

PURSUING LOVE

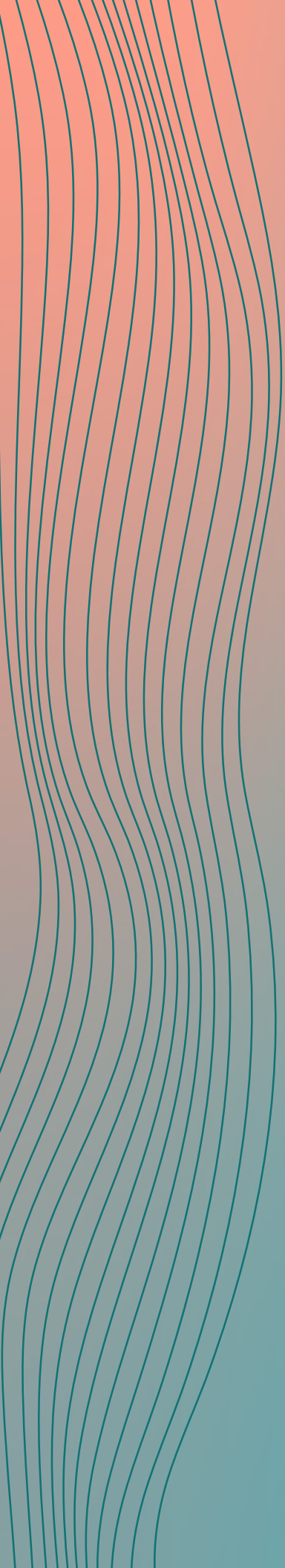


ALLIANCE CHURCH



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“Our supreme model for unity is the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are completely unified as one. God Himself is the highest example of sacrificial love, humble other-centeredness, and perfect harmony.”

- Rick Warren

WEEK ONE

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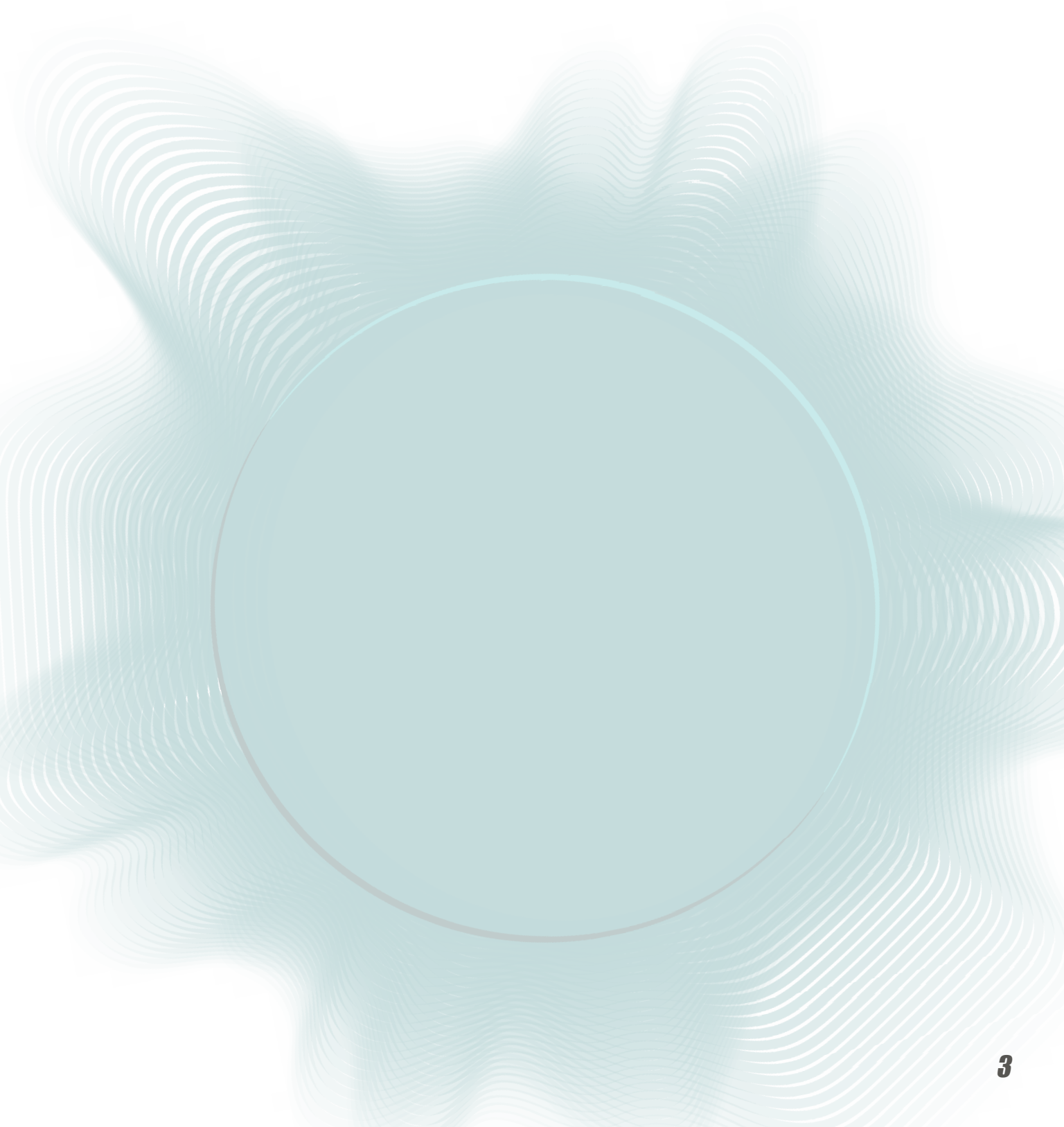
WEEK ONE

MESSAGE TITLE

PASTOR

KEY PASSAGE(S)

NOTES





**LOVE
BEFORE
TIME**

WEEK 1 — DAY 1

READING: *Genesis 1:26, Matthew 3:13-17*

Do you ever think about what God was doing before He created the universe? You might wonder if He was lonely. Even for a perfect and limitless Being, the idea of eternity alone doesn't sound like heaven (pardon the pun).

But God wasn't alone—and He didn't create us out of need for somebody to love. Before the universe began, God experienced community of His own. Scripture clearly upholds that God is one God in three persons, whom we call the Trinity. This week, we will be looking at the significance of this doctrine for our lives.

It is important to note that God is not one God in one person who just so happens to wear three different hats at different times. That's a heresy! And God is not three separate gods—each independent of the other. That's also a heresy. God is not three persons who are each 33.33 percent God, which would mean that none of them are fully God, but combined they are completely God. Again, heresy!

Scripture shouts that there is one God in three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)—each 100 percent God and interdependent with the others. It may be impossible for us to fully understand, but it's true all the same. He has existed through eternity in perfect community. Evidence of this is found in Isaiah 55:1-3, Isaiah 1:18, and Revelation 3:20.

The Father sent His Son to pay your way into a relationship with Himself, and the Spirit calls and seals the invitation. Before we go any further, perhaps the most important question you could tackle is this: have you accepted His invitation?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. There is a significant beauty to the fact that, in our finite human capacity, we cannot fully comprehend the doctrine of the Trinity. How does this mystery of God make you feel about Him?
2. How does the fact that God has never been without community testify to the value of being in community? What value do you place on your relationships with God and with others?

WEEK 1 — DAY 2

READING: *John 3:16-21, 1 John 4:7-8*

On occasion, someone will ask if Allah (the god of Islam) is the same as the Christian God. The answer: not according to Islam's own sacred text: "Say not 'Trinity.' Desist; it will be better for you. For God is one God. Glory be to Him: (for exalted is He) above having a son" (Surah 4.171).

According to Islam, there was a time their god (Allah) was completely alone, having no one to love.

In contrast, our God's Word declares in 1 John 4:7-8 that God is love—in other words, love is not only something God does; love is something He is. If He is ever not loving, He ceases to be God. That's one reason the doctrine of the Trinity matters: Love has always existed within and between the persons of the Trinity. Precisely because God is triune, He has always loved.

We see evidence of this in Jesus's prayer in John 17:24-26. He speaks about knowing the Father and being loved by Him before the world ever began. Since Jesus is eternal, God has always been in a "Father-Son" relationship. Always!

God knows how to love well. He has never not been loving. And this same God deeply loves you! He has always known you, even before you were born, and He wants you to be part of His family.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Read John 17:24-26.
2. The doctrine of the Trinity bears witness to God's eternal, unwavering, and perfect love. How does this witness fortify your trust in God's deep love for you?
3. How does the Trinity set Christianity apart from other religions?

WEEK 1 — DAY 3

READING: *John 14:31*

Why did Jesus give up His life for your sins? It may not be what you think. It goes back to what we've learned about the Trinity.

In the upper room, talking to His followers about His impending death, Jesus said: "... but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (John 14:31 ESV).

According to Jesus, His sacrifice was a sign to the world that He loved His Father—not simply that He loved us. Of course, He loves us greatly (John 15:12-14), but don't miss His first love! The Bible also affirms the Holy Spirit's participation in this eternal and perfect loving relationship.

This inter-trinitarian love is absolutely mind-blowing. Think: what would a community of perfect love look like? Perfect submission to one another, perfect collaboration with one another, 100 percent care and concern for the welfare of each other, zero hidden agendas, zero dysfunction, zero angry outbursts or selfishness or envy or passive-aggressive behavior. Zero jealousy. No hurt feelings. There would be no need for forgiveness, but if there was it would be doled out in unlimited grace—immediately. No grudges. No snide comments or silent treatments or manipulation. Ever. No suspicions, critical spirits, or negative words. Wouldn't it be amazing to live in such a community?

This is the sort of community He was envisioning when He founded His church.

We've got a long way to go. But that's our goal.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How has your church participation reflected this kind of love?
2. Consider praying this: "Lord, help me to know and be awed at the love that exists within You. Help me to know and be awed at your love for me!"

WEEK 1 — DAY 4

READING: *John 17*

John 17 shows us Christ's longest recorded prayer. In verse 20, He has just finished praying for His apostles when He changes gears:

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us..."

What exactly does He mean by the phrase, "that all of them may be one"? We need to look at the text closely and think. Whatever this "oneness" is, it is remarkably like what Jesus has with His Father: "just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us."

Jesus clarifies what He is referring to just a few verses later. "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them" (John 17:25-26).

This oneness that Christ requests in prayer for us is the same oneness of love that He has with His eternal Father. He has created us, His church, that we may reflect the love of the Trinity! His primary vision for the church is not busyness, programs, or singing for its own sake, but ultimately, love. If that sounds a bit too soft and emotional for you, then perhaps you need some schooling in what love really means.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How does the secular world define love?
2. What can we learn from the doctrine of the Trinity about love?

WEEK 1 — DAY 5

READING: *John 17:20-21*

Let's review what we've covered this week:

Our God is a triune God! He has never been alone and has always existed in the loving community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Our God is love, and He needs to be in community to be a loving God. This community of the Trinity is one of perfect love--we can't imagine it.

This God wants us to join with Him in a relationship of love!

Our God has created His church to model the love He has within the Trinity.

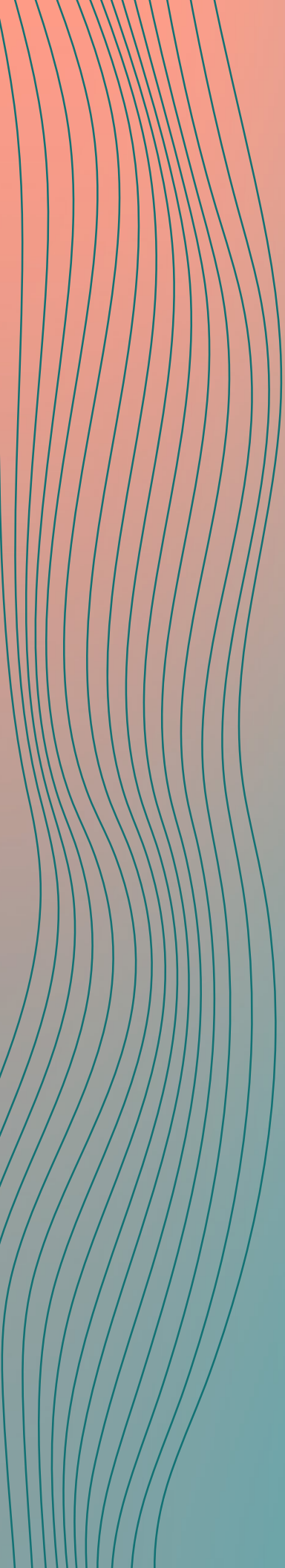
He wants His church to reflect His love for more than just our joy. In John 17:20-21, Jesus prays, "My prayer is not for them alone, I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

This aligns with Jesus's words in John 13:35: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

The reason He desires His church to love is because He knows that such an environment reflects Him and is the most compelling witness to the world—way beyond what we could do alone!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why is the doctrine of the Trinity important when it comes to understanding God's love and how to love others well?
2. Why is love the primary way we can witness to the world?

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“Those in the circle of Christ had no doubt of His love; those in our circles should have no doubt about ours.”

- Max Lucado

WEEK TWO

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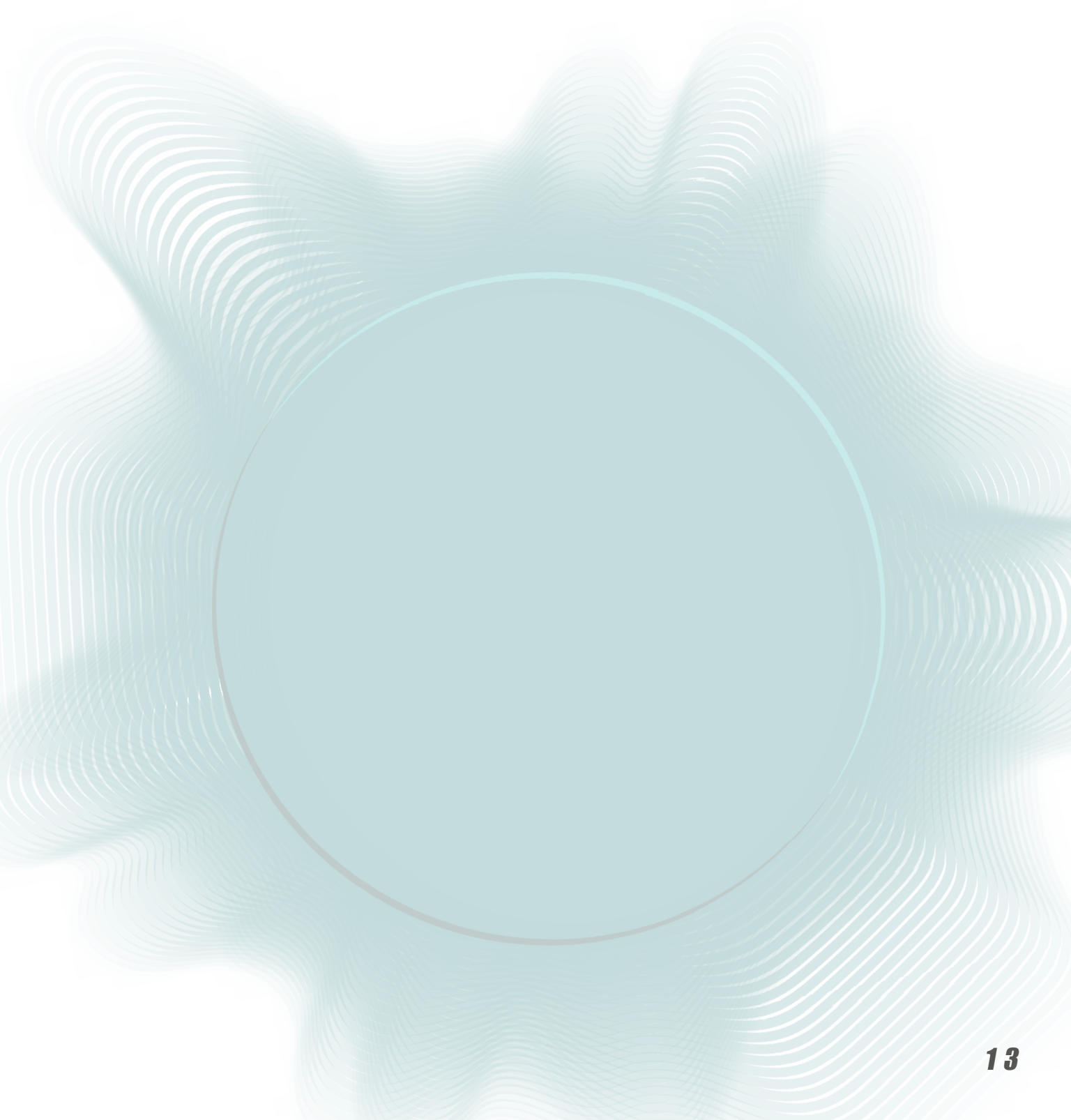
WEEK TWO

MESSAGE TITLE

PASTOR

KEY PASSAGE(S)

NOTES





***PRAYING
FOR LOVE***

WEEK 2 — DAY 1

READING: *Ephesians 2:14; 3:14-15*

Jesus died to reconcile us not only to God, but also to each other. We are redeemed for relationship with God and one another—which sounds great in theory, but living it out is another matter.

The early church struggled with this more than we realize. Consider how two completely different people groups—the Jews and the Gentiles—were called to grow the newly founded Church. The Jews and Gentiles ate with different foods, dressed differently, and more significantly, had different rituals and ideas of “righteousness.”

The Jewish people were designated as God’s chosen people for hundreds of years and given special access to God’s presence. The Gentiles were the “new kids on the block” and showed little appreciation and understanding of the Jews’ longstanding religious traditions. We cannot underestimate the depth of hostility between the two groups. Even so, Jews and Gentiles were called to make up the Ephesian church. Paul addresses this hostility in chapter 2 of his letter.

The Jews and the Gentiles had little in common, but through the redemption of Jesus Christ, all has changed. Through Christ’s sacrificial death “His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity of the two... to reconcile both through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility” (Ephesians 2:15-16).

Redemption in Jesus is the greatest connection, available for all different people. Paul follows up his teaching with a prayer in Ephesians 3:17-21: “for this reason, I kneel before the Father from Whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name...” showing intercessory prayer is one of the important ways we can cultivate unity.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. From whom are you disconnected? How can you pray for them in a meaningful way?
2. How does our redemption in Jesus help us build connections with people different from us? (Hint: Ephesians 3:14)

WEEK 2 — DAY 2

READING: *Ephesians 3:16*

Sometimes relationships can take a lot of work. Loving Jesus can be the easy part. Loving others, especially those that are different from us, is hard. God's commands for unity, humility and service can be exhausting and often overwhelming.

That's why Paul's prayer for the believers in Ephesus is so meaningful. He begins by asking for the inner strength needed to live the way we are called to live with others. Paul prays specifically for strength "according to the riches of His glory" (3:16 ESV). Paul isn't asking for a portion of human strength, but strength in proportion to God's riches.

Paul's prayer for strength is in line with God's abundance and ability rather than our lack and limitations. Indeed, our love is limited and selfish. God's love is infinite and sacrificial. God's love is inexhaustible and the more we need, the more there is available.

In a study on this passage, J. Edwards reminds us that this strength is not based on our behavior, church attendance or volunteer service. We need to remember it is through God's grace and our faith, in spite of our brokenness and weakness, that we are able to be a vessel for His power.

How are we strengthened? Our "inner being" is where we meet God and where we are redeemed. Strength comes from yielding our struggles in faith to our capable God. Spending time in prayer and nourishing our souls with the Word of God also gives us the inner strength to deal with hard relationships. The Word of God is the tool of the Spirit. He will lead us in what to do and give us the strength we need to do it!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is a situation or relationship where you need to be reminded of the strength and power of the Holy Spirit available to you today?
2. Do you pray for God to fix a certain situation or relationship in a specific way, or do you pray for God to show up in the way He wants?

WEEK 2 — DAY 3

READING: *Ephesians 2:20-22; 3:17*

It is mind-bending to think about how a holy, almighty, loving God desires to “dwell in our hearts.” John 15 expresses this presence as “abiding” (ESV). On one hand, we are told that Christ dwells in us, and on the other hand we are told to abide in Him. Both “abide” and “dwell” communicate that we are meant to live out our lives with Jesus.

This is not so much a behavior as it is a heart posture. We are to daily choose to yield our minds, hearts and will to Jesus Christ. We are to give Him preeminence as we live our lives. Spending time in God’s Word and prayer are important tools in cultivating this heart posture.

As Christ indwells us, we gain a better understanding of the depth of God’s love for us. We can then accomplish our mission to not only love God, but love others. Love is not just our power source, but is the primary characteristic of Christ followers (John 13:35) because love is who God is (1 John 4:8).

If we are not filled with the love of God then we will be subject to our own faulty definition and weak capability of human love. If God’s love isn’t the anchor in our lives and relationships, division and disunity will surely follow. Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians to be strengthened so that the indwelling Christ can establish them in His love is key both for them and us as we seek to be a unified church that communicates the gift of God’s love and forgiveness to a needy, broken world.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean for Christ to dwell in our hearts?
2. What difficult person or group of people can you pray for, asking for God’s strength to love them well? Consider praying that they, too, would grow in their understanding of God’s love.

WEEK 2 — DAY 4

READING: *Ephesians 3:18-19*

Worldly culture tells us we are to cut difficult people out of our lives, but Jesus does just the opposite. Romans 5:10 says that while we were His enemies (more than just difficult) He chose to pursue us and reconcile us to Himself by dying on the cross for our sins. What amazing love!

Paul teaches us in his prayer for the Ephesians that the more we understand the measure of God's love for us, the more ability or "power" we will have in our lives to love others well (see also Luke 7:42).

Consider how God can sometimes allow difficult relationships in our lives to give us a greater picture of what His grace and mercy can look like when we follow His example. Our persistence in finding healthy, God-honoring ways to love others gives us a taste of what God's unconditional love is towards us.

Love is the evidence of His prominence in our lives, not the effect of our own effort to love others. God wants us to be filled with His love. Instead of being controlled by bitterness, rage, or difficult relationships, allow yourself to be controlled by (filled with) the love of God.

And as we experience more of God's loving presence, we will then be motivated to love and pray for others. His love will change our perspective on people and make us more open to others who are different from ourselves. It will take us out of our comfort zones to build new and enriching relationships.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How does Romans 8:31-39 help expand our understanding of God's love for us?
2. What is the nature of the spiritual power for which Paul prays?

WEEK 2 — DAY 5

READING: *Ephesians 3:20-21*

The close of Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:20-21 leaves readers with a sense of hopeful expectancy even in dark times. Many people even quote this verse to ask God to work in their favor. But Paul is not making any request of God in these verses; he is simply worshiping God by declaring His sovereignty, omnipotence and goodness.

Taking time to meditate on God's attributes is important because our faith in the ability and power of our God is strengthened that way. But when things don't go as planned, we need to remember that our agenda is not always God's agenda. We can't often imagine or understand what God is accomplishing. But we can be assured that it is bringing glory to Him.

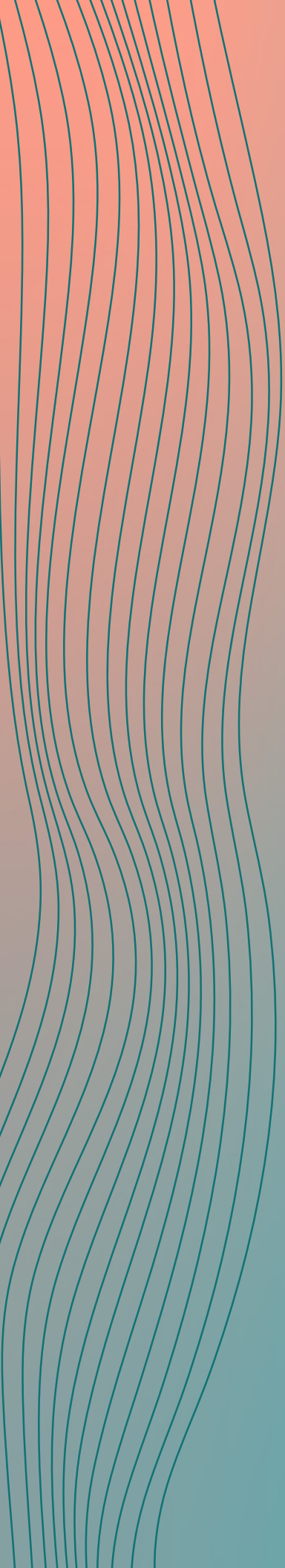
As Christ followers, our identity is not just personal, but is also found in the community of the Church (Ephesians 2:21-22). And as we pursue the love of the "indwelling Christ," Paul says God will be glorified in the Church throughout all generations forever and ever. All the division and broken relationships of the past will not compare to the unity we will have for all eternity.

I find it sobering that in Revelation 2:1-5 (ESV), when Jesus is speaking to the churches, He says this about the Ephesians, "...you have not grown weary. But I have this against you; you have abandoned the love you had at first. Repent...otherwise I will come to you and remove your lampstand..."

May we not give up praying for God's lavish love to operate in ourselves and in our church, for the sake of His glory for ever and ever!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are some ways you can ask God to display His power in exceeding abundance in your personal life, the lives of others, and in the church?
2. What have you learned about what to pray for from Ephesians 3:15-21?

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“Believers are never told to become one; we already are one and are expected to act like it.”

- Joni Eareckson Tada

WEEK THREE

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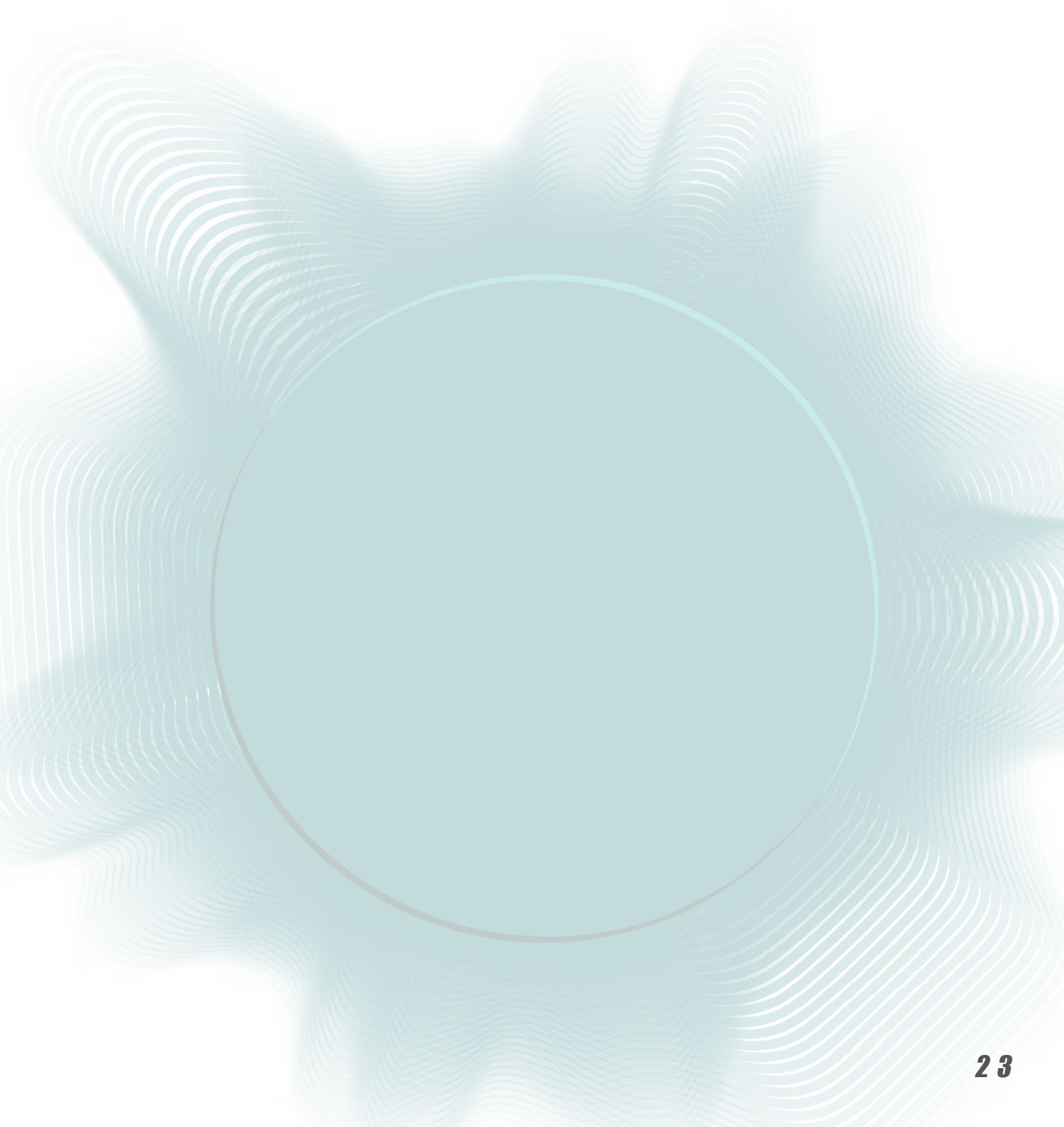
WEEK THREE

MESSAGE TITLE

PASTOR

KEY PASSAGE(S)

NOTES





***LOVE THE
BODY OF
CHRIST***

WEEK 3 — DAY 1

READING: 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27

Belonging to a group is part of what it means to be human. People join groups to relate with others who are like-minded and share common interests. We want to feel belonging, whether from within family, a sports team, or an ethnic group. It's where we often find our identity.

The church, though, has greater significance than any of these groups. God's Word most frequently describes the church as "the Body of Christ," and Jesus as the "Head" of the body (Colossians 1:18). By labeling the church as Christ's Body, Paul communicates two significant truths about the purpose and value of the church. His followers, the people who choose to put their faith in and surrender their lives to Jesus, are identified as "His Body."

As His Body, the church is to do the work of Jesus in the world. All members of the church are called, gifted, and commissioned to live fully under His leadership together.

Belonging to a church involves more than our attendance, our tithe, or our worship preferences. We are called together to be the hands and feet of Jesus for our broken world and for each other. How many times have you wished to feel the arms of God around you? How many times would you have liked to see God work in your life? He can fulfill those desires through a churchgoer who prays with you, provides for one of your needs, or gives you a smile.

Finally, because the church belongs to Christ as His Body, it has profound worth. As members of the church, we are treasured and loved—so much so that one way we can actively love Jesus is to love His church.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How can you be the hands and feet of Jesus?
2. How has the church helped you understand God's love for you?
3. In what ways can you show your love for Jesus by loving the church?

WEEK 3 — DAY 2

READING: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

On this side of eternity, there is no perfect church. In fact, the church of ancient Corinth is a perfect example of an imperfect church! One of their biggest struggles involved its various factions related to worldly concerns.

We, too, struggle with divisiveness and worldly influences. Politics, pandemic policies, and culture wars too often got the best of us. We shouldn't compromise on truth during disagreements, but we can acknowledge that some of us have been hurt by being part of an imperfect church. Many Corinthian congregants would be able to relate.

Paul addressed these painful divisions in 1 Corinthians 12 by reminding them that they are still called to be the Body of Christ. The body metaphor illustrates several guiding principles.

The first principle: we cannot live in isolation from other believers. People who stop connecting with a church cite various reasons, from busy schedules or boredom to hurt feelings. Ultimately, however, Christians who no longer attend church have lost the vision for the value of church participation, and instead focus on worldly and selfish concerns.

If every believer is truly considered part of the Body of Christ, then the arm cannot say "I don't need my fingers anymore." Neither can the toe live when detached from the rest of the body. It's too ridiculous to think about. And it's just as nonsensical to suppose that we can give up on church and spiritually thrive on our own (12:15).

Feeling resistant to functioning as part of the Body does not make someone any less a part of the Body, or any less responsible for serving in it. Ultimately, isolation hurts not only yourself, but the rest of the Body of Christ as well.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What challenges do you face when it comes to faithful participation in your local church?
2. What motivates you to attend church?

WEEK 3 — DAY 3

READING: 1 Corinthians 12:12-28

The metaphor of the church being the Body of Christ leads to a second principle: we must operate in unity. Note that unity does NOT mean uniformity. Again, think of our physical bodies. We are not all arms or legs. We all have different responsibilities and functions, but if we don't work together, we become spastic (a medical term that describes a lack of coordination and resistance to movement). How effective can a "spastic" church be?

Being part of a body also means that every member is equally important. "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (12:26). Paul needed to remind the Corinthians of this because they believed people with certain spiritual gifts were more important than others. They saw people with some of the more visible, "flashy" abilities and gifts and allowed jealousy and insecurity to form, thus creating fertile ground for church division to take root.

Our resources and gifts are given for the benefit of the church, not for the individual. And it is God who gave us our gifts; we didn't earn them (1 Corinthians 12:11, Ephesians 4:12). Our abilities, or lack thereof, are not about us. They're how we are called to serve one another to better reflect Jesus Himself (Mark 10:45).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How does the body metaphor help you understand the importance of unity?
2. What do you struggle to live out the most when it comes to unity?

WEEK 3 — DAY 4

READING: 1 Corinthians 12:14-20

Every Sunday during the NFL season, we yell in front of the TV, decked out in green and gold. Dedicated fans know every player by name. Some players are more famous than others, but each has a crucial role to play. An injury to one could spell disaster for the game, or even the season.

Like the Packers, each Christian has a unique and vital role to play in the Church. God chooses the team. He assigns each member a role. We have a mission and goal. We train, learn the playbook, practice often, and build spiritual muscle memory. On the field of life, we work together as one unit. Yet biblical unity is not uniformity. The Church was never meant to practice groupthink. God invites people of different ages, ethnicities, genders, backgrounds, and financial circumstances to be part of His Kingdom.

How silly would it be if every Packer player had the same job? If there were eleven receivers? Or if every person was a quarterback? The receiver needs the quarterback to catch the ball. The quarterback needs the offensive line's protection to throw the ball. The team needs the players, coaches, managers, and trainers to each do their part. If every player was the same, there'd be no game to watch. No Super Bowl to win.

Like a football team, we are diverse, yet unified. Equal, yet distinct. Individuals, yet connected. Each complements the other so we can function as one squad. Rather than compete against one another, let's foster a team dynamic that helps us remember the reason we're playing and charge forward together.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What prevents you from working like a team with other believers?
2. What spiritual role has God given you to play? Check out 1 Corinthians 12:6-11, 27-28; and Romans 12:6-8 for ideas.
3. How can you honor the roles of other believers and help struggling teammates while guarding against an attitude of superiority?

WEEK 3 — DAY 5

READING: *John 13:34-35 and Leviticus 19:18*

Getting along is difficult.

But divisiveness is deadly. So deadly that the Apostle Paul warns a pastor friend in Titus 3:10 to “have nothing to do with [divisive people].” And Proverbs 6:16-19 says God hates those that “sow discord among brothers.” God values unity so much that Jesus made it His priority prayer request for His followers (John 17).

John 13:34-35 records some of Jesus’s final words before He went to the cross. It commands us to live out the sacrificial love of Christ towards other believers. He gave His disciples an example earlier on in chapter 13 when He washed their feet, and later, when He demonstrates His love by going to the cross.

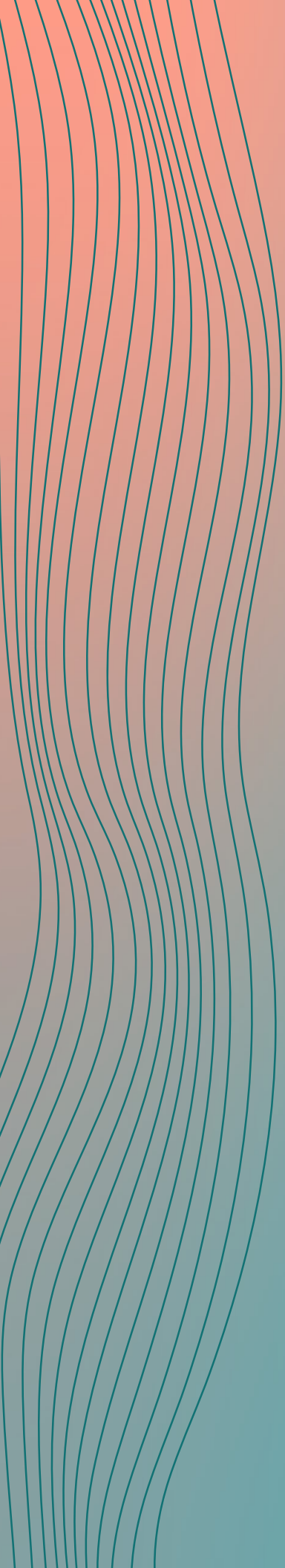
This command also instructs us to live on the love of Jesus. It’s hard to love like Jesus—and impossible if we haven’t experienced His love for ourselves. But we can experience the love of Jesus by asking and trusting Him to show us His love in our lives and His Word. And even though the church is imperfect, oftentimes God shows His love through other believers.

Against all the hostility and divisiveness in this world, a unified church practicing love like Jesus did will inevitably be appealing—and unusual. Something a world thirsty for love would want to check out. And that is exactly what Jesus confirms next. Our unity and love for one another is the defining characteristic that identifies believers and welcomes others closer.

One cannot underestimate this “new command” on which we are to build our Christian fellowship. When the depth of love is true, it is the final apologetic.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of attitudes and behaviors can cause divisiveness?
2. How can you experience more of God’s love for you?

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“Justice without love is legalism; faith without love is ideology; hope without love is self-centeredness; forgiveness without love is self-abasement; fortitude without love is recklessness; generosity without love is extravagance; care without love is mere duty; fidelity without love is servitude. Every virtue is an expression of love.”

- Richard Rohr

WEEK FOUR

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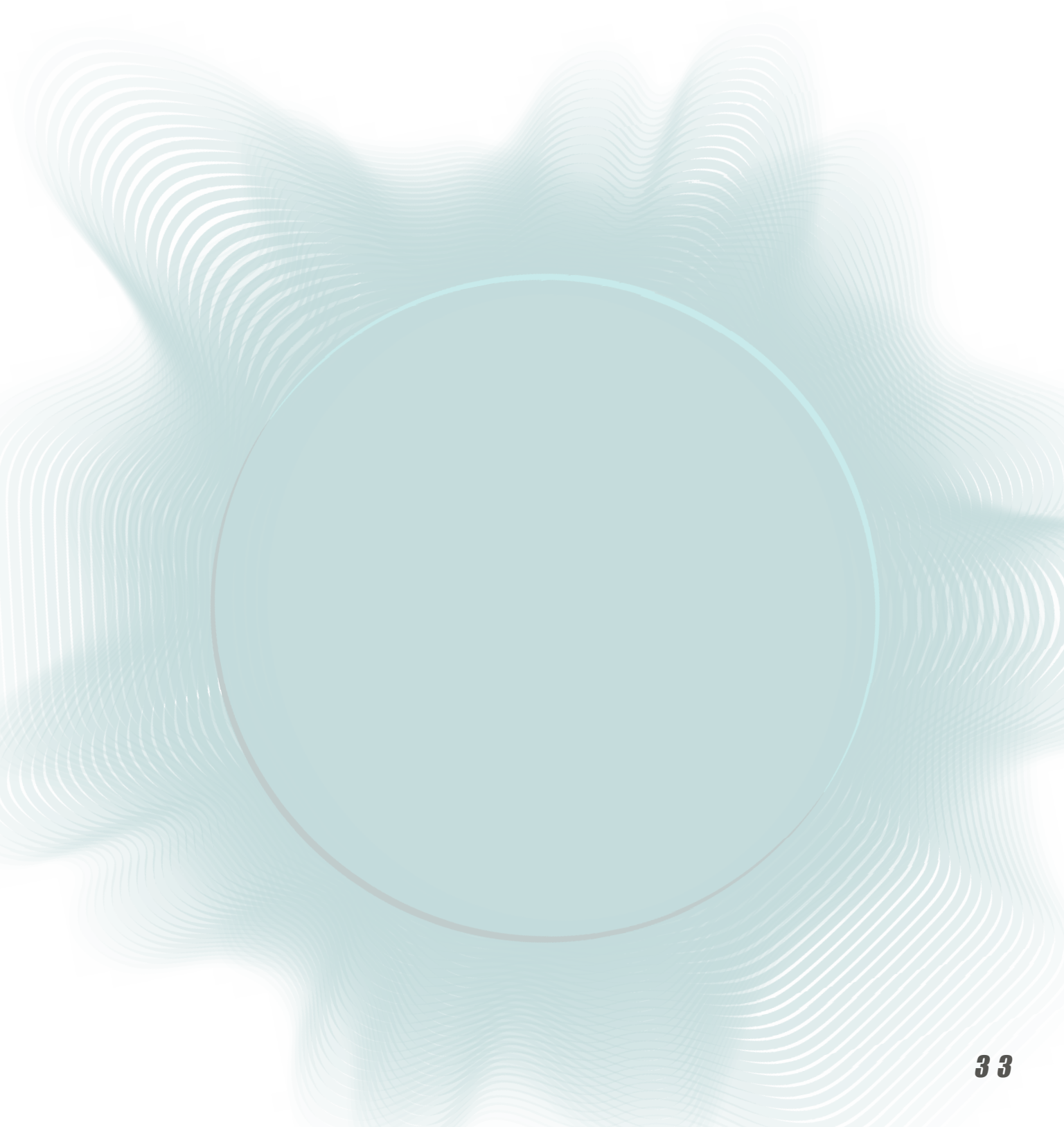
WEEK FOUR

MESSAGE TITLE

PASTOR

KEY PASSAGE(S)

NOTES





***THE
ULTIMATE
REALITY***

WEEK 4 — DAY 1

READING: *1 Corinthians 13:1-3*

Paul wrote “the love chapter” in 1 Corinthians 13 to communicate a vital message to the entire church, not to give us something nice to read aloud at weddings. It is the remedy Paul gives to the Corinthian church—which was the most dysfunctional church in all of the New Testament!

Paul is not writing about a sentimental love or a physical love. If so, he would have used the Greek word *eros* (a type of love that takes for oneself). Or, he would use *philia* (a love of friendship with both giving and taking). Instead he uses the Greek word *agape*, which is a love that gives sacrificially and never takes. The supreme measure and example of *agape* love is God’s love (John 3:16).

Chapter 13 transitions Paul’s discussion on the spiritual gifts to the proper application of these gifts. The entire letter hinges on this chapter, in which he emphasizes love as the very heart of ministry and spiritual life. The problems in the Corinthian church ultimately arose because pride, selfishness, and jealousy motivated their Christian service and testimony instead of *agape* love.

The Corinthians demonstrated that it is possible to have spiritual gifts (abilities) without the fruit (character) of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). The gifts of the Spirit do not guarantee that you are walking in obedience. Even Satan can imitate spiritual gifts (2 Corinthians 11:14)—but never authentic sacrificial love.

Love should be the controlling reality in all spiritual life, not “success.” Paul uses strong language to communicate that action without love is useless, and that a lack of love doesn’t merely diminish our impact—it eliminates it.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are some dangers of believers who have attractive gifts and influential ministries but show little godly love or character?
2. Things that were flashy, exciting, and powerful captivated the Corinthians more than genuine love. In what ways do you see this tendency in yourself? In the church?

WEEK 4 — DAY 2

READING: 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

On one cool autumn day, my husband's childhood dream came true: we bought a boat. In anticipation of summer, we washed it, waxed it, filled it with gear, and dreamed of our first trip to the lake. Now, how silly would it have been if we left it polished and pristine in the driveway? If we did all that visible work but never started the motor inside?

The Corinthian believers expected the Christian life to be attractive, powerful, and profitable. They believed knowledge, spiritual gifts, and exceptional sacrifices would earn them prestige and praise among believers. They may have considered themselves to be spiritually mature, but Paul reminds them that their behavior indicated otherwise. Like a boat without an engine, they were missing the very thing that makes the church act like a church: love. Striving for the best, they missed the greatest prize of all.

The true sign of spiritual maturity is not our knowledge of the Bible, how much we volunteer, or the extent of our generosity. It's the love we have for God's family. Jesus said the world will know we are His disciples by the way we love one another (John 13:35). Our witness hinges upon our spiritual family dynamics.

We can spend all our energy on "Christian" things and still miss the mark. Like shining a boat in the driveway, ministering without love makes our work meaningless. One day, our gifts, efforts, and ministries will end. But how we love one another will remain. Let's embrace God's way of living and relating, and make love our motivation, method, and goal.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you measure your spiritual maturity? Are you prioritizing what you do for God publicly over growing in the characteristics listed in Galatians 5:22?
2. What would it look like to love other believers with your speech, thoughts, attitudes, and behavior this week?

WEEK 4 — DAY 3

READING: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

We are told to “love one another” in a variety of places in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 provides advice for ways we should do this. In these four verses, Paul uses 15 characteristics to describe the kind of love that is not passive, but takes action. Verse 7 summarizes the section in this way: “Love always hopes, love always perseveres.”

This love prefers to give the benefit of the doubt, rather than cultivate cynical suspicion. This doesn’t necessarily mean believing in a person’s goodness, but it does mean believing that as long as God’s grace is operative in our lives, human failure is never final. Love remembers that human failure will never have the final say, so it keeps hoping in God’s good and loving purposes at work in our lives.

Love perseveres and endures. No one can kill it. The Greek word used for “persevere” can also refer to “soldiering on” in battle. Love is something we must fight for and discipline in ourselves. It is not a warm fuzzy feeling.

George Matheson was a brilliant preacher who fell in love with a young woman that later rejected him because he was going blind. Years later he wrote a hymn in memory of that rebuff: “O Love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in Thee; I give Thee back the life I owe, that in Thine ocean depths its flow, may richer fuller be...” Even in heartbreak and disappointment Matheson soldiered on. In spite of human rejection, he chose to live faithfully by resting in God’s love.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Which one of the 15 characteristics in today’s passage do you struggle with the most? Why is that?
2. To what problematic relationship in your life could you apply any one of the 15 characteristics of love?

WEEK 4 — DAY 4

READING: 1 Corinthians 13:7

A husband works late and doesn't text. His wife tells herself: "He doesn't care how much effort I put into preparing dinner. Our family time isn't important to him." A wife orders another Amazon package. Her husband wants to snap: "She keeps spending all our money on frivolous shopping. She doesn't care how hard I work to provide for our family."

When we get irritated with a spouse, it's easy to create stories in our minds: He's selfish. She's disrespectful. And on and on and on. But are those stories true? 1 Corinthians 13:7 indicates that God wants us to believe the best of people. To give them the benefit of the doubt. To put ourselves in their shoes, where we can see and respond clearly—untainted by our biases or personal hurt.

For example, a wife who "believes all things" is willing to consider her husband might be running late because the boss is piling on demands, and he's stressed enough already. So she gives the man a hug, not a lecture, when he finally walks through the door. Likewise, the husband could presume his wife is saving money by buying pantry staples online rather than from the grocery store. He chooses to see those Amazon packages as a sign of her commitment to the family.

The bottom line is this: Your spouse is your friend, not your enemy. You're on the same team! Satan, the real enemy (Ephesians 6:12), delights to see us act unloving. Don't let him win the battle. Believe the best of your spouse, your family members, and others and allow the benefit of the doubt to steer every interaction.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Read Ephesians 6:12.
2. What does it mean to give your spouse, friend, or coworker the benefit of the doubt? How would such a simple shift in thinking change the landscape in your household and other relationships?
3. Agape love is a kick in the face to the Enemy, who desires to sow discord in marriage and other earthly relationships. How might believing the best impact not just your own household but the spiritual battlefield at large?

WEEK 4 — DAY 5

READING: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Just like the Corinthian church, we can all too easily fix our eyes on the temporary and show little interest in the eternal. We can allow ourselves to be influenced by the pursuit of materialism or the accolades and titles of the world. But all these things will pass away. Even the spiritual gifts Paul talks about in Chapter 12 will cease. Only love is permanent. Love never dies.

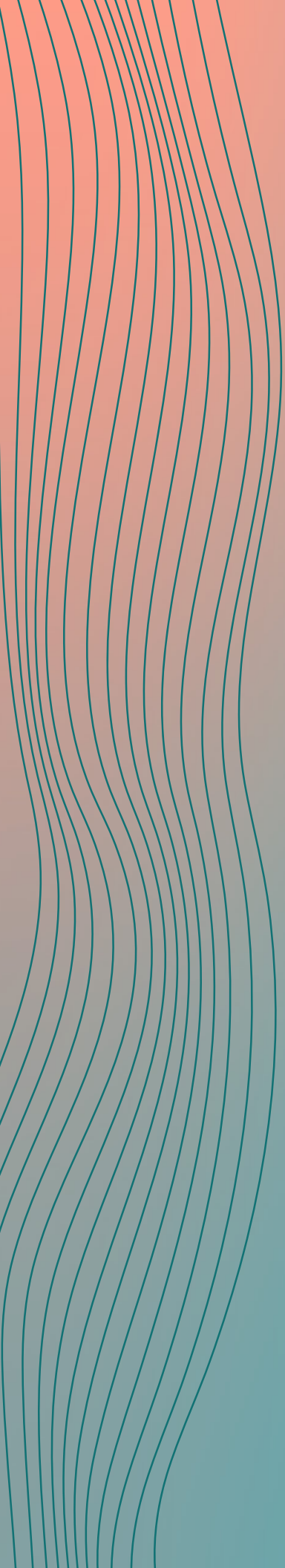
Paul is not speaking about love's successes or failures, but of its permanent divine quality in that it outlasts any failures or successes. Well-known pastor and Bible scholar John MacArthur says in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 13 that love is supreme in the life God gives us because love is the "supreme characteristic of God Himself" (1 John 4:16).

The spiritual gifts, as wonderful as they are, are temporary. Ultimately, it is not our accomplishments, our wisdom, or our successes that will recommend us to our Heavenly Father, it is His love manifested in us through faith that brings us home.

As Paul moves on to address other issues in the Corinthian church, he begins the next section with this: "Pursue love..." reminding them that in all their challenges as a church, lovelessness was their greater problem (1 Corinthians 14:1 ESV). Love is the link that perfects us and connects us with God and one another.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why will spiritual gifts cease to be relevant?
2. It is said that at the end of the Apostle John's life he would repeatedly say at faith gatherings, "Little children, love one another." Those in attendance, annoyed, would question his repetition. Reflect on John's response: "Because it is the Lord's commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient."

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“When the people in a church dwell together in the unity of the Gospel and together pursue the building up of one another in love, they are providing fertile soil for the roots of deep joy.”

- Matt Chandler

WEEK FIVE

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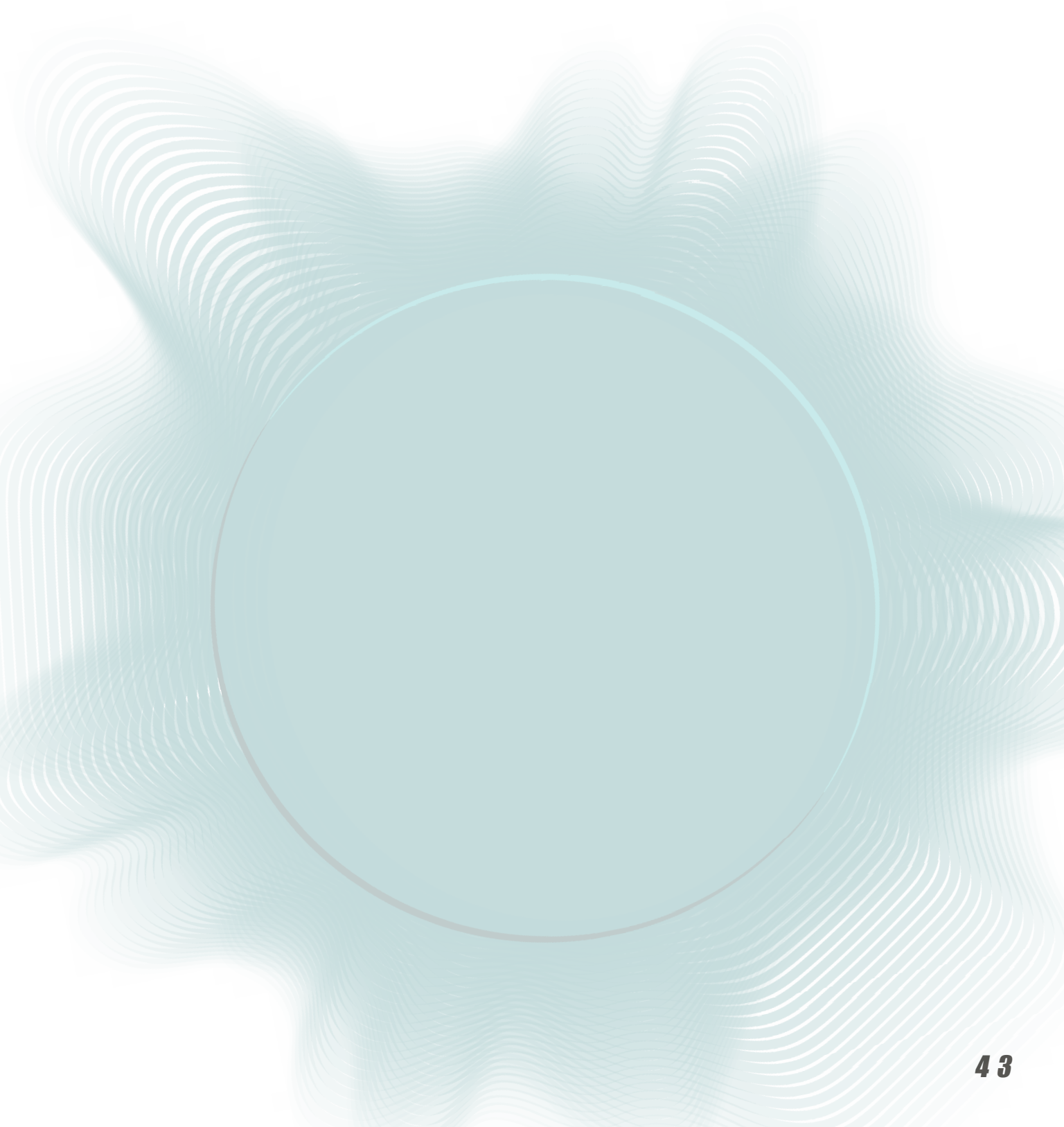
WEEK FIVE

MESSAGE TITLE

PASTOR

KEY PASSAGE(S)

NOTES



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***CONNECTING
WITH ONE
ANOTHER***

WEEK 5 — DAY 1

READING: *Hebrews 10:24-25*

Church social occasions back in the day involved a lot of potlucks with casseroles and pies atop plastic table cloths and folding tables. As good as that was, though, Christian fellowship is more than eating apple pie and enjoying superficial friendship. Biblical fellowship involves deeply committed relationships that remain through thick and thin.

In Philippians 1:5, the Apostle Paul remembers with joy the “partnership” he has with the Philippians in pursuing gospel living. The same Greek word used for “partnership” in this verse is also used for “fellowship” elsewhere. When we work together on ways to further the gospel, we are actively in fellowship with one another.

The body of Christ can’t be all it should be unless we mature in our personal relationships. God has given us each other to help us grow in our faith. The Bible helps us understand what relationships should look like by exhorting us to do the “one anothers” together. In his book *Building Up One Another*, Dr. Gene Getz points out over 40 biblical exhortations to do things “for one another” in fellowship.

Hebrews 10:24-25 is a classic example of this. Its command to “consider” challenges us to take the time to personally know other believers and better understand what each person needs so we can help each other hold fast to the promises and goodness of the gospel. This especially applies in the face of difficult and challenging times.

I still like potluck fellowships, but we should also remember that we need more than food and polite conversation to stay the course and be the body of Christ together.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Read Philippians 1:5.
2. How have you experienced biblical fellowship?
3. How can we better foster space for true biblical fellowship?

WEEK 5 — DAY 2

READING: 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Most of us have seen videos of babies taking their first steps. Many of us have even had the privilege of witnessing those first steps in person. As that little one takes those first few wobbling, uncertain steps, their loved ones wildly cheer them on with words of encouragement. “Come on, Joey, you can do this!” “That’s right, Emma—you’ve got it!” Their loved ones’ words give them courage to make those unfamiliar motions with their feet...and then keep going to master the movement.

Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines courage as “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.” This definition seems accurate for application to the Christian walk as well. We are often called to take steps in our faith that are countercultural, and the journey can be lonely and exhausting.

What a difference it makes, though, to have the encouragement of even one person propelling you to do the right thing! 1 Thessalonians 5:11 gives the exhortation to “encourage one another and build each other up.” Additionally, Hebrews 3:13 says, “But encourage each other daily, while it is still called today, so that none of you is hardened by sin’s deception” (CSB). The encouragement of other Christians not only builds courage within each of us but also helps us grow in wisdom and discernment against sin.

In an increasingly isolated world, let’s use words of encouragement often and with sincerity to spur one another on in our Christian walk each day.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Can you name a particular moment in life where you received encouraging words that had a long-lasting impact?
2. Who in your life can you encourage today with a note, a call, or a conversation?

WEEK 5 — DAY 3

READING: James 5:9

Two golfers share a cart around an 18-hole course. One golfer says to the other, “You’re a lot easier to play with than my old golf partner. That guy was miserable!” “Oh yeah?” the new partner says. “Why’s that?”

“Well, for one thing, the guy would never shut up. Every time I’d tee up and start to swing, he’d make some stupid remark about the grass or the weather and totally break my focus. Then he’d hit half his own balls into the water and expect me to fish them out because he didn’t want to get his shoes wet. What a baby!” The other golfer replies: “Wow, you must really hate that guy.”

“Hate him?!” The man’s eyebrows shoot up. “I don’t hate him! I love him! He’s my dad!”

What do your words say about your attitude toward others—especially those you claim to love most? In James, God tells us not to get in the habit of grumbling or complaining. This admonishment was originally for the early Christians, who had been scattered throughout the region. James wanted these believers to cling to each other and stand united as foreigners in an unbelieving land. Sound familiar?

As our nation becomes increasingly hostile toward Christians, it’s vital that we stand together and support one another. Grumbling and discontentment toward our brothers and sisters in the faith will only dilute our witness to a dark and hurting world.

So next time you’re tempted to complain about someone—especially a fellow believer—ask yourself: Would I say this if God was in the room? Because here’s the truth: He is. The Judge is standing at the door!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Do you have a habit of complaining about people who bother you? What do your complaints reveal about your heart to those listening?
2. If Christians showed kindness to each other rather than bickering over our differences, how might this impact others for Christ?

WEEK 5 — DAY 4

READING: *Colossians 3:16*

Worshipful, communal singing to God is a natural response to Jesus Christ's cosmic restoration at the cross, and perhaps one of the most beautiful expressions of what it means for the church to be unified in Christ. Thus, it is no surprise that when heretical teachings threatened to remove the truth of Christ from the center of the Colossian church, Paul—in emphasis of unity—instructed the Colossians to preserve the gospel by communally singing lyrics of praise and worship to God (Colossians 2:8,16-19; 3:12-16).

That is, worshipful singing to God can serve as a preservative of theological truth and a means for the mutual correction of heresy—whether the lyrics are rooted in the Old Testament Psalms, derived from the hymnic traditions of the earliest Christian churches, or contemporized under the authority of Scripture.

And such worshipful singing to God is all the more valuable when done with one another in community because it brings mutual perseverance and fortification of faith in the church body. Indeed, on the night of His betrayal, Jesus sang a hymn with His disciples (Matthew 26:30), and while imprisoned in Philippi, Paul and Silas sang hymns to God (Acts 16:25).

And this practice is all the more encouraging when understood within an eternal perspective: in knowing that Christ—through His death, resurrection, and exaltation—has reconciled all things to Himself (Colossians 1:19-20). As the Holy Spirit's indwelling of the believer promises (Ephesians 1:13-14), Christ will return in victory, and people of every nation will unify in one heavenly language to worship the Lord forevermore (Revelation 21:24). Oh, what better expression of unity in Christ than believers singing their faith together for the glory of God!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How does singing your faith with others during Sunday worship services encourage you and fortify your faith?
2. Read Acts 16:25. How might you encourage and fortify a fellow believer in their faith today through lyrics of worship to God?

WEEK 5 — DAY 5

READING: James 5:16

Our family served as Alliance missionaries in war-torn Bosnia starting just a few years after the war finished in former Yugoslavia. I remember leaning into our supporting churches early on to ask for prayer for our ministry and family through email. Their prayers carried us through some challenging times.

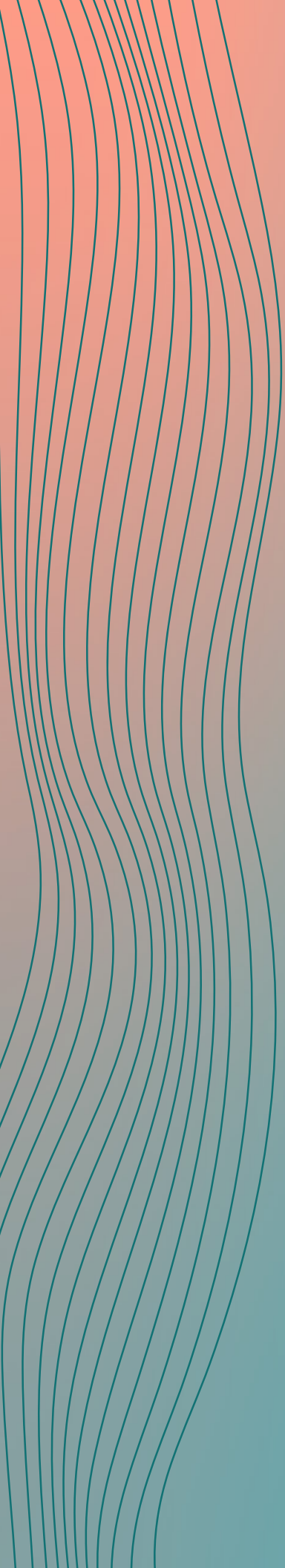
Building a prayer support base is essential for anyone serving in difficult cross-cultural places. Our church is blessed to have a monthly prayer guide to help the congregation pray for our global missionaries. Because I have seen and experienced a wonderful prayer base as a missionary and how this church has rallied in prayer around our “sent ones,” I have increasingly realized how we are all called to build a personal core prayer network. The idea of a core prayer network is for each one of us. Our missionaries model this practice for us, but we can build our own network, too.

We are called to pray for one another in many biblical passages, such as James 5:16, 2 Corinthians 1:11, Ephesians 6:18, 2 Timothy 1:3, and 2 Thessalonians 3:1. Each of these passages point to the reality that God did not create us to stand alone. All of us need prayer warriors in our lives. We are in this life together to have each other’s backs in prayer before our God.

Do you have a group of family and friends who regularly pray for you? Consider who God is calling you to include in your prayer network—those you can lean into for prayer throughout the life-journey to which God has called you. James said it well: “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How have you seen someone’s prayers for you make a difference in your life?
2. Why can it be challenging to consistently pray for someone else’s needs?
3. How has praying for others enriched your own spiritual journey?

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“Sin is almost the only thing we have in common with everyone else, and so at the feet of Jesus where sin is cleansed is the only place where we can be one. Real oneness conjures up for us the picture of two or more sinners together at Calvary.”

- Roy Hession

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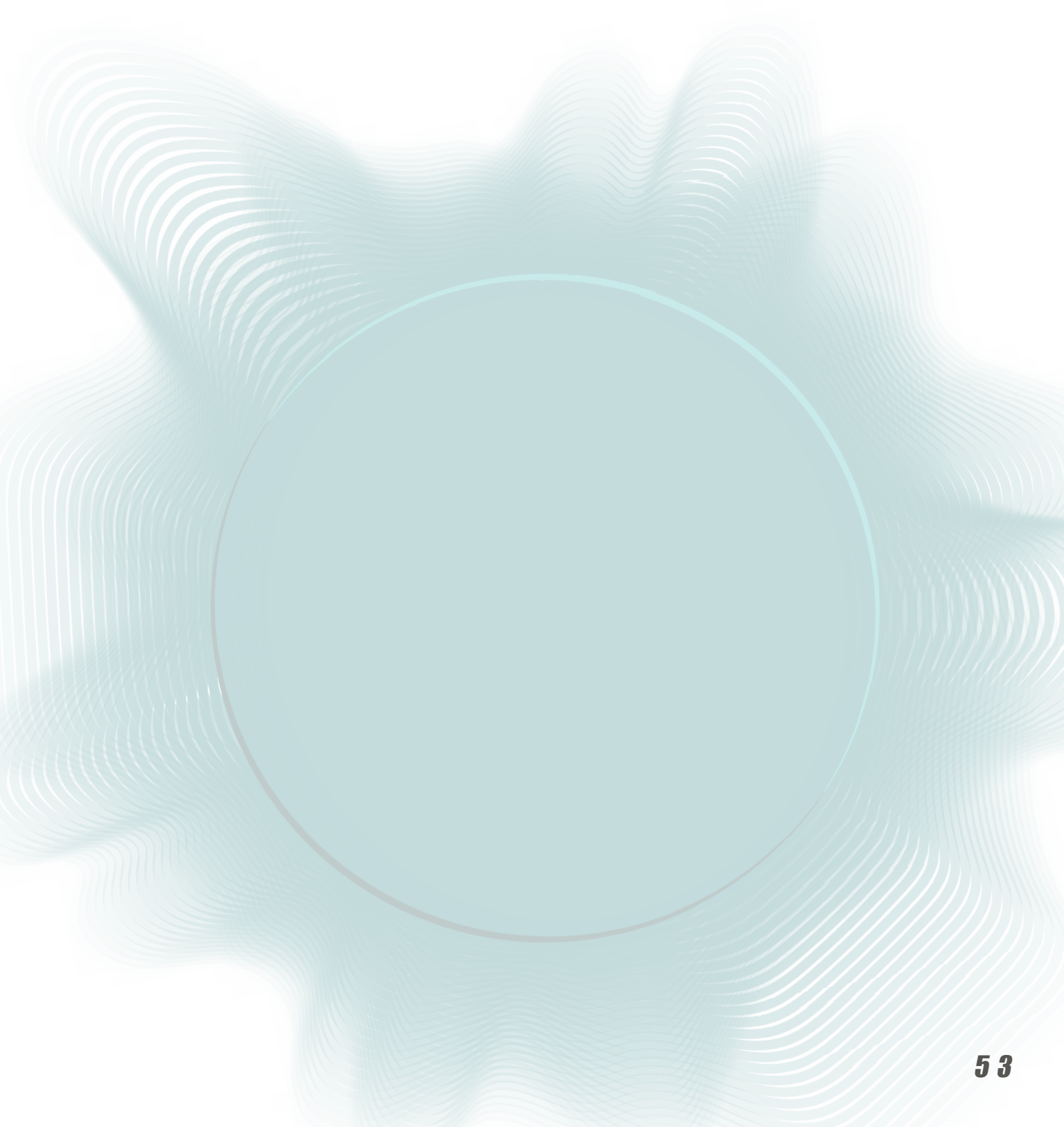
WEEK SIX

MESSAGE TITLE

PASTOR

KEY PASSAGE(S)

NOTES





**LOVING
DIFFICULT
PEOPLE**

WEEK 6 — DAY 1

READING: *Philippians 1:9-10*

How do we love the difficult or dysfunctional people in our lives in healthy, God-honoring ways? One word: boundaries. Boundaries protect the right kind of love and prevent bad behavior from destroying that love.

Boundaries were God's idea. He set boundaries for humans from the very beginning when He told us "no" to eating from the tree of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). When humanity crossed God's boundary and ate of said tree, God established more boundaries that limited access to the Garden of Eden as well as all those rules and laws in the Old Testament. The human race needed to learn how to responsibly and righteously be in relationship with a holy God.

In Lysa TerKeurst's book *Good Boundaries and Goodbyes*, she explains how a relational boundary is about "allowing or limiting access to our emotional well-being according to the level of responsibility people exhibit with that access." Here's what she means. For example, you might have a friend that frequently overshares details of your life with others against your wishes. If you don't want to cut off the friendship, you will have to set a relational boundary by reducing her access to your personal life.

In order to preserve the relationship and protect yourself from getting hurt or angry, boundaries must be established. Don't be surprised if the other person doesn't see your boundaries as a good thing, or if the boundary works, and you lift it, but they go back to their old ways. These are hard things to process, but it doesn't mean that you are wrong to set boundaries. Relationships are hard work. Boundaries are vital for all healthy relationships.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Where do you see a need for boundaries in your relationships?
2. How do you respond when someone puts up a boundary for you?
3. How can the following verses encourage you as you seek to implement boundaries in your relationships? Galatians 1:10, 1 Corinthians 16:13-14, Proverbs 15:1

WEEK 6 — DAY 2

READING: *Ephesians 4:30-32*

When it comes to life and relationships, one thing is inevitable: you get hurt. But what you do with your hurt matters most.

Difficult relationships are often caused by sinful dynamics. Thankfully, God's Word provides us with guidance on how to deal with sin and hurt when it comes to relationships within the church. Confronting others and providing honest feedback on how someone's behavior is affecting you is an act of love. Remaining silent or resorting to flattery only condemns that person to the destructive effects of sin and future heartache. Changing people is God's job; our job is to speak the truth in love and to forgive (Ephesians 4:15).

Forgiveness doesn't mean minimizing the harm done to you. God didn't forgive sin lightly—it cost Jesus His life. Forgiveness means releasing someone from the debt they owe you. You choose to pardon the offense and refuse to punish, retaliate, demand penance, or keep score. Forgiving others means looking to God for justice and waiting upon Him to vindicate us as He deems fit (Romans 12:19-21).

Forgiveness is the shield that protects our hearts from the Enemy's attacks. Bitterly nursing grudges is like handing Satan a weapon he can use to destroy us and the lives of other believers. Unforgiveness is a prison of our own making, but God has given us the key. We can forgive because He forgave us first. May we not disregard or belittle His grace by holding onto our grievances. As beloved children, let's reflect the Father's heart and deal with hurt the way He desires.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What do patterns of unforgiveness look like in your life?
2. Are there people in your life who are unaware of how they've hurt you? How can you confront them gently and honestly and repair your relationship?
3. How can you rely on God for justice rather than demanding emotional payment from them?

WEEK 6 — DAY 3

READING: *Colossians 3:12-14*

When we elevate personal or political issues to a moral level, we make them all about faith when they have little or nothing to do with Jesus. Even in the church, behaviors like favoring some over others, elevating image over maturity, bickering over non-Gospel issues, or shaming those whose faith is weak creep in. Yet if we bite and devour one another, will we not destroy each other (Galatians 5:15)? How will the Good News be appealing if God's family becomes abusive? How will we endure future suffering and persecution if our love for one another grows cold (Matthew 24:12)?

Cancel culture has no place in God's family. We were put together by design. We don't get to choose our spiritual brothers and sisters—God does. And He asks us to "put up with one another" and make peace for His name's sake. In the Kingdom of God, it's a "we, not me" mentality. We're a flock, a body, a city on a hill, a church. As believers, we're connected by something precious and holy—the blood of Jesus—and what God has joined together, no man can tear apart.

God gives us a spiritual family as a shelter in this world. So let's build it up, not tear it down. May we use this time to stick together, not pull apart. To encourage, not bicker. To be thoughtful, not self-absorbed. To be that city on a hill shining God's love and goodness to an increasingly dark world.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How has "cancel culture" or the popular idea of "cutting someone out of your life" influenced your own view of relationships?
2. When have you been tempted to ignore, unfriend, or avoid someone who's also a believer? What motivated this desire or behavior?
3. What would it look like to have a "we, not me" mentality in your relationships with other believers? How would your interactions look different if you treated them like beloved family?

WEEK 6 — DAY 4

READING: 1 Peter 3:9

When somebody cuts you off in traffic, do you smile and wave? Or are you tempted to share a less, uh, friendly gesture? And when your co-worker complains about you to the big boss, do you offer to buy the guy lunch? Or do you secretly imagine him choking on his reheated tacos? What about when that other PTA mom barks orders at you during the carnival fundraiser at school—do you sing her a Broadway show-tune, or would you rather claw out her eyeballs?

Even the sweetest Christian among us still has a sin nature, and our flesh will struggle to speak gently toward rude people. Many of us don't even hesitate to retaliate with nasty words or, at the very least, vindictive thoughts. Yet God says don't—and for good reason: "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing" (1 Peter 3:9).

Unkind people are often forged through unkind circumstances. Somewhere along the way, they learned that the world is an unkind place; therefore, they respond by perpetrating more unkindness. But what if we could break the cycle?

Don't lash back. Pray for them. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Nasty people were made in God's image just like you were, so honor Him by honoring His reflection in every human being, whether crabby or kind. That type of selfless love is powerful, because it's only possible with the Holy Spirit. When we show the same kindness to others that Jesus showed to us—undeserved, sacrificial, selfless kindness—we prove to the world that God is real.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you tend to react to unkind people? Is this response honoring to God?
2. Why does selfless love seem so surprising in today's world?
3. What can you do this week to show God's love to someone who doesn't deserve it? (Remember: you don't deserve it either. That's the beauty of God's love!)

WEEK 6 — DAY 5

READING: *John 15:12*

How do you love people so different from you that they leave you more frustrated than connected? And how do you love someone who can't or won't meet your needs, making you feel unheard, unseen, or unwanted?

Difficult relationships involving a parent, child, sibling, or spouse can complicate these questions further. The more intimate the relationship, the greater vulnerability and capacity for hurt or anger. Investing love into these relationships can seem futile, but God's command is clear: we are to love even those that we find difficult. It can help to remember that we are all difficult in the eyes of God, and difficult people are not an excuse to handle our differences and unmet needs in sinful ways.

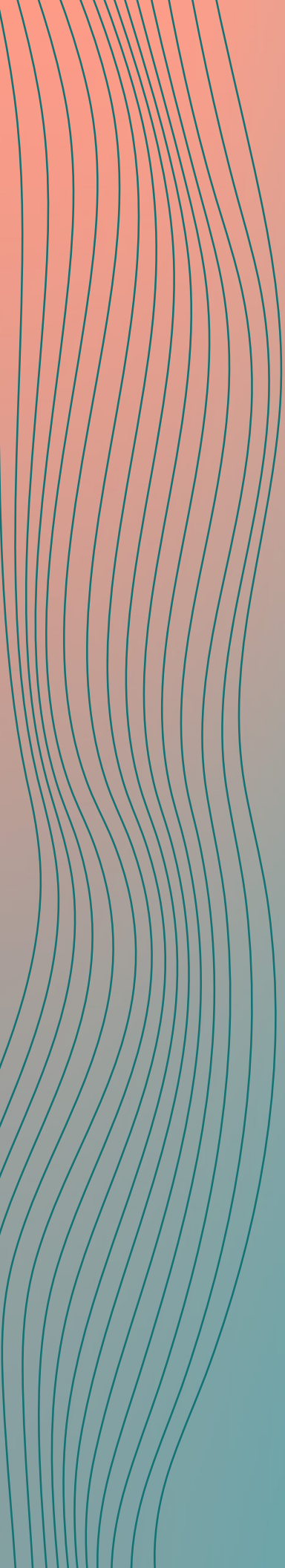
Here are some things to consider.

- Lower your expectations for this relationship. No human can ever meet all your needs. Use this as an opportunity to lean into God's love and claim His promises to meet all your needs (Psalm 23:1, Psalm 63:3, Philippians 4:19).
- Realize human love is limited, selfish, and conditional. God's love is infinite, sacrificial, and unconditional. Ask God to fill you with His love for difficult people. Ask Him to give you "His eyes" to appreciate them (John 15:15-17).
- Be thankful for whatever is good in that relationship and the things you are learning about yourself and about God because of it (Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Of course, this won't be easy. There is often grief for what the relationship could be but is not. However, keep trusting God. If He has allowed this relationship in your life, who knows what kind of redemptive fruit can come from this?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How has God sustained you in a difficult relationship?
2. What are some things that you can be thankful for because of the challenges in this relationship?

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“No one is perfect—there are always going to be little things that people disagree about. Nevertheless, we should always get on our knees together and seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace.”

- John MacArthur

WEEK SEVEN

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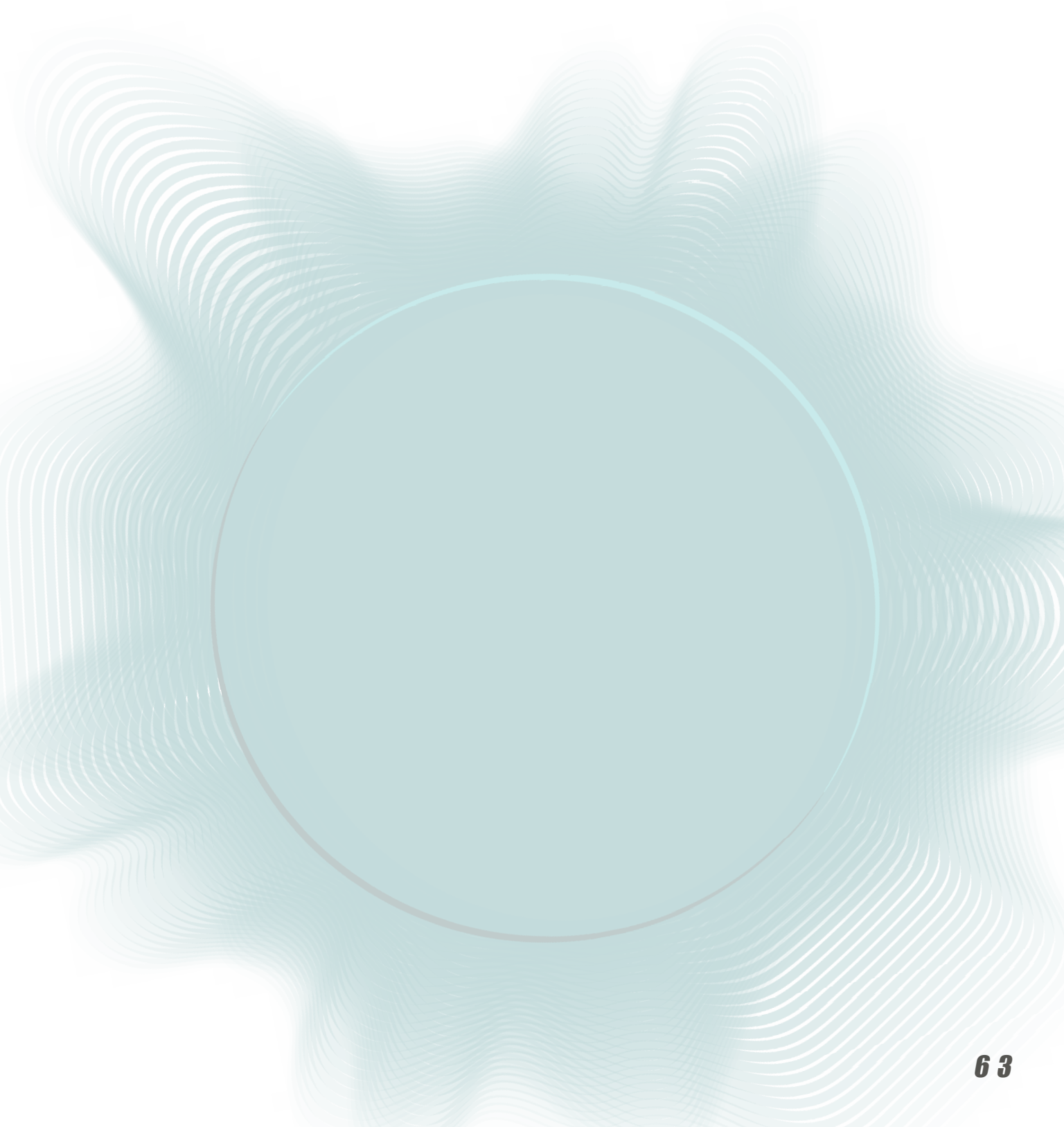
WEEK SEVEN

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PASTOR

KEY PASSAGE(S)

NOTES



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***UNITY
IN HARD
PLACES***

WEEK 7 — DAY 1

READING: *Romans 14:1-4*

When I was young, I was extremely impatient. My grandmother frequently used to say, "Patience is a virtue." I would sarcastically reply, "It's not my virtue, Grandma!" To this day, even though she is no longer alive, I hear her correction ringing in my ears. I still struggle with patience. I get impatient with slow drivers, with people who are self-absorbed, and with picky eaters. I get impatient with my inability to be patient!

Interacting with people who are different from us can provoke impatience. In Romans 14, Paul addresses a conflict between the "weak" and the "strong." The "weak" in verse 1 are Jewish Christians who don't yet understand they no longer must adhere to Jewish dietary restrictions. The "strong" in verse 2 are Christians who realize they can eat anything because decisions concerning food don't have spiritual significance. The food misunderstandings caused conflict for the Christian community in Rome.

When people lose their patience with one another, it inevitably leads to conflict. A source of impatience is a deficiency in understanding the other. In the Christian community, we are called to be patient with one another. As Paul writes in Galatians 5:22-23, the fruit of those walking in the Spirit includes forbearance. We must accept each other's differences with kindhearted patience. It truly is a challenging virtue.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Where do you find yourself being most impatient with people?
2. How can we cultivate patience in our lives?

WEEK 7 — DAY 2

READING: *Romans 14:5-12*

If you look up the definitions for judgment in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, you'll see that the word indicates evaluation, opinion, or discernment. It can also include a judicial component and a reference to the final judgment of humanity by God. In our current context, we often view judgment negatively and we accuse people of being judgmental. We all judge; that's how we perceive information, but what if we left our subjective conclusions to God?

In Romans 14:5-9, Paul expresses how every day, not just sacred days, should be lived in service to God. Both the "weak" and the "strong," those we read about yesterday, are to make their primary focus serving the Lord. They are to live in service of Christ while positively impacting those with whom they are in community. Paul then proclaims that Jesus died and was resurrected to be Lord over all people.

It is because Jesus is Lord over all that everyone will experience the judgment of God. Citing Isaiah 45:23, Paul reminds the Roman Christians that one day every knee will bow before God. It's humbling to recall how each of us will give an account of ourselves before God. He alone has the authority to judge, and so we should place judgment of others in the hands of the only One who has the right to do so.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Is it ever okay to judge people? Reference John 7:24, Romans 12:2, Hebrews 5:14. What about church discipline? (See Matthew 18)
2. How does the assurance of God's perfect justice bring you peace? In what ways does this justice return your focus to serving the Lord?

WEEK 7 — DAY 3

READING: *Matthew 7:1-6*

Years ago, I was going through a spiritual battle and sin was crouching at my door. My mom wisely chose to confront me. She had me over for a lovely lunch and kindly delivered the harsh news that I was playing with fire. She helped me see my blind spot, and to this day I thank God my mom held me accountable!

The warning in Matthew 7:1-2 is often misunderstood. Jesus is forbidding the disciples to judge a person in relation to their eternal destiny, which is why His warning seems harsh. And although the Greek word behind “judge” can mean “discern” or “analyze,” Jesus is not saying Christians shouldn’t discern between good and evil when He explains acceptable judgment.

Verses 3-5 are supposed to reveal the foolishness of hasty judgment. Holding someone accountable to sin can be appropriate, but only after thorough self-examination. The point of verse 6 is that it is inappropriate to give what is holy to what is unclean or to offer wise counsel to hardened hearts, for what is holy is foreign to what is unholy. Jesus teaches not to judge eternal destinies, but to wisely discern sin, both in our lives and others. Holding someone accountable must be done in kindness and with attention to their openness to correction.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Describe how to hold others accountable with kindness.
2. Has anyone tried to hold you accountable? Why did it work or not work?

WEEK 7 — DAY 4

READING: *Romans 14:13-23*

One of my dearest friends is a recovering alcoholic. My son chooses not to drink because he doesn't like how it makes him feel. My husband and I enjoy a fine red wine with our spaghetti. Alcohol is just one of the numerous examples of gray areas: areas where there can be legitimate differences between Christians. So how do we disagree without shattering our unity?

In verse 14, Paul is not talking about sin that is clearly wrong according to Scripture. He is talking about issues of conduct where Christians may differ—those fuzzy gray areas—like Jewish dietary restrictions. Paul teaches that decisions concerning gray areas can be made according to the individual conscience of each person, and that the Holy Spirit is the One who convicts the conscience.

Verse 17 cuts to the heart of the matter by highlighting the fact that gray areas are not at the center of Christian living, nor do they impact salvation. Christians need to be sensitive and respectful of one another's convictions to promote unity within the body of Christ. In addition, we need to exercise our freedom in Christ wisely and charitably. Back in verse 15, Paul proclaims that acting in love is the only way to resolve disagreements over gray areas.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Consider a gray area in which you disagree with another's convictions. How can you wisely and charitably share in the freedom of Christ to restore unity to that relationship?
2. Assess your relationship with the Holy Spirit. Are there any areas in your life where you're choosing to ignore His convictions? Take a moment to bring this sin to the light and make things right with God.

WEEK 7 — DAY 5

READING: *Romans 15:1-7*

Throughout my 40-year journey with the Lord, I have experienced that the more intimate my relationship with God becomes, the more I hear God's call to let go of myself. My daily prayer is, "less of me, Lord, more of you." In our individualistic Western context, which is fed by technology and self-discovery, it is hard to turn our attention outward.

In Romans 15, Paul says that the way of Jesus is to consider others before ourselves. In verses 1-2, Paul reminds the Roman Christians, who have been having dietary disagreements, that they should always evaluate how their behavior might impact the body of Christ. The concern must be to build one another up, so they shouldn't be consumed with themselves.

In verses 3-4, Paul appeals to the example of Jesus, who suffered and died for others. Christians are expected to die to themselves and build one another up. They are to follow Christ's example while looking to Scripture, which is the wellspring of endurance, hope, and encouragement for selfless living. As Paul reminds the Philippians in 2:3-4, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of others." As Christians shed the "me" mentality, God will be glorified!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between selfishness and self-care?
2. How can you be more considerate of those with whom you disagree?
3. What motivates you to live more sacrificially?

The background features a series of concentric, hand-drawn circles that create a tunnel-like effect. The color transitions from a teal hue on the left to a warm orange on the right. The text is centered within this circular pattern.

***MINI-CHURCH
DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS***

WEEKLY QUESTIONS

After each week, review these questions with your mini church:

1. How does this idea apply to people overall?
2. How does this apply to you personally?
3. What does scripture/God say about this topic?
4. Why do you struggle to believe this is true/right/accurate?
5. What would you do differently in light of this? What would you keep the same?

For specific questions that complement our 100x series, visit alliancechurch.org/100xquestions



***THANK
YOU***

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who contributed their time and talent to
this devotional:***

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LOVE LIKE JESUS

God created and saved humans out the overflow of His perfect love—and then He called us to share that love with each other and the world. And for good reason: against all the hostility and hatred in the world, a unified church practicing love like Jesus did will inevitably be enticing. Something a world thirsty for love would want to check out.

Of course, for fallen humans, loving the way Jesus did is difficult—and impossible to do on our own. But that's exactly why Christ's kind of love is powerful: because it's only possible with the Holy Spirit. When we show the same love to others that Jesus showed to us—undeserved, sacrificial, selfless love—we prove to the world that God is real.

