

**It's Simple**  
**Love God, Love People**



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## FROM THE PASTORS

*What does it mean to actually follow Jesus?*

*This is the question that Christians have been seeking to answer for more than 2,000 years. What's interesting is that with all of the books on theology, Church history, and Christian Apologetics, this question still seems difficult to answer.*

*This is our goal for our 2025 Spring Spiritual Journey, to define what it means to follow Jesus. We will be diving into Jesus' teachings to try and answer this question the way Jesus would and in so doing challenge one another to follow Jesus, together.*

*Our prayer for this study is that it would challenge you to the simplicity that can be found in surrendering to Jesus having one's life transformed by Gospel.*

*Would you commit to studying this alongside us? Further, would you be willing to follow Jesus regardless of the cost?*

**Your Pastoral Team**

# HELPS FOR HOSTS

## Top Ten Ideas for New Hosts

CONGRATULATIONS! As the host of your small group, you have responded to the call to help shepherd Jesus' flock. Few other tasks in the family of God surpass the contribution you will be making. As you prepare to facilitate your group, whether it is one session or the entire series, here are a few thoughts to keep in mind.

Remember, you are not alone. God knows everything about you, and He knew you would be asked to facilitate your group. Even though you may not feel ready, this is common for all good hosts. God promises, "I will never leave you; I will never abandon you" (Hebrews 13:5). Whether you are facilitating for one evening, several weeks, or a lifetime, you will be blessed as you serve.

**1.** Don't try to do it alone. Pray right now for God to help you build a healthy team. If you can enlist a co-host to help you shepherd the group, you will find your experience much richer. This is your chance to involve as many people as you can in building a healthy group. All you have to do is ask people to help. You'll be surprised at the response.

**2.** Be friendly and be yourself. God wants to use your unique gifts and temperament. Be sure to greet people at the door with a big smile.... this can set the mood for the whole gathering. Remember, they are taking as big a step to show up at your house as you are taking to host a small group! Don't try to do things exactly like another host; do them in a way that fits you. Admit when you don't have an answer and apologize when you make a mistake. Your group will love you for it and you'll sleep better at night.

**3.** Prepare for your meeting ahead of time. Preview the session and write down your responses to each question.

**4.** Before your group arrives, take a few moments to pray for each member by name. Ask God to use your time together to touch the heart of each person in your group. Expect God to lead you to whomever he wants you to encourage or challenge in a special way. If you listen, God will surely lead.

**5.** When you ask a question, be patient; someone will eventually respond. Sometimes people need a moment or two of silence to think about the question. If silence doesn't bother you, it won't bother anyone else. After someone responds, affirm the response with a simple "thanks" or "great answer". Then ask, "How about somebody else?" or "Would someone who hasn't shared like to share anything?" Be sensitive to new people or reluctant members who aren't ready to say, pray, or do anything. If you give them a safe setting, they will blossom over time. If someone in your group is a wallflower who sits silently through every session, consider talking to them privately and encouraging them to participate. Let them know how important they are to you, that they are loved and appreciated, and that the group would value their input. Remember, still water often runs deep.

**6.** Provide transitions between questions. Ask if anyone would like to read the paragraph or Bible passage. Don't call on anyone, but ask a volunteer, and then be patient until someone begins. Be sure to thank the person who reads aloud.

**7.** Break into smaller groups occasionally. With a greater opportunity to talk in a small circle, people will connect more with the study, apply more quickly what they're learning, and ultimately get more out of their small group experience. A small circle also encourages a quiet person to participate and tends to minimize the effects of a more vocal or dominant member.

**8.** Small circles are also helpful during prayer time. People who are unaccustomed to praying aloud may feel more comfortable trying it with just two or three others. Also, prayer requests won't take as much time, so circles will have more time to actually pray. When you gather back with the whole group, you can have one person from each circle briefly update everyone on the prayer requests from their subgroups. The other great aspect of subgrouping is that it fosters leadership development. As you ask people in the group to facilitate discussion or to lead a prayer circle, it gives them a small leadership step that can build their confidence.

**9.** Rotate facilitators occasionally. You may be perfectly capable of hosting each time, but you will help others grow in their faith and gifts if you give them opportunities to facilitate the group.

**10.** Go through the Small Group Guidelines. This is a very important part of starting a new group. This will help outline and clarify all expectations for your members.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### *How Long Will This Group Meet?*

This study is five sessions long. We encourage your group to add a sixth meeting for a serve project. In your fifth session, each group member may decide if he or she desires to continue on for another study. At that time, you may also want to do some informal evaluation, discuss your Small Group Guidelines, and decide which study you want to do next. We recommend you contact Rob Gaschler at [rgaschler@secondbaytown.org](mailto:rgaschler@secondbaytown.org) for more information on future studies.

### *Where Do We Find New Group Members?*

Recruiting new members can be a challenge for groups, especially new groups with just a few people, or existing groups that lose a few people along the way. We encourage you to use the Circles of Life diagram on page 8 in this study guide to brainstorm a list of people from your workplace, church, school, neighborhood, family, and so on. Then, pray for the people on each member's list. Allow each member to invite several people from their list. Some groups fear that newcomers will interrupt the intimacy that group members have built over time. However, groups that welcome newcomers generally gain strength with the infusion of new blood. Remember, the next person you add just might become a friend for eternity. Logistically, groups find different ways to add members. Some groups remain permanently open, while others choose to open periodically, such as the beginning or end of a study. If your group becomes too large for easy, face-to-face conversations, you can subgroup, forming a second discussion group in another room.

### *How Do We Handle the Child Care Needs in Our Group?*

Second Baytown provides children's activities on Sunday night, Wednesday night and Thursday night. You can contact the church office to find out the specific times and arrange your meetings accordingly. One common solution is to have the adults meet in the living room and share the cost of a baby sitter (or two) who can be with the kids in another part of the house. Another popular option is to have one home for the kids and a second home (close by) for the adults. If desired, the adults could rotate the responsibility of providing a lesson for the kids. The last option is great with school-aged kids and can be a huge blessing to families.



## SMALL GROUP GUIDELINES

It's a good idea for every group to put words to their shared values, expectations, and commitments. Such guidelines will help you avoid unspoken agendas and unmet expectations. We recommend you discuss your guidelines during the introduction meeting in order to lay the foundation for a healthy group experience.

### WE AGREE TO THE FOLLOWING VALUES:

**CLEAR PURPOSE:** To grow healthy spiritual lives by building a healthy small group community

**GROUP ATTENDANCE:** To give priority to the group meeting (call if I am absent or late)

**BE CONFIDENTIAL:** To keep anything that is shared strictly confidential and within the group

**CONFLICT RESOLUTION:** To avoid gossip and to immediately resolve any concerns by following the principles of Matthew 18:15-17

**SPIRITUAL HEALTH:** To give group members permission to speak into my life and help me live a healthy, balanced spiritual life that is pleasing to God

**LIMIT OUR FREEDOM:** To limit our freedom by not serving or consuming alcohol during small group meetings or events so as to avoid causing a weaker brother or sister to stumble (1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Romans 14:19-21)

**WELCOME NEWCOMERS:** To invite friends who might benefit from this study and warmly welcome newcomers

**BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS:** To get to know the other members of the group and pray for them regularly

**OTHER:** \_\_\_\_\_

We have also discussed and agree on the following items:

**CHILD CARE:** \_\_\_\_\_

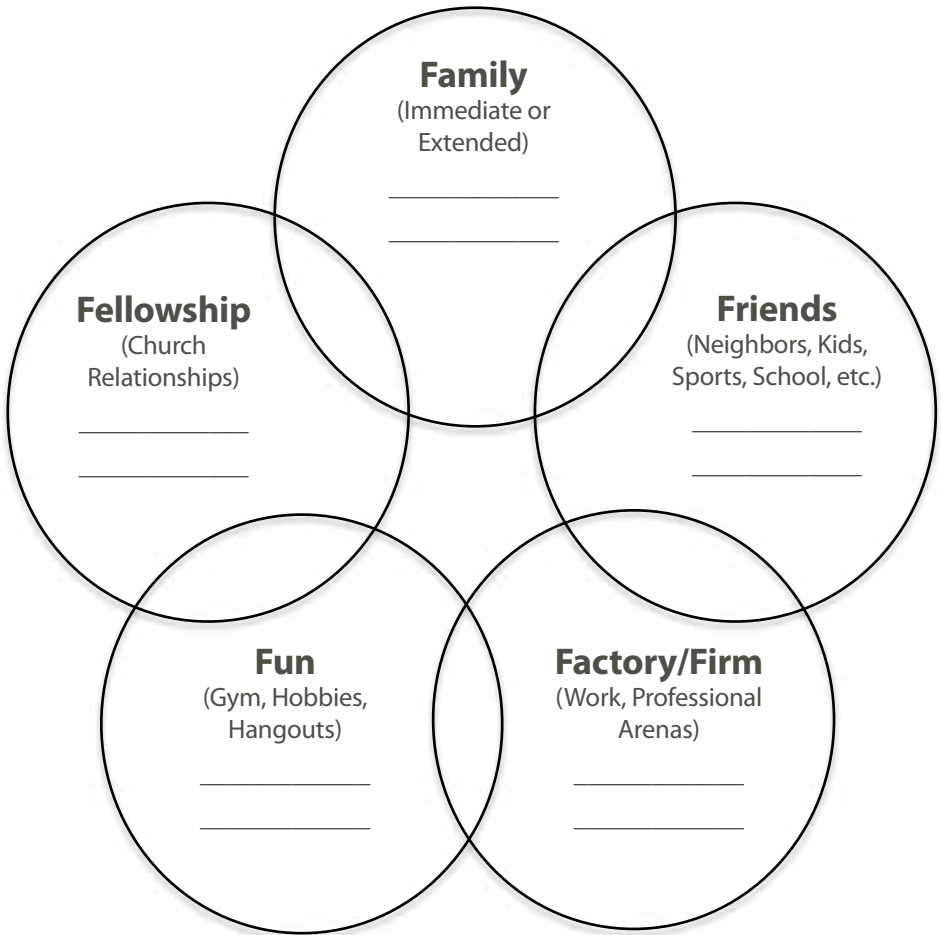
**STARTING TIME:** \_\_\_\_\_ **ENDING TIME:** \_\_\_\_\_

If you haven't already done so, take a few minutes to fill out the Small Group Calendar, which can be found on page 9.

## CIRCLES OF LIFE

Small Group Connections. Discover Who Can Connect In Community.

Use this chart to help carry out one of the values in the Group Guidelines, to “Welcome Newcomers”.



### Follow this Simple, Three-Step Process

1. List one to two people in each circle.
2. Prayerfully select one person or couple from your list and tell your group about them.
3. Give them a call and invite them to your next meeting. Over fifty percent of those invited to a small group say, “Yes!”

## SMALL GROUP CALENDAR

Healthy groups share responsibilities and group ownership. It might take some time for this to develop. Shared ownership ensures that responsibility for the group doesn't fall to one person. Use the calendar to keep track of social events, mission projects, birthdays, or days off. Complete this calendar at your first or second meeting. Planning ahead will increase attendance and shared ownership.

Date	Lesson	Location	Facilitator	Snack/Meal
	Session 2			
	Session 3			
	Session 4			
	Session 5			
	Serve			

## HOW TO HAVE A QUIET TIME

*Transformational Discipleship*, a recently published book based on extensive spiritual growth research, found that the most significant catalyst for life transformation is daily time in God's Word. Having a daily quiet time or devotion will literally change your life. It is critical to living a Christ-centered life. So, for this study, we have provided daily devotionals for each week. Here are some tips to help you get started.

- 1. Begin with the right attitude.** As you begin, take a minute to pray. Ask God to show you anything in your life that is preventing you from hearing from Him. Ask Him to open your eyes and ears to see and hear what He wants to show you (Psalm 119:18).
- 2. Be ready to obey.** Sometimes God will show you things that are difficult to deal with. Maybe it's a weakness in your life. Maybe it's something He's asking you to do. Whatever it is, listen and respond!
- 3. Select a special time.** If you don't set a special time to meet with God, someone or something else will undoubtedly take His place. Start by setting aside 15 minutes. As you get more comfortable, add more time. Remember, the important thing is quality, not quantity.
- 4. Set a special place.** Jesus had a special place He would go to spend time with the Father. Why? He wanted to get away from the noise and busyness of life to devote all of Himself to His relationship with the Father.
- 5. Gather your resources.** We recommend a journal and an *ESV Study Bible*. If you're ready for more, see other resources recommended throughout the study.
- 6. Don't make it legalistic.** The enemy hates the fact that you are making this a priority. He will try everything to get you off track. Don't let him. Be careful, however, to avoid having a quiet time "just to check it off the list."
- 7. Don't give up or feel guilty if you miss a day.** That's exactly what the enemy wants. Just pick back up where you can.

# WEEK 1: NOTHING MATTERS MORE

## SERMON NOTES

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## **WEEK 1: NOTHING MATTERS MORE**

**Beginning the Journey:** Today is your first meeting in our “It’s Simple: Love God, Love People” series, and we are excited that you have chosen to join us. Each week we will take a few minutes to “look back” and discuss what you learned last week through the daily devotionals. Then, we will “look up” at what God wants to teach us in our study today. Finally, we will “look forward” to how we will live out the principles God has taught us today.

**Looking Back:** Take a minute to introduce yourselves to one another, and go over the group guidelines on page 7 as you begin your journey together.

**Looking Up:** Play the video and consider the discussion questions together.

The video started with a story of a super-computer answering the meaning of life. Think of the last TV show you watched, what did the main character want? What was the “meaning of life” he or she was after?

How does “taco love” look different than a self-giving love? Which one is easier or more natural?

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Matthew 22:37-39. What is similar in these texts? What is different?

According to these verses, what is the aim of the whole Old Testament law? Is that surprising? Why or why not?

Read 1 John 4:10-13. According to this passage, what happens when we love God and others?

We might define “perfected” from 1 John 4:12 as “completed” or “finished.” How does God perfect His love in and through us?

Read Galatians 5:22-23. What traits will others see in us when we participate in God’s love through the Spirit? How have you seen this in your own life and experience?

In the video, we heard that when we love God and others, we: practice thankfulness to God who first loved us, remain in Christ’s love by obeying the Father’s command to love, and participate in the love of the Triune God by extending this love to others. How have you seen any or all of these to be true in your life?

**Looking Forward:** How will you take what you learned today and apply it to your life this week? Take a few moments to pray together and ask God to help you live out these truths.

# WEEK 1: NOTHING MATTERS MORE

## DAY 1—READ DEUTERONOMY 6:5

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”*

We may think of the Old Testament law as cold and unwieldy—a long list of burdensome rules that have nothing to do with life today. But the psalmists sang of joy in the law. One psalmist said God’s law was like honey to his lips, another that it revived his soul, and one found his soul’s delight in the law! Jesus Himself said He did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it. Even more, He said not one iota of the law will pass away until God’s promises are fulfilled (Matthew 5:18).

So, what about the law is delightful? Did you know in the first sentence of the book of Leviticus—the book where Old Testament laws are given—begins with “The Lord . . . spoke . . . from the tent”? The first verse of the next book, the book of Numbers, begins, “the Lord spoke . . . in the tent.” From one book to the next, God moves nearer to His people. The words in between these books that brought God nearer were the framework for the Old Testament law. In some mysterious way, through the law, God made a way for His holy presence to draw nearer to His rebellious people. The law was a means for God to offer Himself to His people and to make them holy as He is holy.

The greatest commandment is to love God and love people because the whole law can be summarized through relationships, namely the love between God and His people and the display of His love to the world. This has been true of the law from the beginning: Following the law leads us to God and shows us how to live in relationship with Him. The law does not earn our belonging to God, but it is how we practice our belonging to God.



**In what way is God's law a delight? Does the law feel like a delight to you most days? Why or why not?**

**Read Romans 13:8-10. According to these verses, how do we fulfill the law?**

**How does obedience to the law show love of God?**

**Pray that the Spirit would help you delight in God's law.**

**DAY 2—READ ROMANS 5:8**

*But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

God designed the law to lead His people toward Himself, but it also points out the vast divide between God's holiness and the sin of His people. The moment the priest walked away from his offering, another sacrifice was needed. The law showed God's holiness, but it could never transform the hearts of His people. Their sin remained.

The same is true for us. No matter how much we want to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, we find ourselves running to lesser things. We love God's gifts more than the One who gives them. We commit to love God and people better, but then we walk into the office and our annoying coworker is still annoying. Or a child breaks the same rule for the millionth time this week. We set our minds to love, but instead of acting in love, we default to anger or pettiness. God sees our sinful acts, desires, and imaginative wonderings, no matter how hard we try to hide them. And He loves us anyway.

While we were running after lesser things, in pursuit of personal pleasures, Christ died for us. He didn't demand we clean up our act before He offered His love; He loved us exactly how He found us. And this love came at a high price. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, lived the life we couldn't live and died the death we deserved, so that we could be restored to the Father. The law can't change hearts, but through faith in Christ, His righteousness becomes our righteousness. God's love is exemplified on the cross. This is love: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Spend a moment confessing to God the ways you've failed to love Him more than His gifts.

Read Hebrews 12:2-3. Knowing the cross displays the love of God, what is the joy that Jesus pursued in the cross?

Spend time reflecting on the love of God displayed for you on the cross.

Pray for your love to mirror the love of Christ. Ask the Spirit to help you marvel at the love of the Father shown in Jesus.

**DAY 3—READ 1 JOHN 4:11-12**

*Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.*

If you've ever tried to draw an image, you know there's a difference between the real-life thing and its representation on your paper. With repeated practice and learning, the image might grow closer in likeness to reality, but there will always be a gap between them. The image might look like a bowl of fruit, but there will be a disconnect between reality and its representation. Something similar happens with our righteousness. The reality is we have Christ's righteousness, but we don't live this out perfectly in the present.

Those who have faith in Christ have His righteous standing, but we struggle to uphold the law of love. We have faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who died the death we deserved so we can share in the love of the Father, but showing that same love to others takes practice.

When we love one another, we are practicing the righteousness God has already granted us, a righteousness that leads us to God and allows us to display God to the world. God abides in us and perfects His love in us when we submit to His commands. We love one another because Christ loved us, and our obedience brings us nearer to God's love. We won't always do it perfectly, but through practice and learning, and only by the power of the Holy Spirit, our love will grow to look more like the righteousness of God.

How is God revealed when His people love one another?

Read Ephesians 4:15-16. These verses talk about how the church grows into the likeness of Christ. What builds up the church and what is your personal responsibility?

How is God's love perfected in us when we interact with fellow believers, even and especially with whom we disagree?

Ask God to display His love through you so others may come to know Him.

### DAY 4—READ JOHN 15:9-10

*“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in His love.”*

Think about an adult you admired as a child. Maybe this was a parent, teacher, or mentor. When that person asked you to do something or stop doing something, did you follow his or her directions? If it was someone you loved, even if you didn’t always do it perfectly, you probably tried. You probably wanted to be close the people you looked up to, and doing what they asked showed your respect, loyalty, or desire to please them. Similarly, when we are obedient to the commands of God, we show our loyalty to Christ.

Through Christ’s death we are brought into the love He shares with the Father. But we are also called to participate in that relationship and make it a reality in our lives. Christ commands His disciples to “abide in [His] love” and tells them the way to do it is by keeping His commands. We participate in the love the Father and Son share each time we follow God’s Word.

We submit ourselves to what the Bible commands, not so that God will love us, but because He already does. Think back to that person you looked up to as a child. You did what they asked because you wanted to strengthen an already existing relationship. Because of the love that was already established, you responded in action and the love between you was strengthened further. We submit to the Word of God not to earn God’s love but to abide in the love we already have in Him.

What are some characteristics of God's love for His people throughout the Bible?

Read Colossians 1:10-14. Which of these benefits of God do you most need right now? How are these things found in abiding in His love?

How does viewing obedience to God's Word as one way we abide in Christ's love change the way you view the commands of Scripture?

Ask God for more of the strength, endurance, patience, joy, and thanksgiving that comes with abiding in His love.

**DAY 5—GALATIANS 5:22-23**

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

If someone came and gave you a project that seemed impossible but told you to do it anyway or your relationship is over, then that person wouldn't be a trustworthy friend. But if that person acknowledged the difficulty of the project and suggested that the two of you work on it together, then maybe it wouldn't seem so impossible after all.

When God commands us to love as He loved us, He doesn't leave us to our own devices. He brings us into His triune love and gifts us the Spirit, who enables us to love like He loves. Even when loving feels impossible, we can trust the Spirit to work in us for these purposes. Each time we act in love, we are walking in the Spirit.

How do you know when you are walking in the Spirit versus your own strength? Wherever the Spirit is, there is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

When we choose to love God's gifts over God who gives them, we might find a shadow of goodness or a whisper of peace, but the fullness of goodness and peace are only found in the Spirit. Each time we refuse to submit to the commands of God, we also refuse the fruit of the Spirit. When we obey God, we gain the fruits of the Spirit.

We love God and others because God first loved us. Through the Son's sacrifice, we are invited into God's triune love. Each time we love another we participate in this love, by the power of the Spirit. Our obedience to God's commands begins with, is sustained by, and results in God's love.



Where do you see the fruit of the Spirit in your daily life?  
Where do you desire to grow?

Read Romans 8:10-11. How does knowing the Spirit lives in you lead you to show love even when you don't feel loving?

What have you learned this week about how God's love and God's commands are related to each other?

Ask the Spirit to lead you to love God more than His gifts so you might enjoy the fullness of the fruit of the Spirit.





## WEEK 2: ALL IN WITH EVERYTHING

**Looking Back:** What did God teach you this past week as you read the daily devotions? What opportunities did you have to apply what you learned?

**Looking Up:** Play the video and consider the discussion questions together.

Do you typically make New Year's resolutions? What practices do you put in place to try and reach these goals?

The video made an analogy with a bow, an arrow, and a bullseye that represented daily habits, your love, and the place you aim your love. How does this imagery connect with the Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40)?

In Matthew 22:34-40, Jesus said the law and prophets depend on loving God and others. How do you prioritize acting in this love every day?

If someone followed you around for a day, observing how you spend your time, what would they say you treasure most? How might this differ from what you would say you value most?

Read Matthew 6:19-24. How do earthly treasures compete with your love for God?

Whether our circumstances are easy or difficult, how can thanksgiving and hope found in Christ teach us to love God in every season of life?

Read Romans 12:1-2. These verses give three imperatives, two things *to do* and one thing *not to do* to show our love for God. What do you need to start or stop in this regard?

What can you do daily to focus your heart on God rather than the false satisfaction the world offers?

**Looking Forward:** How will you take what you learned today and apply it to your life this week? Take a few minutes to plan your next meeting and spend some time in prayer together.

## WEEK 2: ALL IN WITH EVERYTHING

### DAY 1—READ EXODUS 34:6-7

*The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”*

If someone you had never met asked you to tell them about yourself, where would you begin? Perhaps you would start by telling them about your job, your hobbies, or your family make-up. Maybe, if you met this person through a friend, you’d start with how you’re connected.

The Lord described Himself as the God who is merciful and gracious, patient, loving and faithful. When God announced Himself this way, Moses had finished writing the Ten Commandments on a second set of tablets. The first were broken when Moses threw them to the ground in anger after he found God’s people worshiping a golden calf. While Moses spoke to God on the mountain, God’s people became so impatient they decided to melt the gold they took on their way out of Egypt and mold it into an Egyptian-like idol. Rather than wait for the God who delivered them, they returned to the comfort of the gods who enslaved them.

In today’s passage, God gave Moses a description of what makes Him different than all other gods. The God of Moses is merciful, gracious, patient, loving, and faithful—no god of our own making could rightly claim these same attributes. Yet, we continually turn back to the comforts of the world—things like money, power, or control—despite knowing they will never live up to their promises.

**Describe a time when you've seen God to be merciful, gracious, patient, or faithful.**

**How does the uniqueness of God make Him exclusively worthy of our worship?**

**Where have you been seeking satisfaction that only God can provide?**

**Pray that you will never grow weary in praising God for His goodness. Ask the Spirit to make worldly things less attractive in light of the glory of God.**

### DAY 2—READ PSALM 9:1

*I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds.*

Look outside and find the biggest tree in view. Now look at just one branch on that tree. Could you name something you're thankful for to go with each leaf on that branch? To recount the goodness of God is like trying to count every grain of sand on the beach. God has continually, throughout eternity, acted in love toward all He has made. But do we take the time to notice?

We may say God saves us and He loves us, but we often forget this as a daily reality. Every morning, His mercies are new (Lamentations 3:22-23). Every moment, God is present with you. Every day, His Spirit is at work sanctifying you, making you holy as He is holy. God acts in love toward you every day.

We are tempted to make our days about what we "must" or "should" do rather than remembering the amazing love of God. Busyness distracts us from noticing the goodness of God, but an attentiveness to God's good gifts directs our hearts to worship. When we pay attention, every good thing becomes a reason to give thanks to our gracious God.

Regular thanksgiving reveals a heart directed toward God. One way we grow in loving God with our whole hearts is by being attentive to the ways He draws near to us. God fills our days with reminders of His love for us, and when we slow down enough to pay attention, our hearts are trained to love Him more.



List five ways God has been generous with you today.

Read Psalm 107:4-9. How can you relate to the words of this psalm?

How can you grow in noticing the goodness of God today?

Pray that God will help you recognize ways He has shown His love for you. Ask the Spirit to make you interruptible, seeing every moment as an opportunity to witness the goodness of God.

**DAY 3—READ JOB 33:28**

*“He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light.”*

Job is famous for his deep suffering. But Job wasn't the only one who experienced deep distress. Over and over the psalmists cried out in lament, the prophets wept over God's unfaithful people, and even the New Testament writers bemoaned their inability to escape their own sin. How do we love God with all our soul when we're tempted to despair? In these seemingly impossible moments, we can remember God's faithfulness and choose to trust Him.

Sometimes loving God feels easy and other times we must rely on what we've seen to be true in the past. Each time we go to God in prayer or meditate on His Word will not feel the same. Sometimes we are moved by God's compassion. Sometimes understanding escapes us. Sometimes we go through the motions so we can check off items on our to-do list. But each time we draw near to God, the Spirit deposits truth in our hearts about who God is and His work in Christ. Even when we don't feel it, the Spirit is doing His work in us. When we draw near to God, He draws near to us (James 4:8). These daily deposits of the Spirit become an anchor when the world turns upside down.

The same is true for those in Christ as it was for Job: God has saved our souls from going down to the pit that we might see the light. If you are in Christ, God is with you and for you today. Draw near to Him, seeking the light.

Would you describe your soul as embittered or delighted today?

Read Hebrews 11:1-3. How do we put these verses into practice daily?

How will you seek to move toward God today, no matter your feelings or experience of Him?

Ask God to give you faith that cannot be shaken by circumstance. Pray for the reminder that God's love can never be removed from you.

### DAY 4—READ ROMANS 12:2

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

We live in a time of unending streaming options. We listen to podcasts, read novels, and scroll through curated social media accounts. We constantly absorb stories because we're storied people. We were created to live in the narrative God is unfolding, but we often seek to fill that longing with other stories. While not necessarily wrong or bad in themselves, these other stories never truly satisfy, so we continue to search for new ones. Stories capture our imagination in a way that helps us feel seen, empowered, and give us a vision of something better. The story of God does each of these things, but in a truer way.

When we fix our minds on the story of God's redemption, we see all other stories in light of this truth. The story of Scripture teaches us to renew our minds by pursuing Christlikeness rather than the world's definition of virtuous living. The narrative of God's plan displays the fullness of life offered through Christ rather than settling for the world's definition of a happy life. To love God with all our minds requires us to renew our imaginations according to God's good design, rather than being conformed to the world's definitions of goodness. Without regular commitment to meditating on the Word of God, lesser stories will conform us into the image of the world. We are never in "neutral." How are you being shaped and formed?

When you imagine what you most want and need, what drives that story?

Read Ephesians 3:20-21. How do your daily desires and longings fall short of trusting God's incomprehensible greatness and ability?

How can you train your mind to long for God's story of redemption in your life and the world?

Ask God to help you meditate on Scripture so that He captures your imagination. Pray that the Spirit will renew your mind daily in Christ.

**DAY 5—READ JOHN 15:14**

*“You are my friends if you do what I command you.”*

Friends are the people you want to be around, who know you best and cheer you on. They are the people you want to spend an evening with, no matter the activity. Consider this: as we submit to Christ’s command to love God with all our heart, souls, and minds, He has called us His friends.

The Creator of heaven and earth draws near to you and wants you to share your life with Him. He doesn’t wag His finger and insist you do better, like He’s disappointed. When you confess your worries and struggles, God is attentive and patient. His loving kindness is compassionate and gracious. He completes our joy as we enjoy His nearness.

Having a friend requires relationship, and relationships begin with knowledge, but they don’t end there. It’s possible for us to know many things about God without actually knowing Him. But when we approach God in prayer, pursue thanksgiving, trust Him with our suffering, and orient our lives around His story of redemption, we enjoy friendship with God. Our Savior is a friend who welcomes us into relationship with the Father and indwells us by His Spirit.

**What are the attributes you would name of a good friendship?**

**Read John 15:11-16. According to these verses, what is the fruit of our friendship with Jesus?**

**How is God inviting you to draw near to Him in friendship today?**

**Pray that you would grow in friendship with and delight in God in such a way that leads you to invite others into friendship with Him also.**





# WEEK 3: EVERYONE NEEDS MERCY

## SERMON NOTES

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## WEEK 3: EVERYONE NEEDS MERCY

**Looking Back:** What did God teach you this past week as you read the daily devotions? What opportunities did you have to apply what you learned?

**Looking Up:** Play the video and consider the discussion questions together.

If you stumbled upon a new lake house and found out it was yours free-of-charge, what would you do first?

Who are the people in your life you want to share celebrations with—those who make an occasion more enjoyable?

Why is God's love toward you something worth celebrating with others?

Read John 13:34-35. How will others know we belong to Christ? Give one example of what this looks like.

In the video, we heard God's love is shown through His mercy—the compassion of God for people in miserable circumstances and the generosity of God toward people who are helpless. How has God shown you mercy through salvation?

Who do you find it difficult to extend mercy to? Why?

Read the story of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35. How did the servant misunderstand the mercy he had received? How might we misunderstand God's mercy?

Read Jude 20-22. God's mercy will lead the Christian to eternal life. What does this teach about how we should view God's mercy?

**Looking Forward:** How will you take what you learned today and apply it to your life this week? Take a few minutes to plan your next meeting and spend some time in prayer together.

## WEEK 3: EVERYONE NEEDS MERCY

### DAY 1—READ JOHN 13:34-35

*“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.”*

People wear wedding bands to show they are married. Kids wear school t-shirts on field trips to identify where they belong. And those who confess Christ as Savior put on love to display themselves as His disciples. Of course, a person can take off a wedding band or forget their school t-shirt, yet they’re still married, or they still belong to that school. In a similar way, the people of God can choose not to love one another and still belong to Him, but choosing not to love is more than a missing ring or lost t-shirt. When Christ’s disciples refuse to extend love to one another, they actively reject the supremacy of Christ in their lives.

We may have reasons—the person hurt us; they haven’t earned mercy; it might be uncomfortable or put us at a disadvantage—but Christ’s mercy has no such prerequisite. Every person bears the image of God and Christ came to save us while we were still sinners. When we refuse to extend love to one another, we misunderstand the mercy God has shown us. The world teaches that loving another is dependent on another’s ideals, behaviors, or what they offer us in return. For those who belong to Christ, loving one another doesn’t depend on the other person’s worthiness of that love, it depends on the loveliness of Christ and our bond together as His family.

We show ourselves to be disciples of Christ when we reflect His character to the world. When we reflect the love of Christ by loving one another, our belonging to Christ becomes visible to the world.

**How is the love of Christ visible through the way you live in the world?**

**Read 1 John 4:20-21. How does this further emphasize the importance of loving one another in the church?**

**How does the love and mercy of Christ enable you to love others?**

**Ask the Spirit to make the love of Christ visible in your life, by enabling you to love the people you come across each day.**

**DAY 2—READ PSALM 145:8-9**

*The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that He has made.*

When was the last time you created something, stood back, and thought, “Hey, that’s pretty good”? When God created the heavens and the earth, He looked at it and called it good. When He looked at humanity, He proclaimed it “very good.”

Sadly, Adam and Eve doubted God’s goodness was enough; they believed God was withholding something good from them. So, they ate the forbidden fruit, and rather than finding something better, sin ravished the goodness God created. But out of love for His creation, God was merciful.

Men and women still bear the image of God and creation still multiplies new life. God creates everything, sustains everything, and gives everything a purpose. This is the mercy of God: despite the devastation of sin—the presence of disease, corruption, and rebellion—God still sustains creation by His sovereign hand. God’s mercy is over all He has made.

Every human was born into sin and actively chooses sin, so every person is dependent on the mercy of God. It is the mercy of God that gives us life, breath, and meaning. In any moment, we have reason to praise because in every moment God is gracious and merciful toward us. He has always been, and will always be, merciful to us—not because we are faithful but because He is.

How often do you recognize God's sustaining work in your life?

Read Colossians 1:15-17. List everything these verses say Christ creates and holds together. What does this teach you about Christ's sustaining work in your life?

How does knowing God's mercy and grace give you hope when you turn to Him in repentance?

Pray God will continually remind you that He is slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and that He will grow you in His likeness.

**DAY 3—READ TITUS 3:4-5**

*But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.*

Imagine a person who set out to ride a tricycle to the moon. This is an absurd proposition. Thinking we can earn a righteous standing before God is just as ridiculous. We could never work hard enough to earn our way into right relationship with God. But God knew that—so He sent His Son to reconcile us to Himself, according to His grace. Christ died the death we deserve so we could live in fellowship with Him. For the Christian, God’s mercy covers our sins, and God’s grace gifts us new life in the Spirit.

God has mercy over all He has made, and He extends His mercy in a particular way to the church. Through Christ, and by the Holy Spirit, we grow into our salvation. In Christ, we are declared righteous, and by the Spirit, we continually grow in righteousness. God’s mercy sustains and sanctifies. When we fail to love God with our whole heart, soul, and mind, the Spirit leads us back to the loving kindness of our Savior. And this renewal generates love in us that we extend to others.

As those who belong to Christ, we rely on Him to be obedient to the greatest commandment. God knows we won’t love perfectly every time. Loving God and others with all our heart, soul, and mind, requires self-sacrifice so that we might walk by the Spirit. When we fail to live up to the righteousness of Christ, God still extends His mercy to us.



**How does God's mercy save us? How does God's mercy continue to save us?**

**Read 1 Peter 1:3-5. According to this passage, what two things are we saved to by Christ's mercy?**

**How should God's mercy lead us to be merciful people with those around us?**

**Pray for God's mercy to those around you as the Spirit makes you look more like Christ.**

**DAY 4—READ MATTHEW 18:33**

*“And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”*

A bird raised in a cage might return to the cage even after they’ve been set free. They trade freedom for a familiar feeling of ease and comfort. We do the same when withhold the mercy of God from others. God’s mercy has granted us freedom from sin by cancelling our debt on the cross, and yet we often demand payment when others sin against us.

When Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, He included, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). But if we’re honest, how often are we as eager to extend forgiveness as we are to seek it? More frequently, we find ourselves pleading for mercy while being stingy in the distribution of mercy. Like the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18, we use our freedom to put others in bondage. Each time we refuse to extend the mercy we’ve been given, we become like a caged bird returning to an old way of doing things.

The mercy of God saves and transforms us, lest we forget our need for it to begin with. When we meditate on the mercy of God shown to us through Christ, it changes the way we interact with others. How could we withhold forgiveness to our neighbor once we’ve realized the depth of our own forgiveness in Christ? Without a doubt, such forgiveness comes at a cost, a laying down of ourselves to become more like Christ, but in our self-sacrifice, we deepen our fellowship with God.

Who do you need to extend the mercy of Christ to this week?

Read Ephesians 4:32. What does this teach about the extent to which we should forgive one another?

The mercy of God frees us to enjoy Christ. How do we enjoy Christ when we offer forgiveness to others?

Pray that God would make you a forgiving person and that through self-sacrifice you might commune more deeply with Christ.

### DAY 5—READ JUDE 21

*Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.*

Growing up is a natural part of life. Eventually a baby needs more than milk to feel full and a child grows old enough to move out of his or her parents' home, but we never outgrow our need for Christ's mercy. Everyone needs mercy, from the moment of conception until the day God calls us home to be with Him.

Jude wrote to a church facing hardship. His letter was an encouragement to the church to contend for their faith. False teachers had infiltrated the church and led Christians astray, enticing them to return to their old ways of living. People began following their own sinful desires and taking advantage of others. To refute these cultural influences, Jude reminded them of the holiness of God and the imminent return of Christ. While they looked to Christ, he told them to keep themselves in the love of God by waiting on the mercy of Christ that leads to eternal life.

When we behold the God of our salvation, He makes us more like Himself. We contend for our faith by reflecting the character of God in whatever corner of the world God has placed us. When who we are and how we live reflects the God we know, we give the world a truer picture of reality, one where a loving God continually extends His mercy through His Son. Everyone needs mercy, including that awkward neighbor, your difficult coworker, and the woman handing you food through the drive-thru window. We won't always extend Christ's love perfectly, but even then, His mercy is there to renew us again and again, until the day the Lord appears or calls us home.

How can you seek to daily abide in the love of God and wait for His mercy?

Read Ephesians 2:12-16. How does this imagery describe the love we have been shown in Christ and how that is to change our lives?

What is one thing you can do today that shows the love of God to someone who needs mercy?

Ask God to lay one person on your heart today that you could extend His mercy to.



# **WEEK 4: IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY**

## **SERMON NOTES**

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## WEEK 4: IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY

**Looking Back:** What did God teach you this past week as you read the daily devotions? What opportunities did you have to apply what you learned?

**Looking Up:** Play the video and consider the discussion questions together.

What's your favorite sports team? If sports aren't your thing, what's your favorite restaurant?

Would you say our small group shares more similarities or differences? In what ways?

Read Matthew 26:26-28. How does our belonging to Christ strengthen how we belong to each other?

If you are following Jesus, what old identity did you take off when you accepted Christ as your Savior?



Read Matthew 5:43-46. How are we to follow Christ's example toward our enemies?

How should the way God treated us when we were His enemies inform the way we treat those we have tension with?

Read Ephesians 2:19-20 and James 1:27. What does this teach us about who we should seek to welcome into the family of God? How do we do this?

Sharing a table with people different from you comes with disagreements and difficulty, but God gives us all the command to love God and others. How does pursuing unity despite our differences show that Christ is worth it?

**Looking Forward:** How will you take what you learned today and apply it to your life this week? Take a few minutes to plan your next meeting and spend some time in prayer together.

## WEEK 4: IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY

### DAY 1—READ MATTHEW 26:27-28

*And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."*

Communities form around commonalities. People become friends by sharing the same interests, physical space, goals, or experiences. Maybe you see each other every day at work, or you grew up in the same neighborhood and went to the same school. People in the same community might enjoy the same hobbies or the same night-out (or evening-in) activities. Communities share commonality, and Christ's community bridges all other communal divides. God draws all types of people together in Christ.

On the eve of His crucifixion, Christ shared a meal with His motley crew of disciples, who seemingly had more differences than similarities. One such example was Matthew, a tax collector, who sat with Simon—a political zealot—and the fishermen Matthew previously collected taxes from. As Jesus instructed each disciple to take the cup He offered, He continued to form them into a new community. This new belonging superseded their previous identity.

For the Christian, old patterns of living no longer make up our identity. Our belonging to God governs any of our other allegiances. We are no longer defined by who we were before Christ but by the grace given to us in Christ. This new community centered on Christ guarantees we'll never be alone. Christ will continue to give us Himself and bring us into the family of faith alongside brothers and sisters.

**How has your identity in Christ shaped the way you view yourself and those you belong with?**

**Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-17. How is the love of Christ to govern the new community to which we belong?**

**What benefits have you received from being part of the family of God?**

**Pray and thank God for the gift of belonging in His family. Ask Him to lead you to find your full identity in Him.**

### DAY 2—READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:19-20

*That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*

An ambassador is a high-ranking official who lives in a foreign country. Ambassadors represent their home country among foreigners in hopes of fostering peace between the two countries. As those who belong to Christ, we are Christ's ambassadors in the area of the world God sees fit to place us. We are commissioned to live for Christ among people who do not know Him.

We represent Christ to the world by mirroring His life and love to others. We love like Christ loves us by extending the mercy God gives us. To love others like Christ also requires us to consider others above ourselves. Just as Christ laid down His life for us, we lay down ourselves to build others up. To love like Christ often requires sacrifice of our preferences, opinions, comfort, or control. God has gifted us with resources and advantages that become instruments of God's love when used to serve others. Loving others is rarely easy or convenient but is a means by which we grow as Christ's ambassadors.

When we're quick to forgive, offer resources to a person in need, or spend time listening to a person we disagree with, we participate in God's work of reconciliation. Through such acts of service, we lay down ourselves for the benefit of another. These daily acts of faithfulness become the way God fulfills His purposes through His people. Since we have tasted the goodness of God, we have the responsibility to implore others, through words and deeds, to be reconciled to God.

**What are some other ways we live in the world as Christ's ambassadors?**

**Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. How did Paul live sacrificially in service to others?**

**Think of someone who is difficult to love. How might you lay down your preferences or opinions and extend the mercy of Christ to that person?**

**Pray that the Spirit softens your heart toward those who are difficult to love. Thank God for the reconciling work of Christ given to you when you were far away.**

### DAY 3—READ MATTHEW 5:43-44

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”*

When people put on new glasses after a prescription update, they see the world better than they did before. Trees turn from green blobs to plants filled with thousands of tiny leaves. Clouds are more than smudges in the sky, they’re now seen clearly in many unique shapes. When we belong to Christ, we receive a new identity, a new purpose, and a new vision. We begin to view the world through the lens of Christ.

Before Christ, we categorize people according to the wisdom of the world. We may also pit one community against another. We judge people based on the communities they share. Those from the same neighborhoods, political groups, or other affiliations easily become “those people.” Either you are on our side, or you are against us. We make enemies of others who are made in the image of God. But through the lens of Christ, only two categories of people exist: those who belong to Him and those He’s inviting to belong.

Those in Christ share a community with those we once designated as antagonists. Together we receive Christ’s love and extend it to others. No one is outside the reach of God’s love. To submit to God’s command to love God and others, we invite even our enemies to the family table. Some will accept our invitation, and others will reject it, but our responsibility is to invite and pray. We invite others into the love of Christ and pray the Spirit will lead them into the family of faith.

**Who did you once consider enemies? How are you responding to them now? What needs to change?**

**Read 1 Peter 3:13-17. How do we prepare to make a defense for our faith in any moment?**

**Which one is most difficult for you—to revere Christ in your heart, to speak of your salvation in Christ, or to act in Christlikeness toward others? Why?**

**Pray for the lens of Christ to see the people around you as either those who belong to Him or those He is inviting to belong. Pray God shows you where you might invite others into His love.**

### DAY 4—READ EPHESIANS 2:19

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.*

You don't have to go far to find people bickering. Take out your phone and pull up social media. It won't take long to find someone angry about something. Even the news headlines from competing publications frame the same story through different lenses to insight a passionate reader. People argue a lot. But this isn't a new thing.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, Jews and Gentiles were bickering with each other too. Before Christ, these groups of people disagreed over religion, politics, and other societal issues. Sound familiar? But when both Jews and Gentiles came to saving faith in Christ, they had to learn to belong to each other. Paul explained how Christ broke down the wall of hostility between them. In Christ, Jews and Gentiles become fellow citizens and saints of the household of God.

As those who belong to this same household, we must also learn to incorporate those we see as different from us. No standard of performance makes a person worthy of God's love. Christ saved us while we were still sinners, not because of anything we have done. Those in Christ will never be good enough to earn Christ's righteousness, and we will never be bad enough to outrun His mercy. We all depend on the righteousness of Christ. As representatives of Christ, we befriend the stranger because Christ welcomes them as He has welcomed us.



How are you tempted to look down on others who don't engage with or know God the same way you do?

Read Colossians 1:19-22. How has Christ reconciled us despite our evil deeds? How can we extend this love to others?

Neither our forgiveness nor our righteousness is dependent on our doing but on what Christ has done. How do we live like Christ by befriending the stranger?

Ask for the Spirit's help to make you more like Christ by softening your heart toward the stranger. As God to forgive your tendency toward division and help you see all people through the lens of your salvation.

### DAY 5—READ JAMES 1:27

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

Characters in movies and television are often driven by a desire for more: power, freedom, money, or something else. These characters are driven by a desire of something that they want, usually for selfish gain. They'll often rub shoulders with the right people to get the thing they find lacking in themselves. These characters don't always want bad things, they might even be admirable in their pursuit, but gaining something to primarily satisfy our own desires is not the "pure and undefiled" pursuit that James wrote of in this passage.

The church James wrote to was being tempted to cozy up with the wealthy and reputable people in town to gain ease and comfort. The people were serving the wealthy at the expense of the needy. James reminded them the way of Christ is the way of humility, not selfish gain. Pure and undefiled devotion to Christ means caring for those who have nothing to offer in return. The goal of such service is deeper communion with Christ.

Caring for the helpless is evidence of a person's growth in Christlikeness. Personal abundance and comfort are sacrificed for the flourishing of the family of faith. When we welcome the helpless into our church family, there will always be need among us. Serving the helpless is our pursuit, as we practice the generosity of Christ that we also rely on. We pray the Spirit reconciles those we serve to Father, but even if our service doesn't yield this fruit, we continue to grow more like Christ as we mimic His way.

**How likely are you to serve those who can give nothing in return? Why?**

**Read Psalm 113. What does this passage teach you about God's heart toward the helpless?**

**Who in your life is in need? Plan to show them the humble love of Christ this week.**

**Pray that God makes you more like Christ by giving you His heart for the vulnerable. Pray for wisdom and strength to care for those Christ loves just as He loves you.**



# WEEK 5: IT'S WORTH EVERYTHING

## SERMON NOTES

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## WEEK 5: IT'S WORTH EVERYTHING

**Looking Back:** What did God teach you this past week as you read the daily devotions? What opportunities did you have to apply what you learned?

**Looking Up:** Play the video and consider the discussion questions together.

Have you seen an orchestra play live? If not, when was a time you saw a large group of people working together to create something?

How do you use your unique gifts, talents, and experiences to praise God? What attributes of God can you see most clearly because of who He created you to be?

Read Philemon 4-7. Why was Paul thankful to God for Philemon? When have you found yourself thankful for another person's faith?

How do we grow in our relationship to God when we love Him and others? What about in our relationship with each other?

Read Romans 15:1-7. According to verse six, what is the single aim of the church made up of a diverse group of people? How does our community share in praise together?

How could we care for each other in a way that helps our community of faith grow in endurance and encouragement?

Read 1 Corinthians 13. What does this teach you about how God calls us to love? How does our group reflect these attributes toward each other?

How can you show your love to those outside of the church? How can our group act as a communal representation of Christ to our neighborhood or city?

**Looking Forward:** How will you take what you learned today and apply it to your life this week? Take a few minutes to plan your next meeting and spend some time in prayer together.

## WEEK 5: IT'S WORTH EVERYTHING

### DAY 1—READ PHILEMON 4-5

*I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints.*

Close friends are easy to celebrate. We look forward to sharing meals for birthdays, presents for anniversaries, or maybe just a movie on the couch to commemorate the end of a busy week. Time with a close friend makes small moments more delightful. And Christ makes close friends out of the most unlikely acquaintances.

Paul wrote this letter to his old friend, Philemon, and had it delivered by a new friend, Onesimus. Onesimus and Philemon knew each other because Onesimus was Philemon's slave until Onesimus ran away and stole some of Philemon's things on his way out. While a runaway, Onesimus met Paul and came to saving faith in Christ. Paul wrote this letter to tell Philemon the good news of Onesimus's faith and how Christ had reconciled their relationship. Paul appealed to Philemon's faith and urged him to accept Onesimus back home as a brother. The gospel changes how we belong to each other.

When we belong to Christ, His love becomes the foundation for every relationship. Strangers become friends. Enemies become brothers and sisters. No one is alone because every Christian is united to the body of Christ, the church. The way we practice this belonging is through obedience to God's command to love God and others, and through this obedience, we find more love, thanksgiving, delight, and a deepening relationship with God and others. As we do, we enjoy more of the inexhaustible depths of God's love for us.



**How might others hear of your love and faith? Whose faith and love has led you to praise God?**

**Read Ephesians 1:15-21. What knowledge did Paul want this loving church to have more of? How can we also pursue this knowledge?**

**How can you take joy in the love of God this week by expressing your thankfulness to a brother or sister in Christ?**

**Pray God would reveal deeper depths of His love through the love of the church. Ask the Spirit to make you an instrument of God's love toward others.**

**DAY 2—READ ROMANS 15:5-6**

*May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Perennial wildflower gardens are known for their diversity. Based on the weather and soil, gardeners suggest different flowers for a garden that grows back year after year. What makes these plots especially beautiful is the way the flowers have different textures, colors, and shapes but share the same space to make a single garden. In these gardens, each flower's uniqueness complements the beauty of the flowers next to it.

People are messier than flowers. Sharing the same space with different people often requires us to rely on a patience and grace that only comes from the Spirit. We have differing preferences and opinions and, if left to our own devices, our differences will foster divisions and discord. We'll form groups and turn against one other, like we did before Christ. But through the power of the Holy Spirit, differences make our community more beautiful.

According to these verses in Romans, God's endurance and encouragement grants us the ability to live in harmony with one another to glorify God. Alone our differences divide us, but together our differences give us a clearer image of God among us. If we rely on our old ways of seeing the world, then our differences will foster jealousy, gossip, and competition. But if we remember how we all depend on the mercy shown to us through Christ, our differences will give us cause us to praise Christ and glorify the Father.

How does the gospel change how you belong to other Christians in your small group? How does it change the way you belong to the global church?

Read Romans 12:13-18. Which one of these commands is most difficult to live out? Why?

Why must we rely on God's endurance and encouragement to live in harmony with one another? How can you do this daily?

Pray that God would reorient what you love most. Ask the Spirit to teach you to delight in the unified praises of a diverse church more than you bemoan the discomfort or inconvenience of including different people.

**DAY 3—READ PHILIPPIANS 2:1-2**

*So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*

Giving ourselves away can be easy when we get something out of it. If you buy presents for someone at Christmas and are lavished with praise, you'll probably do it again next year. If you encourage someone and they heap on compliments, you're more likely to encourage someone else. But if they slam the door in our face or walk away without acknowledgement, we're tempted to grow bitter and not offer ourselves next time. According to Paul, giving ourselves away isn't to be based on the response of the recipient, it's based on the God who enables us to love each other. We give ourselves away not so others will give us what we need but because Christ is already all we need.

According to Philippians, Paul's joy was complete when the church, in full accord, shared the mind of Christ. Christ's humble love is our example of how we live with each other. But how often have we rejected His ways for our own? How many times have we known His will, yet we chose to love our own desires more? Christ offers Himself to us not because we deserve it but because that is who He is. He is a generous, loving God.

As we become more like Christ, we give ourselves away not because of what we get in return, but because of what we've already received. When we extend the grace of Christ to others, our joy isn't dependent on an outcome, our joy is secure in the steadfast character of Christ who has always been loving toward us.

Describe a time when you felt comfort, connection, affection, or sympathy from the Holy Spirit.

Read Philippians 2:3-11 where Paul described the humble love of Christ. How does Christ's love look different from the world's perception of love?

The Spirit completes our joy in Christ when we share His love for others. Considering this, how can choosing to put others above yourself lead to worshipping Christ?

Pray the Spirit will teach you to love others as Christ loves you. Thank God for the ways His steadfast character never changes, and that His love for you will never cease.

**DAY 4—READ 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-5**

*Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.*

A kid who wants every new, expensive gadget is likely to be asked if he or she thinks money grows on trees. Of course it doesn't, but what if it did? What if you finally found a money-making tree that continually sprouted new dollar bills? Money would never be a scarcity; no new gadget would be out of your reach. How would you put your money-making tree to use?

None of us have an endless supply of money, but all in Christ have been given something better—an endless supply of love. The love of God will never stop growing and deepening, we will never face a scarcity or lack in God's love. It's not a resource we need to hoard and protect to make sure there is enough; it overflows in abundance. Money can only buy other things we hope will satisfy, but God's love is the source of satisfaction. Money tempts us to compare and compete, God's love binds us together and connects to God Himself. Money causes division, obstructing our enjoyment of God. God's love orients our affections toward God and others so we can find the peace and rest we crave.

As those who have tasted the love of God through Christ—a love that does not envy or boast but is patient and kind—we are to throw off all envy, human comparison, and fleshly competition. Envy believes someone has something I lack. Comparison pits me against my neighbor. Competition acts as if there is not enough so I must take what I can get before someone else does. These sins inhibit our enjoyment of the peace found in Christ. Where these sins are difficult to shrug off exposes where our hearts are aimed at something other than Christ. We throw off comparison and competition so we can enjoy the abundant love of Christ.

Rewrite today's verse in your own words without using the word "not."

Read 1 Corinthians 13:6-13. Paul said he knew God's love in part but one day he would know God in full and be fully known. How does extending love today prepare you for the day when that His love will be completely known?

Where in your life is comparison and competition interfering with your love for another person? What does this reveal about where your affection truly lies?

Pray that God would free you from the temptation to see others as competition. Ask the Spirit to grow your delight in the abundant love of Christ and to share it with others.

**DAY 5—READ EPHESIANS 5:18B-20A**

*Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

As we grow up, we get new opportunities and responsibilities. We once required support to take a step, but now we can drive a car to get where we want to go. We once spent the evening playing in the yard with friends, but now we stay up too late wrapping up our weekly to-dos. As we grow, we put aside some things, like our tendency to throw tantrum when things don't go our way, and we gain new privileges, like deciding what we have for dinner. Similarly, as we grow up in Christlikeness, we put aside old things, like envy and comparison, and we gain new tendencies, like praise and thanksgiving of God that lead to joy and celebration we never outgrow.

As we grow up into Christ, we continually put aside our selfish desires so we can be filled with Christ. We put on a new identity, take on a new mission, and participate in a new purpose all fueled by the love of Christ. We are saved from ourselves and saved into a new story and a new community. Together we are filled with the Spirit, and we overflow with the abundant love of God. In Ephesians, Paul described this as addressing one another with psalms, or making melodies in our hearts that give thanks to God for each other. It looks like living in harmony with one another. In a world drowning in loneliness, the church ought to be a place where people are known for their love for each other. We belong to each other because we belong to Christ together. Nothing matters more.



**What do these verses call the church to do? When and how often?**

**Read 2 Corinthians 13:11 and 1 Peter 3:8. Would you say rejoicing, restoration, agreement, humble love, and a shared mind describe our church community? Why or why not?**

**Celebrate a specific person in your church. Send a text, write a letter, or share face-to-face, and make known the ways you see God's love at work in his or her life.**

**Praise God for His gracious love that unites you to Him and binds you to the church community. Give thanks for ways you've seen Him at work through His people.**



# COMMENTARY

## WEEK 1

### **Deuteronomy 6:5**

6:4–5 These two verses are commonly known as the Shema (shuh MAH), after the first word of v. 4 in Hebrew. This was considered the greatest commandment; Jesus Christ, when asked which commandment was greatest, cited this passage (Mk 12:28–30). The Shema is the foundational principle for the Ten Commandments, and they in turn contain the essence of God's covenant with Israel. It is divided between a statement asserting the nature of God and one enjoining a certain response to that understanding. He is described as being one. Other interpretations are that the Lord alone is our God or the Lord our God is one Lord.

### **Romans 5:8**

5:6–8 We can be sure of God's love since he did so much for us when we were helpless. We were ungodly, we were still sinners, and we were his enemies (v. 10). Jesus died for that kind of person. The word translated "for" is the Greek preposition *huper* used in substitution contexts. Jesus died in our place. God freely chooses to love us and by doing so confers worth on us through our faith in him.

### **1 John 4:11-12**

4:11 The phrase God loved us in this way means that Jesus was obedient to the point of death.

4:12 John used the phrase no one has ever seen God to refer to God the Father in his heavenly splendor, but God the Son makes the invisible Father clearly known (Jn 1:18).

**John 15:9-10**

15:9–11 Obedience is not all gloom and doom; rather, it's a source of joy. The OT prophets envisioned a period of great end-time rejoicing (Is 25:9; 35:10; 51:3; 61:10; 66:10; Zch 9:9).

**Galatians 5:22-23**

5:22–23 The fruit illustration calls to mind the vine and the branches that produce fruit (Jn 15:1–5). The mention of love first in the list looks back to Gl 5:6, 13–14. Such loving behavior comes through the power of the Holy Spirit by faith. Self-control (Gk *egkrateia*, “holding in passions and appetites”) is placed last in the list for emphasis, because all the works of the flesh reflect lack of self-control. There is no need for prohibitive law when people's lives exhibit love and self-control.

## WEEK 2

### Exodus 34:6-7

34:5–7 Rather than providing a new visual description (in contrast with chaps. 3; 13–14; 19–20; 24), the account of the Lord’s display of his glory this time offers his list of a series of invisible qualities. The Lord has the capacity to be compassionate and gracious, to be slow to anger, and to forgive, in addition to exacting punishment (cp. Nm 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; 103:6–14; 145:8; Jl 2:13–14; Jnh 4:2; Nah 1:3).

### Psalm 9:1

With all my heart means “sincerely” (86:12; 111:1; 119:10). Wondrous works are unspecified here, but elsewhere the phrase refers to God’s acts of creation (136:4), his works in the natural order (Jb 5:9), or the redemptive acts performed on behalf of his people (Ex 3:20).

### Job 33:28

33:25–28 The result of the angel’s work is given here. There will be physical and spiritual restoration, including repentance.

### Romans 12:2

12:1–2 Paul commonly used the indicative mode of speech to make statements about what God has done for us before using the imperative mode to outline our proper response (e.g., Therefore ... I urge you). The order of presentation is doctrine first, and then duty. Our true worship entails offering our bodies as a living sacrifice, which means dedication of the total person to living for God’s honor. Christians are to be different from non-Christian society. We should experience a progressive transformation of life by the renewing of our mind. The mind is changed by prayer, by reading and reflection on God’s Word, by worship, and by meditation on God’s acts as the Holy Spirit works in us.

**John 15:14**

15:13–14 In the OT, only Abraham (2Ch 20:7; Is 41:8) and, by implication, Moses (Ex 33:11) are called “friends of God.” Jesus extended this privilege to all obedient believers.

## WEEK 3

### John 13:34-35

Love must be the distinguishing mark of Jesus's disciples. Jesus's new command closely resembled the Mosaic commands to love the Lord (Dt 6:5) and one's neighbor as oneself (Lv 19:18; cp. Mk 12:28-33). Elsewhere Jesus said we must love even our enemies (Mt 5:43-48). While the command to love God and one's neighbor was thus not new, Jesus's example (as I have loved you) was unparalleled, as was his insistence that we should love our enemies.

### Psalm 145:8-9

145:8 The language of this verse exemplifies God's covenant love toward his people (103:4; 111:4; Ex 34:6-7).

145:9 God's benevolence extends to all his creatures (Mt 5:45). Often called "common grace," the concept is contrasted with God's particular grace, extended only to his chosen people, believers (Ps 145:18-20; Mt 24:31; Rm 11:5; 2Th 2:13).

### Titus 3:4-5

3:4 The words kindness of God ... and his love for mankind stand in stark contrast to the description of lost humanity in v. 3. The difference is due to the appearance of God our Savior, Jesus Christ.

3:5 Salvation comes not by works but through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Some interpreters have understood this as saying that baptism (the washing) causes salvation, but in the context human deeds are clearly downplayed and the emphasis is on divine action and initiative. The washing described here is the spiritual cleansing that is symbolized outwardly by water baptism.



**Matthew 18:33**

18:32–35 The parable's point is now revealed. Since God has shown believers such great mercy by pardoning their sins, they should in turn forgive the sins of others from their heart. The word jailers literally means "torturers." The debtor's torture would continue until the debt was paid in full. Since the debt could not possibly be repaid, the torture symbolizes eternal punishment.

**Jude 21**

20–23 After primarily describing the false teachers up to this point, Jude now exhorted his readers on how to contend for the faith (cp. v. 3). They were to show mercy to those who were wavering, reach out to those who had already been taken in and needed to be snatched from the fire (cp. Am 4:11; Zch 3:2), and show concern for the wayward heretics, all at the same time. But believers were to be careful lest they also became defiled.

## WEEK 4

### Matthew 26:27-28

The making of a covenant was normally accompanied by an act of sacrifice. The slaughter of the animal signified the consequences that would befall anyone who broke the covenant. The old covenant was sealed by such a sacrifice (Ex 24:8). Now, Jesus's sacrifice enacted the new covenant that had been promised in the OT (Jr 31:31–34). In this covenant God vowed to forgive and forget his people's sins. He also promised to write his law on the hearts of his people so that they will fulfill his righteous demands.

### 2 Corinthians 5:19-20

5:19–21 What Christ did, God did. Christ's death mainly affected the world, that is, human sinners (rather than evil supernatural beings, for whom no divine provision for reconciliation has been made). Christ's death upholds God's righteousness. Trespasses were placed on the one who did not know sin. In return, the righteousness of God is credited (imputed) to all who are in him. The message of reconciliation is known to others only when ambassadors for Christ spread it. The Great Commission is the responsibility of reconciled human beings, not angels (Mt 28:18–20).

### Matthew 5:43-44

5:43 The words love your neighbor appear in Lv 19:18. However, the command hate your enemy does not appear anywhere in the OT. Evidently some of Jesus's contemporaries argued that the command to love your neighbor also implied the opposite—that a person was to hate everyone who was not his neighbor.

5:44–45 Loving enemies and praying for one's persecutors does not make a person God's child. Only rebirth does that. However, the sort of forgiving love Jesus mentions displays your family resemblance to the heavenly Father, and thus serves as a sign to your true identity. God blesses both the evil and the good with sun and rain.

**Ephesians 2:19**

Foreigners means short-term transients, nonresidents with no rights. Strangers is a similar word, pointing to resident foreigners who had settled permanently in the country of their choice but who nevertheless had only limited rights. These terms described the Gentiles' position before Christ. Fellow citizens . . . and members are terms that picture the Gentiles' new position. Now they enjoy all the privileges of God's household, where "household" describes their togetherness and inclusion. Believers are adopted into God's family and are united with the saints of every era—past, present, and future.

**James 1:27**

1:26–27 James made an observation about true religion. Just as the hearer looks in a mirror and forgets his own face, so the person who refuses to hold his tongue is deceived about his faith. He hears and talks, but he does not act on what he has heard. James's definition of pure and undefiled religion is based on action, not heedless hearing and meaningless lip service. Care for orphans and widows has always been a special concern of God's (e.g., Ex 22:22–24; Dt 10:18; Is 1:17).

## WEEK 5

### Philemon 4-5

4:4–9 In this section Paul approached peace from two perspectives—peace within troublesome circumstances (vv. 4–7) and constructing an environment of peace (vv. 8–9).

4:5 Graciousness implies selflessness and respect for others (cp. 2:1–4). Seldom mentioned in Paul’s writings, graciousness is expected of believers and Christian leaders (cp. 1Tm 3:3; Ti 3:2). Be known indicates it is part of the church’s reputation. The Lord is near reminded the Philippian believers of Christ’s unseen presence. It also reminded them of his return.

### Romans 15:5-6

Paul’s prayer is that God will bring these house churches of Rome to the place of harmony, love, and unity that will enable them to best honor God.

### Philippians 2:1-2

Four if statements in these verses form the basis of Paul’s appeal. These phrases express conditions that are assumed for the sake of argument. Both Paul and his readers will be inclined to believe the truth of these conditions. Make my joy complete, not “make Paul happy,” reminded them that their steadfastness completed God’s call on his life. Four actions on the Philippians’ part explain what Paul meant. Two verbs translate the Greek word *phroneō*—thinking and being intent on. Beyond mere “thinking,” this addresses values. The Philippians were to value the same way and with one purpose. Between these two, Paul included shared love and spirit.

**1 Corinthians 13:4-5**

Paul personifies love in order to show its daily character and choices. Love is not self-centered but other-focused.

**Ephesians 5:18b-20a**

5:18 Paul's imperatives contrast the differences between being under the influence of wine, which leads to reckless living, and being under the influence of the Spirit, which results in joyful living. The commands are plural; thus the commands refer not merely to individuals, but to the corporate community of faith.

5:19–21 The Spirit's fullness is demonstrated in spiritual understanding, praise, and thanksgiving that are constant and comprehensive. The church that is filled with the Spirit will be characterized by praise and thanksgiving to God. Beyond that there will be evidence of self-control, mutual encouragement, and mutual submission, which are the opposite of rudeness, haughtiness, and self-assertion.



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