

A Better Way

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JOURNEY CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

All of us have said “something needs to change” at some point. You may find yourself saying it often! We are constantly looking for ways to improve our situation. Maybe you are desiring change in your marriage, singleness, school, job, finances, or parenting. The real question is: What have you changed?

We truly desire change, but the problem is when we look to ourselves to change it. What can WE do to create the change we want? Is it a new spouse? A different schedule? A better job? A different major in school? Another self-help book? We end up feeling like a failure when the change we’re seeking doesn’t come. We’re still left wanting something more. We scroll through our social media thinking other people must have stumbled upon the change we all desire.

Is change something we just stumble upon? Or is it something we are awakened to? Join us for 40 days as we learn change is all about following Jesus. Real, lasting change happens when we are following Him with our whole heart. Throughout these 40 days we are going to look at how every area of your life can be transformed through Christ — spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically, relationally, and even financially. The Gospel of Jesus Christ can change everything.

I believe these next 40 days can completely transform your life. Though there is nothing magical about the number, the Bible reveals God considers 40 days to be a spiritually significant period of time in which people are transformed. In fact, in the Bible, any time God wanted to get His people ready to be used mightily for Him, He took 40 days to prepare them.

If you are faithful and journey with us during these next 40 days, I know God will bring the Gospel to life. You are heading towards an encounter with the living God that will overwhelm you with more joy, engulf you with more hope, and astonish you with more love than you have ever known before. But like any journey, in order to follow Christ, you have to take some faith steps.

I am asking you to commit to the following faith steps as we go through this 40-Day journey together:

Participate in all six weekend worship experiences. Each week, the

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sermons will examine what it means to accept the invitation to follow Christ.

Read the daily readings in the 40 Days devotional. Set aside about 15 minutes at the same time each day to read the text, think about the principles, and allow God to change you as you gain a deeper understanding of Him. Every relationship takes time. Your relationship with Christ is no exception. Guard this time.

Join with others to discuss the week's teachings. True transformation never happens alone, but by challenging each other to seek hard after God. If you are not currently in a small group, you can join one of our 40 Days Short-Term Groups. Visit journeyconnect.org/groups to find out more.

Memorize a simple Bible verse each week from the 40 Days devotional that will help you focus on accepting Jesus' invitation. Each week you will be given a weekly Bible verse to memorize that fits the theme of the week. Write this verse down and hang it someplace where you will constantly see it. This will help you memorize and meditate on the verse throughout the week. Memorizing scripture may seem like a challenge, but I encourage you to take this opportunity to grow deeper in your walk with God through this key spiritual habit.

Sacrifice just one thing during the next 40 Days as a statement to yourself and to God of your commitment to follow Him. Sacrifice helps you to clearly focus on God and allows Him the opportunity to really work in your life. This means that for 40 Days, you will give up something from your everyday life occupies your time in order to free you to spend that time with God.

Celebrate the end of our 40 Day journey together at Consume — a Good Friday worship service. This is a time for you to gather with those who also dedicated the last 40 days to growing deeper in their walk with Jesus Christ.

You never feel more satisfied than when you are walking in God's purpose for your life. My prayer is over the next 40 days, God will use His Holy Spirit, His Word, the community of small groups, and this devotion to show you what it means to follow His calling for your life.

In Christ,

Pastor James Hilton

week one

A BETTER WAY TO LIVE

MEMORY VERSE

“I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

John 10:10

Through Jesus Christ, we not only receive eternal life, but we discover the most fulfilling way to live. Embarking on this 40 Day journey, we will examine what it looks like to live the way Jesus wanted us to live, in the power He provides. Jesus showed us a better way to live life in relationship with God and others. During these 40 days, we will discover the way Jesus taught us to live, in abundance and fullness of life. Jesus’ way of life is not a barrier but illustrates for us liberating truths that guide us to live abundantly.

Jesus didn’t just overcome death to give us an exit strategy to get to heaven someday; He provided an engagement strategy for a fulfilling life right here and now. Jesus came to unveil a better way to live—a life brimming with authentic joy and purpose. Jesus taught us God’s deepest desire is not just for us to be morally upright, clean up our lives, and live more religiously. God longs to have a loving relationship with us through the invitation to follow Jesus Christ.

Thanks to Jesus, the power of sin and the colossal chasm that separated us from living a fulfilled life in relationship with God has been conquered through His sacrificial work on the cross. Following Jesus is more than nodding to doctrines or checking off a rule list; it’s entering into a life-altering relationship powered by His divine love and grace. Through Jesus Christ, we not only have life, but we discover the most fulfilling way to live.

DAY ONE

FULLY LIVE

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read John 10:10

In the chaos of life, it's easy to get lost in the grind of just living. You're busy and life is packed, yet you still feel empty. Amidst the craziness, noise, and pressure, there's this call you can't quite shake off, offering a better way to live. It says, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10)." The voice belongs to Jesus Christ and assures us of His promise of abundant life.

You might be thinking, "When I get that [goal you're hoping for]" or "Once I [find the right person,] then I'll experience what Jesus was talking about." But that's where you've got it twisted. Jesus didn't say, "I have come so that one day, in the future, you might have life more abundantly." No, He promised to give us abundant life right now. No future tense, no conditional clauses, no maybes. It's for the here and now!

If you're holding out for some future date to experience God's abundance, you're missing the entire point. It's not a distant dream; it's a present reality. Jesus didn't die and rise again so you could have a mediocre life now and abundance later. He conquered death so you could live in fullness today!

So how do you live this "abundant life" Jesus was talking about? Here's the game-changing revelation: It's a life saturated in a deep, ongoing relationship with God. Jesus declares, "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

This is groundbreaking! Jesus is defining eternal life, not only as a future destination, but also as a present relationship. Eternal life isn't just about length; it's about enjoying that depth and fullness right now. It isn't primarily about a future place or a duration of time but living in relationship with God right now!

Jesus shifts the focus from the everlasting aspect of eternal life to our quality of life right now. Let this sink deep into your spirit: Abundant life in Jesus Christ isn't just a pie-in-the-sky promise for the sweet by-and-by. It's a for-sure guarantee for your nitty-gritty, day-to-day, present situation.

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The key word in a relationship with Jesus is to know. In the biblical sense, to know is not just to have intellectual understanding but to be intimately acquainted with someone. It implies a relationship that involves trust, commitment, and deep emotional connection. Knowing God isn't about accumulating religious facts or adhering to rituals, it's about engaging in a transformative relationship with God.

Eternal life begins with entering into a deep, abiding relationship with God, which only comes through knowing and following Jesus Christ. This is not a shallow, Instagram-able, Sunday-only relationship. I'm not talking about a scroll-through-your-Bible-app-when-you're-bored kind of relationship, only talking to God when you need a favor. That's spiritual snacking, and you can't survive on snacks! I'm talking about feasting daily on the goodness of God, getting to know Him so intimately that His voice becomes the loudest one in the room.

Jesus is inviting us to enter into a level of relationship with God that most of us hardly dare to imagine. He's saying abundant, eternal life is not a future promise but a present reality He came to secure for us. It starts now, today, at this very moment.

Do you want that now abundance? Then you've got to live with God in the now. This isn't just feel-good theology; this is spiritual reality. You find abundance not by grabbing hold of the things of this world but grabbing hold of Jesus Christ. I'm talking daily surrender, a moment-by-moment handing over of your will, your plans, and your desires to Him with no reservations and no holding back. I know it sounds scary, but what Jesus is offering you is not about loss; it's about gain. It's trading the life you currently live for one rooted in the fullness of the life God created. It's transforming your limited vision into God's panoramic view of your life.

A Better Way: Abundant life doesn't just fall into your lap. It's a relationship with God, and like any relationship, it requires investment. So, are you willing to go all-in for this kind of life? If you are, then stop holding back and start running hard after God. Every day this week, make this daily commitment before you get out of bed: "God, I want to know you more; I give my life to you. Show me your way and I will walk in it."

DAY TWO

POWER OF SIN

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Romans 6:20-23

You don't have to look very hard to see that something is terribly wrong in our world. But not just in our world, something is also wrong in us. What's wrong? We live in a world ensnared by sin. The harsh reality is everywhere you look, you see the power of sin. From the loneliness of heartbreak, tears from brokenness, and hurt from cruelty to the horrors of evil, we see the power of sin's hideous curse.

Sin was not part of God's good plan for our lives. We were never meant to live in a world where sin exists. In the beginning, everything was fully alive because God created every good thing. Humanity dwelt with God in uninterrupted closeness. Life thrived in abundance and was centered around God. But all that changed when sin entered the world.

Through the pull of temptation, Satan convinced Adam and Eve to take the first step of death. Yet death came, not as death but masquerading as life. The cunning lie of sin is life could be found outside of God, not with God. In an act of rebellion, the first couple sought to find life focused on what they wanted instead of what God wanted. What they found was life died when sin began. Humanity became under the curse of death and God was heartbroken.

It's that same lie from the devil that constantly destroys our lives. Our fall is that we run from God, believing the deadly lie of sin. We run from the One who offers life, thinking life is found in creation instead of the Creator. We exchange God for what we think we want and seek our will to be done. Yet in our step to live without God, we have stepped into death.

Sin ensnares and enslaves us, robbing us of life. We are physically alive but spiritually dead. There is now a profound separation from God, who is the source of life itself. "Your iniquities have separated you from your God" (Isaiah 59:2). We're not talking about a temporary disconnection or a slight drift. We're talking about an absolute, terminal break from the One who breathed life into us. There is now this chasm that is so wide and so deep that no human effort can cross it.

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This is the sobering, life-altering power of sin. Its oppressive power compels us toward actions, thoughts, and attitudes that sever our connection with God. Sin isn't just about wrong actions or misguided decisions. Sin is a force, a deadly power that ensnares and "results in death" (Romans 6:21). James 1:15 elaborates, "After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." Sin is not static; it's dynamic, growing, reaching its ultimate form in spiritual death. "You were dead in your transgressions and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). Dead means disconnected, cut off, and entirely separated from God, who is life.

I know this sounds bleak, but what is wrong with our world and what is wrong with us? We have turned from God and the consequences of sin are death. But this is where the story gets incredible. It's into this darkness that Light came. Life came to conquer death. Jesus came to reverse the fall and bring us back to God. Yet, to bring us life, the Author of Life would have to die. The only way for us to live was for Jesus to die. That is the price God was willing to pay for us to find life in Him again.

A Better Way: Are there areas where sin has built a wall between you and God? Understanding the gravity of sin is the first step toward experiencing the abundance of life that comes from Jesus Christ. Jesus came to restore what was lost and dead through sin. Jesus longs to break those chains that tether us to a life of dead existence instead of a life of abundance with God. Through Christ's sacrifice, we find forgiveness, restoration, and the opportunity to mend our broken relationship with God. Jesus bears the weight of our sin. On the cross, Jesus was separated from God and died the death we deserve. He died in our place, so the moment we trust in Him, our old sinful life dies, and we are reconciled to God. Out of death comes a resurrection.

DAY THREE

INVITATION TO LIVE

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Ephesians 2:1-10

Apart from Jesus Christ, we find ourselves living life in a state of spiritual death. I am not talking about walking dead like zombies in a movie, but a spiritual death that represents a separation from God who is the very source of life. The hardest truth for us to admit is we have all sinned — not just a little but a lot.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, vividly depicts our spiritual condition before Christ. He labels us as “dead in trespasses and sins.” (Ephesians 2:1). Sin isn’t merely messing up; it’s outright rebellion against God, pushing Him out of our lives and causing separation.

Sin creates an insurmountable gap between us and Him. We are spiritually lifeless, ensnared by sin’s grip, and a vast chasm separates us from God, the very source of life. We are slaves to our sinful nature, following this fallen world’s ways, destined to face God’s wrath. Our own efforts can’t bridge this separation. We are “children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3), deserving God’s righteous judgment.

But there’s an astonishing twist to this story. Despite our spiritual death and rebellion, God — in His immense mercy and boundless love — intervened. He didn’t abandon us to the grave; instead, God made us alive in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:4-5).

To bridge the unfathomable separation caused by sin, atonement was required. Atonement entails paying sin’s penalty, satisfying God’s justice, and enabling sinful humans to approach a Holy God. In His infinite love and wisdom, God provided the solution through Jesus Christ. Jesus alone, fully God and fully human, could serve as the perfect sacrifice. His sinless life met God’s standard of holiness. On the cross, Jesus willingly bore the weight of humanity’s sins, enduring the punishment our sin deserved.

Through Jesus’ sacrificial death, redemption was accomplished. Only through Jesus Christ can we escape sin’s power and penalty. God, through Jesus, offers a way back to Him: Reconciliation. Through Christ, God bridged the unfathomable gap sin had created, removing sin’s hostility and restoring a relationship with Him. Jesus’ work not only eradicated the sin barrier but also grants us access to God’s

presence. Through faith in Christ, we can boldly approach God's throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16).

Jesus did all the work for us! The cross of Jesus Christ is the ultimate bridge between sinful humanity and a holy God. On that cross, Jesus bore our sins' weight, paying the price for our rebellion. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds, you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24). On the cross, Jesus experienced separation from God and died taking our place so we could be reconciled to God and live.

To fully embrace this reconciliation, you have to respond with repentance and faith. Acts 3:19 encourages, "Repent, then, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." Repentance means turning from your sins to God. Faith involves trusting Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Through repentance and faith, you're no longer separated from God. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1). This peace is more than a ceasefire; it's complete relationship restoration, healing the spiritual separation caused by sin. Through our faith in Jesus Christ, He gives us a better way to live by reconciling us with God who is the source of abundant life.

A Better Way: If you feel God's call to come to Christ and receive Him as your Savior but haven't yet responded, do so now. Responding to God's call is as simple as a heartfelt prayer: "Dear God, forgive my sins. I believe Jesus is Lord, that He died on the cross, and that You raised Him on the third day to forgive my sins and give me new life in Him. I repent of my sins and trust solely in Jesus Christ. I give my life to You. Thank You for the gift of eternal life through Your Son, Jesus. Amen."

It is always extremely encouraging for us to hear from those who respond to the invitation of Jesus and receive His free gift of salvation. If you've made that decision, we would love to hear from you. You can email me at PastorJamesHilton@JourneyConnect.Org. We want to personally encourage you, help you, and pray for you.

DAY FOUR

A NEW “I”

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Galatians 2:20-21

You know, sometimes the Bible can sound a bit like one of those mind-bending riddles from a Dr. Seuss book, right? I mean, think about it: “I have been crucified with Christ,” and then, “the life I now live.” It’s almost like a paradox, isn’t it? It gets even more confusing with the mind-boggling words, “It is no longer I who live” and yet, “the life I now live” (Galatians 2:20). It makes you wonder: Do we live or don’t we?

But here’s the beautiful thing: The more we dive into these verses and wholeheartedly chase after Christ, the more they start to make perfect sense. What Paul is getting at is this: There used to be an “I” that existed, and now, there’s a whole different “I” that’s alive and thriving. That’s the essence of becoming a follower of Christ and truly living life to the fullest.

The old version of ourself is gone. A brand-new version is in its place. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Back when we were stuck in the death grip of sin, God stepped in, made us alive with Christ, and raised us up with Him (Ephesians 2:5–6).

Why did Jesus Christ have to go through all that suffering and death? It was to take our “old self” down with Him and bury it once and for all: “We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing.” (Romans 6:6). So when we trust in Jesus Christ, we become one with Him, and God sees our old self as gone! Our past life is history, and every sin, every failure, every debt we owed to God? Paid in full.

The old life had to fade away so we could step into this new, vibrant life Jesus Christ secured for us. But you might be wondering, who is this new self? Is it still you? This new self is Christ Himself living in us. It’s not just us anymore; it’s Christ in us: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” This new self is marked by Christ’s presence, His constant support, and His endless vitality. Our old, sinful nature is put to death, and we are set free from the power of sin. His life, His love, His purpose dwell within us, and we are called to live in

unwavering faith in Him. In Him and through Him, we find life and are given a new way to live life.

So, to sum it up, Galatians 2:20 reveals two big truths about this new self: It's Christ-infused, Christ-sustained, and Christ-fortified, and it's all about living each moment by faith in Jesus Christ. Embracing this truth means letting go of the old patterns of thinking that have held us captive — doubt, fear, guilt, and self-reliance. Instead, we are invited to live life in the light of Christ's love, grace, and truth. It's about trusting Jesus completely, surrendering our lives to His guidance, and allowing His Spirit to work within us.

From God's perspective, Christ is living in us, empowering us to live the way He designed us to live. He's doing His part. He brings us to life, empowers us with His Spirit, and assures us that we're never alone. But from our side, it's all about following Him, trusting God moment by moment, leaning into His promises, and seeking to align our lives with His perfect will.

A Better Way: God wants participation, not passivity. He gives you the power to live, but it's up to you to keep taking steps to follow Him. The life we live now is a life of faith — a life of pursuing, obeying, and deeply loving Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us. Jesus has given us a better way to live — a life that is lived in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. He has given us the power to truly live in the fullness of life, but we have the responsibility to keep taking those steps to follow Him. So, I want to challenge you. Ask yourself what bold steps you can take today to place Jesus Christ at the absolute center of everything in your life. Finally, pray, "God, the life I now live, I live in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ."

DAY FIVE

PRONE TO WANDER

BY DARRELL LEBLANC

Read John 10:1-30

"Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love." I remember how these lyrics from the hymn "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" so deeply resonated within me the first time I heard it so many years ago.

Do you ever find yourself prone to wander? Prone to go astray? If you do, know this: You are not alone. This is a struggle each and every one of us faces every single day.

In John 10, Jesus tells a story of the good shepherd and His sheep. Jesus declares, "I am the good shepherd" and "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." In this metaphor, Jesus calls those who believe in Him His sheep. If you've placed your faith in Jesus for your salvation, that's you.

If you know anything about sheep, they sometimes get a bad rap. They tend to wander off. You eventually find them stuck in a fence or barbed wire, covered in briars, or lost altogether. It's easy to think, "If sheep were a little smarter, they wouldn't get themselves into these situations." But did you know sheep are incredibly smart problem-solvers with great memories and social intellect?

Have you ever found yourself in a situation you didn't want to be in? Or a situation you know God doesn't want you to be in? How did you get there? Do you think it was because of a lack of knowledge?

Despite how intelligent both sheep and mankind are, neither is intelligent enough not to wander. Intelligence is not a factor in whether you wander. Paul, the writer of the majority of the New Testament, understood this when he said, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." (Romans 7:15). He knew the right things to do but couldn't do them. It almost seems like it's hopeless; wandering is just a part of life we have no control over.

If it's not about knowledge, then what can help us stop wandering? How do we live the abundant life Jesus called us to live?

First, we need to know the voice of our Shepherd. God speaks to

us today through His Word. If we don't spend regular time in the Bible, we won't know whether it's God leading us in one direction or someone or something else guiding us astray. Make a commitment to spend these 40 Days with us. It's a great way to initiate or reinforce the habit of constantly being in God's Word, to know His voice, and to experience life to the full.

Second, we need to be in community with other believers. Sheep make every effort to stay close to the flock because they know there's safety there. It's harder for a predator to pick a single sheep out of a flock than it is to go after a stray. The easiest way to be in community is by being in a group. If you haven't joined a 40 Days group yet, it's not too late. Go to journeyconnect.org/40days to find out how to connect with a group that's right for you.

And if you feel like you've wandered too far or too long for God to work in your life, know we worship the Shepherd who will leave the 99 sheep for the one that is lost (Luke 15:4). God is absolutely crazy about you and wants more for you than you could ever ask or imagine. He came that you may have life, and have it to the full!

A Better Way: Take a moment and pray, thanking God for being the good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. Ask Him for the strength to not wander, to be able to hear His voice through all the chaos and noise.

Commit to reading God's Word and this devotional every day, whatever it takes. When you go to bed, place your Bible on top of your phone so it's the first thing you pick up each morning. Set a daily alarm to remind you to read. Partner with a spouse or friend to keep each other accountable.

Lastly, join a group if you haven't done so. Life was not meant to be lived alone. There's no telling what God might do in and through you over these 40 Days!

DAY SIX

GOD'S WAY IS BETTER THAN OURS

BY HANNAH PECK

Read Isaiah 55:1-9

Have you ever tried to hang a picture frame? I think there are two ways to go about doing it. The first is following the instructions. You gather some nails, a hammer, mark the wall, etc. The second is the way I prefer: "I'll do it my own way."

I can still remember the first time my husband saw me hanging picture frames in our house. Instead of reaching for a level or a ruler, I grabbed some tape and a pencil. I measured the distance on the wall with the tape, folded it in half and called that center. I then eyeballed how to level the picture, hammered in the nails, and hung the frames. To my defense, I still think the frames were mostly level, but I also know it could've been better had I done it the right way.

How many times have you bought Ikea furniture, disregarded the instructions, and built it how you think it should go? Then you find you're left with an extra piece, a wobbly leg, or sometimes even the drawers opening the wrong way.

Maybe it's because we want control and don't want to listen to instructions, maybe we think we know better, maybe we're lazy, or maybe we just like doing what we've done in the past. Whatever it is, we seem to hate using the guidelines.

Isn't that how we go about life? We put the guidelines we've been given to the side and choose to figure it out our own way. But that's not how God intended for us to live.

This brings us to the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is one of the major prophets writing to the people of Israel, God's people. The book of Isaiah is filled with accounts of Israel turning from God and following their own way of life, one filled with sin and rebellion.

Isaiah 49-55 weaves the story of the suffering servant king. He tells us of a servant who will fulfill God's mission. The servant in this story will be beaten, rejected, humiliated, and killed, but we learn this death will be a sacrifice for people's sin. The servant comes back to life, and

His death will provide a way for people to have a relationship with God. Sound familiar? Isaiah here is forecasting what will come to be told in the Gospels. The suffering servant king is Jesus Christ.

Israel turned from God's plan time and time again. If it was up to them to plan everything, we would've never had the blessing of salvation from Jesus Christ. However, Isaiah 55:8-9 reminds us that God's plans are better than our own; thank goodness for that.

Isaiah goes on to tell us people will respond in two ways: They will either turn from their sins and follow God's way of life, or they will reject God's way and never experience the blessing of salvation.

Isaiah didn't include this warning just for the Israelites. He wrote this for you and me as well. We need to stop rejecting God's way and, instead, be the first group Isaiah mentions — the ones who turn from their ways and follow God's way.

So, why do we keep choosing our own way?

It could be the same reason stopping you from using the instructions when hanging a picture frame or building furniture. It could be your pride, your cynicism, or your need for control to do things your own way. Yet, our way leads to wobbly furniture and lopsided picture frames, which is exactly how our life will feel.

Lean into Isaiah 55:2-3, "Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy...listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest fare." Stop living your life in a way that will never satisfy you. God's way of life is supremely better than your own.

A Better Way: Thank God this week that His plans are better than any of yours. Thank Him that He authors our steps. And I challenge you this week to ask God to reveal areas in your life where you have chosen your way over His. Ask Him to redirect your footsteps. This isn't a one-time decision, but one we must consciously make all the time.

week two

A BETTER WAY TO LOVE

MEMORY VERSE

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

John 13:34-35

Jesus revolutionized our understanding of a fulfilling life by teaching us how to love authentically. He showed us that true joy isn't in pursuing personal desires but in a selfless devotion to loving God and others. This isn't about fleeting emotions or superficial affection; it's a deep, Christ-centered love that transforms lives, including your own. Experiencing the transformative love of Jesus Christ is more than a comfort: His love empowers and elevates your own capacity for love. This week, prepare to discover the life-changing power of this love. Embrace the wisdom and love of Jesus Christ, and you'll find the only life worth living is one richly filled with love.

DAY SEVEN

LOVING GOD AND OTHERS

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read John 13:31-35

There is one simple phrase that sums up the life and heart Jesus had toward people: "He loved." Jesus was constantly moved with compassion and love for people.

On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus gathered His followers together. He yearned to etch the essence of His mission into their hearts. He wanted them to grasp the profound depth of what He was calling them to do. In very clear words, He shared one of the most important characteristics of anyone who follows Him is love.

When Jesus uttered the words, "A new command I give you: Love one another," He wasn't adding to an already burdensome list of rules and regulations. He was setting a new standard, a guiding principle that would shape the core of our relationship with God and our interactions with fellow human beings. He was giving us a better way to live.

Jesus went on to explain that our love for one another is how people will know we are His disciples. We prove the authenticity of our faith in Christ not by the rules we keep, but by the love we have for one another. Love is a tangible and contagious reflection of our love for Him.

Jesus couldn't have been clearer about what He desires from us: He wants us to love like He did. But this isn't your run-of-the-mill love; it's a love that's sacrificial, selfless, and boundless, mirroring the very essence of His love for us. It's not a duty; it's a fire of compassion that burns deep within us.

Let's get something straight, Jesus isn't interested in creating a bunch of religious rule-followers who are always trying to earn God's gold star by being nice to people. He is saying, in essence, "I want you to see my unconditional love for you so that it changes the way you love me and others."

Here's the big question: How do we live with this kind of love? I'll keep it real with you: you can't force love. Love is always a response to the loveliness we see in someone.

Think back to when you fell for someone. At first sight, sparks flew, and your heart leaped. As you got to know them, your love grew naturally, not because you had to but because their loveliness drew you in. Your love for them grew, not because you were commanded to, but because your heart couldn't resist responding to their loveliness.

This is the power of what Jesus is offering. The only way you can truly live in this kind of love is when your eyes are opened wide to behold the awe-inspiring love Jesus displayed for you. The Holy Spirit takes the unmatched love of God shown on the cross and uses it to light a blazing fire of love within your heart for God and for others.

Jesus gives us a better way to love, one that is not forced but awakened as we reflect on His love for us. In the words of the Apostle John, "We love because He first loved us." (1 John 4:19). Your ability to love others, to be selfless, to go the extra mile...it all flows out of experiencing God's relentless love for you.

Jesus' love fuels your love. It's the key that unlocks the floodgates of your heart, enabling you to love, not because others are perfect or even lovable but because Jesus is absolutely worth it!

You see, the more you grasp the immensity of Christ's love for you, the more you live to love others. It transforms you from the inside out. Your ability to love people, even hard-to-love people, isn't rooted in their worthiness; it's anchored in the sheer greatness of Christ's love for you.

A Better Way: Take a moment to reflect on your relationship with God and with others. Recognize that your love for others is a testimony of your relationship with Christ. Ask yourself, "Does my love for others reflect the love of Jesus in my life?" Who is God calling you to love, even if it feels like a struggle? Be honest with God about your struggles and ask Him to let His love be the catalyst to love. Take time to pray for God to deepen your love for Him and for those around you. Ask Him to help you see others through His eyes and to love them as He loves you.

DAY EIGHT

WHAT WOULD LOVE DO?

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read 1 John 4:13-21

In a world where division and self-interest often reign supreme, there emerges a question that soars above the clamor, a question that demands our undivided attention and gives us a better way to live: 'What would love do?'

This is no ordinary question. It's a call to plunge headlong into a love so dynamic, so revolutionary that it possesses the astounding potential not only to transform our individual lives but also to reconstruct the very world we inhabit. This isn't the kind of love that's confined to greeting cards and heart emojis. No, this is a love that stands empowered and emboldened by none other than Jesus Christ Himself.

Consider the early church, a band of individuals with no wealth, political clout, social prestige, or military might. Despite these apparent limitations, the early followers of Christ would rewrite history. They dismantled oppressive empires, quelled the flames of social violence, and steered culture in a new direction — all without resorting to revolutions, warfare, or power plays.

How did they achieve such a remarkable transformation? They lived by this single, overriding question that would revolutionize their every action: What would love do? This question became the lens through which they viewed the world, the filter through which they approached every situation.

What made these early Christ-followers so influential was not their persuasive arguments, political sway, or earthly power. What set this movement apart was their love. Living out this question "What would love do?" was the catalyst that enabled them to change the world. Their love possessed an inherent influence, a compelling force that drew people in, fostering belief in the message of Jesus Christ. Yet their love also had power. Their love created opportunities for God to miraculously move with power through them.

What God did among the early followers of Jesus Christ, He wants to do again in our world. God desires to replicate the miraculous deeds and transformation that occurred among the early followers of Jesus.

He wants to see His power and love at work in the world today, just as it was in the early Christian community. This is what John meant when he wrote, "In this world we are like Jesus." (1 John 4:17 NIV).

When Jesus lived, His love was not merely a sentimental feeling but a force that transformed lives and defied the ordinary. It was the love of Jesus that birthed the miraculous. Blind eyes received sight, the lame walked, the dead were raised, and the brokenhearted found healing. His love compelled him to bring supernatural solutions to human problems.

Don't miss the power of why this is so important. When we love as Jesus did, His supernatural power and grace continue to work through us. Our love becomes a conduit for God's divine intervention in the lives of others. It opens doors to miracles, healings, and transformations that defy human explanation. In our acts of love, whether small or grand, we create an environment where God's supernatural power can manifest. Lives are touched, hearts are changed, and the impossible becomes possible.

We actually become the hands and feet of Jesus on Earth, walking in the same love, power, and authority Jesus demonstrated. Through us God brings supernatural solutions to the human problems around us. Our love creates the opportunity for God to move and work in our world.

We start to see the world through His eyes and respond to situations with His heart. This is why every follower of Christ must reclaim the power of love that Jesus commanded us to live by. In every interaction, before every response, we must ask "what would love do?"

A Better Way: What would occur if, in every interaction you had, you asked yourself, "what would love do?" What transformations would unfold at home, at work, at school, in traffic, and even in the lines at the store? I wholeheartedly believe it would alter everything. It would amplify our influence and provide opportunities to share the message of Jesus Christ while demonstrating His love.

Today, commit yourself to embracing this love in every aspect of your existence. Be known by your love, just as Jesus intended. By living out this Jesus-empowered love, you create an opportunity for God to miraculously act. Your love has the potential to transform hearts, bridge divides, and proclaim the boundless love of Jesus Christ to a world in desperate need.

DAY NINE

RECEIVE BETTER - LOVE BETTER

BY LAURA HEHRE

Read Genesis 16:6-13

Have you ever pondered this thing called love? With countless songs, poems, books, and movies about it, love has become a casual part of our vocabulary. We use it to describe feelings about food, clothes, vacations, and people in the social limelight, but is that truly love? Do we receive love in return for things that hold our affection?

In His Word, God describes what love is in numerous passages. In the well-known portion of scripture known as "The Love Chapter," Paul clearly and intentionally teaches us what true love looks like (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). From Genesis to Revelation, God consistently reveals His love for us, with the ultimate demonstration being the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, a reflection of what love is and how love acts (John 3:16). In 1 John, God states not only what love is, but who love is, "for God is love" 1 John 4:8 (ESV). But to know intellectually about love is one thing: Receiving, experiencing, and encountering Who Love is, is another thing entirely. It is only in receiving this love that we can learn how to really love others.

This is what makes the story of Hagar so powerful. We may find ourselves in a desolate wilderness running from a loveless family, marriage, life, or situation. We may not experience the love of God or be able to receive it because we are blinded by pain, suffering, family wounds, dysfunctions, or unbelief. Perhaps we never learned how to love because we were never shown it to begin with. Hagar was running from loveless relationships and harsh treatment; she felt used, abused, and unloved. Does that sound like you? Are you running from situations or circumstances that feel far beyond your control? Hagar, like many of us, wanted to love and be loved, but what did she really know about love in the place she was living and the circumstances of her life?

I was weary in the wilderness when Jesus blessed me with something beautiful, something I desired and asked for but had trouble receiving. Somewhere along life's journey, I began to view God as my Commander in Chief and me as His only soldier called to duty rather than a chosen child loved by my Abba Father. My circumstances

shifted my view of God to a harsh taskmaster, a lover of humanity but not a lover of me. Jesus revealed to me I had forgotten how to receive His love simply because of who He is, not because of what I do. If I can't receive His love, how am I able to give it away to others? How can I love those around me, deeply and intentionally, without the radical love of God for me? His love for us compels and urges us to love others (2 Corinthians 5:14-15), but we cannot give away something we do not have.

Perhaps your story has led you down this path. Maybe the world has begun to rob you of the ability to receive the constant outpouring of God's love. Hagar ran, but Jesus met Hagar in the wilderness of her desperation. He saw her, He understood her, He loved her right where she was. Hagar received Jesus' love and called Him El Roi, "a God who sees" (Genesis 16:13). Only from this place of receiving was she able to offer what she learned to her son, so he could learn to receive the love of God (Genesis 21:9-19).

It takes time and intentionality to dig deep into what you believe love is, allowing the Holy Spirit to transform your view of love through daily renewal in scripture. For me, it began with searching God's word, learning the character of God, and His heart for us. Exodus 34:6 and Psalm 36:5-7 are two of many favorite reminders of the goodness of True Love.

A Better Way: Ask God to search your heart, revealing areas of your life hindering your ability to receive Jesus' love. "Father, I want to know you more. I want to receive you as lover of my soul, my romancer, the desire of my heart. I long for you, to live in your love fully and freely. Open my eyes to areas that are keeping me from receiving the depths of your love. Do that which is necessary to make me like you, Jesus. Allow your love to move me to love those around me. Thank you, Jesus, for loving me so."

DAY TEN

WHAT IS RADICAL LOVE?

BY KATE ALEXANDER

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

It's beautiful to see the thread of love woven throughout the Bible. From God creating life to giving His Son's life for those He created to the promise of Jesus' return so we may be brought to the fullness of glory in Him. Our attempts at love are simply an echo of what we've witnessed from our Father. Practically, what does this radical love look like in our own lives? How can we love as radically as we have been loved? Let's start with understanding what radical love is and what it isn't.

Radical Love Isn't...

- Conditional. Just as we don't have to earn God's love because of what Jesus did for us, we must not make others earn ours. Look at what Paul writes: Love is patient. Love is not resentful. True, radical love doesn't look at someone and say "I will love you if..." It says "I will love you because..." Our unconditional love comes from knowing that God first unconditionally loved us.
- Withholding. True love is vulnerable, honest, and trusting. Love rejoices with the truth. No one tells someone they don't trust their hardest truths. This is why telling our story within the context of building a relationship is vital. As we bravely speak vulnerably, God uses that honesty to build trust which, in turn, allows us to be mutually non withholding, calling each other up in love.
- Natural. To love radically, we must defy our sinful nature. Naturally, we are selfish beings, but we are called to a selfless love.

Radical Love Is...

- Sacrificial. Love endures all things. It does not insist on its own way. Radical love calls us to sacrifice for those around us. What better example of this than Jesus Himself? Jesus became a sacrifice in our place for our sins and calls us now to be living sacrifices for Him! (See Romans 12:1).

- Accepting. Love is not arrogant or rude, regardless of socioeconomic status, cultural background, ethnicity, lifestyle, or personality. Jesus was a friend to sinners. He ate with tax collectors. He asked a Samaritan woman for water. Yet, He always called them higher and never confused accepting them for accepting their sin. We must be open to loving those we disagree with and showing them the better way to live in Christ. If we are not willing to sit with the broken, how can we expect to kneel at the feet of Jesus?
- Found In Jesus. The only reason we have the ability to love is because of what He's done for us.

Our culture's idea of love is often the opposite of what God declares love truly is. If you read 1 Corinthians 12, you'll realize even the spiritual gifts God gives us aren't for ourselves but for others to see Jesus reflected within us. They're for the edification of the church. "But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31, ESV). What is that more excellent way? Utilizing the gifts, talents, and knowledge God gives us not for our own benefit, but to love others well. The love God models for us is not self-seeking, but it is wildly sacrificial, as gently correcting as a crisp autumn breeze, and everlasting beyond what we can comprehend.

In the upside-down Kingdom God invites us into, the weak become strong, the dispensable become indispensable, and the unlovable find unconditional love in Christ Jesus. Let's strive to love others with that same radical love.

A Better Way: I challenge you to act out each of these characteristics of love found in 1 Corinthians 13 today. How can you rejoice with truth today? How can you endure all things? Pray, "Jesus, we're so thankful for Your example of radical love. Continue to gently correct us and draw us back to Yourself when we choose selfish things over others' needs as a loving Father would. You do not simply love, but You are the embodiment of love. Because of Your example, we can learn to radically love others with an unconditional, sacrificial love that surpasses what we even know to be possible. Help us do that well. In Jesus' name. Amen."

DAY ELEVEN

UNCONDITIONAL CHRIST-CENTERED LOVE

BY ROB RUSTON

Read John 13:35 & Galatians 5:22-23

Today, we are going to talk about unconditional Christ-centered love and how Jesus has called us to love others in the same way.

Unconditional love is defined as love that is boundless with no limits. It's a love that persists through the highs and lows of life, embracing someone entirely for who they are, flaws and all. Unconditional love is not a feeling; it's a verb. Here at Journey Church, we say Love Moves.

The unconditional love of Jesus is nothing short of awe-inspiring. Jesus' love is characterized by forgiveness, mercy, and an unwavering desire for the well-being of every person.

Jesus demonstrates unconditional love throughout the Gospels. In John 13, Jesus tells His followers, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34 NIV). I admit, this command seems really hard because some people are difficult to love. We might even say some people are impossible to love. Yet, God still loves them, and He has called us to be world changers by loving them as well. I believe it will take a major mind shift for some of us to stop and realize we can't pick and choose whom we love. Jesus did not command us to love those who love us first; He didn't command us to love those who are easy to love. Jesus commanded us to love one another, meaning we are called to love with an all-inclusive form of love.

The good news is when Jesus gives His followers a commandment, He also gives them the ability to do it. In John 14:12, Jesus makes an extraordinary statement that those who believe in Him will not only do the works He has been doing but even greater works. This is an awe-inspiring promise and raises the question: How can mere mortals like us, with all our flaws, possibly hope to emulate the perfect love of Christ?

The answer lies in the role of the Holy Spirit. When we come to faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells in us, equipping and empowering us to walk in ways that honor God. In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul lists the "fruit of the Spirit," qualities that are produced in us when we are led by the Holy Spirit. Among these qualities is love, along with

joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are not attributes we muster up through sheer willpower but are the outcomes of a Spirit-led life.

When we're talking about unconditionally loving others as Jesus does, we're really talking about a Spirit-enabled love. It's the Holy Spirit who helps us to rise above our sinful tendencies and limitations. He cultivates in us the kind of love that is patient, kind, and selfless — a love that reflects the very nature of Christ. As we yield to the Spirit, we become conduits for God's love to flow through us to others.

This doesn't mean we won't stumble or fail at times; we are, after all, still human. But even in our weakness, the power of the Holy Spirit can manifest in extraordinary ways, enabling us to express a form of love that is much greater than anything we could accomplish on our own.

While we may grapple with the tension of being imperfect beings called to imitate a perfect Savior, we are not left to navigate this tension by ourselves. The Holy Spirit serves as our guide, continually transforming us and equipping us with the divine love that enables us to love others genuinely, just as we have been loved by Christ.

Loving this way will always seem hard to us. It's okay to come before the Father and say, "I am really struggling with loving this person right now. They have hurt me, scared me, hurt the ones I love. Father, I want to obey You. Help me to love this person well."

A Better Way: Pray, "Father God, I thank You for the unconditional love of Jesus Christ. I pray You would fill me with your Holy Spirit so I may love others as Jesus loves me. Help me to overcome fear and pride and to love others even when they are hard to love. Give me the strength to forgive others and to sacrifice my own needs when You call me to. In Jesus' name, Amen."

DAY TWELVE

LOVE HAS NO LIMITS

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Luke 10:25-37

Luke records a riveting encounter Jesus had with a shrewd religious theologian. This man, while Jesus was teaching, audaciously interrupts with a question that reverberates through the ages: "What shall I do to inherit eternal life? What's the key to truly living?" Implicit in his question is the assumption he must somehow impress God to earn His acceptance.

Jesus, ever the Master of wisdom, counters with a question of His own. He inquires what the law dictates. Swiftly, the theologian summarizes the commandment: To love God wholeheartedly and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus applauds his response, affirming that by living out these divine decrees, one discovers the essence of abundant life.

But this guy wants to place limits on this love commandment, to shrink it into something more manageable. "Who is my neighbor?" he asks, attempting to narrow the scope. Surely, he muses, he doesn't have to love and care for everyone, does he?

In His reply, Jesus shares one of His most compelling parables, the tale of the Good Samaritan. Through this narrative, He paints a vivid picture of love in action. In this story, a Jewish man falls prey to robbers, left half dead on a desolate road. A priest and a Levite, figures revered for their righteousness, pass him by without offering aid. Yet a Samaritan, an outsider for whom Jews held deep-seated hatred, stops in his tracks to help. He tends to the wounded man, transports him to an inn, and ensures his care at considerable personal expense.

Through this parable, Jesus conveys a revolutionary message: Love knows no bounds and encompasses meeting every need, whether material, physical, or economic, through selfless acts. Love compels us to step out of our comfort zones, just as the Samaritan did, risking his own safety to extend compassion.

Jesus beckons us to widen the embrace of our love to those we would not naturally love. By featuring a Samaritan aiding a Jew, He powerfully asserts that anyone in need, regardless of differences in

race, politics, class, or religion, is our neighbor.

This love is not passive; it is active and transformative. It doesn't merely exist in words but is demonstrated through deeds of compassion, mercy, and kindness. It calls us to action, to be the Samaritan who stops to help, the one who shows mercy, even when it's inconvenient or costly.

Jesus ends the parable by asking a poignant question: "Which of these three proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" The theologian, compelled by the moral of the story, concedes the true neighbor was "the one who showed him mercy." It's in this pivotal moment that Jesus doesn't merely provide an answer: He extends a profound challenge, declaring, "Go and do likewise."

The statement is profound because the question asked was, "What can we do to live in the fullness of life?" Jesus isn't interested in inundating us with a litany of rules and regulations; rather, He unveils the profound truth that genuine abundance and purpose in life are discovered when we choose to live in love.

Loving as Jesus did is the key that unlocks the door to fullness. In essence, Jesus is revealing love is the heartbeat of a truly abundant life. It's through living to love that we discover purpose, fulfillment, and the inexhaustible joy of making a difference in the lives of others. So when Jesus says, "Go and do likewise," He gives us the answer as to how we can live an abundant life right now, every single day.

A Better Way: Embracing the challenge to love as Jesus loved, we find the abundant life our souls long for. Jesus doesn't want us to narrow down our love; He wants us to live in the abundance of love. Why would you want to limit what God created to be the source of abundance in life?

Today, we are summoned to embrace Jesus' paradigm of love. Who in your life presents a challenge when it comes to love? Pray for the courage to love them, even when it's demanding. Ask God to open your eyes to see the hurt of people around you, then boldly step forward and live out that love. When we choose to love without boundaries, we partake in a love that follows the path set by Jesus, leading us to the abundant life He offers.

DAY THIRTEEN

THE LOVE OF CHRIST IS THE DRIVING FORCE TO LOVE OTHERS

BY MARTIN PEDATA

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

In today's hustle to be successful, popular, or rich, we often forget what really matters: Jesus' love for us. Remember what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15? It's the love of Jesus that should be the driving force in our lives. This love is more than just a feeling; it's a transformative power that changes our priorities, behaviors, and decisions. Specifically, this love from Christ becomes the driving influence that enables us to genuinely love others. It shifts our focus and enables us to love as Jesus loves us.

The depth of Christ's love is so profound that it led Him to the cross, sacrificing Himself so we all might partake in eternal life. Think about it: Jesus loved us so much He died for us. That's a big deal! He made this ultimate sacrifice so we could have eternal life. This is not an abstract theological point but a tangible reality. When fully grasped, it motivates us to action — not out of obligation, but out of a deep sense of awe and gratitude that naturally cultivates passion for Him.

When we let the love of Jesus be our guide, our lives experience a transformative shift: Our motives, ambitions, and even everyday mundane decisions begin to reflect our desire to honor Him. We're not just following rules; we're living a new life empowered by our love for Jesus and His love for us. This is not a burdensome duty but a liberating passion that gains its strength from an ongoing, deepening relationship with Christ.

The compelling nature of Christ's love doesn't stop with individual transformation; it reverberates into our surroundings. We become conduits of this immense love, sharing it not as a mandated task but as a spontaneous overflow of what we've received. The same love that once captivated us now flows through us, serving as a catalyst for change and drawing others toward the Kingdom of God.

Astonishingly, it's the love of Christ that fuels our passion for Him, creating a virtuous circle. The more we experience and internalize His love, the more passionate we become about emulating that love in our lives. This passion for Christ, in turn, drives us back to His

presence, hungry to know Him more, to love Him more, and to serve Him more effectively. Our passion becomes a responsive echo to the compelling love Christ first had for us, thus intertwining our deepest affections with the profound Truth of the Gospel.

The magnitude of Christ's love creates a radical transformation to occur within us. The life we once lived focused on personal aspirations and desires starts to shift toward a life lived for Christ. This doesn't mean abandoning personal goals or ambitions; rather, it implies a reorientation of these pursuits in a manner that aligns with Christ's teachings and exemplifies His love. This transformation is more than a moral reformation; it's a reshaping of our inner selves, driven by an ever-growing passion for Christ.

This transformative love doesn't exist in isolation; it has social implications. When Christ's love becomes our driving force, we naturally become vessels of this love to others. The authenticity of our transformed lives serves both as a testimony to others and as a conduit through which God's love can be felt. Through our actions, words, and demeanor, we manifest Christ's love in the world, thus fulfilling our Christian mandate to love others.

A Better Way: How has the love of Christ influenced your daily actions and decisions to love others? In what areas do you find it challenging to love others instead of yourself? What practical steps can you take this week to allow the love of Christ to be your driving force? When Christ's love is our driving force, we are propelled into a life of meaningful action, unshakeable faith, and radiant love. Are you ready to let His love be your compelling force?

Pray, "Lord Jesus, become our driving force to love others. Fill us with the unfathomable love that compelled you to die for us on the cross and help us to live not for ourselves; but for you, entirely and passionately. In Your name, we pray. Amen."

week three

A BETTER WAY TO GREATNESS

MEMORY VERSE

“Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Mark 10:43-45

Jesus desires for you to flourish and achieve greatness in your life, a vision He crafted for you even before you were born. He created and has destined you for greatness! But God's definition of greatness is radically different than what most people think. It isn't about ascending to a position where others cater to your desires or serve you. Instead, it's about allowing God's power to flow through you more fully, enriching the lives of those around you. God doesn't limit His transformative work to those the world deems great; He moves through anyone open to placing greater trust in Him. By following Jesus, you are invited to embrace a better way to greatness, a life in which God works through you.

DAY FOURTEEN

THE GOAT

BY JOHN SELLERS

Read Philippians 2:5-11

To this day, you can still hear debates about who is the greatest of all time, in other words, the GOAT. We endlessly debate Peyton Manning versus Tom Brady, Messi versus Renaldo, and Michael Jordan versus LeBron James. Go ahead, make your argument. Who's the GOAT?

What would you do if someone offered you the opportunity to learn from the GOAT? What would it be worth to have Michael Jordan or LeBron James teach you everything they know about basketball? What would you do if Tom Brady appeared at your door and offered to be your kid's personal QB coach? What would your reaction be if Taylor Swift called you and said she'd give you and your closest friends a private songwriting masterclass?

This week, we will discover and examine the incredible truth that Jesus not only has designed you to live a life of greatness, but He offers to walk with you and go before you to show you how it's done. He wants to guide you into a better way to greatness.

No matter where you stand on the Jordan versus LeBron debate, make no mistake: Jesus is the undisputed GOAT. There is no one who compares. Age after age has gone by and famous people have come and gone, but we still praise Jesus. Long after Tom Brady and Michael Jordan are long forgotten, distant memories, Jesus will still be at the top! As the Scriptures put it, Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the King of Kings, and the Name above all Names.

And catch this: Jesus, The GOAT, is inviting you to learn from Him, to follow Him, and to let Him show you a better way to greatness. Will you follow Him?

At the end of our passage for today, Philippians 2:9-11, Paul unpacks the greatness of Jesus for us. He tells us God the Father exalted Jesus to "the highest place" and gave Him the "name above every name." This is God's way of saying Jesus, His Son, is the greatest man of all time. The name of Jesus is higher than any king, emperor, pop star, YouTube personality, dictator, or champion who has or ever will live. His status is higher than any of these. In case you doubt this, it

says He has been given the “highest place!”

Sooner or later, every person — even the greatest among us — will bow down before Jesus and acknowledge He is Lord. There will come a day when the debate ends forever. In other words, at some point, everyone will openly recognize Jesus is the GOAT!

The question is: How did Jesus accomplish this greatness? Did He achieve the highest number of championship wins? Did He perform some amazing physical feat? Did He grab some impressive seat of power or accumulate some unheard-of amount of money?

This is where it begins to unfold. This is where you start to see the better way of Jesus. Paul answers that question in verses 5-8, in the section before the “therefore” of verse 9. You may expect him to list all the ordinary achievements we think about regarding greatness: titles, victories, championships, power, or wealth. But instead, he shares something unexpected. The true greatness of Jesus is seen in the way He humbled Himself, “made himself nothing,” and became a servant to the point of “death on a cross.”

The better way to greatness Jesus demonstrated for us and invites us into is the true greatness that comes through humbling Himself and becoming a blessing to all of us through sacrificial service.

I know this sounds so backward. It sounds so different than what you have seen and heard. But this simple idea is the path toward true and lasting greatness. Even if this sounds strange, I invite you to walk with us each day this week and learn from the GOAT Himself as He invites you into this better way!

A Better Way: As you begin your time with God every day this week, spend a few moments praising Jesus for all He has done for you! Thank Him for humbling Himself and coming to give His all for you to be forgiven and set free. As you do, you are exalting Him as the Name above all Names, just like we learned in Philippians 2 today.

DAY FIFTEEN

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK

BY JOHN SELLERS

Read Matthew 20:20-28

I remember the feeling to this day. We had been anticipating the release of the latest and greatest video game, Super Mario Bros. 3. The day finally came. Our friend's dad found a couple of copies and brought them home for us. We rode a victory lap around the neighborhood on our bikes with the Nintendo cartridge lifted high above our heads in triumph. It was like we had won the Super Bowl as kids from everywhere came out and joined us as we gathered around to watch my brother play the game for the first time. It felt like greatness.

Back then, there was no doubt who was the best when it came to playing video games. It was my brother. Even though we'd brag to each other and even fight about it sometimes, we all knew he was the best. More times than I can name, we'd wait outside the room until he reached the final boss, come in quietly, and watch him beat the games we struggled with and gave up on.

From a young age, it is a natural tendency to want to be the best. Kids argue about who is the fastest, the strongest, the best at soccer, video games, or dancing, who has the best grades, the most trophies, or the best fantasy football team. In our house, some of the most heated arguments can center around who was first, who is the best, or who has the most.

But this doesn't stop when we are no longer kids, does it? If we're honest, adults struggle with the same things. Who has the best house, career, achievements, success, and most significant bank accounts? We even tend to brag about our children on the bumper stickers of our cars.

When I read passages like Matthew 20 and others, it surprises me to read about the disciples arguing with each other about who was the greatest and who would have the best positions in the Kingdom. How could those closest to Jesus be so childish? But over the years, I have seen repeatedly that we do the same things.

It's almost humorous in this instance that the mother of James and John is the one who comes to Jesus, trying to work them into the

most powerful positions in His Kingdom. She wanted her sons to be the greatest among the disciples. Then all of a sudden, once she starts the conversation, James and John are there making their case to Jesus. And just like a childhood scuffle over who is the best at Fortnite, all the disciples begin to argue with each other when they hear about this.

Jesus takes this opportunity to teach them a lesson about what true greatness is. And what we learn is greatness is not what you think.

They thought greatness was all about power, fame, and influence. They saw greatness the way the world around them saw it. Greatness to them was about being lifted high so everyone would be there to serve their every desire. It was about being at the top and having the most followers and subordinates. They expected Jesus would come to overthrow the oppressive Roman Empire and usher in a new earthly kingdom. And they wanted to be influential in that kingdom.

What comes to your mind when you think about greatness? Our thoughts are similar to theirs. We picture being at the top, having many followers, or having people praise us, our achievements, our successes, or wealth, and ultimately, meet our every need and desire.

But Jesus offers a better way. He teaches that true greatness is found in the path He paved for us. True greatness comes when you focus on humbly serving others. It is about serving those around you, not being served.

This is why Jesus came! What the disciples missed at this moment was that Jesus would accomplish something beyond the scope of their imagination. Through His humble life of sacrificial service, death on the cross, and resurrection, He was building an eternal Kingdom that stretched to every nation across the planet! And He was training them to be part of it!

A Better Way: Jesus gives us a better way to greatness. It isn't what you first expect! Today, every time you feel the pull toward worldly greatness, pause and focus your heart and mind on the truth that true greatness comes through serving others. Ask God to show you one person to serve or to bless today.

DAY SIXTEEN

TAKE THE FOCUS OFF YOURSELF

BY JOHN SELLERS

Read Matthew 11:28-30 & Philippians 2:1-11

The better way to greatness begins with humility.

One of the common threads in our world's understanding of greatness is the idea of putting yourself at the center. It is a pursuit of how I can have the most outstanding accomplishments. How I can have the most attention. How I can get the most followers or likes. How can people serve me and do what I want them to do? How can I have my name or my face in front of the most people?

Let's be honest. Where does this self-centered approach get us? It leads to an unending striving for more. It can lead to constant competition, anxiety, and fear of failure: Constantly feeling like you don't measure up, and feelings of bitterness at others because they don't meet your expectations of how they should meet your needs. It leads to selfishness in our marriages and our relationships as we try to make them all about us. Jesus offers us a better way.

I love how Jesus offers us an easy yoke in Matthew 11. His invitation to follow Him is an invitation to rest at the level of our soul. Part of this easy yoke and soul-level rest is a call to walk away from our worldly pursuit of greatness and embrace His wise instructions.

In Philippians, Paul urges us to walk in the example of Jesus. We are encouraged to pursue greatness, but we find it in the ways God gives to us.

Jesus' example is the example of humility. He walked a constant path of humble service. He humbled Himself from the fullness of His glory as God the Son when He was born into our world as a baby. Instead of putting Himself on a pedestal and becoming the greatest earthly king the world had ever seen, He lived a humble life, teaching, healing, and serving those in need. Instead of living for the moment's applause or fame, He humbled Himself to the point of death.

Think about that: God the Son becoming human and then choosing to die! And Jesus' death was not in some epic movie screen battle, but the humiliating death of a criminal on a cross. Jesus did all of this to serve you and me! He did this to give us a way to be forgiven and

brought into a relationship with Him forever. Because Jesus did this, we will glorify His name forever and ever!

Paul instructs us, in light of Jesus' example, to have the same mindset of humility. You are invited to walk in the same path of greatness, and it begins by choosing to humble yourself.

The concept of humility in Philippians 2 is to take the focus off you and put it on the needs of others. Paul states this clearly and firmly when he writes, "Value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

Humility is taking me out of the center and asking, how can I bless the people God has put around me? It is choosing to count their needs and desires as more important than your own. This is what Jesus did when He chose your salvation and life over His comfort and life.

As you contemplate this call to walk in humble service to others, remember Jesus' promise: His way is easy and light. Following His way leads to rest for your soul.

Choosing a life of humility is giving up the endless striving for worldly greatness. It is choosing to give up the constant fear of failure, the neverending chase for accomplishment, and the feeling of not measuring up. It is choosing to embrace the joy and peace that comes from allowing God to move through you as you work to bless others.

A Better Way: If humility is shifting the focus from me to you, then God wants to cultivate empathy in you toward the needs of those around you. Ask Him to give you eyes to see the needs of others and opportunities to serve the people around you. Ask Him to allow you to bless someone today by counting their need as more important than your own.

DAY SEVENTEEN

SERVING TAKES SACRIFICE

BY JOHN SELLERS

Read Mark 10:41-45

Serving someone else always requires at least some level of sacrifice. From the simplest act of service to the most extravagant, serving others will cost you. Visiting someone in the hospital will take time out of your day and money for gas. Sitting with a new person in the cafeteria during lunch may take giving up the comfort of hanging out with your usual friend group. Focusing on your spouse's or family's needs may mean helping them with homework or processing through their tough day instead of turning on the game or watching the show you wanted to watch at the end of a long day of work.

This connection between sacrifice and humble service is one of the keys to experiencing the greatness God wants for you. As the disciples were grumbling and fighting over which one should be first and most important in the Kingdom, Jesus reminded them that anyone who wishes to be great in His Kingdom must become a servant to others. And He points to His own mindset: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Jesus makes the connection that greatness comes when you serve others, and serving others is demonstrated through the sacrifice you make for them. I don't know about you, but I am so thankful for Jesus' sacrifice for me of laying down His own life to die in my place. If He had not served me that way, I would not have the blessing of salvation and the beauty of being counted a child of God.

One of the truths Jesus wants you to see is that the sacrifice is worth it. In Hebrews 12:2, we are reminded it was for the "joy set before Him" that Jesus endured the suffering and shame of the cross. Jesus could see the greatness and joy on the other side of the cross. The joy of seeing so many broken people be transformed, made new, and enjoying the presence of God forever with Him. The greatness of heaven, filled with the songs of the redeemed forever singing, "Blessing and honor and glory and power be to the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!" As Jesus sacrificed it all on the cross,

His focus was on the greatness ahead. He knew the sacrifice would be worth it.

For me, this is where the struggle to serve others begins. I often lose sight of the greatness God has in store for me. I lose sight of the reality that the sacrifices it requires to live a life that blesses those around me are worth it. I look at the cost it will require of me to meet the need or live a lifestyle of generosity. So often I hesitate because all I see is the sacrifice, when what I need to see is the future joy it will bring.

Today, God wants you to see this connection. He wants you to see what the disciples couldn't see. The greatness and joy God has in store for you are beyond what you can imagine. The eternal impact He wants you to have and the things He wants you to see and be part of are unbelievable. This is what makes the sacrifice worth it.

A Better Way: What is one sacrifice God is calling you to make that you have been hesitating on?

- *Is it sacrificing to put the needs of your husband or wife first?*
- *Is it taking the next step in using your resources for His Kingdom through tithes and offerings?*
- *Is it giving up time to serve on a team at church or as a part of an outreach project with your life group?*

Once you have identified this area of calling, determine the cost. What precisely is the sacrifice God is calling you to make?

Remember it is here where the greatness and joy God desires for you begin. The sacrifice is worth it!

DAY EIGHTEEN

GIFTED TO SERVE OTHERS

BY JOHN SELLERS

Read Romans 12:3-8 & 1 Corinthians 12:21-26

We've all had this happen at one time or another. It's nighttime, the house is dark, and you quietly walk to the bathroom or kitchen to get a drink of water. You're doing all you can not to wake anyone. As you make your way at full speed, you hit the leg of the end table with your pinky toe. Next thing you know, you're on the ground, writhing in pain and trying not to scream!

Isn't it fascinating how pain in one of your body's most minor, seemingly least essential parts can affect every other part of your body? Whether we realize it or not, the parts of our body, though very different from one another, all have a role to play in the well-being of the whole. In a way, each part fulfilling its purpose serves all the other parts. When one part has something wrong, all the others feel it. In the same way, when one part is experiencing something unique, the rest of the body also experiences it. For example, when you eat a perfectly cooked, juicy steak, though it is your mouth eating it, your whole body is happy! (Can I get an Amen?!)

It's no surprise God uses the example of the body when describing the church and the role each of us plays. In our passages today, we are told we are the body of Christ and are individual body parts. This means we have a specific gift and role to play. We are called to humbly use our gifts to serve others, and when we do this for one another, we experience the care and joy God intends for His people.

1. Discover Your Gift

As each body part has a specific role and purpose, God has given you a particular calling and role. God has created you with unique talents, experiences, passions, and gifts. No one else is wired precisely how you are.

This means you're important and valuable to Him and to the people around you. If you are not connected and using your gift, the people around you are missing something important God has intended for them to experience through you. Never doubt your importance and value!

Are you aware of your wiring and how God has designed you? This is the first step in understanding how to follow Jesus in a better way of serving.

Go to journeyconnect.org/giftassessment and you will find a simple tool to help you begin to understand the spiritual gifts God has blessed you with.

2. Use Your Gift to Serve Others

One of the phrases that stands out to me in Romans 12:5 is each member “belongs to all the others.” Unsurprisingly, it also reminds us in verse 3 not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to. Like we’ve been working through all week, our calling is to humbly seek to use our gifts and talents to bless others. This should soak into us to the point that we view our talents and gifts as if they genuinely belong to the people God has placed around us.

Once you discover your gifts, talents, and wiring, these passages have a clear message: Use them. Don’t sit on the sidelines. If God has called you to a church, you have a gift the people in that church need. You are God’s plan to meet that need. So, as Romans 12 reminds us, if you have a gift, use it to its fullest to serve others.

Some of you are gifted at leading children, others are talented at using technology, and others can sing or play the drums. It’s easy for us to assume everyone can do what we can do, or that there’s no real place for us to use our gifts. Yet, that cannot be further from the truth.

At Journey Church, we have an event coming up this weekend across our locations to help you connect your gifting to a specific team that allows you to serve others. It’s called our Next Steps class. Maybe the step God is calling you to take this week is to attend Next Steps and connect to your calling.

A Better Way: What is your gift? How has God uniquely wired you? What talents do you have? Your gifts and talents are meant to serve others. Look for ways this week to take the next step to use your gifts to bless the people around you.

DAY NINETEEN

WE GET TO DO THIS

BY JOHN SELLERS

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-9

Have you ever seen something so remarkable you couldn't help but tell your friends about it? Maybe it was an alligator walking down the road in your neighborhood, a surprisingly good movie, or a YouTube video so funny you couldn't keep it to yourself. As we turn to 2 Corinthians 8 today, Paul has seen something remarkable he wanted to share with the Corinthian church and us today. The extraordinary thing he saw was the unexpected and God-glorifying generosity of the people in the churches in Macedonia. What was so remarkable about what Paul had seen?

Paul tells us the people in those churches were experiencing extreme poverty. They were the ones who were in need. But what stood out to Paul was that even in their poverty, they were begging Paul to be able to contribute their resources to help the Christians in Jerusalem who were in need. And not only did they go to Paul asking to help, but they gave above and beyond their means. What Paul encountered in the people of Macedonia was a radical and joyful heart to serve others through generosity. It was a greatness so remarkable Paul took notice and couldn't help but spread the word about them.

What strikes me about the actions of the Macedonian churches is they gave freely. They obviously did what they did not because they had to but because they saw it as a privilege to help. They weren't begging Paul for money to meet their real and present needs. They were begging Paul to let them give sacrificially because they wanted the joy of participating in meeting the needs of the believers in Jerusalem.

This posture is an excellent example of what we have discussed all week. The Macedonian churches were living out the heart and attitude of Jesus by considering the needs of the Jerusalem church as more important than their own. They walked in the better way to greatness that Jesus wants you and me to experience.

More than that, they discovered an unbelievable reality: There is joy in serving others. As the Scriptures teach us, they understood it is better to give than to receive. And they were living this out.

It reminds me of how silly it would be to talk about eating ice cream as if it were a burden or something you have to do: "Oh, I have to go out and get ice cream tonight, and boy, am I dreading it!" "I just came from Dairy Queen and had one of their caramel sundaes, and man, am I glad that's over with!" That sounds absolutely loony to me! Why? Because I don't have to eat ice cream; I get to eat ice cream. It's one of the most enjoyable things you can do! Somehow, the Macedonian believers viewed their sacrificial giving as a joy and a privilege, even when living in poverty!

This is one aspect of the greatness Jesus wants you to experience. Yes, serving is costly. Yes, serving is a sacrifice. Yes, serving is hard work. But living in humble service to others gives indescribable joy and fulfillment. You won't experience it from any other way of life!

It reminds me of teams I have served with on short-term mission trips. We go to places struck by a hurricane or a tornado or put on Children's Bible School for kids in a park or churches in the Dominican Republic. We work hard and are more exhausted at the end of the week than you can imagine. And at the end of every mission trip I've ever been on, no one complains about the difficulty or the sacrifice. Instead, they always say things like, "That was the best week of my life; when can I sign up for the next one?" This experience is the joy of serving.

A Better Way: Does your attitude toward serving match the attitude of the Macedonians? Have you allowed yourself to slip down the path of viewing serving and giving as a burden or a task to be done? Today, God wants to remind you there is a more profound joy and fulfillment He wants you to walk in, and experience that will only come through allowing the love you have that experienced in Him to overflow into acts of service for people around you. Will you take a step of faith to serve, believing greater joy is in store for you?

DAY TWENTY

THE CHURCH IS UNSTOPPABLE

BY JOHN SELLERS

Read Matthew 16:18 & Acts 2:38-47

I love the personality of Peter. He was an act-first, think-second kind of guy. This rash, take-action MO resulted in him being able to walk on water but also getting rebuked by Jesus, saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" It included cutting off a soldier's ear to defend Jesus and then, later the same night, denying he even knew Him in front of a young servant girl.

But the transformation Jesus brought into Peter's life led to the privilege of seeing and experiencing what true greatness looks like. When Peter laid down his pride and pursuit of personal accolades and followed what Jesus taught and modeled for him, God used Peter to preach to thousands and spur on the birth of the church! Had he continued in the world's understanding of greatness, Peter would have missed it.

Jesus told Peter He would build His church, and it would be an unstoppable force in this dark world, so much so that the forces of Satan and Hell could not hold it back! How would Jesus' church be unleashed? The greatness of the unstoppable church would come through humble, sacrificial service to others.

The church was born, first and foremost, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. There would be no church and hope for you or me if Jesus had not humbled Himself, come as a human into this dark world, lived a perfect life for us, and laid down His life on the cross in our place. The greatness of the church was given through the perfect action of Jesus who became last instead of insisting on being first. It came through Him choosing to consider our needs more important than His comfort or even His own safety and life.

And His church goes forward in greatness when His people walk as Jesus did. We see this in the life of Peter. When Jesus talked with Peter on the beach after His resurrection, He told him to "feed My lambs." Jesus' instruction to him was to live out the love he had for Christ by serving the people of God. Jesus invited Peter into the life of greatness He had taught and shown him how to pursue.

And when Peter embraced this calling, it changed everything. When he understood his purpose was to serve Jesus by serving people, it allowed Peter to experience greatness far beyond anything he ever imagined. Peter stood up boldly and proclaimed the message of Jesus, and thousands of people believed and experienced salvation after his first sermon! Peter would live the rest of his life “feeding the sheep.” He would have the privilege of seeing the church spread worldwide, people being transformed from death to life, and experiencing the hope of Christ. He would have missed so much had he hesitated or kept living for himself!

When we read about the early church in Acts 2, they were known from the beginning to be people who sacrificed to serve each other and the world around them. The church began to spread all over the world, not because of a military conquest or a powerful emperor. The church spread worldwide despite being opposed by some of the most powerful empires on the planet by the power of the gospel of Jesus and through a people who embraced a life of humble service to each other. The greatness of the unstoppable church was unleashed through humility and through serving!

If Peter were sitting down with you today, I believe he would tell you one thing: Don’t miss it! God has greatness in store for you! He wants to show you something incredible and use you to bring hope, healing, transformation, and life-change in a dark world. As you begin to take your eyes off yourself, humble yourself and use your resources, time, gifts, and talents to serve the church and people in our world, God will do incredible things right before your eyes. He will use you as part of His unstoppable church that is turning the world upside down. What is keeping you from being part of it?

A Better Way: This week, God has shown you a step or two to take. What is holding you back? Look to the example of Peter and choose at this moment to move forward in faith. As you do, you will experience the greatness of His unstoppable church going forward through you!

week four

A BETTER WAY TO BE RICH

MEMORY VERSE

“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

2 Corinthians 9:6-7

The idea of being rich can captivate our hearts, filling us with dreams of comfort, security, and prestige. But what if we’ve misunderstood the nature of true riches? You might be surprised, but Jesus actually wants you to be rich! But this isn’t about hoarding wealth; it’s a groundbreaking perspective on being rich toward God. Jesus offers us a far better way to be wealthy, not in the material sense, but in a way that satisfies the deepest yearnings of our souls. He redefines being rich through a lens of generosity, urging us to leverage our resources — not just to improve our own lives — but also to make a meaningful impact on the lives of others and further God’s kingdom on earth. It’s a radical shift that aligns material wealth with spiritual abundance, redefining what it means to be genuinely wealthy. Being rich isn’t about how much you have; it’s giving what you have to make an impact both now and for eternity. This is the most fulfilling form of wealth you could ever imagine!

DAY TWENTY-ONE

HOW TO BE RICH

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Luke 12:13-21

Jesus wants you to be rich!

No, that's not a misprint, and I'm not talking about prosperity gospel. No, this is a paradigm-shifting revelation that'll challenge everything you thought you knew about being wealthy.

Jesus reveals a better way to be rich, not through hoarding but through radical generosity. He's unveiling a richness that delves deep into the core of your soul. Satisfying the most profound yearnings of your heart by the impact you make on others and the eternal legacy you create when you are generous. It's a wealth that leaves you utterly fulfilled.

Jesus gives us a vivid picture of this in Luke 12:13-21. A rich man's land yields an abundant harvest. His first impulse is to build bigger barns to store his surplus, ensuring his own future security. But God intervenes, saying, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Jesus warns, "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21 NIV).

Did you catch that? Accumulating riches isn't the issue; it's neglecting to be rich toward God. It's missing the opportunity to bless others and God's kingdom.

So, what does it mean to be rich toward God? It's a divine call to embrace radical generosity as a way of life, a recognition that every resource we have is a gift from God. Being rich is using what you have, whether it's overflowing or just a trickle, to make a real impact in the lives of others and advance God's Kingdom right here on Earth. Being rich is not about what you have, but what you do with what you.

And how do we do that? Through a powerful principle God Himself ordained: Tithing. Don't let that word scare you; it's not some religious mumbo-jumbo. Tithing is a radical way of living out your faith that allows you to be rich toward God. The word "tithe" literally means a tenth, or 10 percent. It's when you give the first 10 percent of your

income to your local church.

Why the local church? Because the local church is the heartbeat of God's work on Earth. It's where lives are transformed, where people find hope, and where the mission of God is carried out. Your tithe fuels the mission, supports ministries, and reaches out to those in need in your community. It's supporting the very place where you're being spiritually fed, where your faith is growing, and where you're making a difference together in the community.

Now, let me be clear; I'm not saying there aren't other great causes out there. Supporting various charities and organizations is commendable, and that's where the concept of offerings comes in. Offerings go beyond the tithe; they're additional gifts we give to God in response to specific needs, opportunities, or the prompting of the Holy Spirit. But your tithe, that's a unique commitment. It's about investing in your spiritual growth, your community, and the expansion of God's kingdom right where you are.

When you refuse to tithe, you're not just holding onto your money; you're actually robbing God (Malachi 3:8-10). God isn't up in the clouds, wringing His hands because He's missing your cash. No, it's about recognizing everything you have — your income, your possessions — it's all a gift from God. He's given it to you, and tithing is your way of acknowledging that. In tithing to your local church, you are investing in your spiritual growth, your community, and the expansion of God's kingdom right where you live.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking: "This sounds impossible! I can't afford to tithe." But listen, this is where so many people miss out on the blessing of following God's principles. Instead of throwing in the towel, take a calculated approach. Set a percentage and a timeframe, and then slowly work your way up. Start with just 1 percent next month. The following month, bump it up to 2 percent. In less than a year, you'll find yourself tithing in full.

A Better Way: How rich are you according to Jesus? Jesus' perspective on being rich is revolutionary. It invites us to transcend the relentless pursuit of material wealth and discover true richness in generosity. By leveraging our resources to bless others and advance God's kingdom, we become genuinely wealthy in a way that satisfies the deepest longings of our souls.

DAY TWENTY-TWO

JESUS IS ENOUGH

BY GRACYN HILTON

Read Phillippains 4:19-20

We always want the best thing. There is something in us that strives toward the new and improved, to have the best product out there, whether it's a new piece of technology or trendy clothing or the latest gadget. But when we get that "new thing," we never feel fulfilled. We still long for something else. I have found this evident in my life. Striving for the next great thing, telling myself if I could just have more of what I found valuable, then I would be happy, secure, and fulfilled. But the Lord continues to reveal to me that I will never feel fulfilled or satisfied in those things.

The reason we feel this way is that we were designed and created by God with a desire to be fulfilled. The problem is we constantly look in the wrong places. We turn to the world, longing for things and trying to find satisfaction in what we have. We often set standards for the world to meet, claiming if we just had that money, job, or success, life would be great. But those things fail. We let the pull of riches be the focus of our lives rather than the One that truly matters. The truth is, God is the only One who can fulfill us. He is the only One who can satisfy our desires.

God has created us to find fulfillment in Him. Nothing else! Jesus Christ died on the cross and took all our sin and guilt so nothing can separate us from God. We have all we need in God and can trust He is enough for us. We don't have to keep looking in the world to find something to fulfill us. He has given us a better way to live as every want and need is satisfied in Him. When we give our all to Jesus, He begins to work through our all. He begins to transform us and our mindset. We begin to think about how we can give Him glory and serve Him. He helps us to understand the riches of the world do not compare to God and His love and character. No amount of money or position can compare to Him because that is how good our God is. We can look back and see He has never failed us and never will. We can look back and see He is always with us and always working things out for our good.

But the reality is living our lives for Him and choosing to rely on Him is challenging. Our sinful desires try to convince us we don't need God, that He truly won't do what He says He will. But we have to make a choice. We have to live in daily surrender to know He is worth it. We truly don't need anything else besides Him. We don't need that relationship or job or house to satisfy us. All we need is Jesus Christ. He will fulfill us. In Philippians 4:19, Paul shares with us the promise that God will meet all our needs so we can give Him glory.

He provides heavenly riches that outweigh anything the world will offer. We can trust and stand firm knowing our God will provide for us. We don't need anything besides Him. He is sufficient. And with this truth, we can allow God to fill in every need and want we have.

When you feel like you need something else to fulfill you, remember God is enough. God is strong enough. God's love is enough. God is powerful enough. And the beautiful thing is that not only is He enough, but He is more than enough. He goes above and beyond everything we could think and imagine. And we have the blessing to live in a personal and intimate relationship with Him.

A Better Way: I challenge you to put every need and want in God's hand and allow Him to be the center of it all. Allow him to show you He is enough for you in every aspect. Take time to pray and ask God to show you what you are searching in the world to try to fulfill you. What God reveals, lay it down at the feet of God and let Him be the center of everything, holding on to the promise that He is Enough. Pray, "Jesus, I thank You and praise You for who You are allow me to turn to You and trust that You are enough for me, and no riches or thing will compare to You."

DAY TWENTY-THREE

MONEY CAN'T BUY YOU HAPPINESS

BY GABBIE VEGA

Read Matthew 6:19-23

I am sure at some point in your life you've heard the saying "Money can't buy you happiness." Some people would argue that because money can buy you the things that can make you happy, this is not a true statement. For those of you who disagree with this statement, what if I were to change a single word? What if instead, the saying was "Money can't buy you joy" or "Money can't buy you peace"? Would you still disagree? When I say this, I don't just mean the surface level peace that when the storms of life come, like losing a loved one, being on the brink of divorce, not knowing what college to go to, or feeling like your season of singleness will never end; that kind of peace fades away. Rather, I am talking about a peace that transcends all understanding. Would you say money could buy you that?

When we meet Jesus in Matthew 6, Jesus is in the process of turning things upside down! In this passage, He completely redefines the definition of wealth and riches. He approaches it by talking about the treasures that you can and cannot store up in Heaven and the idea that no one can serve two masters fully. Let's break this down for a second.

If I had one \$100 bill and promised it to two different people, what would happen? I wouldn't be able to follow through with it because that is an impossible promise for me to keep! I can't offer 200% of something, when I only have 100% to give. Likewise, when Jesus explains you can't serve two masters, He is saying is you can't give two people 100% of your devotion and loyalty, especially when they contradict each other. You wouldn't be able to keep your word to one without completely disobeying the other. That is what Jesus tells us serving money and God is like.

The world constantly barrages you with a clear picture of what you should do with your money: Spend it (whether you have it or not). But Jesus gives a better way. Serving money and striving for it for the sake of an earthy definition of rich will lead you to things with an expiration date. You will be empty and chase after temporary things that could never fill you. According to Mark 8:36 "What does it profit

a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" How much are you really gaining if what you're losing is infinitely more valuable?

In James 1:17, we are told "every good gift and every perfect thing comes from above." The good and perfect gifts referenced are not the ones with a price tag; they are the ones the Lord wants to bring into your life. Psalm 37:4 tells us that if we delight in the Lord, He will give us the desires of our heart. God is such a good Father; He wants to bless us more than we even want to be blessed.

Take that in for a second...

The God who created the stars and the skies, knows every hair on your head and wants to give you good things. You will lack nothing. What freedom to know these blessings are not contingent on anything I could do! If this is what is available, why do we strive for the material things of this world, holding on to our money and expecting it to satisfy us for eternity? When you strive after Him, He will lead you to treasures that transcend this world and will never fade away.

A Better Way: Your finances are more than just dollars and cents to be spent; they are seeds to be invested for the Kingdom of God. When wisely used, they have the potential to bear incredible fruit for God's glory. In our community and world, these resources are leveraged to make the most significant Kingdom impact possible.

Giving is not just a financial transaction; it's an act of worship, a physical expression of your trust in Jesus Christ. When you give, you're participating in God's work on Earth. If you're not trusting Jesus with your money, are you really trusting Jesus? How might you answer this question and what needs to change if money can't buy you happiness?

Prayer: Father, thank You for redefining what it means to be rich and wealthy. There is no earthly commodity that compares to the beauty and the goodness of knowing You. I ask that You would bring this to the forefront of my mind and that I would never grow numb to this fulfilling gift. Thank You for the love that You have for me that You would send Your Son so I may be free. Amen."

DAY TWENTY-FOUR

MORE MONEY, MORE PROBLEMS

BY JADNER LUGO

Read Matthew 19:16-22

What do you dream about the most? Is the goal to make as much money as possible? To retire early? To have riches and financial freedom that can allow you to say “yes” to everything?

Many people spend a lot of their time either dreaming about how to fix their financial situation or ways to make more money. But if you think more money brings significance, then you are sorely mistaken.

As we looked to the Scriptures, we see this clearly outlined through the story of the rich young ruler. He’s in an enviable position. He has everything going for him. Through the eyes of the people who see him or know him, he has not a need in the world. He’s young and rich. What else would someone want in the ancient world? But the reality is he knows there is more that he is longing for. There is still something missing that he will never have enough money to buy.

So, this young man decides, wisely, to seek answers from Jesus. Here is this incredibly rich young man going to the miracle performing Teacher who has no place to lay His head at night for insights into how to live life. As he asks Jesus about how to gain eternal life, there is a pride that enters him. Not only does he have all the money he could ever need, but in his own eyes, he never does anything wrong! Perfect Jesus is having a conversation with a pretend perfect guy and Jesus’s next call to action is so clear that it shows this man he is not perfect at all. In fact, his flaw is fatal, and he doesn’t even see it coming.

This rich young man is heartbroken to hear Jesus ask him to sell everything, give to the poor, and inherit the treasures of Heaven instead of his current treasures. He left the presence of Jesus with his head hanging low and full of sorrow, wondering if he would ever be able to fill what his heart was missing.

Looking at this man from our seat makes him look ridiculous. Can you imagine what his life would have been like if he just listened to Jesus? Can you imagine the stories he would talk about if he had decided to follow Jesus instead of following money? The miracles, the conversations and wisdom shared? But he walked away from the

opportunity for all of that, just to return to the same place he once was, with the same riches that didn't satisfy him before.

It's easy from the coziness of our lives now to read and judge the heartbreak decision of the rich young ruler. But the reality of it is, many of us choose to be just like him every day. We walk away from eternity for the temporary. We focus on the riches or lack thereof right now, instead of giving ourselves to the riches of what Jesus has already promised in Heaven.

The jarring truth is God wants you to be rich! And God's path to riches is never acquired by the conventional path the world offers. Instead, God's path to riches is counterculture. Do you realize God's path to riches is through generosity? In Malachi 3:10, God even challenges His people to test Him in generosity and He said He would bless them in overflowing measure. Even though God makes this promise, we refuse to put Him to the test because we feel as if money is always better off in our hands than in God's.

What the young man failed to realize was he wasn't searching for more riches, he was searching for purpose. He left with riches that would be lost as soon as he passed away. Jesus offered him both riches and purpose that would last for eternity.

A Better Way: Today, you have the same choice. Will you be the rich young ruler who focuses on what you currently have, or will you receive the invitation from Jesus Himself and receive greater riches and purpose than you ever could on your own? It takes a step from you. A step from hoarding to generosity. From consumption to sacrifice. From death to life.

A better way begins by doing the opposite of the Rich Young Ruler. What gets in your way from following Jesus completely? Whatever it is, it's stopping you from experiencing the riches God has for you. Set aside earthly possessions and live sowing what is eternal.

DAY TWENTY-FIVE

HOW TO MANAGE MONEY GOD'S WAY

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Luke 14:28-30

If you're tired of worrying about money, then it's time to start listening to what God says about managing money. What is desperately needed is not more money but financial margin that comes from following God's financial plan with the money we already have. Here's a breakdown of God's financial game plan.

Make a Budget and Stick to It: Do you find yourself often worrying about making it to the next paycheck as the month comes to a close? The anxiety is all too common, but Jesus offers a better way: budgeting.

In Luke 14:28-30, Jesus tells a parable about a man building a tower. He says that before building, the man should "count the cost" to ensure he has enough to complete it, lest he becomes a subject of mockery. Similarly, by setting a budget before each month starts, you give every dollar a purpose, ensuring you won't be caught short when life throws unexpected costs your way.

Begin by listing out all your expenses, start with giving and then list out your needs: Food, utilities, shelter and transportation. After that, prioritize everything else in the budget based on your income, your situation and where you want to be financially.

Now, creating a budget may not be the most exciting activity, but it works, and it is a sign of maturity. Adults devise a plan and follow it while children do what feels good. Putting in the time and effort to make a plan and giving every dollar you bring home a job before the month begins is a must if you want to manage money well and do it according to God's ways. With various tools and apps available, you can create your first budget in minutes.

Live on Less Than You Make and Save for the Future: The book of Proverbs cautions against consuming everything you have (Proverbs 21:20). To truly live with financial freedom and to honor God, you need to save. As you put together a budget, you can make the decision to live on less than you make. This is what will give you money left over to save for future opportunities and challenges.

Saving money is hard work! Hebrews 12:11 tells us, “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” Discipline in saving reaps spiritual and practical rewards. It also allows you to actually enjoy life with the money God wants to bless you with. Saving money allows you to stop being anxious about money so you can pay cash for that next vacation, plan for children’s education, invest in your retirement, and create an emergency fund for when the unexpected happens.

Investing Wisely: Proverbs 13:22 encourages leaving an inheritance for your children’s children, which is a call to build wealth responsibly. Wealth-building is not a sin; it’s a mechanism to extend your blessings to others.

Avoid Debt: Debt holds you back. It’s got you paying off last year’s Christmas presents in June. And then you’re stuck paying off that beach vacation in December. You can’t get ahead like that! That is why the Bible consistently warns against debt. Proverbs 22:7 states, “The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender.” By avoiding debt, you keep the power God has granted you over your resources and stay free.

Remember your Why: Why do all this? We’re told in Proverbs 11:25 that “a generous person will prosper” and “whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.” That’s the whole reason we follow God’s ways of handling money. We don’t just save, invest and build wealth so we can hoard money or enjoy it all ourselves. The biggest reason we want to create margin in our finances and build wealth is so we can use it to be outrageously generous. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, “God loves a cheerful giver.” Generosity is in our spiritual DNA as followers of Jesus Christ. Giving is the most fun you’ll ever have with money.

A Better Way: God’s financial plan is a divine blueprint that works every time. It’s time to align ourselves with it. All the money we have is ultimately God’s (Psalm 24:1). Managing money responsibly is a way to honor God and this includes avoiding debt, saving, and building wealth over time. Pray that God will give you the wisdom and courage to start managing your money according to His plan. What steps do you need to take to follow God’s financial plan?

For more help you can unlock Ramsey+ for free at journeyconnect.org/ramseyplus.

DAY TWENTY-SIX

WHAT YOU GIVE MATTERS

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Mark 12:41-44

It may surprise you, but God cares deeply about the amount you give. God doesn't merely glance at your giving; He scrutinizes it. Why? Because God views our giving as a reflection of our relationship with Him. It's about the condition of our hearts.

Jesus consistently emphasized the connection between our hearts and the amount we give. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). Whatever you give money to, a force pulls your heart toward it. What you spend a little money on stirs your heart very little. Yet, when you dedicate a large amount of money to something that carries greater personal importance, it awakens a more profound pull in your heart. It's the amount that stirs up the interest of your heart. So, when you give an amount that really matters to you, it gets the attention of your heart, and that, in turn, draws the attention of God.

When your giving has the power to impact your lifestyle, it draws your heart to God, and in those moments, He is genuinely delighted. However, when your giving lacks heart and the sacrifice of faith, it fails to catch God's attention. It doesn't stir His emotions or move His heart because it really did not matter to you. But when we give in a way that truly matters, it's that heartfelt sacrificial giving that not only brings joy to God but also to us. When you give an amount that matters, it means it matters to you. And that's precisely what matters to God. It signifies our devotion to our Heavenly Father.

Giving forces us to say no to ourselves because pleasing God is what really matters to us. This is the point Jesus was making in the story of the poor widow. Jesus observed wealthy individuals giving substantial sums of money to the temple, drawing admiration from onlookers. However, in the midst of it all, a poor widow quietly approached, giving two small copper coins, barely worth a cent in worldly terms. Yet, Jesus sees her heart and declared a profound truth, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything — all she had to live on." (Mark 12:43-44 NIV)

What made her giving extraordinary? She gave an amount that mattered deeply to her. It wasn't about the size of the gift in worldly standards, but the depth of her love was revealed in her sacrifice. In that moment, she connected her heart with God's heart. Her act of sacrificial giving grabbed Jesus' attention because it represented an authentic display of her love and trust in God.

God delights in our giving when it's an expression of love and faith. It's about the sincerity and sacrifice underlying the gifts we bring. When we give with a heart full of joy and sacrifice, our gifts transform into acts of worship. The gift draws our heart toward God, becoming a channel for a profound and personal connection with God.

Throughout Scripture, we encounter instances of God's pleasure in offerings rooted in sincere hearts willing to sacrifice. But we also find stories where God was displeased with insincere or ritualistic offerings. In the book of Malachi, God reprimanded the Israelites for offering blind, lame, and sick animals as sacrifices, exposing their lack of reverence and devotion. Their gift did not matter to them, so it did not matter to God. God's desire is clear: He wants our giving to mirror our hearts, an extension of our love for Him.

A Better Way: Take time to think of how you give and the amount you give. Does your giving please God, get His attention and delight His heart? God notices your gifts in a personal way, like a father receiving a gift from a child. Some gifts are acceptable to God, while others are not. God peers beyond the mere amount and into the depths of your heart. He rejoices in the gifts that mirror your devotion and faith. Let your giving be a fragrant offering and a source of joy as you truly delight in your Heavenly Father. This is the challenge and the invitation: when we give in a way that matters to us, it shapes us because it draws our hearts toward God and draws God's heart with delight toward us.

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN

PUT YOUR MONEY TO WORK

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Luke 19:12-26

Jesus never hesitated diving into challenging topics. His approach didn't stem from a desire to stir controversy; rather, it was rooted in a profound concern that no one should miss out on abundant life. When it comes to money, Jesus doesn't hold back; He confronts and challenges us. He delivers a powerful truth that brings clarity to Our lives: our sacrificial giving here on Earth directly shapes the magnitude of our heavenly rewards.

In Luke 19, Jesus gives a powerful illustration of this life-altering concept. A nobleman is preparing to depart for a distant land to become a king of a kingdom. Before his departure, the nobleman, a representation of Jesus, entrusts 10 servants with various sums of money. Each servant, without exception, symbolizes the followers of Jesus, including you and me. His instructions to His servants are crystal clear: "Put this money to work, until I come back." (Luke 19:13).

When the nobleman returns, he calls his servants to give an account of how they managed the money he gave them to do his work. The first servant multiplied his wealth tenfold, the second fivefold. But the third servant's report stands in stark contrast; he wasted what was given to him.

What unfolds next is a vivid picture of the principal Jesus wants us to grasp. The nobleman's response to the first servant, who proved faithful in the little, is electrifying: "Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities as your reward" (Luke 19:17). To the second servant, he grants authority over five cities (Luke 19:19). But the servant who did nothing with what he was given was cast out because it revealed he did not trust in his master or find joy in the master's work.

The nobleman's departure and return parallel Jesus' ascension to heaven and His eventual second coming. As followers of Jesus we are called to be faithful stewards of the money we have and leverage the opportunities God has entrusted to us until Jesus returns. Herein lies the heartbeat of Jesus' message: The extent of our sacrificial generosity on Earth will directly determine the magnitude of our

reward in Heaven.

Just as the servants received money, we too have received resources from God and been given the opportunities to make a difference with what God has entrusted to us. The nobleman's directive, "Put this money to work" (Luke 19:13), encapsulates Jesus' heart for us. Every single day, we are called to utilize all we possess, to be fully immersed in God's business, and to pursue His purposes with unwavering determination.

Jesus doesn't desire for us to squander our lives on trivial pursuits that hold no eternal significance. He longs for us to live lives of abundance, lives that leave an indelible, eternal impact. He fully comprehends that the power of greed and fear will attempt to rob us of the blessings He yearns to bestow upon us. However, the key to unlocking these blessings lies in our unshakeable trust, demonstrated through a lifestyle marked by open-handed, sacrificial giving.

When we choose to live with open hands, freely sharing our resources, God responds with blessings and rewards. But when we hold on to what we have, we inadvertently invite fear and scarcity into our lives, and we forfeit the blessings God has ordained for us. The tragic result is we also miss out on the incredible rewards awaiting us in Heaven. Our rewards and blessings for living a life of generosity extend far beyond this temporal existence. How we use our money today profoundly shapes our eternal destiny.

Those who clutch their resources, giving sparingly, will find themselves with meager rewards when Jesus returns. But those who give with radical generosity will encounter an overflow of abundance that transcends anything we can imagine. There's an undeniable connection between our giving and God's lavish blessings upon us. When we withhold, our blessings dwindle, but when we give sacrificially, our blessings multiply exponentially.

A Better Way: How are you doing in putting the money God has given you to work? Your response to this question will not only shape your present reality but also your eternal destiny. You can't outgive God! There's nothing more exhilarating than realizing that your impact will reverberate far beyond your final breath, leaving an enduring legacy of love, generosity, and unwavering faith that transcends the bounds of time itself.

week five

A BETTER WAY TO BE FREE

MEMORY VERSE

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Ephesians 4:31-32

We’ve all felt the sting of betrayal or hurt. These experiences have a way of chaining us to bitterness, trapping us in a cell of past hurts so we feel we can’t escape. But Jesus offers us a way to be free and find healing from past hurt: The power of forgiveness. This isn’t just your standard fare of life advice; it’s a call-to-action that brings life. The forgiveness found in Jesus does not just inspire us but empowers us to forgive. This week you will learn the tools you need to move toward the hurt, address the pain, set relational boundaries, and finally break free from the hurt of the past through forgiveness so you can experience real healing. No matter how deep you have been hurt, Jesus provides a better way to be free!

DAY TWENTY-EIGHT

THE POWER TO FORGIVE

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Ephesians 4:25-32

In the grand tapestry of life, we all carry a common thread: Hurt. Most of the wounds we bear from the past were inflicted on us by others. Those hurts have a remarkable way of shaping our future. They leave imprints on our hearts, etching bitterness, anger, and resentment into the very fabric of our being. But in the midst of this struggle, there exists a profound and liberating truth: Jesus Christ reveals the path to freedom from past hurt is found in forgiveness, and the power to forgive is rooted in the forgiveness He gives us.

Imagine carrying a heavy backpack filled with stones. Each stone represents a hurt, a grudge, a painful memory. As you walk through life, this burden grows heavier, weighing you down, and hindering your progress. Bitterness, rage, anger, and malice are the stones that make the load unbearable. They consume your thoughts, poison your relationships, and steal your joy. The more those hurts grow, they become like heavy stones that keep us from moving forward.

Unforgiveness imprisons you in a cycle of pain and resentment, holding you captive to the past. To break free, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other... (Ephesians 4:31–32). The only way to be free is through the profound act of forgiveness. But let's be real, that seems impossible! How could we ever do that? The answer: "Just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

Don't miss this promise: The power to forgive is found in understanding the forgiveness secured for us in Jesus Christ. On the cross Jesus, the sinless Son of God, carried the weight of our sins upon His shoulders. He stood in our place, taking the punishment we deserved. He became sin for us, so we might become righteous through Him.

Imagine standing before a judge to receive a just sentence for your crimes. Instead of pronouncing that sentence upon you, the judge steps down from the bench, takes your place, and endures the punishment on your behalf. This is akin to what Jesus did for us on the cross. He took our place, accepted the full weight of our sins, and

endured the divine judgment that should have fallen on us.

As Jesus hung on the cross, the weight of our sin was transferred to Him. He bore the full consequences of our sins, the separation from God, so we wouldn't have to. As He hung in agony, He uttered those profound words: "Father, forgive them!" (Luke 23:34). This was the only way we could be forgiven. Jesus' death provides a way for our sins to be washed away and our guilt to be replaced with His righteousness. The moment we receive Jesus Christ as Savior, EVERY sin we have done, will do, or could do is eternally forgiven.

Understanding the depth of what Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross is central to grasping the power of forgiveness. We realize our own forgiveness is not based on our merit or efforts but on God's grace and the finished work of Christ on the cross. This revelation is what gives us the power to forgive. The Holy Spirit uses the forgiveness of Christ to create within us an awe and gratitude in our hearts that empowers us to extend the same forgiveness to others that we have received from God. Just as God forgave us through Christ, we are called to forgive others in the light of that same sacrifice. Forgiven people have the power to forgive people.

A Better Way. Jesus provided us a better way to be free that comes through forgiveness. Forgiveness is not an endorsement of wrongdoing or excusing what was done. Instead, it is a release of the grip hurt has on our lives. When we forgive, we break the chains of bitterness by choosing to let go of the stones that have burdened our souls. In forgiving, we imitate Christ, who first forgave us.

The freedom that comes through forgiveness is never easy. It will require time, tears, and prayer. But remember, you have been given the power to be free through Jesus Christ. It's choosing to release the stones of hurt, one by one, until your backpack is empty. It's a daily decision to walk in the light of Christ's forgiveness and extend that same grace to others.

DAY TWENTY-NINE

WHAT DOES FORGIVENESS LOOK LIKE?

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Matthew 18:23-35

The path to freedom isn't always easy, but Jesus gives us the clarity we need to move past the hurt of the past. Instead of getting even, Jesus calls us to forgive.

In Matthew 18:23-35, Jesus tells the story of a King who confronted a servant who owed him an insurmountable debt. The servant, facing the prospect of losing everything, pleaded for mercy, promising to repay the enormous sum. But his debt was beyond his ability to repay. Fortunately for him, the King was a merciful man and took pity on his servant by canceling his debt. He decided to let go of his right to be paid back.

This is the point of the story Jesus wants us to see. Jesus reveals the essence of forgiveness is a decision to cancel a debt. Forgiveness is letting go of what someone owes you. It's the decision that the person who hurt you does not owe you for the hurt they caused you. It's releasing the debt of wrong of those who caused it and allowed you to be hurt from it.

When someone hurts you, they take something from you. That's the reason you are hurt. If somebody gossips about you, it amounts to that person stealing your good reputation. If a man is unfaithful to his wife, he robs her of emotional security and the love she gave to him.

Every time a person hurts you, that person now owes you something. This is why the common first response to hurt is, "You owe me!" You feel you are a victim. You have been taken advantage of and treated wrongly. To achieve justice, a transaction must take place that transfers something back to you for the wrong caused to you. It could be an apology, a favor, money, or some other form of reimbursement, but the tension will remain until you feel the debt is settled.

This longing to make the person pay for what they did is dangerous. While it feels good in the moment to think of all the ways we want to make the person pay for what they did, Jesus knows this path leads to more bitterness and anger. The more you hold on to hurt it keeps festering like a wound that refuses to heal. Unforgiveness locks us in the hurt of the past so we can't be free.

Thankfully, Jesus offers a better way. He calls us to follow His example to forgive. Forgiveness is releasing the debt, to declare, "You don't owe me anymore." It's not about helping the one who hurt us; it's about freeing ourselves from the chains of resentment.

A Better Way: What does this forgiveness look like in practical terms?

Identifying what you feel you are owed. This clarity is essential for genuine freedom. Take a moment to reflect and write down why you're hurt and whom you're angry with. Then be specific about what you feel they owe you. It's about recognizing someone has taken something from you — a piece of your heart, your peace, your trust.

Decide to cancel the debt. Forgiveness is both a decision and a process. It involves absorbing the pain and deciding "you don't owe me anymore." When Jesus absorbed the pain of our sins and released us from our debt, He also gave us the power to free others from the hurt they have caused us. It's a quiet declaration to God that you refuse to make the person who hurt you pay for what they've done. It's not rooted in emotion but in a deliberate act of release.

Dismiss the case. Make the decision not to hurt them or demand a personal repayment. As you walk this path of forgiveness, you'll encounter moments when painful memories resurface, and old wounds are prodded. In those times, you must remind yourself, "I forgive you; you don't owe me anymore." It's the case dismissed, the final verdict of forgiveness.

Lean into love. Pray for those who've hurt you and asking God to grant you a genuine love for them. It's about wanting good for their lives, just as God has desired good for ours. It does not mean you trust them and become close to them again, but it does mean that you want to have compassion for them just as God has shown us.

Take the time to work through these steps. In some cases, professional counseling may be necessary. Embrace the freedom Christ offers!

DAY THIRTY

TAKE THE BANDAGE OFF

BY KAREN ESTEVEZ

Read Luke 23:13-32

Picture this day. Jesus was examined by the Roman governor and was found to have no fault against Him. Therefore, He was going to be punished and then released. However, the entire crowd disagreed and wanted Jesus to be crucified and have Barabbas, a murderer, released in His place. The crowd was so persistent, loud, and demanding that the governor eventually granted their demand. Jesus was led out with two criminals to be crucified and at that moment, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" Luke 23:32 (NIV).

Jesus was not upset, angry, or shouting back to the crowd, but instead, asked His father to forgive them. Jesus bore the hurt, rejection, betrayal, and pain, yet He had peace in this situation to ask His father to forgive them.

Now, take a deep breath and reflect on your pain, hurt, betrayal, rejection, and the situation that hurts to talk about. It felt like the world was against you; almost unable to have anyone on your side. Possibly, for you, it was silent, you never spoke about it, and you internalized it. No one knew, and you just dealt with it, feeling as if you bore the world on your shoulders. Lastly, like myself, you may think, "I am over it; this happened years ago. I'm fine." But have you asked your Father to forgive them? Have you forgiven them?

There are situations in our life that we have endured but have not healed from. Therefore, when we are faced with a similar situation, we endure it again and again and again when in reality, it's crippling us.

Jesus understands the crippling pain we bear in our lives. He knows we need to be set free from our past hurts, so He did not just leave us to suffer with it on our own. Jesus bore every form of hurt, pain, and sin upon Himself on the cross, securing for us the ultimate freedom and healing.

Jesus' sacrifice was not merely to forgive us, but also to provide a way for us to experience emotional and spiritual healing right now as we forgive others. Just like Jesus asked His Father to forgive them,

we are to do the same. You may ask why. That is because your Father is watching over you and is listening, just like He was for Jesus on His day of crucifixion in His hurt, betrayal pain, and rejection. Like Jesus, when we take our hurts to our Father God in prayer and ask for the grace to forgive those who have wronged us, we go through the process of healing and redemption. You're opening a way for God to work and take you from a place of suffering to hope.

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" Romans 5:1-5 (NIV).

Today, reflect on your situation and the unforgiveness you're holding onto. Take time and dig deep today. What are you enduring in your life that is not processed and forgiven? I know for myself it's almost like ripping off the bandage of a wound. When the wound is covered, you can't see it, it doesn't bother you, and no one is aware of it.

However, when you rip the bandage off, the initial reaction is "ouch" from the adhesive that had been there for a while. The wound is now open, and you have to treat it to get better, as it's no longer covered. Now, you can see it, which means you have to take care of it. This is your opportunity where your healing process can begin because where there is healing, there is peace and forgiveness.

A Better Way: Again, take a deep breath and reflect on that situation. It's time you take off the bandage and allow healing to happen and the wound to completely heal. Ask God to help you release the thing or many things that are depleting you.

Start with this prayer: "Jesus, I no longer want to endure through this pain, and I want to ask for You to help me take off the bandage on my wounds so I can begin the healing process. Father, forgive them for they did not know what they caused in my life. I surrender them to You, and I pray this in Your holy name, Amen."

DAY THIRTY-ONE

PROTECTING GOD'S INVESTMENT

BY TRICIA BULLEMAN

Read Psalm 16:1-11

One afternoon, my husband and I came home to find our neighbor sitting on the tailgate of our old Chevy pickup, reading a book she removed from the cab. That's right! Our new neighbor slid her hand through the small triangular window to retrieve a book from the dash and was sitting in our driveway reading it. To say we were surprised is an understatement. We felt violated but gave her the benefit of the doubt...until a few weeks later when we found a hole cut out of our privacy fence so that when the woman wanted a family pet, she could borrow ours!

Understandably, we didn't offer our home up to her, make her keys for our vehicles, or remove the back gate as an open invitation. Instead, we addressed the encroachment of our property line and set a clear boundary with our neighbor. Seemingly, most people understand crossed boundaries regarding material things, but when it comes to matters of the heart, mind, and body, we struggle to set and stick to them.

Boundary setting is an important part of choosing to forgive. As followers of Jesus, we often become confused about what forgiveness is and is not. Misunderstood Christian principles such as "turning the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39) and "not looking to your own interests but to the interest of others" (Philippians 2:4) can lead us to conclusions and choices that hinder the establishment of healthy relationships based on pleasant boundary lines, the very things that allow for healing and growth.

In Psalm 16, David expresses his gratitude for the way boundary (property) lines have fallen. David prays and acknowledges that God's presence is the psalmist's safe place. He understands his boundaries have fallen in pleasant places because the Lord has placed them as protection out of love. David confesses that God is responsible for good boundaries resulting in abundance, according to His promise. David's psalm reflects his personal responsibility of a life of fellowship with God and His saints, those allowed inside his boundaries. In contrast, David resists inviting men onto his "land" who run and

trample over it, those who invite evil and destruction. The psalmist sets before himself the commands of the Lord as counsel because they reveal the path of life.

In their book "Boundaries", Cloud and Townsend state, "Our spiritual and emotional growth is God's 'interest' on His investment in us. When we say no to people and activities that are hurtful to us, we are protecting God's investment" (p.109). God is pleased when we care for His investment. We are good stewards when we attend to our souls and heal from negative experiences as we identify hurt, process emotions, understand the need for forgiveness, set boundaries, and move forward. It's not your responsibility to change someone else's behavior, but you can control how you engage with them. Boundaries are not about pushing people away but about stewarding the relationships God has given us. They help us walk in love and wisdom.

Because of His love, God established boundary lines for humanity to promote love and connection with Him and others. God defines both His and our responsibilities throughout His word. Boundaries protect freedom. As we reflect Him, we have the freedom to set and adhere to relational boundaries to protect what belongs to God, namely ourselves as His children. We are free to keep physical, emotional, and spiritual safeguards even as we forgive and heal from relational challenges.

A Better Way: Do you struggle to set healthy boundaries? Spend time in prayer, asking God for the wisdom to set boundaries that are both loving and firm. Clearly define what your boundaries are. Whether they're emotional, physical, or mental boundaries, make sure you understand what they entail. Then, clearly discuss your boundaries with the person. Stick to them and establish consequences for those who act irresponsibly or manipulatively toward you. But also, do you struggle with crossing others' boundaries? If so, consider the root cause of the conflict. Take ownership of your part and give and receive forgiveness. Confess your part to God and to safe people who will tell you the truth and help you respect limits.

Pray, "God, thank You for investing in me and providing biblical boundaries through Your Word. Help me form boundaries that fall in pleasant places and stand firm in them. Help me own my part and move forward to steward Your investment in me. Amen."

DAY THIRTY-TWO

BEWARE OF THE SIDE YARD

BY REBECCA SELLERS

Read Psalm 147

One September morning, my youngest and I had just arrived home from a bike ride and began picking up remnants of our croquet set in the grass. As we rounded the corner to the side yard, everything appeared in its place and presentable. A few strides later, it hit me without any warning sign: The most obnoxious odor I had ever smelled. I suddenly remembered with acute precision what was forced inside the shiny green trash bin days ago...a raw seafood order that had arrived rancid. It was not visibly noticeable, but the interior bin needed a bleach concoction of care immediately.

As with most of the mundane day-to-day moments, within hours I felt the Spirit whisper deep into my soul about that foul and shocking outdoor trash bin situation. So often in my own life and in loving others, things can often present themselves well packaged but there can be a simultaneous decomposing internally that no one is aware of.

No one chooses the rotten feeling and rawness of hurting; we all experience the heartache and grief of living in a broken and dying world. Some conceal it easily, but we each have pain that needs to be honored and tended to. Our hurt may appear tame internally, but God has a way of outing it for our good. It feels inopportune, but healing happens with noticing and outing.

Healing has no timeline, and it is certainly not linear. Some hurts are like an onion that you peel back layer by layer, year by year. A few years ago, the Spirit dropped a nugget about Matthew 18 in my heart. When Jesus discusses processing forgiveness 77+ times with one person, I learned one layered event may need to be processed over and over again simply for the Spirit to heal every location in our brain affected by the hurt.

Did you know there is research showing physical healing happens to our neural pathways and grooves when we fully process our hurt and forgiveness? It can't be explained scientifically, but you and I know it is the work of our Jehovah-Rapha, the God Who Heals. It is the Gospel active in our living world. Jesus' longing for us to be healed

and whole is visible right before our eyes.

Newly married and a handful of years out from a series of traumatic events in my life, I had a friend question the validity of my past hurt and forgiveness due to a current heartache. That is the stuff that sticks with you. I continued to wrestle with shame for years each time grief would revisit me. Then, almost two decades later, Jesus took me by the hand and ushered me to the deepest hardest layer of it through a series of events outside of my control. He had things for me to unpack internally that He had ordained for the 20-year-old version of me to face, not the 20. That's when I realized I need to be faithful to process my heartache and forgiveness layer by layer, year by year, until He calls me home to the fullest of healings.

So, I pen these words to you... there is heartache but also deep healing ahead, beloved. Maybe it is time now to do a layer of the work or maybe in the days ahead. No matter the kind of hurt, it takes diligent achy work to heal deep hurt. It takes letting safe people in and often at least one season of therapy. I am not sure a harder work exists for me...to sit patiently with my ache and tend to my wounds with the salve of God's care all while assessing the cost of my hurt. We cannot rush it, but we must be willing to see it all the way through.

I urge you, please do not choose to be like my shiny green trash bin that appeared pristine but was overlooked, alone and rotting internally in the side yard. Your insides are worth so much more than that, truly. All of you is.

A Better Way: Our bodies cry out deep down for healing, even when we don't want to feel the hurt. Jehovah-Rapha put that longing in us so we would long for a time and place so much better than this world we know. He is fully aware of every ache in our heart and every neural pathway in our brain that needs to be made new. Let's ask Him to show us today how to take just one step toward sitting with, tending to and processing our hurt and forgiveness. He has healing ahead for us, take time to ask Him to heal it.

DAY THIRTY-THREE

TRULY FREE

BY SHANA HILTON

Read Matthew 11:28

For years, I had lived in a state of perpetual hurt and anger over how I had been wronged. My father struggled with alcoholism and my past was filled with a lot of trauma. I was broken, I was hurting. I had learned to muster up what I needed to move through life, but my hurt from my past was crippling my future. I was weary and I was burdened.

Here is the really good news: This is no longer my story. And God wants you to know your story does not have to end in trauma, brokenness, and anger. God revealed Himself in some powerful ways so I could break free from the hurt of the past, the unforgiveness and loss of joy that I was experiencing. Because, my friend, living in the hurt of the past will only bring one thing: A complete and utter loss of joy. How did God free me from my past hurts and allows me to find healing?

First, I had to learn I was not alone. God had not abandoned me in my hurt. God had not forgotten about me in my loneliness. God still saw me. God revealed to me that I am not invisible to Him. I am His child; I am His daughter. He loved me so much that He died for me. Even if I were the only person on the planet, God would have responded the same way and sent His son to die on the cross for me. He called me out in the middle of my darkness and despair and drew me in, giving me access to Him. He knew me, loved me, and wanted me. This is where my true worth comes from. He is where my value comes from. No matter what you might be feeling, we must rest in the truth that you are seen and known by a loving God who sacrificed His Son so you can have eternity with Him.

Second, I had to realize I was putting so many expectations on myself that were not from God but from myself. People I loved did and said things that destroyed me. Many times, those words and actions were on repeat in my head. To fight those feelings of worthlessness, I set these high expectations on myself to prove the condemning voices wrong. But I kept failing and even worse, I thought the God of the universe thought I was failing as well. But that is not what He thinks

about me. Ephesians 2:4-5 tells us because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions, it is by grace you have been saved!

God does not declare over me my failures. He declares I am fearfully and wonderfully made. I am bought with a price. (I am bought at a price.) I am His child, called out for His purpose. If we want to live in freedom from past hurt, we must change the script of what we are speaking over ourselves. We are not failures, we are not useless, we are not broken, we are not unlovable. Jesus paid the ultimate price for us so we could be called a child of the King!

Third, I had to not only forgive others, but I needed to forgive myself. I had to forgive myself for not being strong enough, for allowing the pain of what was done to me to consume me, for allowing hurt to affect so much about me. I believed God could save me from my sin. I believed that there was nothing I could do to make God love me more and there was nothing I could do to make God love me less. What I needed to do was to recognize the truth of what God did for me, not only allowed for me to be forgiven of my sins but was enough to also heal my brokenness. I realized that through Jesus Christ, I didn't have to live broken anymore!

Today, Jesus declares you don't have to live broken anymore. You don't have to live angry with your past hurting you. Jesus has given us a better way to be free and find healing from past hurt through forgiveness. The God of the universe loved you enough to die on the cross for your sins. His death not only saved you from your sins but gave you the ability to truly live free. Free from the bondage of sin, free from the pain of regret, free from living trapped in the hurt of your past. Free to forgive others and forgive yourself.

A Better Way: Pray, "Lord, let me begin to live in that freedom today. Let me truly believe that You love me, You see me, You think more of me than I think of myself. Help me today to release the unforgiveness that I have for others and for myself. Let me truly come to You and find rest in You. Bring refreshment to my weary soul and let me live truly free!"

DAY THIRTY-FOUR

MOVE TOWARD THE MESS

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Romans 12:14-21

No one really likes conflict. It hurts, and it's tough. But it's also unavoidable in the world we live in. You will always experience conflict in life, but it's how you deal with conflict that defines your experience in life. What if instead of running from conflict when it happens, God actually wants us to see it as an opportunity?

God could very easily make life conflict-free. But he didn't because conflict actually serves a purpose. Every conflict provides an opportunity for God to use you and teach you something that you could never learn without it.

While you can't change how other people act in a conflict, you can change what you do in conflict. It can be tempting to believe that by running from conflict, we can solve the problem. But it rarely works that way. You can't run from the issue and expect resolution. You can't ignore a hurtful relational problem and expect it to just disappear.

Paul instructs, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:18) You can't force peace, but you can do your part to live at peace. God has empowered us through Jesus Christ to be the type of people who seek peace by taking the initiative whenever conflict comes. With attention and practice, we can develop the ability to move toward the mess and work to live at peace. How can you do that?

A Better Way: There are six commitments that will help us move toward the mess in any relationship. These commitments allow you to deal with the conflict in a way that is healthy, seeks peace, and brings healing.

1. *Allow room for human mess: Paul instructs, "Make allowance for each other's faults" (Colossians 3:13, NLT). Paul encourages us to make allowances, give margin, be patient when you are hurt. When someone offends you, don't respond immediately. Take time to pray about it. Many disputes are so insignificant that they should be resolved by quietly overlooking an offense. Breathe! Don't make the mess bigger than what it really is. Overlooking an offense is a form of forgiveness. But if the*

problem continues to grow, then go to the next commitment.

- 2. Invite God to Intervene: Jesus shares when conflict happens, you are to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Prayer invites God into the conflict. It allows God to work in your life and the life of the person who hurt you. It also begins the transformation process in us. You will never come to peace with people who have wronged you until you start praying for them. Before you do anything else, spend time praying for those who hurt you.*
- 3. Deal with the Person Directly: Talk to them before you ever talk about them. Be the initiator in conflict resolution. It doesn't matter whose fault it is. When it's your fault, take the initiative. When it's their fault, take the initiative. If there is a problem, don't let it fester, take the initiative. Go directly to that person, deal with the issue, and work for peace by dealing with the situation.*
- 4. Seek to Listen: Begin with the willingness to hear the other person's story. Before you can ever discover a possible solution to the conflict, you need to understand what is going on with the person you are in conflict with. Listening shows you value the person, not just your point.*
- 5. Focus on Being Self-aware Rather Than Self-righteous: Self-righteousness is defensive. It only sees the problems in everyone else. Self-awareness means you understand you are just as sinful as the other person. As you become self-aware, you examine and confess your part of the conflict first. Our greatest tendency is to become obsessed with other people's behaviors and actions, without looking at what we have done or how we have acted.*
- 6. Speak the Truth in Love: Speak to address the issues, not to attack the person. Avoid telling people what you think they are, instead describe how their actions affect you. It may be the truth but if you're not speaking it in love, you will never experience peace.*

People will hurt us, and there will be conflict. But when it happens, move toward the mess to bring healing. Stop seeing conflict only as a bad thing; it's an opportunity. Pray God will give you wisdom to move toward the mess conflict creates.

week six

THE ONLY WAY TO LIVE

MEMORY VERSE

"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ."

Philippians 3:7-8

God didn't design you to get by; He created you to thrive, to live with an unparalleled sense of passion! When life shouts "Quit!" it's that God-inspired passion that screams back, "Not today!" It's a passion not self-generated by hype or a fleeting emotional high, but awakened through the passion of Jesus Christ. Venturing into the depths of His love for us, our hearts are set ablaze with purpose, and our souls are ignited by a fervent passion to live for the glory of Jesus Christ. Placing Jesus at the center of our lives is an invitation to align our desires with God's divine plan, to live fully and intentionally in surrender, and to embrace His transformative power. Jesus Christ died and rose so you might desire God above all. Don't settle for the paltry joys of the world when infinite joy is offered in Jesus Christ. Will you determine to make Him the all-consuming focus of your life? Your deepest happiness is intricately connected to living with a passion for God's glory. This is the only way to live!

DAY THIRTY-FIVE

PURSUING CHRIST WITH PASSION

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Philippians 3:7-11

In the fast-paced whirlwind of life, we're all in hot pursuit of something. It's like a burning hunger deep inside us that never quits. The Apostle Paul knew what this chase was all about. "Everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8, NLT). Paul, who once had it all, realized everything he was pursuing was junk compared to knowing Jesus Christ.

Our world tries to distract us all the time. It says, "Chase success, grab those awards, savor the quick thrills." But Paul's words cut through the noise: "I threw everything else away to gain Christ."

To "gain Christ" isn't some religious phrase. It's turning your life upside down. It's a blazing passion to get closer to God. It's knowing Jesus so deeply that everything else fades away.

Over these 40 Days, we've explored the better way Jesus has shown us to live. But here's the warning: If we're not careful, following Jesus' way can become about trying to impress God or earn something from Him. It becomes a treadmill of trying harder and doing more.

We begin following Jesus for the wrong reasons and with the wrong fuel. We aim to be better for Christ instead of being in Christ. That's what drains the life out of following Jesus. It's not about trying harder or doing more. It's about living each day, focused on what Jesus Christ has done to give us abundant life.

Here is the secret to living with passion for Jesus: Don't focus on what you think you need to do for Jesus, but focus on what He has already done for you. This ignites the passion we need to walk the better way He showed us. We don't try to earn God's love by loving others; we love because of His love for us. We don't serve others to gain a ticket to heaven; we serve because Jesus served us and made us right with God. We don't give to manipulate God to bless us; we give because we've been blessed in every way through Jesus. We don't forgive others to earn forgiveness; we forgive because we've already been forgiven.

When you stand in awe of who Jesus is and what He's done for you. When you focus on the greatness of his life, death, resurrection, and return, the Spirit of God sparks a fire in you to passionately follow Him.

Paul shows us passion isn't just knowing facts about Jesus but a profound hunger for a deeper encounter with the living God. You don't just want to know about Jesus; you want to know Him personally. You want to feel the power of Jesus' resurrection, the power that beat death. You're willing to share in Jesus' sufferings because you know that's how we live in the glory of Jesus Christ. You live every day with a passion for Jesus because you can never get over what Jesus did for you. Passion for Jesus isn't just a feeling; it's a rock-solid belief that He's more valuable than anything else in the universe.

Always remember this: Jesus doesn't want your goodness, morality, or hard work. He wants you. He wants you to follow Him because you can't get enough of Him, not because you're afraid or guilty. He wants you to chase after Him because you know He's worth more than anything else. When you follow Jesus with passion, everything changes. Passion is the only way to live.

A Better Way: What are you running after? What's on your mind, what drives you, what are your goals? Are you stuck on success, popularity, or comfort? Will you, like Paul, let go of everything else and chase after Christ with unstoppable passion? Will you dive deep into knowing Him, feeling His power, and sharing in His struggles?

In this pursuit, you'll uncover the treasure your heart's been yearning for — the endless, boundless, and never-ending treasure of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. May your life be marked by this relentless chase, because you'll discover the greatest prize of all in Him.

DAY THIRTY-SIX

PASSION-FILLED PURPOSE

BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

Read Hebrews 12:1-2

At age 15, God spoke in me the calling He was placing over my life. At the time, I was utterly lost and riddled with a sense of no real purpose. I had recently lost the entire group of friends I had done life with since the 7th grade, and I had lost hope that I belonged anywhere in this world. Yet, at the lowest moment of my teenage years is the exact moment God revealed His calling for my life. He wanted to work through me and was calling me into ministry.

In my pain, God gave me purpose. For some reason, out of all the people around me, He chose me. Little did I know the race set before me was going to be the hardest race I've ever run. I would experience a life full of tragic and life-shattering obstacles, while at the same time giving me joy and affirmation of purpose I had never known before.

How often does the "What's my purpose in life?" question run through your head? Whether you're 12 or 70 years old, it's a question all of us have or will wrestle with. The beautiful truth I want to share with you today is this: God has a purpose for you because He has called you. Every follower of Jesus Christ has been called to ministry. In His wisdom and love, God has a specific purpose for you, a race that He has set before you — this is your calling.

This race began the moment you took your first breath and will not end until you take your last. Your calling is not just a one-time event or a single task; it's a lifelong journey of becoming more like Christ and participating in His redemptive work in the world. It's filled with obstacles, snares, roadblocks, and more that you must overcome to finish the race.

Hebrews describes these obstacles as the "sin that so easily entangles." To finish the race God has set before us, we are commanded to "throw off everything that hinders." That's a command not to throw off just the sins that are most visible, but to throw off every sin, including the sins that we hide behind closed doors and have grown comfortable with.

What do we need in order to finish the race set before us? Endurance.

This involves effort and commitment. No one has ever won a race by sitting on the sidelines. That same principle applies to us as we step into the purpose God has for us.

Where do we get this endurance from? The author of Hebrews states it clearly, by “fixing our eyes on Jesus.” For marathon runners, one of the tricks of the trade is a runner will fix their eyes on a particular point ahead of them as they run. This offers a destination for them to focus on that keeps them going. By fixing our eyes on Jesus, we are given the endurance to finish the race He has set before us. We look away from all the distractions around us, the sin that seeks to entangle us and our eyes stay fixed on the “pioneer and perfecter of faith”.

Right now, nearly two-thirds of U.S. 18 to 29-year-olds who grew up in the church have withdrawn from their faith. What this reveals is the Christian faith is not for the faint-hearted. It’s a passion-filled purpose that requires endurance and reliance on Jesus to survive.

It takes fixing your eyes on Jesus to finish the race set before you. It’s allowing God to move and work through you to accomplish His purposes in your life. It requires grit, determination, discipline, endurance, and faithfulness in pursuing the “pioneer and perfecter of faith.” It’s fueled and ignited by a miracle mindset that is confident and convinced that your actions have an eternal, Kingdom-focused impact.

Your calling is not limited to what you do in church; it’s a 24/7 commitment that impacts every area of life. Every aspect of life is seen through the lens of this calling, and every decision is weighed against its alignment with God’s purpose. It’s stepping into a divinely ordained purpose made possible only through what Jesus did, “for the joy set before him” endured on the cross.

A Better Way: Dedicate time each day from now until the end of 40 Days to ask God to reveal His calling for your life. Do it boldly. Don’t hold back. Don’t let fear, distractions, or your current struggles stop you. The calling is there. God has already ordained it. Now, it’s time for you to step into it.

DAY THIRTY-SEVEN

PASSION + PURPOSE

BY MATTHEW RHOADS

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Have you ever made a sacrifice for something or someone you love or are passionate about? Maybe you sacrificed sleep to complete a project, sacrificed going out with friends to spend time with your son or daughter, or pushed through an injury so you could continue playing sports. When I was in high school, I was a HUGE tennis player. Though I wasn't the best on the team, I sure was passionate...some might say too passionate. I was willing to risk injuries and persist through pain to continue playing because I loved tennis and my team.

In some ways, everyone can relate to this idea of sacrificing things: When you are passionate about something, you make radical sacrifices that don't make sense to other people.

"Why?" people will ask you. "Why do you give so much to your church?" or "Why did you turn down that promotion just to be present in your kid's life?" or "Why didn't you go to the party last night?"

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul explains this idea of making a sacrifice in order to achieve a goal. Paul compares our time here on earth to a race. He says, "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable" (1 Corinthians 9:25 ESV). This is profound and shapes the way you will live your life.

To be a good athlete, you need to practice self-control. When training, you may have to cut back on eating desserts or choose to sleep instead of hanging out late with friends. You have to sacrifice your wants and desires to perform to the best of your ability.

The same goes for our walk with Christ. If athletes do all this for a perishable wreath, how much more should we sacrifice for the imperishable reward secured for us in Heaven? How much more should we die to our wants and fleshly desires to walk in the future Christ purchased for us with His blood? How much more should we be willing to sacrifice because we are passionate about Christ?

There's a second part to this, and that's when our passion God has instilled inside of us meets the purpose He has for our life. Being passionate about Christ is good for starters, but our human passion alone isn't enough. We need to know the purpose Christ has given our lives so we have somewhere to direct that passion.

If we don't know our purpose in Christ, we will explode with passion at the start but quickly burn out because we failed to recognize the eternal purpose He created us for. It's like waking up one morning with a spontaneous urge to run; you might run for a day, but the enthusiasm may wane after a week. Contrast this with setting a goal to train for a 5K over three months. This not only fuels your passion but also provides a sustained purpose. That gives you both passion and a purpose that allows you to hold onto something when your passion begins to fade.

The third point is you talk a lot about what you are passionate about. You sacrifice talking about other things because what you are passionate about is the most important thing. As followers of Christ, we want everyone to know the greatness of Christ. That's what the Great Commission we read in Matthew 28:16-20 is all about. We are ALL called to go and share the Gospel.

One practical way we can live this out is by inviting friends, family, classmates, and co-workers to hear about the resurrection this Easter. It may seem awkward or intimidating to bring up church at a family gathering or the workplace, but Christ has called us and has given us the strength to make daily sacrifices for His name. That means sacrificing our pride and comfort zones. God has placed you in the situations and places you are in for a purpose and out of love, we proclaim Christ.

A Better Way: As you begin to link your passion to the purpose God has given you, press toward the imperishable reward Jesus Christ has secured for you in Heaven. Remember the people and places God has surrounded you with are opportunities to show your passion for Christ while living out His purpose for you. Write down one person you will invite and fervently pray for as we approach Easter services across Journey Church.

DAY THIRTY-EIGHT

A BETTER RHYTHM

BY ADRIENNE LUGO

Read Deuteronomy 6:5-9

Have you ever walked into a room to get something but then forgot what you were getting? Have you walked into someone's office or even called a friend to ask them something and then forgot what it was you were going to ask them? I have done this plenty of times! I get busy and distracted so quickly that things slip my mind, and I forget. This is why God gave us verses in the Bible like Deuteronomy 6:5-6.

God does not want us to get so busy and distracted in the world that we forget what should be first in our lives. These verses make it clear that we are created to love God with everything we have because of who God is and what He has done for us. Loving God with all our heart can be described as putting God first in our thoughts and feelings, putting God first because His thoughts and ways are higher than ours, as it says in Isaiah 55:8. Loving God with all our soul can be described as putting God first over our deepest desires. Loving God with all our strength means we are to love God to the greatest extent we possibly can. Our identity, actions, gifts, and capacities are to be devoted to God.

This love, this passion, this relationship isn't something God wants from us but something He wants for us. As we spend more time with God through reading the Bible, praying, and worshiping, we develop a priority and passion to be more like Him, do all things for Him, and share with others what He has done for us. So, what does it take practically to do this? What can we do to never forget what life is all about? How do we create a rhythm in our lives to passionately put God first in everything we do?

Verses 7-9 speak to the patterns of our days: when we wake up, when we are home, when we are out, and when we are getting ready for bed. Every part of our day is outlined because our love for God should saturate every part of our life. When you wake up, what do you do first? When you go to bed, what's your last thought? In the car, what are you listening to? What kind of conversations are you having with your friends, family, or kids?

As parents, we are called to leave this impression on kids. We are called to pass on the passion we have for God. If you don't have kids, who has God put in your life who you can pass on the passion you have? Who has He put in your path, while you are home, out doing errands, serving at church, who you are called to leave an impression on for the glory of God?

God's word is something we should continuously observe and spend time in. Verse 8 is that reminder. We are to keep God's word close and in our perspectives. A way to keep it close is to set up a rhythm of reading the Bible regularly or memorizing verses like these so when we need the reminders, it's right in the forefront of our minds.

Because I so easily forget things, one of the most valuable lessons I have had to learn in my life is to keep important things where they belong. I never have to wonder where things are. I go back to their rightful place and I always find it. The same goes for the truth of God's word. My fight to keep God as the main priority in my life comes in developing a rhythm. As life gets difficult, I find my way back to where He is in the rhythm I have set for my life.

A Better Way: Reflect on your daily rhythm. Where are you being distracted from putting God first? What does the rhythm of your life reveal? What is your priority? With every season, I know my rhythm looks different. Each time my family and I enter a new one, I need to spend time intentionally reflecting to see how I need to shift priorities and keep God first. Pray that God reveals what part of your rhythm He wants you to focus on, and pray over whom God has put in your path to share His love with.

DAY THIRTY-NINE

LIVING A CHRIST CENTERED LIFE:

JESUS — THE ULTIMATE PURSUIT

BY TIM BULLEMAN

Read Matthew 7:24-27 and Colossians 3:1-3

In high school, I worked extremely hard at playing football, so much so that during my freshman year, I was able to play on the varsity team. As a senior, I led the state in tackles, received several football scholarship offers, and was scouted to play at a Division 1 college. My happiness was based on success in football and popularity. For a moment, these things were bringing the fulfillment I wanted. I wanted to be accepted by my peers, to be noticed. I was focused on glorifying myself and thought popularity and athletics would bring me true happiness. But life changed. Shortly after graduation, I began to realize I was hoping and building my life upon temporary, unstable things.

In a divine turn of events, I attended Arkansas State University. I knew only two people, my wife and her sister. Moving 900 miles away from everything I knew was one of the scariest times in my life. When I arrived, I wasn't popular, I had no friends, and I didn't play football. Tricia and I began attending a church in our small town. For the first time, I began to grow in a real relationship with God. What changed? I started to build my life on Jesus Christ, caring less about people knowing me and more about people knowing Christ through me. I invited Jesus to be the center of life and made the decision that I would spend my life pursuing Him!

As I pursued Jesus, the focus was no longer on me. Serving others became more important than hanging out at parties and leisure weekend activities. I invested in teaching kindergartners Sunday mornings and leading students Wednesday nights. At work, I started looking for ways for God to work through me to love others.

I was serving others because I wanted them to see Jesus. That became my motivation. I no longer cared about people noticing me. Despite our family and friends thinking we were crazy, God changed my ultimate desire. We started serving in the little church shortly after our wedding in 1996. Almost 30 years later, we have an even greater passion to serve our Lord Jesus Christ and see others come

to know and serve Him.

As followers of Jesus, our focus is on heavenly matters. This pursuit of Christ guides us on the path to holiness. The study of Scripture equips us for this journey, deepening our understanding of His ways, which then translates into practical good on earth. Through our actions, character, and interactions with others, we bring the spiritual atmosphere of Heaven to earth.

How do we live this way? We must constantly set our minds on things above, not earthly things (Colossians 3:2). This means we humble ourselves and pray, confessing our dependence on God. We read and study the Scriptures to grow in our faith. We join in groups with other like-minded believers. We seek to serve others by putting their legitimate needs before ours. We discover our spiritual gifts and put them into practice within the church. We generously give our money to our church as a way of investing in what God is doing in our world.

As Christ's followers, living in pursuit of Jesus Christ is the only way to live. If we place our hope and joy in the things of this world, it will fade, rot, and be destroyed. God says temporary things are built on a sandy foundation that will sink and disappear. However, building our lives on the Rock is a firm foundation that focuses on the eternal. We don't settle for the trivial joys of the world when infinite joy is offered in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the all-consuming focus of our lives. This is what brings us the deepest happiness and ultimate joy.

Living this way not only changes us, but God uses it to begin to change others. In this dark world, living for Jesus and demonstrating His love to others makes people curious, as they are drawn to the light of Christ. They want to know what we know that they have not found in the world. We reveal that our identity has been established, not based on anything we have done, but upon what Christ has done for us. We reflect our Savior as we love and serve Him and others in light of eternity.

A Better Way: Take time to pray that God will reveal any areas where you are seeking temporary hope and joy in things that can't deliver. Confess that God is the only One who can meet your deepest needs and ask Him for a desire to live with Christ as your ultimate pursuit. Praise Him for His presence now and for eternity.

DAY FORTY

THE PASSION OF CHRIST

BY PASTOR JAMES HILTON

Read Revelation 5:9-14

Passion is a word that carries immense weight. It's not just a fleeting emotion, but a driving force that propels us forward in life. As followers of Christ, our ultimate passion should be for Jesus Himself. But there's a profound truth we must grasp: Our passion for Jesus is ignited and sustained by the Passion of Jesus Christ.

The term "Passion of Jesus Christ" finds its origin in the Latin word "passio," which means "suffering". In the context of Jesus Christ, it refers specifically to the events leading up to His crucifixion and His sacrificial death on the cross.

Jesus, the Son of God, who had all the divine power to stop what was happening to him at any time, willingly embraced the agony of the cross. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed with profound anguish, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). Jesus knew that the only way we could live was He would have to die.

Crucifixion was invented by the Persians around 500 B.C. and perfected by the Romans in the days of Jesus. It was reserved for the most horrendous criminals. The pain of crucifixion was so horrendous that a word was invented to explain it: Our word "excruciating" literally comes from the Latin word meaning "from the cross." Crucified people could hang on the cross for days, passing in and out of consciousness.

To ensure maximum suffering, scourging, and intense beatings preceded crucifixion. Jesus' hands would have been chained above His head to expose His back and legs to an executioner's whip. With a whip made of hooks, the executioner would rip the skin, muscle, tendons, and even bones off the victim as he shouted in agony, shook violently, and bled heavily. Jesus was then forced to carry His roughly hewn wooden crossbar of perhaps 100 pounds on His bare, traumatized, bloodied back and shoulders to the place of His own crucifixion. Upon arriving at His place of crucifixion, they pulled Jesus' beard out (an act of ultimate disrespect in ancient cultures), spat on Him, and mocked Him in front of His family and friends.

Jesus the carpenter, who had driven many nails into wood with His own hands, then had 7-inch, rough, metal spikes driven into the most sensitive nerve centers on the human body: His hands and feet. Jesus was in unbearable agony as they lifted Him up, and His Cross dropped into a prepared hole, causing His body to shake violently on the spikes. Naked, beaten, and embarrassed, Jesus was left to die.

The real agony of the cross goes far beyond the physical suffering Jesus endured, but that Jesus bore the weight of the world's sins and experienced separation from God. On the cross, Jesus willingly took upon Himself the weight of all our sins. As He hung on that cross, He became sin for us, a sinless sacrifice taking on the full penalty of our wrongdoing.

This act of bearing our sins was excruciating in a spiritual sense. Jesus, who had enjoyed eternal communion with the Father, experienced a moment of separation from Him. This separation represented the ultimate judgment of sin, as sin cannot stand in the presence of a holy and righteous God. The Bible captures the depth of this agony in Jesus' cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). In that moment, Jesus, the sinless Son of God, felt the weight of our sin, the wrath of eternal justice, and experienced separation from His Father. This was the only way our sins could be forgiven. His death alone could bridge the gap between God and humanity, offering reconciliation and forgiveness to all who believe in Him.

So, when we speak of the "Passion of Jesus," we're not only talking about the physical suffering, but also the spiritual agony. His passion was not a passive surrender to suffering; it was an active, intentional act of love and redemption. Jesus willingly endured all of this to bring glory to God by providing us with redemption and the opportunity for a restored relationship with our Heavenly Father.

A Better Way: Take time to praise Jesus for His passion. Our passion for Jesus is not self-generated; it flows from the wellspring of His Passion. It's ignited by the all-consuming love that led Him to the cross, by His relentless pursuit of the Father's will, and by His unwavering commitment to our salvation. Our passion for Jesus is fueled by the passion of Jesus. Join in with all the redeemed from the ages and cry out to Him in passionate praise, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (Revelation 5:12)

FINAL WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

At Journey Church, we exist to help people connect to Christ, Community, and their Calling. That is why we work so hard to produce this devotion. Thank you for walking this 40 Days journey with us as we seek to follow the better way Jesus Christ revealed for us to live. My prayer is that God used what you have read here to stir within your heart a greater love for God and passion to live in the better way of Jesus Christ.

If you have worked through this devotional and you still have questions about your faith and your relationship with God, please share your questions with one of Journey Church Location Pastors or send us an email to info@journeyconnect.org.

Thank you to all those who contributed to making this devotional possible. You are some of the most anointed people I know, and it is a joy to partner with you, helping take steps of faith to follow Jesus Christ. A special thank you to Sandy Moran for fresh editing eyes and to the Fairing's for sacrificing to give me a special place to be still before the Lord and write these devotions.

In Christ,

Pastor James Hilton

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REFERENCES

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- "Crazy Love: Overwhelmed" by a Relentless God by Francis Chan
- "The Explicit Gospel" by Matt Chandler
- "Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No To Take Control of Your Life" by Henry Cloud and John Townsend
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final notes

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