



THE
LIFT
TOUR

COUNTER CULTURAL TEACHINGS OF JESUS

UNIVERSE
COUNTER CULTURAL

WELCOME TO THE LIFT TOUR 2024

Greetings,

I pray all is well with you! On behalf of our entire team, I wanted to personally say Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to be a part of this incredible experience known as The LIFT Tour. We're incredibly grateful that you would allow us to partner with you this year to help facilitate a spiritual encounter between your students and Jesus. We honor you for dedicating your time and energy! Please know this weekend does not happen without you! We've been diligently praying for your students. Our hope is that this weekend will change their lives forever.

In preparation for our time together, The LIFT Tour team worked methodically through the details to ensure your students will have the best experience. Our purpose this weekend is three-fold. We want to intentionally create an environment where students can Engage Scripture, Exalt Christ, and Be Equipped with the necessary tools to pursue Christ passionately and to be salt and light for their generation. To help generate flow and synergy, we feel that what happens in the large group environment must carry over into the small group sessions. The Gospel will be presented in a clear, innovative, and applicable way during each large group session.

The small group sessions will consist of a few discussion questions to help you facilitate and cultivate a healthy dialog with your students. Please know these questions are only a "guide" for the weekend. You know your students; feel free to contextualize any of these questions as you deem necessary. We encourage you and your adult leaders to take plenty of notes while listening to the sermons and ask God to give you a few points of discussion for each small group session. It is totally okay if you don't complete all the small group questions because the conversation is rich and eventful. The goal is not to complete the questions for the sake of accomplishment. Instead, the goal is to build connections that will lead to application and transformation. Be open and receptive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As you spend time with your students, pray for "God moments" where you can engage them in spiritual conversations that will lead to discussions concerning their salvation.

Noteworthy: During one or two of the sessions, our communicators will extend a public invitation and give your students an opportunity to respond to the Gospel. We desire to inspire and encourage your students to experience a personal relationship with Jesus. We want every participant to fully understand what it means to be a citizen of heaven and to live redeemed. This invitation will not feel manipulative or come across as unauthentic. While the invitation is being presented, please be prepared to receive your students and counsel them. We want to make sure every student understands the decision they are making. Our entire team is praying to see God move unimaginably this weekend! Thank you for allowing us to serve you and your students!

Praying for you always,



Chief Strategic Officer





Historically, Jesus, the Messiah, was one of the most interesting and intriguing people to ever live, not just because of His divinity but also because of how He lived and what He said. Whether or not you are a Christian, you must admit that His life was captivating. The words He spoke, the stories He told, and His polarizing effect on culture and people made Him one of the most fascinating people to ever live. Most notably, throughout His ministry, **Jesus made some shocking claims that were challenging, controversial, and counter-cultural.** That's what made **His teachings so inverted** from the teachings of the day ... they were **contrary to the cultural norms.** When talking about Jesus, we often focus on the grace and the love that Jesus showed others; however, that's only one side of Jesus. Jesus also said many things that shocked people and caught them off guard. So much so, that even Jesus' disciples, in **John 6:60 (CSB)**, struggled with some of Jesus' teachings: **"Therefore, when many of His disciples heard this, they said, 'This teaching is hard. Who can accept it?'"** And, if we are honest, this question is still being considered today ... Who can or will accept Jesus' teachings?

The theme for **The LIFT Tour 2024 is I N V E R S E.** Inverse simply means, **"something that is the opposite or reverse of something else."** When Jesus spoke, His teachings were the inverse of what culture was and is saying. It was the opposite of what we would assume to be true. **This year we will explore some of the most challenging and controversial teachings of Jesus.** One of the most common truths that have regularly been applied to the person of Jesus is the fact that **He comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable.** Yes, Jesus said and demonstrated the most loving, accepting, and grace-filled practices. However, He also taught complicated truths that even perplexed the people who knew Him best. Why? Because **Jesus taught both grace AND truth!** So, if we want to have the power to truly change our lives and this world, learning how to navigate the tensions between Jesus' teachings on grace and truth is essential. Therefore, during **The LIFT Tour 2024**, we will highlight four counter-cultural claims made by Jesus. **W E C L O M E to the I N V E R S E!!!!**

Session ONE - Unity: Division gives birth to togetherness (Luke 12:49-53)

Session TWO - Love: Dismiss the "eye for an eye" ideology (Luke 6:27-36)

Session THREE - Compassion: Demonstrate compassion over polarization (Matthew 7:1-6)

Session FOUR - Submit: Decide to follow Jesus...it's the best option (Matthew 16:24-28)

PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR FACILITATING SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS:

- Remember, you can never teach a person anything; you can only help them discover it. This is the purpose of the discussion questions. It is an opportunity for you to guide the students to discover the truths revealed in the passages. This is most effective when they are given the chance to answer the questions rather than being spoon-fed the answers.
- You can follow the curriculum and content just as it is laid out. 1) Read the passage [allow students to read as much as possible]. 2) Present the discussion questions. Allow time for students to come up with the answer. If it's quiet at first, they are likely thinking. Don't get nervous, this is what you want.
- After they have given their answers, you can share your own. Please don't get caught up or waste a lot of time on a question they may not understand. Just go on to the next question.
- There is not necessarily one right answer for each question. However, you want to listen to the answers. This will help you get an idea of the level of understanding of each student who participates.
- Don't ignore wrong answers but do your best to be diplomatic in pointing toward the truth. You can say something like, "Hmmm, that's an interesting thought, but what if we look at it this way...." You want to do your best not to embarrass anyone, because some in your group may not know the Lord as Savior just yet.

“I came to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already set ablaze! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how it consumes me until it is finished! Do you think that I came here to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on, five in one household will be divided: three against two, and two against three. They will be divided, father against son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” (Luke 12:49-53 CSB)¹

Introduction

If we’re being honest, it seems a bit odd and counter-cultural to read these words from Jesus. This is the same Jesus who is the Messiah, the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6), and the “light of the world” (John 8:12). To hear Him say, “I came to bring fire on the earth” and division that would separate even families is unexpected, to say the least. How are we to understand such strong language that reads with a such a matter-of-fact tone and seems completely contrary to what we would think Jesus would say? It doesn’t have that good and comforting feeling we want to associate with the Good News.

It is only human nature to be drawn to all the benefits of Jesus dying on the cross for the sins of mankind so that we could be reconciled with God and be made new creations. There are countless songs we sing and sermons we hear that are dedicated to the goodness of God demonstrated through the ministry of Jesus. After all, Jesus Himself said, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). What is often overlooked or blissfully ignored, at least in most of our lives, is that seeking and saving requires a somewhat uncomfortable version of Jesus. What do I mean by that? Well, seeking and saving requires a Messiah who is the warrior king and who’s war with evil has eternal consequences for mankind. Let’s think about it this way:

Question: What if before there could be peace there had to be war? Meaning...

- *Before there could be reconciliation, a consequential fire had to burn bright...*
- *Before a water baptism could be celebrated, a bloody baptism had to be endured...*
- *And that before there could be togetherness, there had to be division?*

Outline

Here in this text (Luke 12:49-53), we see that the unity and togetherness of the church was born of fire and blood and war that was so consequential it even divided fathers from sons, mothers from daughters. Yet the purpose of all this was something so magnificent and beautiful. A new family, a new tribe, one that could no longer call earth home. A people whose unity was both a story to be told and an invitation for all to join. So how does this division Jesus spoke of give birth to togetherness? What does this counter-cultural story teach us?

1. A **FIRE** that gives **TRANSFORMATION**.

Jesus doesn't mix His words. He said, "I came to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already set ablaze!" The 'fire' that Jesus speaks of is pivotal in understanding this entire text. It is important to first note the larger context of these words. Jesus' statement on fire appears after a lengthy discussion on his second coming (Luke 12:35-48). He has basically just taught, and used story to do so, that His followers should live ready for Jesus to appear again and return for His people. Furthermore, there would be rewards and consequences for those who were faithful and unfaithful.

With this context in mind, the fire Jesus is speaking about refers to judgement, with a particular focus on His second coming. Simply put:

- **There was a judgement that Jesus endured on the cross...**

This is why Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mark 15:34)

On the cross Jesus was, "pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds. We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished him for the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:5-6)

- **There is a judgement that we can escape because of the judgement that Jesus endured...**

Those who believe escape judgement because, "He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

"Truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life." (John 5:24)

- **And there is a judgement that cannot be escaped for those who do not believe.**

Unbelief leads to judgement because, "Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God." (John 3:18)

Unbelievers experience eternal judgement, "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:46)

There can be no mistaking the fact that this fire or judgement is the key to our salvation and thus transformation. New Testament scholar Dr. Leon Morris articulated it this way:

Jesus is saying that God's plan is for salvation that involves judgment, but a judgment that the Messiah will bear for others, not one he will inflict on others. It is not an attractive prospect, but Jesus longs for it to come, for only so can the saving work be accomplished.²

The fire that Jesus speaks of is a long time coming. In many respects, it is the culmination of a war between good and evil that began in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 3, we have what has been traditionally referred to as the fall of man. This is where Adam and Eve rebelled against God's desired

2 Morris, L. (1988). *Luke: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 3, p. 237). InterVarsity Press.

will for their lives and thus sinned by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result of their sin, God gave a series of lasting consequences. And when He began assigning a consequence for the Devil, who had taken the form of the serpent, He said, “I’m declaring war between you and the Woman, between your offspring and hers. He’ll wound your head, you’ll wound his heel” (Genesis 3:15, The Message).

Throughout church history scholars have agreed that this is the first mention of Jesus in the Bible. In fact, this verse is often referred to in the Greek as the *protevangelim* which is a combination of two words meaning ‘first gospel’. So, let’s put this in perspective, the first mention of Jesus in the Bible shows God’s personal hostility towards evil and sin. He hates evil so much that through the future offspring of Mary, God would bring about the enemy’s destruction. And the enemy’s destruction means our deliverance. You see, without the fire there can be no freedom. Without Jesus enduring our judgement, we could never be declared innocent.

If fire is a metaphor for judgement, then baptism is a metaphor for the cross. When Jesus said, “I have a baptism to undergo” He was speaking of His death. He was speaking of an event so brutal and violent that He would be covered in his own blood. The crucifixion of Jesus is a bloody baptism where the “serpent wounds the heel that crushes him; and so, Satan would be permitted to afflict the humanity of Christ and bring suffering and persecution on His people...” but, “the serpent’s poison is lodged in its head; and a bruise on that part is fatal. Thus, fatal shall be the stroke which Satan shall receive from Christ.”³

If ever there was doubt the meaning of the baptism that Jesus is referring to, then He clarifies with the words, “it is finished!” The word that Jesus uses in Luke 12:50 to describe His baptism being finished is derived from the same word He uses in John 19:30 to describe His sacrifice complete on the cross. It is the Greek word *teleo* which simply means something is fully accomplished or perfected. It is a term often used in the marketplace and among merchants to describe a debt being fully paid. The bloody baptism of Jesus would fully accomplish the salvation of all who would believe. For all who would listen, Jesus will have the last word in this war. He may not have fired the first shot, but he finished it with a devastating blow to the serpent of old.

2. A **TRANSFORMATION** that brings **DIVISION**

While the fire and baptism demonstrate Jesus as the warrior king, bloodied on the field of battle and defeating His venomous enemy, there is a postwar picture that emerges in the wake of judgement and death...one of division. While the fire/judgement and baptism/crucifixion provide the possibility for personal transformation, they also mean that some will not believe. There is a very real and lasting consequence for those who do not look upon the Son and believe.

Jesus would ask a question that demonstrates the very sad reality of unbelief, “Do you think that I came here to bring peace on the earth?” Most of us would provide a resounding “YES!” to such a question. Afterall, don’t we read every Christmas the words from the prophet Isaiah calling him “the Prince of Peace?” Jesus provides the answer, but and uses a word to emphasize a resounding “NO!”⁴ Jesus, of course, offers inner peace of the soul, but the peace we personally experience is accompanied by division when others do not believe.

The purpose of Jesus’ mission was to redeem a people...to set a people apart to the gospel of God. At the beginning of God’s story, way back in Genesis 3, humanity enjoyed a home that was

3 Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 19). Logos Research Systems, Inc.

4 Morris, L. (1988). *Luke: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 3, p. 237). InterVarsity Press.

paradise. All of creation existed in harmony. There was a sacred coherence between man and woman, the rest of creation, and of course with God. But paradise would soon be lost and with it the destruction of all that was harmonious. So, when Jesus is hanging on the cross, and tells the repentant criminal next to Him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise”, there is an amazing picture that emerges. The word that Jesus uses for ‘paradise’ comes from an old Persian word that means garden or walled garden.

In the beginning of the story, we get ourselves kicked out of paradise, which was our home. Through the bloody baptism of the cross, Jesus makes it possible to go to a new paradise. In other words, Jesus makes it possible for us to go home again. The war that was declared in Genesis 3 was all about making it possible for people to come home. The problem is that not everyone will go home. Not everyone will look and believe. Some will continue to reach for forbidden fruit and find creative ways to explain and cover up the brokenness of their own making. It is a sad reality that should cause no one to celebrate or feel a sense of pride. Rather it should stir a deep sense of gratitude for the grace experienced, and a commitment to pray for those yet to experience it.

To show how personal the division of belief and unbelief will be, Jesus explains the impact this will affect family relationships:

“They will be divided, father against son,
son against father,
mother against daughter,
daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law,
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

It is difficult truth to hear, especially for those of us who have people we are close to that do not believe in Jesus. And if we are not careful, there is a somewhat understandable reaction that says, “What kind of God would cause division among families?!?” or “We don’t worship a God that would cause a father to be against his son!”

While these types of reactions are understandable, let us consider from God’s perspective. His children rebelled and were deceived. In other words, WE caused division from HIM. But in the wake of our self-sabotage and destruction God had already devised a plan, a way for us to be reunited with Him. In other words, God would make a way to destroy the division that we had caused.

We were the prodigal son who demanded his inheritance while his father was still alive and ran off to another country to satisfy every desire imaginable. Yet through it all the father waited for the right moment. That moment His wayward son would come to the end of Himself and stop grasping at forbidden fruit. That moment in which there were no options left and he decided to come home. It had to be to the surprise of the son that the father had been waiting the entire time. The best part, in my opinion, of the entire story is that the father did not allow the son to come home in rags and filth. Rather,

The father told his servants, “Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then bring the fattened calf and slaughter it, and let’s celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” (Luke 15:22-24)

The division that is the result of fire and baptism has everything to do with our transformation. A transformation that destroys division with God and thus makes us into a new creation altogether. And

being this transformed-new-creation-type-of-person means we don't belong to the ashes of our bad decisions anymore. We are now sons and daughters of God. And, as such, we don't belong to this world anymore. Now we are pilgrims, sojourners, making our way home to the heaven country.

But Jesus is not saying that a type of divorce occurs between family members. His words are simply a matter of practical implication. There is an undeniable division between believing and unbelieving family members. Those family members will, and should, continue to love and care for one another. This division shouldn't cause us to disown our loved ones. If anything, it should cause us to love them all the more. It should motivate us to show them the love of Jesus, so they too can have division with God destroyed.

3. A **DIVISION** that establishes **TOGETHERNESS**.

Fire. Baptism. Division. What the point? All of this leads to a new people. A tribe set apart. A heavenly population. When our division with God is destroyed, we become part of this movement of redeemed people throughout history that are collectively known as the Church. A people seeking to fulfill God's wants for God's world through the stories that are their lives. This is what the war declared against the enemy would eventually accomplish. A people, that were themselves God's plan.

With this perspective in mind no wonder Jesus uses such strong, and to our ears, uncharacteristic language. A war was waged between good and evil, God and the devil. Blood was spilled and the Savior died. Heaven collided with earth so that the division between God and man could be bridged - so that the church could be established. Jesus didn't come to play nice with sin, He doesn't accommodate what was intended to kill. He fought and bled and cried and died. And yes, that does cause a practical division between loved ones to become a reality. But that practical division doesn't have to be a permanent division. For all who believe will have division with God destroyed.

When observing the strong language that Jesus uses one scholar commented, "suddenly Jesus lets the volcano in his own heart burst forth".⁵ The heart of Jesus was to destroy division between God and man and create a new people galvanized around the person and work of Jesus, right belief, and obedience.

A war was waged.

...

The warrior King of the Universe fought and conquered death and the enemy.

...

A people were redeemed and transformed.

...

These individuals, brought together under the banner of redemption, make up the Church.

...

Local expressions of this togetherness have taken root all over the world.

Conclusion

I can't help but wonder if the greatest threat to our togetherness isn't some outside scheme, cooked up at an evil meeting, by those with ill will towards believers. Maybe what threatens our unity more than anything is us. Could it be that those separated to the gospel of God are the biggest threat to causing separation among the people of God?

5 Robertson, A. T. (1933). *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Luke 12:49). Broadman Press.

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

SESSION ONE

1

What are a few things that stuck out to you most from this first session?

2

Which of the statements Jesus made in this text caught you off guard the most? Why?

3

After listening to this counter-cultural teaching from Jesus, in your opinion, what did Jesus mean when he said, “I came to bring fire on the earth”?

4

In vs. 51, Jesus said “he did not come to bring peace, but rather division.” In context of this passage, how is Jesus the great divider?

5

What are some areas in culture, society, or the church that lack unity? What (if anything) can you (we) do about it?

“But I say to you who listen: Love your enemies, do what is good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If anyone hits you on the cheek, offer the other also. And if anyone takes away your coat, don’t hold back your shirt either. Give to everyone who asks you, and from someone who takes your things, don’t ask for them back. Just as you want others to do for you, do the same for them. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do what is good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do what is good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High. For he is gracious to the ungrateful and evil. Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.” (Luke 6:27-3)

Introduction

Sadly, we live in a world where an “eye for an eye” ideology and mindset is our preferred posture. It’s all about the “get back” and the “payback.” When it comes to an offense, culture tends to suggest *you do unto others the same or worse as they have done to you!* However, that’s not Jesus’ perspective, position, or teaching. His response to an offense tends to contradict what culture or society suggests. Specifically in this text, we see that Jesus never stopped challenging His disciples to take a higher level of living. He urged them to do counter-cultural things like love their enemies rather than give in to an “eye for an eye” ideology.

This text deals with the attitude and actions of those who follow Jesus. Christ’s disciples are to be characterized by the actions of love...loving enemies, doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse you, praying for those who mistreat you, not retaliating with violence, and willingly...generously giving the shirt off your back. You lend and do not expect a repayment.

This verse is usually referred to as the **golden rule**. This is apparently a restatement of the second commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus discussed the logic of selfless love...great is the reward. Jesus Himself is gracious and merciful to all people, and disciples of Jesus are to follow His example. The golden rule can also be used to help guide us on how we deal with conflict.⁶

Jesus assumed that anybody who lived for eternal values would get into trouble with the world’s crowd. As Christians, we are the “salt of the earth,” and the “light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-16), and sometimes the salt stings, and the light exposes sin. Often, non-believers show their hatred to Christians by avoiding us or rejecting us (Luke 6:22), insulting us (Luke 6:28), or even physically abusing us (Luke 6:29). This is something we must expect in culture and society (Phil. 1:29; 2 Tim. 3:12).⁷

With that being known, the central question is... *How should we treat our enemies?* We must love them, do them good, and pray for them. Hatred only breeds more hatred. It is a vicious and repetitive cycle. As Christians, we should advocate for love and be an adversary of hatred. James 1:20 says, “For man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life God desires.” This cannot be done in our own strength, but it can be done through the power of the Holy Spirit (ref. Rom. 5:5; Gal. 5:22-23).

⁶ Walvoord, J., & Zuck, R. (1989). *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*. Victor Books.

⁷ Wiersbe W. W. (2007). *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: The Complete New Testament in One Volume* (2nd ed.). David C. Cook.

We must not consider these admonishments as behavior modifications or rules to be obeyed. They describe an attitude of the heart that expresses itself (1) positively when others are negative and (2) generously when others are selfish, and (3) holistically, all for the glory of God. It is an inner disposition, not a legal duty. We must have the wisdom to know when to turn the other cheek and when to go and claim our rights (John 18:22-23; Acts 16:35-40). As Christians, it is our duty and responsibility to live as citizens of heaven (Phil 1:27) and exercise discernment.⁸

In our primary text, Luke 6:27-36, two overarching principles stand out:

1. We are called to treat others as we want to be treated (Luke 6:31), assuming we want the very best spiritually for ourselves.
2. We must imitate our heavenly Father by being merciful and showing Godly love to others (Luke 6:36).

Quote: “God and love are synonymous. Love is not an attribute of God, it is God; wherever God is, love is.” – Oswald Chambers.

Outline

A counter-cultural perspective of Godly love dismisses an “eye for an eye” ideology because there is a belief that the important thing is not that we are vindicated before our enemies but that we become more like God in our character (Luke, 6:35). This is the most significant award anyone can receive, far greater than riches, food, laughter, or popularity (Luke 6:24-26). These things will one day pass away and vanish, but Godly character will last for eternity. We must believe Matthew 6:33 (ESV), which states, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you,” and put it into practice.⁹

Jesus never stopped challenging His disciples to take a higher level of living. He urged them to do counter-cultural things like love their enemies rather than give into an eye for an eye ideology. The principles spelled out by Jesus are shocking. They go against every grain of society in every fiber of a man’s being. Culturally, man rebels by nature against what Jesus is saying; however, these principles must be heeded, for they represent the salvation of society and the hope of man for life.

Jesus’ counter-cultural teaching on love demonstrates:

1. A **PRACTICE** of **OBEDIENCE** (vv. 27 – 28).

There is an age-old saying, “Obedience is better than sacrifice.” This phrase comes from the Bible, specifically from the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel 15:22. It is a statement made by the prophet Samuel to King Saul. In this context, obeying God’s commands is more important than offering sacrifices or religious rituals. As Christians, we are called to be the “salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-16).¹⁰ Living counter, culturally, means that we consistently practice a lifestyle of obedience to God’s word and Jesus’ teachings.

“In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)

“First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

⁸ Wiersbe W. W. (2007). *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: The Complete New Testament in One Volume* (2nd ed.). David C. Cook.

⁹ Malina, B. J. & Rohrbaugh, R. L. (2003). *Social-science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Fortress Press.

¹⁰ Grudem, W. A. (1999). *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*. Zondervan.

2. A **PRINCIPLE** to **APPLY** (vv. 29 – 31).

As we practice a lifestyle of obedience to God's word, the byproduct is that we will begin to willingly apply certain principles. Specifically, from this text, we are called to (1) love our enemies, (2) do them good, and (3) pray for them. Hatred only breeds more hatred, "for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (James 1:20). We are called to treat others as we would want to be treated. However, this cannot be done in our own strength but only through the power of the Holy Spirit.¹¹

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Give careful thought to do what is honorable in everyone's eyes. If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:17-18)

"Therefore, whatever you want others to do for you, do also the same for them..." (Matthew 7:12)

Quick Reference Note:

Jesus uses four powerful action words in these verses:

1. Greek *agapaō* -- love your enemies.
2. Greek *poimeō kalos* -- do good to those who hate you.
3. Greek *eulogeō* -- to speak well of.
4. Greek *proseuchomai* -- to pray for, to intercede for.¹²

None are in the passive voice. They don't just take care of themselves. They are active verbs describing deliberate action to do good to one's enemies.

3. A **PROMISE** that's **GIVEN** (vv. 32 – 36).

We see that in this text, a promise is given to us for living counter-culturally. Not only is it a promise, but there are eternal benefits for obeying God's Word and showing Godly love to others. We will receive a great reward, which means all that we have suffered and lost on earth will be restored through eternal life and inheriting all our Heavenly Father has for us. We are eternally known as a child of the Most High Himself.¹³

"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." (James 4:10)

"For while we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For rarely will someone die for a just person—though for a good person, perhaps someone might even dare to die. But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6-8)

Conclusion

Here in this text, Jesus is teaching the true meaning of INVERSE. The world says to hate your enemies; however, Jesus stands in complete opposition to this practice and says we are to love our enemies. The world says to show vengeance [an eye for an eye]; Jesus says to show mercy. The world says that not acting on our hatred is cowardly; Jesus says it's an act of faith, obedience, and love. The world says alignment with tribes and sides should be our primary position, but ultimately, Jesus says we should choose love first before we choose sides.

¹¹ Wiersbe W. W. (2007). *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: The Complete New Testament in One Volume* (2nd ed.). David C. Cook.

¹² Marshall, A. (1975). *The Interlinear KJV-NIV parallel New Testament in Greek and English*. Zondervan.

¹³ Walvoord, J., & Zuck, R. (1989). *The Bible Knowledge Commentary / New Testament*. Victor Books.

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

SESSION TWO

1

What point did you connect with most in session two? Why?

2

Why is it so hard to love your enemies?

3

What is the benefit of loving your enemies? (Hint: Read Luke 6:35 and James 4:10)

4

Is there someone in your life that you need to either forgive or extend grace to?

5

Read Romans 12:14-21. What is the common theme between this passage and Luke 6:27-36?

“Do not judge, so that you won’t be judged. For you will be judged by the same standard with which you judge others, and you will be measured by the same measure you use. Why do you look at the splinter in your brother’s eye but don’t notice the beam of wood in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the splinter out of your eye,’ and look, there’s a beam of wood in your own eye? Hypocrite! First, take the beam of wood out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother’s eye. Don’t give what is holy to dogs or toss your pearls before pigs, or they will trample them under their feet, turn, and tear you to pieces.” Matthew 7:1-6

Introduction

One of the central themes of the Christian faith is compassion. After commanding believers to “put away” worldly behaviors, in Colossians 3:12-13, the Apostle Paul offered a series of positive commands to put on or to clothe yourselves with behavior fitted for God’s people:

Therefore, God’s chosen ones, holy and loved, put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, accepting one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a complaint against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive.

In essence, Paul said that when we show compassion, empathy, love, and care for others, we identify with Jesus Himself. For Jesus, His life encompassed compassion. He consistently dedicated His life to loving the cast-aways, throw-aways, and giveaways. He healed the sick. He showed love to people regardless of their socioeconomic status, culture, or heritage. He fed the hungry. He cast out demons and He even raised the dead. His example reminds us to see and care about the needs of those around us. Everything He did was counter-cultural.

Based on what we see through the various examples Jesus provides in scripture, perhaps the greatest need for our faith, neighborhoods, and nation today is choosing love, not sides, and choosing compassion over polarization. In this ever-increasingly polarized world, we see more separation and division than unity, love, and oneness. And, as we think about the spiritual ramifications of this cultural shift, now more than ever, our world needs a generation who will rise and live counter-culturally.

A true counter-cultural generation chooses compassion over judgment, kindness over hostility, and empathy over retaliation. In Matthew 7, we see how we should live as compassionate followers of Jesus. Compassion comes from the Latin word “compati,” which means “to suffer with.” It is more than mere empathy and care—it is the desire to help someone suffering or going through a difficult time and to help that person ease their pain. Even living in a polarized culture and society, God calls for Christians to show compassion by showing empathy, kindness, and love to others.¹⁴

Although compassion and empathy are two different things, they do go hand in hand. There can be no compassion without empathy, and one cannot empathize if he doesn’t know compassion. It is not easy to bear someone else’s suffering or feel someone else’s heartbreak. But it is possible to feel

14 Butler, T. C. (1991). *Holman Bible Dictionary: With summary definitions and explanatory articles on every Bible subject*. Holman Bible Publishers.

empathy with a heart of pure kindness. To have a compassionate heart means to have a kind heart. If compassion is an intense desire regarding other people's feelings, then kindness is the act you do to help them get through hard times.¹⁵

Outline

Matthew 7:1-6 is an excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, which includes the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, and other essential teachings from Jesus Himself. This is one of Jesus' longest and most famous sermons during His time on Earth. This Sermon takes place on a mountainside not far from Capernaum, where He is speaking to a crowd—including His disciples—that has gathered to hear from Him and be healed. Jesus is saying these counter-cultural things because the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Jews of the time would hold others to strict standards but not hold themselves to those same requirements. He warned His followers and disciples not to follow the same practices.

In our text, Jesus continued His counter-cultural teachings because the spiritual leaders lacked Godly compassion and tended to be more comfortable judging, categorizing, and criticizing others. Likewise, if we're not careful, we, too, will lack a spirit of compassion and be more attracted to judgment and polarization if we ignore this teaching from Jesus. Ultimately, this text challenges us that if we want to truly live like Jesus, we must first look within and examine ourselves accordingly. Thus, **in the midst of this polarized culture, Jesus teaches that we are still called to:**

1. **SET the STANDARD** (vv. 1-2): Beware of harsh and unmerciful judgment.

Question: How do you respond when someone does something wrong? Living counter-cultural involves setting a different standard and having a different response. In this text, "judge" means criticizing, condemning, or censoring. It is fault-finding. However, Jesus is saying that when a person makes a mistake or has a different perspective than us, our response should be that of compassion, not criticism or judgment.¹⁶

Jesus also warns us to be careful of how we treat others because we will be judged accordingly. The Pharisees "played God" as they condemned other people, but they never considered that God would one day judge them.

Mathew 7 has a parallel passage that says:

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you; a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over—will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. (Luke 6:37-38)

Not only will God judge us in the end, but people are also watching us right now, and we receive exactly what we give from others. We will reap what we have sown.

Questions: What standard are you setting? Are you a person of compassion or a person of judgment?

American evangelical theologian, philosopher, and Presbyterian pastor Francis Schaeffer stated, "Biblical orthodoxy [straight thinking on the bases of the Bible] without compassion is surely the ugliest thing in the world."

15 Grudem, W. A. (1999). *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*. Zondervan.

16 Walvoord, J., & Zuck, R. (1989). *The Bible Knowledge Commentary / New Testament*. Victor Books.

“The one who gives an answer before he listens—this is foolishness and disgrace for him.” (Proverbs 18:13)

2. **LIVE** with **INTEGRITY** (vv. 3-5): Beware of hypocritical and deceitful judgment.

Question: Have you ever asked something of someone that you weren’t willing to give or do yourself?

A lack of Godly compassion and integrity will lead to a posture of being judgmental and hypocritical. Jesus is intentional about the illustrations He uses. Jesus chose the symbol of the eye because this is one of the most sensitive areas of the human body. The picture of a man with a 2 x 4 stuck in his eye, trying to remove a speck of dust from another man’s eye, is ridiculous, indeed. However, if we do not honestly face our sins and confess them, we close our eyes to others, and then we cannot see clearly enough to help or serve others. The Pharisees saw other people’s sins but refused to look at their own sins. This lack of willingness to see their own sins impacted their ability to show compassion.¹⁷

How do we live with compassion and integrity? After we have taken an honest assessment of our lives before God and we have acknowledged those personal blind spots, then we will be in a better position to offer compassion and constructive criticism. But, until we are willing to be honest with ourselves, we will never be able to exemplify this posture that Jesus articulates here in this text. The Pharisees were guilty of this, and Jesus denounced them for it. Jesus cautions that we lack compassion and integrity when:

- We think the worst of others.
- We only speak to others about their faults.
- We judge an entire life only by its worst moments.
- We judge the hidden motives of others.
- We judge others without considering ourselves in the same circumstances.
- We judge others without being mindful that we will be judged.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. So, if the light within you is darkness, how deep is that darkness!” (Matthew 6:22-23)

3. **PROTECT** our **PEARLS** (vs. 6). Beware of insensitive and undiscerning judgment.

When we exercise wisdom and discernment, we tend to have more patience and compassion for others and how they respond to us. Sometimes, there will be moments when people are not open to hearing about Jesus. As God’s people, we have been entrusted to handle the “holy things” of the Lord. Specifically, He has entrusted us with the precious truths of the Word of God (2 Cor. 4:7), and we must regard them carefully. While it is true that we must carry the gospel “to every creature” (Mark 16:5), it is also true that we must not cheapen the gospel by a ministry that lacks discernment.¹⁸

Even Jesus refused to talk to Herod (Luke 23:9), and Paul refused to argue with people who resisted the Word (Acts 13:44-49). **TRUTH:** Being discerning doesn’t mean that you lack compassion. It just means that you’re mindful of the timing. Jesus is saying it is wise for Christians to assess the

¹⁷ Wiersbe, W. W. (1992). *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines the New Testament*. Victor Books.

¹⁸ Wiersbe, W. W. (1992). *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines the New Testament*. Victor Books.

condition of a person's heart before sharing the precious pearls of the gospel.¹⁹

Conclusion

This is truly a strong, counter-cultural language used by Jesus. However, He was teaching reality. He was stressing the fact that there are some unbelievers so wicked and profane that they may be compared to dogs and pigs. They are said to be worthy of the gospel. Who are they?

- The notorious sinner. The scoffers and scornful. The enraged and revilers. The openly wicked and profane. The hardened judges and critics. The persecutors.²⁰

Critical Question: Can they be saved? Yes! Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:13). Anyone who turns and calls upon the Lord shall be saved. Thus, we never judge; we always pray and show compassion. Ultimately, Jesus reminds us that we must steward our lives well before we can live counter-culturally before others.

“Watch out for the dogs, watch out for the evil workers, watch out for those who mutilate the flesh.” (Philippians 3:2)

19 Walvoord, J., & Zuck, R. (1989). *The Bible knowledge commentary / New Testament*. Victor Books.

20 Malina, B. J. & Rohrbaugh, R. L. (2003). *Social-science commentary on the synoptic gospels*. Fortress Press.

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

SESSION THREE

1

What were some of the most challenging parts of Jesus' teaching for you? Why?

2

What are some of the ways that you have found yourself judging others unfairly?

3

What is the difference between making a judgement and being judgmental? How can you discern this difference in your own life?

4

What is Jesus talking about in v. 6 when he says, "Do not give dogs what is holy...do not throw pearls to pigs..."

5

What are some ways you can cultivate compassion and empathy rather than judgement when you encounter someone whose actions or choices are different from yours?

Introduction

Let's be honest; we live in a society where casual Christianity has become popular and culturally acceptable. We have compromised the integrity of scripture for the sake of being relevant. We've allowed trending topics to set the standard for Christian living. Thus, now more than ever, our world desperately needs a generation of students who will rise from the ashes of mediocrity, draw a line in the sand, and make a declaration that they will live counter-cultural. Our world needs a generation who will unapologetically live as citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20-21). For this to happen, there must be a commitment to actively living a life of obedience and submission to Jesus. This type of submission requires one's whole self (mind, body, soul, and spirit). Submitting our lives to Jesus means being constantly attentive to His active presence in our lives and allowing Him, who is love, to be the source and the goal of all we do, say, and think.

Dutch Catholic priest, professor, and theologian Henry Nouwen (2006) wrote:

The obedient life develops our abilities to hear and sense God's presence and activities. The word obedience includes the Latin word *audire* [where we get the word auditing from], which means 'to listen.' The obedient life is one in which we listen with great attention to God's Spirit within and among us. Resistance [to submission] in the form of preoccupation and distraction often prevents us from seeing the truth of our lives, hearing God's voice, and living a spiritual life. To listen with obedience to the voice of God requires building up a resistance to all the other voices that compete for our attention.²¹

Unfortunately, we live in a world where the casual Christian wants to be numbered among the flock (or group) but doesn't want to surrender and follow the Shepherd totally. The casual Christian desires the forgiveness from the cross that Jesus brings but never intends on carrying their own cross. The casual Christian loves the warm, fuzzy moments and experiences, but never offers a commitment to Jesus beyond temporary moments and feelings. In short, casual Christians want the crown; they just don't want the cross. Thus, the question for you today is: Are you a casual Christian, or are you willing to live counter-culturally?

Counter-cultural living isn't just about deciding to follow Jesus, (though that is important and the start). It is a commitment to the "spirit of the disciplines". Spiritual disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken, to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order. They enable us more and more to live in a power that is, strictly speaking, beyond us, deriving from the spiritual realm itself. It's more than willpower. Access to this spiritual power through disciplines is actually central to transformation. When willpower works, it works great. It just doesn't normally get you very far, especially early on in your journey with Jesus. But through life-giving practices grounded in the life of Jesus, we gain access to a life-power that is far beyond our own power.²²

21 Nouwen, H. (2006). *Spiritual direction: Wisdom for the long walk of faith*. Harper One Publishing. (pp. 18 & 19).

22 Willard, D. (1988). *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. Harper & Row.

Living a sustainable counter-cultural life ultimately means we are willing to surrender and submit our lives to Jesus and put into practice, everything that is the Word of God teaches us. In Matthew 16:24-28, Jesus metaphorically uses the cross as a symbol of love, obedience, sacrifice, and submission:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it. For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will anyone give in exchange for his life? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will reward each according to what he has done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Quick Commentary

Having declared His person, Jesus then declared His work, for the two must go together. He would go to Jerusalem, suffer, and die, and be raised from the dead. This was Jesus’ first clear statement of His death, though He hinted at this before (Matt. 12:39-40; 16:4; John 2:19; 3:14; 6:51). “And He was stating the matter plainly” (Mark 8:32 NASB). In that day, the cross was a horrible means of capital punishment. The Romans would not mention the cross in polite society. No Roman citizen could be crucified; this terrible death was reserved for their enemies.²³

Why did Jesus make these statements? If you read the previous verses (Matt. 16:21-23), Peter has just rebuked what Jesus said about His crucifixion. Jesus told him that he wasn’t seeing the big picture and thinking of the eternal effects of His death and resurrection. Jesus then followed up by turning to the disciples and saying that if they plan on following Him, they should be ready to take up their own crosses. He explained the seriousness of what it means to follow Him.

Outline

So, with the theme of INVERSE in mind, what can we take away from this counter-cultural teaching of Jesus? Well, if we believe following Jesus is always the best option, then we must put that belief into practice by answering three critical questions.

1. Are you willing to **LAY SOMETHING DOWN?** (vs. 24a)

The world says to do what you want, when you want, however you want, as long as it makes you happy. However, Jesus calls us to do the hard things, starting with denying oneself. The Greek word “deny” (aparnesastho) means to disown, disregard, forsake, renounce, reject, refuse, restrain, disclaim, do without. It means to subdue and to not regard oneself and one’s interests. Very simply put, it means to say “no.” The call is not to say “no” to some behavior or thing but to self. We’re called to lay some things down to deny ourselves. This means much more than just giving up something or doing without something. It means actively and consistently saying yes to Jesus and no to self. It means to let Jesus rule and reign in our hearts and lives. It means relinquishing control so Jesus can have complete control. It means to give yourself wholly to Jesus.²⁴

23 Wiersbe, W. W. (1992). *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines the New Testament*. Victor Books.

24 Butler, T. C. (1991). *Holman Bible Dictionary: With summary definitions and explanatory articles on every Bible subject*. Holman Bible Publishers.

“What will it benefit a man if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will a man give in exchange for his life?” (Matthew 16:26)

Here’s a counter-cultural thought: The people who lived this way before Jesus are the ones who are typically genuinely happy. Giving our lives to Jesus and living as an “others-centered” person does not take away from our lives; it adds to it.

2. Are you willing to **LIFT SOMETHING UP?** (vs. 24b)

Let’s be clear, this idea about lifting something up is ultimately about affirming and advocating for holy and righteous living. To take up a cross does not mean carrying burdens or having problems. Taking up the cross means identifying with Christ in His rejection, shame, suffering, and death. But suffering always leads to glory. This is why Jesus ended with the reference to His glorious kingdom in Matthew 16:28.²⁵ This statement would be fulfilled within a week of the Mount of Transfiguration, described in chapter 17.

In Galatians 2:19b-20, Paul wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

Following Christ requires lifting a cross. It starts with dying to self so that you can say, like Paul, It is no longer I who live. When Jesus says, “take up your cross”, He is saying that we are to live as dead men and women (as it relates to carnality, worldliness, and giving into the desires of our flesh). We are called upon to take up our cross once and for all and relentlessly follow Jesus with everything that we have! We can’t go back. We can’t back down. We can’t turn away or lay down the cross! No, we are called to die to ourselves and humbly follow the footsteps of Jesus.

Jesus said it as simply as He could tell it:

“If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me. Where I am, there My servant also will be. If anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.” (John 12:26)

“Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” (Luke 14:27)

3. Are you willing to **LIVE IT OUT?** (vv. 25-26)

The first question, are you willing to lay something down, is asking if you are open to answering the call. The second question, are you willing to lift something up, is asking if you are ready to count the cost. However, the third question, are you willing to live it out, asks, are you prepared to live counter-culturally?

To be a disciple of Jesus is to follow Him continually. It is a way of life and a pattern of living, not something that is trending or that you do temporarily. Living counter-cultural means that you’re willing to be salt and light and eager to lead and love people. Living counter-cultural means you’re willing to learn how to disagree well with people in places and spaces that you don’t fully understand or that have a different perspective than theirs. It’s saying, “God, you are my Heavenly Father and the Good Shepherd. I trust you, and I will follow you no matter what!”

25 Wiersbe, W. W. (1992). *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines the New Testament*. Victor Books.

In verse 24, Jesus' words can be paraphrased this way, "If anyone wishes to be counted as an adherent of mine, he must once and for all say farewell to self, decisively accept pain, shame, and persecution for My sake, and he must then follow and keep on following Me as My disciple."²⁶

Conclusion

The Psalmist, David, in Psalms 23, reminds us that living counter-culturally is always the best option because we have a Heavenly Father who will supply all our needs when we submit all our ways to Him.

The Lord is my Shepherd; I have what I need. He lets me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He renews my life; He guides me along the right paths for His name's sake. Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord as long as I live. Amen (Psalm 23).

Bottomline: "We are all servants. The only question is whom we will serve." - R. C. Sproul

Living for self will get you nothing. However, living for Christ brings you everything! That's living in the INVERSE!

26 Henriksen, W. (1973). *New Testament commentary: Exposition of the gospel according to Matthew*. Baker Book House.

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

SESSION FOUR

1

What connected with you most in this session? Do you believe that you have been called out by Jesus?

2

What are some practical ways you need to deny yourself?

3

What does it mean to take up your cross? (Hint: Look at verses 25-26 and Galatians 2:20).

4

What would it look like if you were able to live completely by Matthew 16:24-28?

5

How would your church/youth group be different if everyone was willing to live by Matthew 16:24-28?

INVERSE: The Counter-Cultural Teachings of Jesus

The 21-Day Devotion

*All verses from the Christian Standard Bible

Week One | UNITY

- Day 1 – The Power of ONE (Galatians 3:27-28)
- Day 2 – Unity vs. Uniformity (1 Corinthians 12:12)
- Day 3 – The Blessing(s) of Unity (Psalms 133:1)
- Day 4 - Christian Humility (Philippians 2:1-2)
- Day 5 – Jesus' Prayer (John 17:20-21)

Week Two | LOVE

- Day 6 – Love in Action (1 John 3:16)
- Day 7 – A New Command (John 13:34)
- Day 8 – Christian Ethics (Romans 12:9-10)
- Day 9 – Love Imitated (Ephesians 5:1-2)
- Day 10 – The Most Trusted Love (Psalms 52:8-9)

Week Three | COMPASSION

- Day 11 – Do Unto Others (Ephesians 4:31-32)
- Day 12 – Righteous Compassion (Psalms 112:4-5)
- Day 13 – Biblical Orthodoxy without Compassion (1 John 3:17-18)
- Day 14 – The Lord's Compassion (Psalms 103:8)
- Day 15 – Unfiltered Compassion (Romans 12:15)

Week Four | SUBMIT

- Day 16 – Submit and Resist (James 4:7-8)
- Day 17 – I Surrender All (Proverbs 3:5-6)
- Day 18 – The Wisdom of Wise Counsel (Hebrews 13:17)
- Day 19 – What's Missing (Hebrews 11:6)
- Day 20 – Are You Willing to Pay the Cost (Luke 14:33)

LIVE IT OUT | The Counter-Cultural Commitment

- Day 21 – Matthew 28:19-20

INVERSE | Devotion ONE

Loving God Deeply
from Charles Spurgeon's sermon, "Love's Logic"

To feel love to God we must tread along the 'road of faith'. Truly, this is not a hard or perilous way, but one prepared by infinite wisdom. It is a road suitable for sinners, and indeed saints must come that way also.

If you would love God, do not look within you to see whether this grace or that be as it ought to be, but look to your God, and read his eternal love, his boundless love, his costly love, which gave Christ for you; then shall your love drink in fresh life and vigor.

Beloved, there are few of us who know much of the depths of the love of God; our love is shallow; ah, how shallow! Love to God is like a great mountain--

The majority of travelers view it from afar, or traverse the valley at its base: a few climb to a halting place on one of its elevated spurs, whence they see a portion of its sublimities: here and there an adventurous traveler climbs a minor peak, and views glacier and alp at closer range; fewest of all are those who scale the topmost pinnacle and tread the virgin snow.

So it is in the Church of God-- Every Christian abides under the shadow of divine love: a few enjoy and return that love to a remarkable degree: but there are few, in this age sadly few, who reach to seraphic love, who ascent into the hill of the Lord, to stand where the eagle's eye has not seen, and walk the path which the lion's whelp has never trodden, the high places of complete consecration and ardent self-consuming love.

Now, mark you, it may be difficult to ascend so high, but there is one sure route, and only one, which the man must follow who would gain the sacred elevation. It is not the track of his works, nor the path of his own actions, but this, "We love him because he first loved us." John confessed that in this way he attained his love for God. For the highest love that ever glowed in human bosom there was no source but this- God first loved that man.

Do you not see how this is?
The knowledge that God loves me casts out my tormenting dread of God: and when this is expelled, there is room for abounding love to God. As fear goes out, love comes in at the other door.

So the more faith in God the more room there is for soul-filling love.

Our soul is satisfied with marrow and fatness when we know that the whole heart of God beats towards us as forcibly as if we were the only creatures he had ever made, and his whole heart were wrapped up in us. Love to God produces a desire to be with him; a desire to be like him, a longing to be with him eternally in heaven, and this breaks us away from worldliness; this keeps us from idolatry, and thus has a most blessedly sanctifying effect upon us, producing that elevated character which is now so rare, but which wherever it exists is powerful for the good of the church and for the glory of God. AMEN

INVERSE | Devotion TWO

A Prayer for Unity

Max Lucado from “In the Grip of Grace”

On the last night of his life Jesus prayed a prayer that stands as a citadel for all Christians: “I pray for these followers, but I am also praying for all those who will believe in me because of their teaching. Father, I pray that they can be one. As you are in me and I am in you, I pray that they can also be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me” (John 17:20–21 NCV).

How precious are these words. Jesus, knowing the end is near, prays one final time for his followers. Striking, isn’t it, that he prayed not for their success, their safety, or their happiness. He prayed for their unity. He prayed that they would love each other. As he prayed for them, he also prayed for “those who will believe because of their teaching.” That means us! In his last prayer Jesus prayed that you and I be one.

Of all the lessons we can draw from this verse, don’t miss the most important: unity matters to God. Why? Because “all people will know that you are my followers if you love each other” (John 13:35 NCV). Unity creates belief. How will the world believe that Jesus was sent by God? Not if we agree with each other. Not if we solve every controversy. Not if we are unanimous on each vote. Not if we never make a doctrinal error. But if we love one another.

Unity creates belief. Disunity fosters disbelief. Who wants to board a ship of bickering sailors? Paul Bilheimer may very well be right when he says: “The continuous and widespread fragmentation of the Church has been the scandal of the ages. It has been Satan’s master strategy. The sin of disunity probably has caused more souls to be lost than all other sins combined.”

Could it be that unity is the key to reaching the world for Christ? The world will be won for Christ when the church is one in Christ. If unity is the key to evangelism, shouldn’t it have precedence in our prayers? Shouldn’t we, as Paul said, “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3 NIV)? Nowhere, by the way, are we told to build unity. We are told simply to keep unity. From God’s perspective there is but “one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16). Unity does not need to be created; it simply needs to be protected.

Where there is faith, repentance, and a new birth, there is a Christian. When I meet a person, whose faith is in the cross and whose eyes are on the Savior, I meet a brother or a sister.

Wasn't that Paul's approach? When he wrote the church in Corinth, he addressed a body of Christians guilty of every sin from abusing the Lord's Supper to arguing over the Holy Spirit. But how does he address them? "I beg you, brothers and sisters" (1 Corinthians 1:10 NCV). When the church in Rome was debating whether to eat meat offered to idols, did Paul tell them to start two churches? One for the meat-eaters and one for the non-meat-eaters? No, on the contrary, he urged, "Christ accepted you, so you should accept each other, which will bring glory to God" (Romans 15:7 NCV).

Is God asking us to do anything more than what he has already done? Hasn't he gone a long way in accepting us? If God can tolerate my mistakes, can't I tolerate the mistakes of others? If God allows me, with my foibles and failures, to call him Father, shouldn't I extend the same grace to others? If God doesn't demand perfection, should I? "They are God's servants," Paul reminds us, "not yours. They are responsible to him, not to you. Let him tell them whether they are right or wrong. And God is able to make them do as they should" (Romans 14:4 TLB).

God's ship is a grand vessel. Just as a ship has many rooms, so God's kingdom has room for many opinions. But just as a ship has one deck, God's kingdom has a common ground: the all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

INVERSE Unity Challenge:

1. Will you pray with your church, your youth group, The LIFT Tour Team, and other followers of Jesus Christ for the day when Jesus' prayer is answered?
2. Will you pray for the hearts of those who are harden to the idea of biblical unity?
3. As a facilitator and advocate for biblical unity, will you commit to refusing to allow cultural differences to interfere with God's truth?

"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" – Psalms 133:1 (NIV)