

# TOGETHER

*A six session small group study*



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# Getting the most out of this study

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*Below you will find a few ideas to get you started in preparing for and participating in your small group.*

## **Personal Preparation**

1. Read the chapter and start to think through some of the questions. Jot down a few initial responses.
2. Read through the Bible references, perhaps even more than once. Highlight or underline inspiring phrases in your Bible that you'll want to share with your group. The Bible references in this booklet are from the New King James Version (unless otherwise noted), but feel free to read a different translation if you would prefer.

## **Group discussion**

1. Come to the study prepared.
2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. If you are worried about speaking in public, just read the answers that you have prepared ahead of time.
3. Be sensitive to other members of the group. *Listen* attentively; you may be surprised by their insights. *Observe* body language so you can properly gauge emotions and feelings. *Validate* and encourage one

another. *Engage* in the discussion and connect your responses to what others are saying. Many questions do not have “right” answers, but could have a variety of responses.

4. Be careful not to dominate. Sometimes we might get a little over eager to share our ideas! By all means participate, but be sure to allow others to also.
5. Expect God to teach you through your reading of Scripture and your discussion with others. Pray that you will be open to His teachings and that He will show you how to change and grow.
6. Remember that things shared in the group are confidential and should not be discussed outside of the group, unless permission was given to do so.
7. If you are a facilitator, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.







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## Foreword

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The three distinct Persons of the Trinity exist in perfect harmony and fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our God is a God of togetherness, of fellowship. Throughout the Bible, God teaches us what it means to live together in community with each other. This begins with our family, our congregation, and extends to those we live and work with, and all the various people we encounter through our lives. During His life on earth, Jesus continuously pushed the boundaries of who our neighbor is, who we must care for, who is included.

In the New Testament especially, these teachings often come in “one another” commands – making clear how we are to interact with *one another*. They teach us how to live as people made new in Christ.

Over the course of this series we’ll explore the foundation for our life together, embracing differences, and key aspects such as receiving one another, empathy, persistence against injustice, and life within the congregation.

Community is not a reward bestowed at the end, in the new heaven and earth. Living ***together in Christ*** is here, now, and within our reach.



## 1

# In His image

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*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.*

1 John 4:7

Understanding that we are all made in the image of God is foundational for understanding how we should interact with each other.

*Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Genesis 1:26-27; see also Genesis 5:1-2). **Every human being is made in the image of God.** Because of this, we have a responsibility to identify with and connect with all people, whether believers or nonbelievers, as those who bear this same image. This also means that we recognize that every human is worthy of dignity and respect.*

Our need for belonging is a direct reflection of God, who is understood to be triune: three distinct Persons, one substance, in eternal relationship with one another. It is from these fundamental relationships at the heart of God that love is generated, and from love, all creation bursts forth. If God is fundamentally an interconnected Being, then it follows that those made in the image and likeness of God are also fundamentally designed for such relationships. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is an invitation into this trinitarian way of living, loving, and relating – **a life in absolute relatedness.**

*A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick.*

Brené Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*, TED Talk, June 2010

We've all been excluded from something before. Think back to a time when you have been left out; think of the feelings you experience. We are overcome with a deep sense of shame: shame that we are not good enough; shame that we must have done something wrong to merit this exclusion – or worse, that we ourselves must *be something wrong*. We question who we are, our place in our friend group or community, and sometimes even our fundamental self-worth. To be deliberately excluded is one of the deepest pains a human can experience, since we are fundamentally wired for community. Exclusion and rejection defy the very order of creation and the essence of who God is. When we exclude a person or group of people, we are certainly not living in the mind of Christ, but we are also resisting what it means to be human.

Unfortunately, when we look back on history, and even today, Christians have time and time again fallen into the trap of dualistic thinking – declaring who is in and who is out; who is saved and who is not. However, when we look at Scripture, especially throughout the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the portrayal of the first church, we see a movement and push towards inclusion.

**Excerpt from Ephesians 2:14-22** - *For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation ...so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross ...He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near... Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household*

*of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.*

**John 17:21-22** - *I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.*

**Galatians 3:26-28** - *For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

The inclusive unity embodied and taught by Jesus is a unity that comes, not through recognizing our differences, but through embracing those differences and realizing that in our diversity we more perfectly reflect the divinity of our expansive Creator. Loving our neighbor means ***loving and respecting our neighbor as they are***. The community of God, this dwelling place that we are *being built together for*, is a place where everyone matters; where everyone knows they are seen, valued, and embraced.

Let's go back to our opening Bible verse and read a bit more.

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:7-11).*

God's life-giving love is the theme of this passage, explained in three points: God is the source of all love (v.7-8); God models what genuine

love is (v. 9-10); and God commands us to love each other (v.11). The whole point is to trace the relationship between God's love and human love, and to show how human love flows from God's own love. Love comes from God to us, then flows through us to others in the community. It is through God's love that we have the power to embrace others, to love others, to respect others, and to see all as God sees them; **made in His image and worthy of love.**

*The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. The type of love that I stress here is not eros, a sort of esthetic or romantic love; not philia, a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends; but it is agape which is understanding goodwill for all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of men.*

Martin Luther King Jr., *The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma*, 1957

## ADDITIONAL READING

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### *Diversity, blindness, and our mission*

DISTRICT APOSTLE KOLB - JULY 5, 2020

*Let us make man in Our own image.* Everything comes from Him. And He set them all on earth at one time or another. And He made them equal. It says that in Scripture, men and women are equal. All people are equal – they are meant to complement one another. He has a desire that all of them belong with Him and He is with them. We can read in Corinthians: there are a diversity of activities but it is the same God who works all in all. *All in all.* That is what the Lord wants to do. And He creates such diversity! He is a wonderful Creator. 40,000 species of spiders. Look at the flowers! So much diversity, and He did the same with people. All of us are different from one another – billions of people and we can all still be separated by our fingerprints.



It's astounding. Each one unique, and yet, each one from one Source, one Author – the triune God.

Then we consider sin came into this world with the fall of Adam and Eve. Sin created three big divisions: between God and humans, between people with each other, and between humans and the creation. I'd like to focus on the second one – the stress between people. God made all people diverse and yet by sin we are the ones who created race, ethnicities, nationalities. We decided to see each other differently and to group people. That has caused a great trouble, when we have put everyone into different groups because the next thing that comes along is judging. Mankind thinks they can judge one another. It's impossible – because we know nothing of one another; everything in life, what God intended for each one. We know nothing and we try to be the judge. We are blind.

It's a blindness that we ignore the suffering and the need of other people. Sometimes it becomes even a bother. Perhaps we think, *I don't want to hear about it. It's disturbing to see it on the news, there's nothing I can do about it anyways.* Just like those that passed by the one that was robbed on the side of the road. It is true – we cannot fix all the misfortune of this world, nor can we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by it. But it must affect us and we must do something about it. And this is when the Holy Spirit tries to come to us and relieve us of this blindness. He reminds us what Jesus Christ said, *Love one another as I have loved you. Do unto others as you would have them do to you.* And little by little He talks to us in our heart to prompt an action, step by step, person by person, deed by deed, to help. And that takes us back to our mission - that is how ***everyone shall experience the love of God.***

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1. Share a time that you felt excluded or left out. Can you explain why you still remember it?

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2. Discuss the quote from Brené Brown. In what ways have you experienced this in your life?

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3. What does it mean to be made in the image of God? Discuss how this truth affects our relationship with God and each other.

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4. Read and discuss: Galatians 3:26-28, John 17:21-22, Ephesians 2:14-22. What do these verses teach us about living together?

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5. Read and discuss the quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.. What does the phrase *beloved community* mean to you? How does this quote build on the verses from 1 John (1 John 4:7-11)?

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6. Share your thoughts on the sermon excerpt from the additional reading. Discuss the themes of diversity, blindness, and judgment. Discuss what you learned about how we can live out our mission of *everyone experiencing the love of God*.

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7. PERSONAL REFLECTION: Create a list of attributes of God. Look for those attributes in the people around you.

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## One Another-ing

**Read the following Bible verses:** John 13:31-35, 2 John 4-5, John 15:1-17, Romans 13:8-10, Leviticus 19:18, 1 John 3:11-24, 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13; 4:9, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 1 John 4:7-21, 1 Peter 1:13-25, Proverbs 3:3-4

How does the context surrounding each “one another” command in the Bible verses above provide clarity on life in community? (If there is not a direct “one another” command, discuss what the verses teach about how we should to treat one another.)

Write a prayer of gratitude reflecting on today’s reading.

How can you practically grow in living out these instructions towards your fellow humans?

## 2

# At the margins

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*Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.*

Romans 15:7

Receive one another. Welcome one another. What does it mean? Who are we to receive? Jesus was always widening the circle of compassion and dismantling the barriers that exclude. Let's take a closer look at some well known phrases He talked about in the Sermon on the Mount – ***The Beatitudes*** (Matthew 5:3-10).

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.*

*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Who are the blessed? It's not who you would think, especially for those sitting on that mount in Jesus' time. Those who were rich, healthy, carefree, successful – *that's who was thought of as blessed*; those who society favored. Yet, Jesus contradicts the thinking of the time by pointing to "the least of these" as the ones who God favors.

The Beatitudes are not necessarily a list of “to-dos” but rather the good news of Jesus Christ spoken into the emptiness of the world as it is; *the poor, the meek, the mournful, those who hunger and thirst*. The blessings that accompany each situation are not only for the future, but something that can be experienced already now, because Jesus is in our midst. They are a call to open our eyes to the blessedness of the people around us, and even more so, those at the margins. We could even hear them as a call for us to bring them some of these “blessings” – *to comfort, to lift up, to fill, to show mercy, to see God* at work in us, as we invite them into the fellowship of God’s children.

Perhaps God created diversity, differences, “otherness” so that we might find our way to embracing and accepting the “other” into our community. **Jesus stood at the margins**; He stood with the sinner, the leper, the impure to usher in a new remarkable inclusion, the very kingdom of God. Living the gospel then, is about choosing to live in this ever-widening circle of inclusion. The first church was known for living the gospel with joy, taking in the orphans, and always being mindful of the poor. Perhaps God created margins as an invitation, knowing that when we move and stand there, the margins get erased.

When we look at this invitation, it raises some fundamental questions: Is God expansive or tiny? Is God inclusive or exclusive? What is the chance that God holds the same narrow point of view as I do?

We belong to each other and to our expansive God who looks at humanity not as good and bad people, but as beloved children. **The measure of our compassion with “the last, the least, and the lost” lies less in our service of those at the margins, and more in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship with them.** Reaching out to all people so that they may experience the love of God doesn’t make a difference, in as much as it will *make us different*.

**We should learn how to stand in awe at what some have to carry rather than in judgment of how they carry it.** Judgement creates distance that moves us away from each other; it creates a competitive spirit and is often self-aggrandizing. Standing at the margins with the broken reminds us, not of our superiority, but of our own brokenness.

The embrace of our own brokenness, frailty, and suffering creates intimacy with ourselves and others. Standing in awe helps us move from blame to compassion and understanding, from alienation to connection, from self-absorption to life-giving community.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus consoles His disciples with the words: *I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you* (John 14:18). Perhaps we can look at these words not only as a comfort, but also as an invitation: ***As I won't leave you as orphans, don't leave anyone behind.*** We could hear it as a call to seek out the isolated, the rejected, the abandoned, and walk toward them, with open arms, to bring them to a place of belonging.

## ADDITIONAL READING

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### *Everyone shall experience the love of God*

WRITTEN BY APOSTLE JOHN FENDT - JULY, 2020

In the mission statement of the New Apostolic Church, it states “everyone shall experience the love of God.” The focus on ‘everyone’ is founded on the teaching of Jesus Christ. The gospel makes it clear that with God, there is no differentiation of people.

At the end of Matthew, Jesus instructs His apostles to *go and teach all nations* (Matthew 28:19). Further, Jesus Himself testified of His offer of salvation to the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. In the context of the culture of that time, this was totally outrageous. A man did not speak with a woman who was not of his own family, and a Jew surely would not stoop so low to speak with a Samaritan. In Matthew 25, He deepens this understanding – those who will be accepted into His kingdom are the ones who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, took the stranger in, clothed the naked, visited the sick and the one in prison. Here He describes *circumstances of life* in which anyone might find themselves. There is no reference to racial or cultural differences. Christ makes it clear that helping these individuals is the same as doing it for Him.

**As a church that strives to reach out to all people and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ, the New Apostolic Church does not accept nor condone discrimination or racism of any kind.**

A key element of the teaching in Matthew 25 is the focus on action, so much more than just a narrow focus on one's feelings or thoughts about others. Jesus makes it clear that true disciples go out of their way to seek those who are in need and to provide for that need. This instruction is also clear in the Great Commission wherein He said *go*. In a service for ministers in 2017, the Chief Apostle focused on this word from Matthew 28:19 in this way:

***Go** – The mission is go because Jesus knew and wanted that we have a personal relationship, a personal contact with the people.*

***Make disciples of all nations** – To make disciples means our task consists of motivating people to follow Jesus. That means that first we have to believe that the gospel is valid for all men. Whatever the conditions they live in, whatever their cultural background, whatever their economic situation, whatever their past. That's my concern when I look into the congregations worldwide, I always ask myself, is that the image of the population of this country? Not yet. But our task is that we should go to all the nations and to every part of the population.*

Throughout Christian history, the carrying out of the Great Commission has always been connected with action. So it must be today. We cannot wait until we trip over the one who is in need. We must go to them.

It has been customary throughout our Church's heritage, that when one of our members is in need, ministers and members go to them to help, support and offer pastoral care. For example, when someone passes away, the members of our congregations visit those who are mourning.



Often there are no words to be said to alleviate the pain of those who grieve ...*mourn with those who mourn* (Romans 12:15). Truly, one's presence carries weight. But further, the willingness to listen patiently as mourners express their feelings, can have a significant impact.

We have brethren in our congregations, as well as friends and neighbors around us, for whom the death of George Floyd and many others as well, has caused a great deal of personal pain. It is like a scab being torn off a wound. The wound is discrimination – *a lifetime of discrimination*. Those of us who have not experienced this do not really understand. Remember, our calling as Christians is to 'go' to those who suffer. Even if we cannot identify with someone's specific experience, we must strive to understand them. We must make the effort to listen patiently, without becoming defensive and without trying to justify anything. *Just listen* because your brother, your sister, your neighbor is suffering.

*To go* also implies something more. We need to make it clear, as a church and as individuals, that we reject and decry injustice. To understand injustice, we should consider one of the causes – *inequity; the idea that there is a different standard for one group of people than there is for another group*. God is righteous – He loves every human being equally. Christ's example and teaching make it clear that the offer of salvation is for all people.

The call to act is made clear in the epistle of James. In chapter 2, verse 14-17 we read, *What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

Echoing the words of the first Christians at Pentecost: Men and brethren, *what can we do?*

- Go, and approach those around you who seem to be suffering, outside your comfort zone
- Listen, listen, and listen
- Offer what you can to support and comfort
- Thereafter, genuinely self-reflect
- Strive to love and understand people as Christ does

People grieve and suffer due to a lifetime of discrimination and racism. Let us make the effort to learn from our brethren who carry the burden of injustice, discrimination and racism. The way we think about this topic may require significant change. The manner in which we act and react may also require significant adjustments. Being a Christian means that we take the necessary action to fulfill our holy responsibility to ***embrace, serve, and love all*** in the mind of Christ.

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1. What does it mean to receive or welcome another?

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2. Read Matthew 5:3-10. Discuss the perspective of the Beatitudes as expounded on in the reading. Who is blessed? What actionable response does this understanding lead you to?

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3. What happens when we stand *at the margins*? How do you stand at the margins?

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4. Discuss biblical examples of Jesus' interactions with, and teachings regarding, "the last, the least, and the lost". How can you emulate His example in your life?

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5. Discuss how standing in awe rather than judgement can change your perspective of someone.

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6. From the additional reading, how do the concepts behind the Great Commission teach us how to reach out to the margins?

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7. **PERSONAL REFLECTION:** Think about the people you interact with. Who is at the margins? How could you or your family reach out to them? What would it mean to stand with them? What would it mean to erase the margin?

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## One Another-ing

**Read the following Bible verses:** Romans 15:1-13, 1 Corinthians 11:27-34, 1 Peter 4:7-11, Proverbs 21:10

How does the context surrounding each “one another” command in the Bible verses above provide clarity on life in community? (If there is not a direct “one another” command, discuss what the verses teach about how we should to treat one another.)

Write a prayer of gratitude reflecting on today’s reading.

How can you practically grow in living out these instructions towards your fellow humans?

## 3

# Empathy

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*Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*

Galatians 6:2

Empathy is a characteristic of God, epitomized in Jesus Christ, and necessary to live as citizens in God's kingdom. Empathy refers to the ability to relate to another person's pain vicariously, as if you have experienced the pain yourself; one who empathizes suffers along with the one who feels the sensations directly; being aware of, sensitive to, and experiencing the feelings and thoughts of another.

Feeling sorry for a person automatically generates feelings of pity, which are not particularly helpful in situations where people are in pain. **Empathy** becomes the bridge that connects two people together and creates space for more genuine healing, understanding, and compassion.

Let's watch a short video to start our exploration of empathy (*you can find the transcript at the end of the chapter if you are unable to watch the video*).

**Brené Brown on Empathy**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>



Now that we have an initial understanding of empathy, let's further explore this concept through the words of Scripture. Starting in the laws of Moses, God teaches that His way is one of empathy, understanding, and compassion.

**Leviticus 19:33-34** - *And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.*

The concept of ***feeling with someone*** is evident when we notice how God instructs the people to recall their own past experiences when considering how they will treat strangers in their land.

David also recognized the empathy of God in his life:

**Psalm 56:8** - *You number my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle; are they not in Your book?*

Here we see one of the four qualities of empathy; recognizing emotion in other people. David feels that God recognizes his sorrow and even carries his sadness – *[You] put my tears into Your bottle.*

Over and over, we see the empathic nature of Jesus Christ revealed. In this example we see Him sharing the emotions of those that were gathered at the tomb of Lazarus:

**John 11:33-35** - *Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept.*

Listening to Christ’s teaching and witnessing His conduct, the apostles learned this divine attribute and preached it to their congregations:

**Romans 12:15** - *Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.*

**1 Corinthians 12:25-26** - *...that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice*

*with it. This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.*

**Hebrews 13:3** - *Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also.*

**2 Corinthians 11:28-29** - *...besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?*

These verses show us all four qualities of empathy and how connecting with a vulnerable and painful experience in your own life helps you to empathize with another. Through these examples and teachings from Scripture we can see the empathetic nature of God and recognize the need for us to develop the same nature in ourselves.

The following quote gives us an interesting image to conclude our discussion on empathy:

*All too often our so-called strength comes from fear, not love; instead of having a strong back, many of us have a defended front shielding a weak spine. In other words, we walk around brittle and defensive, trying to conceal our lack of confidence. If we strengthen our backs, metaphorically speaking, and develop a spine that's flexible but sturdy, then we can risk having a front that's soft and open... How can we give and accept care with strong-back, soft-front compassion, moving past fear into a place of genuine tenderness? I believe it comes about when we can be truly transparent, seeing the world clearly – and letting the world see into us.*

Roshi Joan Halifax, *Braving the Wilderness*, pg. 147, 2017

**ADDITIONAL READING** 

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*On another's sorrow*

 WILLIAM BLAKE - from *Songs of Innocence*

Can I see another's woe, and not be in sorrow too?  
 Can I see another's grief, and not seek for kind relief?

Can I see a falling tear, and not feel my sorrow's share?  
 Can a father see his child weep, nor be with sorrow filled?

Can a mother sit and hear an infant groan, an infant fear?  
 No, no! never can it be! Never, never can it be!

And can He who smiles on all hear the wren with sorrows small,  
 Hear the small bird's grief and care, hear the woes that infants bear -

And not sit beside the nest, pouring pity in their breast,  
 And not sit the cradle near, weeping tear on infant's tear?

And not sit both night and day, wiping all our tears away?  
 O no! never can it be! Never, never can it be!

He doth give His joy to all: He becomes an infant small,  
 He becomes a man of woe, He doth feel the sorrow too.

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh, and thy Maker is not by:  
 Think not thou canst weep a tear, and thy Maker is not near.

O He gives to us His joy, that our grief He may destroy:  
 Till our grief is fled and gone He doth sit by us and moan.



## *Brené Brown on Empathy*

So, what is empathy and why is it VERY different than sympathy? Empathy fuels connection. Sympathy drives disconnection. It's very interesting. Theresa Wiseman is a nursing scholar who studied very diverse professions where empathy is relevant and came up with four qualities of empathy.

1. *Perspective taking - ability to take the perspective of another person or recognize their perspective as their truth (i.e. in their circumstance or situation).*
2. *Staying out of judgment.*
3. *Recognizing emotion in other people.*
4. *Communicating that.*

**Empathy is feeling WITH people.** I always think of empathy as this kind of sacred space. When someone's in a deep hole and they shout from the bottom, *"I'm stuck. It's dark. I'm overwhelmed."* Then we look and we say, *"Hey!"* and climb down and say, *"I know what it's like down here, and you're not alone."* Sympathy is, *"Ooh! It's bad, huh? Do you want a sandwich?"*

Empathy is a choice and it's a vulnerable choice. In order to connect with you, I have to connect with something in myself that knows that feeling. Rarely, if ever, does an empathic response begin with, *"At least..."* And we do it all the time because, you know what? Someone shared something with us that's incredibly painful and we're trying to put a "silver lining" on it.

*"I had a miscarriage." - "At least you know you can get pregnant."*

*"I think my marriage is falling apart." - "At least you have a marriage."*

*"John's getting kicked out of school." - "At least Sarah is an A-student."*

One of the things we do sometimes in the face of very difficult conversations is we try to make things better. If I share something with you that's very difficult, I'd rather you say, "I don't even know what to say. I'm just so glad you told me." Because the truth is, rarely can a response make something better. ***What makes something better is connection.***

**Please watch the video together before you start your discussion.**

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1. What stuck out to you most from the video?

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2. Discuss the four qualities of empathy.

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3. Discuss the differences between empathy, sympathy, and pity.

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4. Walk through the Bible verses in the reading and discuss what each verse and its context teach you about empathy, how they relate to the ideas presented in the video, and who showed empathy and who received it. Then do the same with the following verses: Job 2:13, 30:25, Isaiah 53:5, Romans 8:26, 15:1, 1 Peter 3:8, Hebrews 4:13-16, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

- 
5. Discuss the concept of a *strong-back* and *soft-front*.

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6. Read *On Another's Sorrow* together. What phrase struck you the most? What is the author trying to communicate?

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7. **PERSONAL REFLECTION:** How do you usually handle conversations with someone in pain? In the past, have you tried to “fix” the problem? Write a few thoughts on how you could better respond in that situation.

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## One Another-ing

**Read the following Bible verses:** Galatians 6:1-10, Romans 14:13-23, James 5:13-20, Exodus 17:9-13

How does the context surrounding each “one another” command in the Bible verses above provide clarity on life in community? (If there is not a direct “one another” command, discuss what the verses teach about how we should to treat one another.)

Write a prayer of gratitude reflecting on today’s reading.

How can you practically grow in living out these instructions towards your fellow humans?

## 4

# Overcoming division

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*Do not grumble against one another...*

James 5:9

*The world feels high lonesome and heartbroken to me right now. We've sorted ourselves into factions based on our politics and ideology. We've turned away from one another and toward blame and rage. We're lonely and untethered. And scared.*

Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*, pg. 45, 2017

Perhaps you feel the same.

Studies have found that this “us versus them” culture that we find ourselves in leads to more disconnection and a diminishing sense of shared humanity. Often, these divisions create connections that are based on fear and disdain, not shared trust, respect, or love. The like-minded groups that we find ourselves in result in our withdrawing from those that think differently than we do. Oddly, this does not help us feel more connected, but rather lonelier.

We can find in the book of James, that the apostle is addressing similar divisions among the members, who are arguing. In chapter four, he addresses the root of their quarrels:

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (James 4:1-3 NIV).*

What desires battle within us? As we read in the verses, not getting what we want, having the wrong motives; perhaps trying to prove that we are right, our pride, envy or jealousy (which James addresses in earlier chapters).

The following quote from James Baldwin hints at another hidden root of division:

*I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.*

With all these hidden emotions and incentives battling within us, how can we find a way to live in community with those around us? Let's return to the fourth chapter of James:

*Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and He will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up. Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and destroy. But you - who are you to judge your neighbor? (James 4:7-12 NIV)*

Initially, James addresses how to right our relationship with God. What does it mean to submit ourselves? “*Submit yourselves to Him as subjects to their prince, in duty, and as one friend to another, in love and interest. Submit your understandings to the truths of God; submit your wills to the will of God, the will of His precept, the will of His providence*” (Matthew Henry, commentary). And why should we mourn and weep? In remorse for our sin, and the sins of others; times of contention and division are times for sorrow.

Then, James comes to our relationships with others; specifically speaking against and judging one another. Everyone stumbles and is vulnerable to judgement. However, because we believe in the mercy of God, a Christian should respond with humility. James words should lead us to the following actions in overcoming divisions:

1. **Self-examination:** We must look beneath the surface to reveal the root of our divisions, quarreling, and anger. We also should scrutinize our relationships – what are our underlying attitudes and motives towards each other?
2. **Evaluate by God’s standards:** James emphasizes being doers of the law, with some specific references to purity, peace, submissiveness, mercy, impartiality, and sincerity. As discussed at the beginning of this series, we are all made in the image of God; this common humanity should be a connecting point that we can return to.

*If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other (Mother Teresa).*

3. **Change:** When we submit to the law (to love God and our neighbor), come near to God, resist the devil, show remorse, and repent for our sin, we will be changed.
4. **Rely on God’s grace:** James again and again reminds us that we need to rely on the grace of God to overcome our divisions. The trait of humility before God and before each other will lead to a community based in love and self-lessness, rather than grumbling and quarreling based in selfish desires.

We know that James’s writings were mostly focused on a community of believers, brothers and sisters of the same faith. But how can we overcome differences with people that we don’t even know?

One tool is the **ARC of Reconciliation**, which is a continuous process that engages our head, heart, and hands in helping us to build a loving community outside of the church. The first step is **awareness (head)**: building our knowledge and understanding of a particular issue. For example, if one finds it difficult to understand racial discrimination,

the first step would be for them to do some research about racism in their neighborhood, town, state, or country historically. It might be helpful to become familiar with certain terms or events in history, or read books by authors who are people of color. The point is not to gather facts, but rather to raise your awareness of someone else's experiences (See the chapter on *Empathy*).

The second step is building **relationships (heart)**: fostering friendships and collaboration with people who are different from you. Perhaps it's hard for one to understand what it means to have a disability. Spending time with someone who lives with a disability expands your heart for that experience and situation; it stretches your understanding and compassion for their experience. The same can be said for relationships between the young and old; spending time together and sharing experiences and perspectives pushes open the way we view the world and each other. Sometimes this might be uncomfortable. However, we can embrace the discomfort as a sign that we need to dig deeper and do the hard work of getting know what causes these feelings. Reconciliation is relational; it can only happen when we are proximate to each other.

The third and final step in the cycle is **commitment (hands)**: being committed to promoting equality, justice, empowerment, and inclusion. You will recall in the story of the adulteress in the eighth chapter of John, that Jesus said to those gathered, *He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first*. In the verses that follow, it says that they were *convicted [or convinced] by their conscience*, and left without throwing any stones. However, one only needs to glance at social media to see that many today *are not convicted by their conscience*, and are more than willing to throw stones at one or the other, whether they are deserving or not.

Perhaps, in our commitment to overcoming divisions, we can become **stone-catchers**; people who stand up for the one who is being accused, pushed down, discriminated against. Not in some grand display or protest, but in everyday life; in your family, in your congregation, in the places you work, to the neighbor or person you encounter on the street, we can be examples of the grace and peace of Jesus Christ.



*Civility is claiming and caring for one's identity, needs, and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process... [Civility] is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, listening past one's preconceptions, and teaching others to do the same. Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements.*

Cassandra Dahnke and Tomas Spath, Institute for Civility in Government, *Braving the Wilderness*, pg. 95, 2017

## ADDITIONAL READING

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### *Discovering a new meaning of the Great Commandment*

WRITTEN BY APOSTLE JOHN FENDT - APRIL, 2021

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39).*

In His high priestly prayer, the Lord Jesus said “*I do not pray that you should take them out of the world*” (John 17:15). As Christians, we are subject to the circumstances that surround us in society. During most of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, everyone was affected by the global pandemic. In the United States, this was coupled with political strife and social unrest. Society became extremely polarized, with people expressing strongly held, opposing views. The danger for us as New Apostolic Christians is that these circumstances negatively affect relationships with others, including our brethren in the congregation.

The Great Commandment is so fundamental to Christian teaching that one might think that it does not require further consideration. Current circumstances, however, bring urgency to the need to review

and deepen our understanding of this foundation block of the gospel. The Lord makes it clear that there are no acceptable excuses for not loving one's neighbor. However, one might try to play with the words of the Great Commandment. For example, is one's enemy only the person who stands against them in adversarial situations, such as on a battlefield or in a courtroom?

The dictionary defines "enemy" as *one that is antagonistic to another*. On this basis, one might feel that they are surrounded by enemies in their everyday life. *This feeling is heightened by the power of social media.*

Have political issues become a primary focus of our attention and thoughts? We are all allowed to have whatever opinion we wish relative to issues like politics. However, **our priority as Christians must be our relationship with Christ and one another**, not issues of the current day.

The Lord does not expect that we will seek *common ground* when we do not agree with each other - He expects that we will seek *higher ground*. We love our neighbor because we love Christ, not because our neighbor is always so lovable. Jesus Christ is "the higher ground." Human definitions of right and wrong or good and bad must be subordinated to the *law of love*.

In Romans 14:12-15, Paul provides a wonderful teaching of how, in a practical sense, we can and should seek the higher ground in Christ.

*So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way. I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.*

Let's apply what Paul is saying about clean and unclean food to the issues discussed earlier, such as politics or social issues. *Do not destroy with... [opinions, politics, societal views, prejudice...] the one for whom Christ died.* His instruction is not to establish which view is right or wrong, but rather if a person has an honest conviction about an issue we should respect their view. Though we may disagree with their perspective, we don't have to allow it to ruin our relationship with them. In the twelfth chapter of Romans, Paul encourages us to *be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another* (Romans 12:10). We can respect and honor one another by refraining from anything that might hurt the other. We should not allow our differences to cause us to judge others or speak ill of them.

We can always remind ourselves to seek higher ground by asking, *How can I please and honor God in this situation?* Paul also wrote to the Corinthians, *Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God* (1 Corinthians 10:31). This also applies to our relationships with each other. Glorifying God brings Him praise and honor by showing who He is, what He is like, and *what He is doing in us*. It also helps us prioritize maintaining our relationships over proving who is right or wrong. As the new life in Christ grows within us, we must recognize new and deeper meanings in the Great Commandment - the need to seek and find the higher ground in Jesus Christ. Romans 12:18 (NLT) summarizes it nicely: ***Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.***

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1. Some people would say that we are experiencing a high level of divisiveness in our society right now. Would you agree? How do you think we got to this point?

2. Why do you think “us versus them” relationships create more disconnection and loneliness?

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3. Read James 4:1-12 together. Why do we quarrel?

What are some underlying causes?

What are James’s recommendations for overcoming divisions?

What are the four actions we can take? How do these actions build up relationships?

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4. Discuss the ARC of Reconciliation. Can you think of examples for each of the steps? How is it possible to make this a continuous process?

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5. Discuss the quote about civility. What actionable points can you take from this quote? Where in your life could you put these concepts into practice?

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6. From the additional reading: what does it mean to seek higher ground? What instruction does Paul give us in overcoming division?

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7. **PERSONAL REFLECTION:** Think of some divisive relationships in your life (past or present). Take time to think about and examine what the underlying cause could be. Write out some steps of how you could approach this relationship and start to reconcile with this person.

## One Another-ing

**Read the following Bible verses:** James 5:7-11, Galatians 5:13-15, Mark 9:42-50, Zechariah 7:9-10

How does the context surrounding each “one another” command in the Bible verses above provide clarity on life in community? (If there is not a direct “one another” command, discuss what the verses teach about how we should to treat one another.)

Write a prayer of gratitude reflecting on today’s reading.

How can you practically grow in living out these instructions towards your fellow humans?

## 5

# Persistence against injustice

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*And we exhort you, brothers and sisters: warn those who are idle, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See to it that no one repays evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good for one another and for all.*

1 Thessalonians 5:14-15 CSB

How do you *pursue what is good for one another and for all*? What are we to do when we come up against injustice in our lives? We can find some answers in Jesus' parable of the *Persistent Widow* in Luke 18.

*There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, "Get justice for me from my adversary." And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, "Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me" (Luke 18:2-5).*

Often when we look at parables, we assume that one of the characters in the parable is God. However, we can understand this particular parable a little differently. The judge, who does not fear God or regard man, is governed by self-interest and self-preservation. We can understand him to represent injustice.

Most often in the Bible, the widow, along with the poor, the orphan, and the stranger, represent society's most vulnerable and marginalized.

Seemingly, according to the parable, this widow has been wronged in some way by her *adversary*. What is she to do? **She persists**; she causes the judge some trouble by putting pressure on him and she relentlessly states her case. In this instance, she is granted justice.

Jesus reminds us:

*In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world* (John 16:33 NIV).

We will experience injustice. We will also live alongside those that experience injustice. In the face of this injustice, we can learn from the widow, in persistently standing up for what is right and putting pressure on those that act unjustly, specifically in our *sphere of influence* (the people we encounter from day to day). Sometimes this persistence brings justice and makes things right. However, sometimes it does not. *But take heart!* Don't give up! Persist!

Being persistent in doing what is right might feel hopeless sometimes. We can see these feelings of hopelessness as a window into understanding what the disenfranchised feel. Accompanying them in their suffering takes us back to our commitment to empathize. We are called to be persistent against injustice not because it is easy or because we will always win, but rather because it is the right thing to do.

*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God* (Micah 6:8 NIV).

District Apostle Kolb held a youth service on this Bible verse in 2020 and summarized the points as follows:

*What does God expect of me?* These three things:

1. **Act justly:** Do what is right, do what is good. Over 50 times, the Bible says to “do good.” What does that mean? What is good? What is just? In our world, there is a lot of injustice;



this is a horrible, cruel, bitter thing. Sometimes there can be justice, and sometimes not. We must learn from the example of Jesus, “*Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do unto them* (Matthew 7:12). Acting justly is about my attitude, my relationship with God and with my neighbor. I should treat others as Jesus treats me. How? No exclusion, no lies, no harm, no indifference.

2. **Love mercy:** We can look to the example Jesus gave in Matthew 25; sharing what we have and caring for the least; serving one another.
3. **Walk humbly with your God:** We continue to foster and grow our relationship with God. We understand what it says in Psalm 31: *But as for me, I trust in You oh Lord, I say You are my God, my times are in Your hand* (Psalm 31:14-15) – that He is still the One that sees over all things, and we recognize His goodness in our lives.

Persistence, as shown by the widow, is a challenge, especially when justice is not forthcoming. However, we know that eventually God’s will *will be done*. But in the meantime, we can persist in standing for what is right, and not lose heart.

*We know our efforts cannot bring in God’s kingdom. But hope plunges us into the struggle for victories over evil that are possible now in the world, the church, and our individual lives. Hope gives us courage and energy to contend against all opposition, however invincible it may seem, for the new world and the new humanity that are surely coming.*

A Declaration of Faith from the Presbyterian Church

ADDITIONAL READING 

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## Excerpt from the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. - 1963

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was “well-timed” according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “wait.” ...This “wait” has almost always meant “never.” [It relieves the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to frustration.] We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

...I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say “wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your brothers smoldering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; ...when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; ...when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness” – then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair.

...We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the **tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be coworkers with God**, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.

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1. Read the *Parable of the Persistent Widow*. Discuss the events in the story.

What does each person stand for?

How does the widow stand up against injustice?

What does it mean for us today?

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2. Read Micah 6:8. What does God expect of us? What do each of the three phrases mean to you: *act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God*?

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3. Read the ending quote together. What victories are possible today? What encouragement do you take from the quote?

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4. Can you think of a recent example of injustice that you either witnessed or experienced? How did you respond? Is there anything you would change based on what you have learned in this chapter?

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5. From the additional reading: How do you see the actions of the widow reflected in the Martin Luther, Jr.'s letter? How does he state his case? How does he apply pressure? How can we be "coworkers with God" as it describes in the last sentence?

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6. PERSONAL REFLECTION: What prevents us from standing up for someone experiencing injustice? Write down each barrier you can think of. How can you overcome these barriers?

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## One Another-ing

**Read the following Bible verses:** Hebrews 10:19-25, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, 5:1-24, Malachi 2:10

How does the context surrounding each “one another” command in the Bible verses above provide clarity on life in community? (If there is not a direct “one another” command, discuss what the verses teach about how we should to treat one another.)

Write a prayer of gratitude reflecting on today’s reading.

How can you practically grow in living out these instructions towards your fellow humans?



## 6

# In the church

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*Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.*

Romans 12:9-13

When it comes to living together, where do we start? **In the church.** The congregation is the place where we can learn how to live together as a loving community of God and then practice those same actions outside the church.

Paul's words to the Romans give us a good starting point. ***Let love be without hypocrisy.*** Perhaps better understood as *let your love be sincere*; love in the community must be genuine and not just mere pretense, or a mask that we put on, pretending to care for others. As we learned in the first chapter, the basis of our love for each other is the loving relationship that exists in the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. This is a new degree of relating to others, a selfless, giving relationship of love. The following sentences tell us how to accomplish this selfless, giving love.

***Abhor what is evil*** (or one could say, *I renounce Satan and all his works and ways*). ***Cling to what is good*** – both an attitude of goodness and the good deeds that flow out of that.

***Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love*** – this speaks to the heart of the Christian community, the love and devotion

between brothers and sisters in faith. Jesus was continually inviting His followers to move beyond the limitations of the blood family. Paul often exhorted the congregation to *greet one another with a holy kiss* (Romans 16:16); a sign of special affection, honor, and respect. The Greek word that is here translated as “*kindly affectionate*” was used in the Greco-Roman world to describe the tender affections of family life; *to love, feel affection, especially of the mutual love of parents and children*. The same is true of *brotherly love*. Paul is emphasizing the familial dimensions of the faith community. Believers should feel the same devotion to their brothers and sisters in faith as they do to their own families.

***...in honor giving preference to one another.*** We should go out of our way to affirm and esteem one another; again, something especially important to those at the margins or those who feel underappreciated.

The next set of teachings centers on Christian service; ***not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.*** Aglow with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we put our gifts to work in our family, congregation, and community.

The next few phrases give encouragement for difficult times – ***rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer.*** Hope is needed because life is full of struggles; patience, which could also be translated as *endurance*, leads to hope as Paul teaches in Romans 5:3-5; and diligent prayer is a necessary discipline in dealing with the worries of life.

The last two exhortations return to our relationships with each other: ***distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.*** We can look to Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32 as examples of how the first church lived out this command in a very literal way – they shared what they had so that no one was left in need. In Paul’s writings we see three concentric areas to practice help and hospitality: first to the family (1 Timothy 5:4, 8), then to the congregation (as discussed in the verses above), and third to the larger community outside the church (Galatians 6:10). As Christians, we should be attentive to the needs of our neighbor and respond to those needs. Along with giving to others, we also need



to learn *to receive* from them. Sometimes, this can be even harder. However, we must recognize that everyone has something to give, something to teach, something to share.

*Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people.*

Rachel Held Evans

Paul's words are especially relevant for us today because of the culture we live in. Our current society places a high value on individualism; defined as *a doctrine that the interests of the individual are or ought to be ethically paramount* (Merriam-Webster). This perspective is antithetical to the ideas that Paul describes to the Romans. Therefore, living in community, living together is not something that comes easy to us; it requires us to overcome the individualistic push of the culture around us.

The writer of Ecclesiastes gives us some very logical images to help us begin to see our way through this struggle.

*There is one alone, without companion: he has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, "For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?" This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.*

*Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up.*

*Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; But how can one be warm alone?*

*Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*

Ecclesiastes 4:8-12

What can we learn from these seemingly simplistic illustrations? Standing alone is vanity, selfishness, and a misfortune. The one who stands alone works constantly because it's never enough and is therefore denied any comfort. What is the cure? *Two are better than one*. The two are satisfied in their labor and lift and edify one another. They are *kept warm*, which we can understand as meaning they feel the love, connection, and companionship of the other. And they can *withstand* that which comes against them.

*A threefold cord is not quickly broken* – perhaps we can understand this as a foreshadowing of the words of Jesus Christ:

*Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them (Matthew 18:19-20).*

When two or three are gathered in His name, Christ comes to them, and with Him, they cannot be broken. But what are the parameters of this gathering? *Agreeing*, as mentioned in verse 19, means overcoming our innate self-centeredness and putting others before ourselves; fostering fellowship, communion, connection. **Creating a place where everyone feels at home means that everyone has to give up something so that others can also feel at home.** Jesus adds the qualifier *on earth*, reminding us of His teaching on prayer – *Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven*. When we *agree on earth*, and ask of the Father that which is His will, *it will be done*. Jesus further clarifies in the next verse: *For where two or three are gathered together in My name...* What does it mean to gather in Jesus' name? Gathering in the mind of Christ; His identity, His will, His way, His love; in worship of Him; realizing our dependence on Him; as a community with the characteristics that Paul described to the Romans – then, He is there *in the midst of them*. The amount of people doesn't matter; it's about the intimacy of their fellowship that invites Christ to be with them. Jesus Christ joins our community, and makes that community strong, loving, accepting, and a taste of the kingdom. As we used to sing in an old hymn – *There is our shield: the blessed fold; our home; our Father's house, behold!*

As we build and grow a loving community in the church, we'll become thriving examples of what it means to have loving relationships and a life lived *together* wherever we are.

## ADDITIONAL READING

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### *The Lost Sheep*

HOWARD THURMAN - SEPTEMBER 16, 1951

**Introduction:** *“Everybody in some sense is lost.”* Thurman notes that in the parable of the lost sheep Jesus portrays God as a shepherd who loves and actively seeks out the sheep who is lost. For Thurman, this portrayal of the shepherd and the sheep also demonstrates the importance of community. The sheep was out of touch “with the group that sustained him.” A sense of isolation can occur with human beings who wish to be “independent,” and it also can happen with nations – and have devastating results. The parable teaches that, like the shepherd, God is not passively waiting; God takes the initiative and is always actively seeking and searching for those who are lost. What the shepherd does for the sheep, God wants to do for human beings: restore them to fellowship and the community in which they truly belong.

This parable has to do with the most persistent question of the human mind and human spirit, “What is God like?”

There was a sheep...enjoying his grass and the other things that sheep enjoy as he went along, and then when he started feeling chilly...he discovered that he was alone. That everybody had gone. That is, that all the sheep had gone. And he began crying aloud.

And then the shepherd, who had many sheep, missed him when he got back to the fold, and he left his ninety-nine...and he went out to try to find this sheep that was lost. And Jesus says, “God is like that.” Nothing heavy and theological about that. Just that here is a shepherd who loves his sheep, and one of the sheep in doing the most

natural thing in the world – and that is to eat the grass – did it with such enthusiasm and over a time interval of such duration that he didn't know when the shepherd called [because he had unknowingly distanced himself], and he was lost.

And why was he lost? He was lost because he was out of touch... Out of touch with the group that sustained him, the group that fed him, that gave him a sense that he counted... There's a certain warmth in that. There's a certain something that is creative and redemptive about the sense of community, about the fellowship.

Now I call your attention to two things about that. The first is that this lost sheep wasn't a bad sheep. And what he did was not a bad thing. It became a deadly thing, however, when [in eating grass], or in the quest of it, he unwittingly paid the price of being cut off from the rest. Now, there are many of us that are lost that way. Have you ever heard anyone say, "I can stand on my own two feet"? You have heard that. You have heard people say, "While it's nice that I have the good feeling of other people and the sense of belonging... I don't *need* anybody. Only the weak need other people..." But it is true, isn't it... that nobody wants to be insulated. Insulation...is something inside of me – there's something inside of me that pulls up the drawbridge so that I'm on my little island. And sometimes I do it because I'm afraid; sometimes I do it because I'm clumsy and awkward, and I don't quite know how to establish a relationship with my fellow [people]...

Now, Jesus says that God is like the shepherd, seeking always to find those who are out of community with their fellows, and when they have found it, when they have found their community, then all the world seems to fit back into place, and life takes on a new meaning. Have you ever had the experience of being cut off from some fellowship, some community, and then all during the time that you are cut off nothing seems to be right? The sun isn't as bright as it should be. Life isn't quite right.

And then you are restored. And when you're restored, a lot of things seem to fall into place. Now that can be not only in terms of human relations but it can be in terms of dimensions of community of feeling

and thought that restore meaning and value to your very life, as illustrated, for instance, in the great speech that appears in Bernard Shaw's *St. Joan*, when they say to her, "We'll burn you at the stake," and she takes the document and tears it up, and then she says, "I won't recant, for if I recant then you're going to lock me in a dungeon where I can't see the sunlight, where I cannot breathe, where I cannot be a part of the movement of life that sustains me. It is better to die at the stake than to be cut off from the things that give me a sense of community as a dignified, meaningful human being." And that is why the inner attitude is so important, for if I am unyielding, if I am embittered, if I am unforgiving, if I have bitterness that I cannot relax, then those things stand between me and the things that feed my spirit...

The lost sheep. The searching shepherd.

That is how God is, if we let Him.

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1. What does it mean to "practice community" in the church?

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2. Read through Romans 12:9-13 together. Write the verses again in your own words. How can we help each other practice these exhortations from Paul?

3. Look up the references to Acts, 1 Timothy and Galatians and discuss how they add to the meaning to the concentric circles of help and hospitality.

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4. Discuss how the definition of individualism can be contrary to what we have learned in this series about community, fellowship, and togetherness.

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5. Why are two better than one?

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6. How can we invite Christ into our presence?

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7. From the additional reading: *Everybody is in some sense lost*. Share how you have witnessed or experienced this yourself.

In Thurman's telling of the parable, the sheep naively and unknowingly wandered away. How could that happen to us?

How does the parable answer the question, *What is God like?*

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8. Discuss this quote from the reading: *Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people*. How have you experienced this? How is small group a reflection of this sentiment?

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9. PERSONAL REFLECTION: How can you more firmly place yourself in the congregation? How can you strengthen your relationship with your community of believers?

## One Another-ing

**Read the following Bible verses:** Philippians 2:1-11, John 13:1-7, 12-17, 1 John 1:5-7, Galatians 5:22-26, Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12:4-27, Psalm 133:1, Colossians 3:12-17, Ephesians 4:25-32, Zechariah 8:16-17

How does the context surrounding each “one another” command in the Bible verses above provide clarity on life in community? (If there is not a direct “one another” command, discuss what the verses teach about how we should to treat one another.)

Write a prayer of gratitude reflecting on today’s reading.

How can you practically grow in living out these instructions towards your fellow humans?







## Facilitator Notes

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*Below you'll find a few suggestions for leading your small group discussion. More training materials can be found on [ndi.nac-usa.org](http://ndi.nac-usa.org)*

1. Begin your discussion on time and stick to 60 minutes unless you have agreed on a longer time together.
2. Be sure everyone in your group has a book and encourage them to prepare beforehand.
3. Encourage everyone to participate, but do not pressure those who might not be comfortable yet. Remind the group of the confidentiality of the conversation, that this is a place of trust and if you're comfortable, please feel free to share your personal thoughts and feelings.
4. If everyone was not able to read the chapter ahead, it might be helpful to have someone read it (or take turns reading it) together.
5. You'll notice there are different types of questions; some questions are *knowledge and interpretation* (discussing what has been explained and how each person understands it), and others are *application* (applying the concepts to our personal lives).
6. Feel free to ask the questions in your own words, or skip one if you feel it has already been answered. Consider your group and come up with additional questions if you would like.

7. Avoid answering your own question right away. If necessary, rephrase the question until it is clearly understood.
8. Don't be afraid of silence – people may need time to think through their responses.
9. Don't be content with just one answer. Ask, “What do the rest of you think?” or “Anything else?”
10. Acknowledge all contributions, and try to be affirming. If an answer is off base ask, “What led you to that conclusion?” or “What do the rest of you think?”
11. The Empathy chapter includes a short video. Have the video ready on your computer or phone to share with the group. If it's not possible to watch the video together, ask your small group to watch the video on their own before coming to the discussion.
12. The One Another-ing section ends each session with the a study of Bible verses that teach us how we ought to treat “one another” that relate to the chapter in some way. Be sure to leave sufficient time to read the verses and discuss the questions. Be creative with this section - you can read the verses aloud, or break into smaller groups to discuss and report back, or have everyone read one verse and share their thoughts.
13. The Additional Readings give further insight to the chapter theme and one or two questions are directed towards that content. It is highly recommended to include this material in your discussion.
14. Have fun! Allow your small group to be an environment where people can learn and grow in a place of trust, love, and generosity.





# Resources

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***Below you'll find a list of resources that were used in the research and creation of this booklet, in addition to various Bible translations and commentaries.***

Boyle, Gregory. *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017.

Brown, Brenè. *Braving the Wilderness*. New York: Random House, 2017.

Robertson, Brandan. *True Inclusion: Creating Communities of Radical Embrace*. Saint Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2018.

Thurman, Howard. Introduction and commentary by David B. Gowler and Kipton E. Jensen. *Sermons on Parables*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2018.

Tisby, Jemar. *How to Fight Racism*. Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2021.

*One Another*. Nashville, Tennessee: She Reads Truth, 2021.

*Finding the Courage for What's Redemptive* by Bryan Stevenson. On Being with Krista Tippett. Podcast aired December 3, 2020.

*The Power of Vulnerability* by Brenè Brown. TED Talks. Posted January 3, 2011.

*Brenè Brown on Empathy* by Brenè Brown. RSA Shorts. Posted December 10, 2013.

love **one another** · receive **one another** · be like-minded toward **one another** · wait for **one another** · bear **one another's** burdens · let us not judge **one another** · confess your sins to **one another** · pray for **one another** · do not grumble against **one another** · serve **one another** · consider **one another** in order to stir up love and good works · exhort **one another** · comfort **one another** · edify **one another** · be kindly affectionate to **one another** · give preference to **one another** · wash **one another's** feet · have fellowship with **one another** · we are members of **one another** · care for **one another** · bear with **one another** · forgive **one another** · teach and admonish **one another** · be kind to **one another** · honor **one another** · live in harmony with **one another** · build up **one another** · welcome **one another** · offer hospitality to **one another** · submit to **one another** · clothe yourselves with humility toward **one another** · don't criticize **one another** · do not complain about **one another** · be at peace with **one another** · pursue what is good for **one another** · do not lie to **one another** · be compassionate to **one another** · love **one another** · receive **one another** · be like-minded toward **one another** · wait for **one another** · bear **one another's** burdens · let us not judge **one another** · confess your sins to **one another** · pray for **one another** · do not grumble against **one another** · serve **one another** · consider **one another** in order to stir up love and good works · exhort **one another** · comfort **one another** · edify **one another** · be kindly affectionate to **one another** · give preference to **one another** · wash **one another's** feet · have fellowship with **one another** · we are members of **one another** · care for **one another** · bear with **one another** · forgive **one another** · teach and admonish **one another** · be kind to **one another** · honor **one another** · live in harmony with **one another** · build up **one another** · welcome **one another** · offer hospitality to **one another** · submit to **one another** · clothe yourselves with humility toward **one another** · don't criticize **one another** · do not complain about **one another** · be at peace with **one another** · pursue what is good for **one another** · do not lie to **one another** · be compassionate to **one another** · love **one another** · receive **one another** · be like-minded toward **one another** · wait for **one another** · bear **one another's** burdens · let us not judge **one another** · confess your sins to **one another** · pray for **one another** · do not grumble against **one another** · serve **one another** · consider **one another** in order to stir