch with that coworker who is clearly not OK, but are we engaging at a level that allows them to experience how Jesus is constantly transforming our lives? Don't get me wrong; it is good not to give up the habit of meeting with other believers. There is great benefit and purpose to meeting in community life as we encourage and sharpen one another, but all that is gained there is meant to be shared as we go out into the world. We cannot hoard his love away inside our hearts like children of scarcity. We are children of a God whose love is extravagant, abundant, and meant to be shared with all people, specifically those who are not like us. God did not die for us and give us a new identity so we'd hide within the tightly-sealed vacuum of our church communities — holding tight until His return while trying not to breathe the air of the world.

It's hard to step out of safe environments and engage honestly and openly with people who don't think like us, act like us, talk like us, etc. That requires vulnerability — a catalyst to honest and open engagement with others. Again Jesus is our example. He left Heaven, sacrificing comfort and so much more to walk in our toxic world, to engage with us honestly and openly. Why? So we could receive and experience the power of salvation. He wants us to do the same for others.

"Again he said, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.'" - John 20:21

Yes, the gospel is from God to us, to call us out of our old identities defined by sin. But the gospel is also to go from us to others, to live out our identities as his ambassadors in the world. God is sending you to share him with others everywhere you go.

Which is more tempting for you: living in a Christian bubble or living no differently than those of the world? Why? How do both keep people from seeing your life and glorifying God?

How does it impact your view of life, God, and mission, to know that God is a sending God and that Christianity is an outward-focused faith?

Spend some time thinking about your neighborhood, school, or place of work. You've been lavished with extravagant love by the most extravagant gift-giver of all time. Ask God to show you how to share that love he has given you with the people in your spheres of influence.

Consider your week. How much are you alone? With other Christians? With not-yet-believers? If the last group gets the least time, how can you look outward? Invite colleagues into non-work/non-school life. After a few meals or drinks, invite them into your home, your family, and community. Make individual relationships corporate through meals and hobbies.

DAY 4: HOW DO I LIVE THIS OUT?

If Jesus tasked us with sharing the good news of him with others, how do we live this out? Living a sent-out life requires a level of courage, bravery, dedication, passion, and resilience that can be hard to muster. How do we do that daily? And how do we deal with the dissonance we feel between our lives — lives set apart from the world for God — and the lives of people who live according to the world's way? How do we share him in a world that rejects him? How do we keep from turning people into projects that kill the relationship? How do we stay gentle, loving, and respectful when our family, neighbors, and colleagues might hurt us with their rejection? And how do we keep bearing witness to the wonderful person of Jesus after that rejection?

These are all tough questions, complex and full of nuance, but the overarching answer is simple. We do it by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our God is good! And he has provided us with an advocate who will empower us to live a sent-out life. We are not alone in this!

"If you love me, obey my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him because he lives with you now and later will be in you. No, I will not abandon you as orphans — I will come to you." - John 14:15-18

"But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative — that is, the Holy Spirit — he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. "I am leaving you with a gift — peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid." - John 14:26-27

If we love him, we will obey what he's asked us to do. By human effort alone, this isn't possible. It will leave us exhausted and continually experiencing the failure of falling short of the glory of God. He provided a better way, and it is a supernatural, empowered way through the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who transforms us into a new person by changing the way we think (Romans 12:1-2). It's the Holy Spirit who will teach us everything and remind us of everything Jesus told us (John 14:26). It's the Holy Spirit who empowers us to do what God calls us to do (Romans 8:12-14). It's the Holy Spirit who helps us tell others who are not like us about Jesus (Acts 1:8). Sharing the good news of Jesus becomes a way of living when we continually offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, praising Him with every thought, action, word, and deed; when we live our lives in response to his overflowing, extravagant love; when we live our lives in obedience to him.

What does relying on the Holy Spirit look like in your life in general? Spend some time thanking him that he did not leave us alone, and for the Holy Spirit who gives us the words to speak, prayers to pray, recollection of scripture, and awareness of opportunities to share the good news.

What are some specific ways you can be vulnerable, generous, hospitable, and servant-like with your own life? Will it be difficult to do so? Ask God to help you identify ways in which to share your life with others who are not like you.

Create a culture of uninhibited sharing. In what ways can you help people who don't yet believe in Jesus, and in what ways can you admit your own needs and turn to them for help? It can be as simple as sharing or asking for the stereotypical cup of sugar.

Take some time and write out a succinct explanation of your faith in Christ.

DAY 5: WHAT FROM THIS WEEK DO I NEED TO RETURN TO?

Today, spend some time reviewing your notes from the past week.

What did God teach you this week?

Are there any "Aha!" moments you don't want to forget?

Is there a specific day you want to spend more time with? Take today to do that.

What do you want to be sure to discuss with your small group or a friend?

After you review the week, record any additional thoughts here. Then write a prayer of response to God.

WEEK THREE

**THE
GREAT
COLLABORATION**

NOTES:

DAY 1: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity — all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved. - Acts 2:42-47

If the Great Commission tells us what we are supposed to do and the Great Commandment tells us how we are supposed to do it, then the Great Collaboration tells us who we are supposed to do it with. This week we will look at the power of togetherness or fellowship. We will explore some of the myths and misunderstandings around togetherness and how truth without grace is a disaster waiting to happen.



Have you ever received a text message and had to ask Google, "What does this abbreviation mean?" Or what is the difference between WFH and WFT,

and is one of these saying something that I shouldn't be texting grandma? (Actually... grandma will appreciate both of those if she Works From Home and is a fan of the Washington Football Team.)

My guess is there are a bunch of words we read in the Bible or hear on a Sunday morning that can also fall into the "googling now" category – multisyllabic theological terms like etiological, eschatological, and teleological. But in Acts 2, we also find first century words being used in a way that might be different than our modern-day understanding. In the words of The Princess Bride... "I do not think that it means what you think it means."

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. - Acts 2:42

In your own words, list the four things all believers devoted themselves to:

1.

2.

3.

4.

How did you describe fellowship? Fellowship is one of those super churchy or super nerdy words. You are just as likely to hear it at Comic-Con in the Lord of the Rings booth as you are on a Sunday morning. It is often referenced as

something that a church leader thinks we want, but to be honest, there is kind of a Christian hippy, commune-y sort of vibe to the word. What exactly was the first church devoted to?

The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*, and the picture from Comic-Con is surprisingly very accurate. Tolkien's first book was titled *The Fellowship of the Ring*, based around nine characters who accepted the task of working together to destroy the ring. The unique element that bound them together was their devotion to the mission. The importance of their backgrounds, their privileges, their strengths, their intellect, their ethnicity, their age, and their abilities took a back seat to fulfilling the mission together. Fellowship is a connection around a unifying concept or purpose that does not take away from our uniqueness, but locks us together, with others, for a greater cause.

This model for fellowship is seen in our beliefs as a church. We are committed to unity in the essentials, to liberty in non-essentials, but in all things to love. What, then, are the unifying essentials?

They are that Jesus is the Christ, savior of mankind through his death, burial, resurrection, and exaltation to the right hand of God in Heaven, and that the Bible is the supreme authority as our guide to Christian faith and service.

The model for fellowship mirrors the Apostle John's description of the way Jesus lived in John 1:14, being "full of grace and truth". Over the last year, we have first-hand experience with the marked difference between being committed to "truth" versus being committed to "grace and truth". How many Christians do you know who were Facebook-raging against the Democrats? Against the Republicans? Against equality protests? Against masks? Against vaccines? For the Democrats? For the Republicans? For equality protests? For masks? For vaccines? It is surprisingly easy for the non-essentials to fracture our unity.

Where have you experienced this?

With highly charged non-essentials, what does it look like to balance grace and truth?

The Apostle Paul would describe this balancing act in Romans as “do[ing] all that you can to live in peace with everyone.” In Proverbs, Solomon would say that “when people’s lives please the Lord, even their enemies are at peace with them.”

And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity — all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

- Acts 2:45-47

What are some of the actions that the early church did to promote this peaceful living?

Which one of these actions stood out to you? Why?

DAY 2: WHAT ELSE DOES SCRIPTURE SAY ABOUT THIS?

Yesterday we spent time thinking about how the non-essentials can disrupt a commitment to fellowship. Today we will be looking at what devotion to scripture, fellowship, Godly relationships, and prayer looks like according to the Apostle Paul.

As we start, write out a short prayer, telling the Lord what you need from him today:

Do you ever use the Yelp! app? When you find yourself in a new city looking for a place to eat, it comes in so handy. The rating is based on the experience and opinion of people who have previous interaction with that restaurant. But it is crazy how much power the app has. A local restaurant can make it or go under just based on its Yelp! rating. Amazon reviews, Rotten Tomatoes scores, the number of stars next to the name of a hotel – we have become reliant upon these ratings and reviews to influence our dining, travel, and entertainment behaviors. However, something changes when a person who knows us, knows what is good for us, and knows what is pleasing to us, recommends a restaurant for us. Even if it might have a lower Yelp! score, we will give it a try because of our connection to the recommender.

The Apostle Paul writes about the power of this connection. In Romans 12:2 he says, *“Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.*

- Romans 12:1-2

Paul is asking us to allow God to transform us into a new person by changing the way we think. His initial step for us to become new starts in our minds, recognizing that we are prone to read the Yelp! review and mimic the behaviors and customs of our culture. When our thought process changes, we cease to be influenced by today's reviews and begin understanding God's will for our lives.

When we see this through the lens of the four devotions (scripture, fellowship, Godly relationships, and prayer) of the early church in Acts 2:42, we find that a commitment to scripture allows God to transform our thinking when we spend time in his word and in prayer. Our thinking is further changed when we are committed to fellowship and relationships with other believers. These four elements help us to *"learn to know God's will"* for our lives.

Let's do a quick evaluation. On a scale from 1 to 10, mark how you are doing in your commitment to:

Scripture

Fellowship

Godly relationships

Prayer

Which of these four areas would you like to see growth in? What is one step that you are going to take to see that happen?

Paul goes on in verses 3-5 to say, *"because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better*

than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us. Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other".

His description of the Great Collaboration is that of a body, made up of many parts, yet all belonging to each other. He goes on to identify some of the roles of these parts starting in verse 6:

In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

His list is not exhaustive but written with the emphasis that in our part and role in the body of Christ, we are to do everything in faith, with excellence, and with understanding and acceptance of the responsibility of our role for the rest of the body.

What is one recent example of how you have been positively impacted by another part of the body of Christ?

Paul wraps up this section by describing evidence of the body working together. As you read verses 9-18, underline the items that come more naturally to you and circle the items that are the most challenging.

Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all! Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.

What evidences did you underline? Why are these easier for you?

What evidences did you circle? What makes them more difficult?

What is your take-away from today's devotion?

DAY 3: HOW DOES THIS CHANGE MY LIFE?

The first car I ever bought was a two-seat Chevy pickup truck. It had a sweet bench seat, manual transmission, and power nothing. In addition to the bench seat, manual transmission, and power nothing, it had one other major problem – the seat was made of vinyl.

In the winter the vinyl was so cold that... you know how when you stand in front of a roaring fire, your jeans can retain heat and when you start to walk away it feels like the fireplace is following you? Well, it was the exact opposite of that feeling, which is ironic because, in the summer, hot jeans could not hold a candle to the third-degree burns on your hamstrings.

The scars (literal) of those vinyl seats have stuck with me, making me suspect of the effects that the finest Corinthian leather might have on my upper legs. If we were going to rank seat material, I would put vinyl at the bottom of my list...every (summer or winter) day!

Each of us has things we value. We subconsciously assess and build lists to create a pecking order of preferences and associations.

Take a moment to put in order, from lowest to highest, the following values from 1 (highest) to 10 (lowest).

- _____ **Working hard**
- _____ **Being humble**
- _____ **Not wearing white after Labor Day**
- _____ **Keeping your word**
- _____ **Providing for your family**
- _____ **Standing up for what is right**
- _____ **Being generous**
- _____ **Being on time**
- _____ **Saying thank you**
- _____ **Being kind to others**

Each of us has a priority of values that looks different. How did your ranking of these values compare with others in your group?

Being in fellowship doesn't mean having exactly the same values. In Acts 15:4-11, Paul and Barnabas returned to uncover a value problem after preaching the good news of Jesus to Gentile cities.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, "The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses."

Why would these Pharisee-Christians value circumcision and following the law of Moses so much that they wanted the Gentile believers to do the same thing?

So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: "Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. God knows people's hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus."

In your own words, what are the key elements of Peter's argument?

Peter was focused on the bigger picture and, because of his devotion to fellowship, he used his influence to reset the value priorities of the group. The next verse says that *"everyone listened quietly as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles."* Fellowship amplifies the essential beliefs and de-emphasizes all other competing values.

We all need someone who helps us see the bigger picture. Who is Peter for you? Who are you Peter for?

Pray and Respond: Where are your attitudes more like the Pharisee-Christians than like Peter?

DAY 4: HOW DO I LIVE THIS OUT?

Yesterday we spent some time looking at how agreement around values can overshadow our devotion to fellowship. Each of us has things that we feel strongly about, and when we find someone who also feels strongly about the same things, we can misinterpret that feeling of agreement as fellowship. Today we will look at the toughest part of the Great Collaboration, which is often the people we are collaborating with! We will spend some time evaluating a theme of Jesus' life: flattening the social status curve to increase our understanding of those we could be collaborating with.

For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar. - Psalm 138:6

In Philippians, Paul tells us that we *"must have the same attitude as Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges and took the humble position of a slave"*. His life modeled an element that is frustratingly challenging. Jesus' life on earth was not characterized by clinging to what he was owed, but rather by the way he befriended and elevated the lowly. He was close to and cared for those who were oppressed, disregarded, and viewed as "less than".

One day some parents brought their little children to Jesus so he could touch and bless them. But when the disciples saw this, they scolded the parents for bothering him. Then Jesus called for the children and said to the disciples, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. - Luke 18:15-16

Children of the first century were viewed as less than. With high infant mortality rates, the Roman tradition was to withhold naming a child until 8 or 9 days after they were born. Jesus confirmed their value, asking his followers to have faith, like children have faith.

Who in your life needs to have their value confirmed?

Soon afterward Jesus began a tour of the nearby towns and villages, preaching and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom of God. He took his twelve disciples with him, along with some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. Among them were Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons; Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's business manager; Susanna; and many others who were contributing from their own resources to support Jesus and his disciples. - Luke 8:1-3

Women were viewed as less than, with a common prayer of first-century Jewish men thanking God that "I am not a Gentile, slave, or a woman". A man could divorce his wife for anything that displeased him, including burning the toast. The role of women in the first century was primarily to serve the men and bear legitimate children. Jesus affirmed their equality, counting Mary, Joanna, Susanna, and other women among his closest followers.

Who in your life needs to have their equality confirmed?

And as we read last week, other ethnicities were viewed as less than. Tribalism and genocide were rampant. Gentiles were commonly referred to as “dogs”, and from a Jewish perspective, the Samaritans were seen as racially impure and a 550-year grudge was firmly in place as the Samaritans opposed and undermined the repatriation of Jerusalem (described in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra).

Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, *“Please give me a drink.” He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food. The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, “You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?”*

Many Samaritans from the village believed in Jesus because the woman had said, “He told me everything I ever did!” When they came out to see him, they begged him to stay in their village. So he stayed for two days, long enough for many more to hear his message and believe. Then they said to the woman, “Now we believe, not just because of what you told us, but because we have heard him ourselves. Now we know that he is indeed the Savior of the world.” - John 4:7-9 and 4:39-42

Jesus confirmed their worth. While Jesus was of Jewish birth and culture, he demonstrated that he valued all ethnicities by caringly preaching the gospel to a village of Samaritans.

Who in your life needs to have their worth confirmed?

The infirm were viewed as less than, and it was a common practice to exclude them from worship at the temple. They were relegated to begging for alms outside the temple gates. Individuals with leprosy were treated the worst, forced to remain outside of the city and yell "unclean, unclean" when someone approached.

Large crowds followed Jesus as he came down the mountainside. Suddenly, a man with leprosy approached him and knelt before him. "Lord," the man said, "if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean." Jesus reached out and touched him. "I am willing," he said. "Be healed!" And instantly the leprosy disappeared. - Matthew 8:1-3

Jesus affirmed the humanity of the infirm, touching the untouchable leper and restoring sight, health, life and fellowship to those in need.

Who in your life needs to have their humanity confirmed?

As you think through our modern society, who are the people or groups that have the most immediate needs? What can you do to flatten the social curve for them?

DAY 5: WHAT FROM THIS WEEK DO I NEED TO RETURN TO?

Today, spend some time reviewing your notes from the past week.

What did God teach you this week?

Are there any "Aha!" moments you don't want to forget?

Is there a certain day you want to spend more time with? Take today to do that.

What do you want to be sure to discuss with your small group or a friend?

After you review the week, record any additional thoughts here. Then write a prayer of response to God.

Take time to write those things down or revisit a day you want to spend more time with. Then write an honest prayer to God thanking him for meeting you as you spent time seeking him this week.

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