

Jul 14-20; Week One: There Is More Joy in Giving Than Receiving

Key Session Theme:

We all want to be happy, but many of the things our culture tells us we need in order to be happy, often more money or possessions, don't actually make us happier.

Good news:

When we practice generosity, we not only experience more happiness, but we also index our hearts from a scarcity mentality to the abundance mentality of Jesus.

The Joy of Generosity:

One of the *most* counterintuitive of all Jesus' teachings is this teaching on money and generosity: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (**Acts 20v35**)

Generous people:

- Are happier
- Are healthier
- Have lower levels of depression and anxiety
- Are more interested in personal growth
- Have better relationships
- Have a higher life expectancy
- Laugh more!

A key task of our apprenticeship to Jesus is discovering the joy of living a generous life.

Abundance and Scarcity

When we come to trust Jesus' vision of abundance, and God as our Father-Provider, then we're *free* to be generous with what we have.

But if you have a scarcity mindset, you look out on the world and see a world of lack where you need to look out for yourself and get what you can before it's gone.

Jesus Is Teaching on Three Levels

1. Jesus is teaching his apprentices about how to see God and our life in God's world: Who God *is*: "our Father."
 - a. Generosity is woven through the library of Scripture.
 - b. Generosity is at the heart of the *Gospel* itself!
2. Jesus is teaching his apprentices about the architecture of our hearts. "If a person gets his attitude toward money straight, it will help straighten out almost every other area in his life." —Billy Graham
3. Jesus is teaching his apprentices about the practice of generosity. Generosity needs to be a practice in order for us to become more generous people and experience the joy it offers.

Key Scriptures and Context

Matthew 6v19-24: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

- The problem isn't that we want to store up treasure; it's that we store it up in the wrong place — in worldly things rather than Godly things.
- Money is ultimately about our heart. *Our heart follows our money.*

Session summary

- Jesus was right: happiness is found in the opposite place than where we are often told. There is more happiness in living simply and generously than in acquiring money and possessions.
- A key task of our apprenticeship to Jesus is discovering the joy of living a generous life.
- There are two ways of looking at the world:
 - An abundance mindset
 - A scarcity mindset
- Generosity is a practice by which we index our heart from a scarcity mentality to the abundance mentality of Jesus.

Reflection Questions

01 Whether you were the giver or recipient, share about a time when you experienced the joy of generosity.

02 What fears or desires keep you from being generous? (It could be a scarcity mindset, a need for “security,” greed, or something else.)

03 How would your life be different if you were free of the fear of not having enough?

04 What is one act of generosity you can do this week that would counter the fear you may carry?

Jul 21-27 Week 2 : All We Have Belongs to God

01 What did your practice of generosity look like this week?

02 What has it looked like to invite God into your current framework of generosity? How has he led you or invited you to be generous in a new way?

03 Where have you noticed the influence of greed in your own life this week and what might you need to confess to God or others in light of that?

04 When it comes to simplicity and generosity, what internal or external obstacles are you facing?

Key Session Theme:

The practice of generosity reminds us of our roles as stewards of our resources to be used for doing good.

Good news: As we step into our roles as stewards, God gives us wisdom through the Scriptures as guidelines for our giving. And as we ask God and listen for his guidance regarding our giving, he'll help us give wisely and joyfully.

Jesus' View of Wealth:

Stewardship is “the active and responsible management of God’s creation for God’s purposes.” —Randy Alcorn

God owns it all. God is the owner; we are the caretakers.

We are entrusted by God with resources to do good. Many of us live under the false assumption that whatever money we receive is ours to consume.

Some of it is for us — to live! God provides for us; not just for our needs, but also for us to enjoy. Some of our money is to give away. Some of it is to build for the future — for what God has put in our hearts for our families or businesses or Kingdom dreams.

God blesses us to give more, not just to have more. When we give, when we are good stewards of what has been entrusted to us, God often does give us even more. But, the purpose is not to make us rich but to make us even more generous.

“God blesses us to raise our standard of giving, not our standard of living.” —Randy Alcorn

Six Guidelines for Giving:

- Regular (**1 Corinthians 16v2a**)
- Proportional (**1 Corinthians 16v2b**)
- Sacrificial (**2 Corinthians 8v3**)
- Voluntary (**2 Corinthians 9v7a**)
- Joyful (**2 Corinthians 9v7b**)
- Motivated by apprenticeship to Jesus (**2 Corinthians 8v9**)

Listening: The lack of a clear rule to follow means we have to listen to the Spirit of God in our hearts ... to regularly come to quiet before God and ask him, “Father, thank you for the gift of these resources; what do you want me to do with them?”

Key Scripture Passage and Context

Luke 12v35-37: “Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.”

God is a rich, generous master who takes the place of a servant to his servants.

Luke 12v42-46, 48: “The Lord answered, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose the servant says to himself, ‘My master is taking a long time in coming,’ and he then begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers. ... From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”

- In this parable, if the steward does a good job stewarding the master’s house, the master will give him even more resources to steward.
- But if he abuses the resources that he’s been given, the owner will return when he doesn’t expect and expose his misuse.

Reflection Questions

01 What emotions surface in you as you consider Jesus’ parable of the faithful and wise manager? How does it encourage you and how does it challenge you?

02 In your family of origin, what were the views and emotional dispositions towards money? In what ways have those shaped your relationship to money today?

03 Share about a time when you asked God about a financial decision in your life and listened for his direction.

04 How could the truth that everything belongs to God free you to live more generously?

Jul 17 – Aug 02 Week 3 - Making a plan for regular giving

Opening Questions

01 How did the truth that everything belongs to God free you to live more generously this week?

02 Did you sense God say anything to you about the way you steward your resources this week?

03 What is one way that you have lived as a “caretaker” this week? What did that look like?

04 One year from now, what do you want your life to look like with regards to money, simplicity, and generosity?

As we come to the end of our Generosity Practice, it is clear that a generous life will not be stumbled upon but must be strategized for; our world of advertisements and algorithms, and our hearts prone to greed and fear, create too strong an undertow.

What is most needed at this point is a plan: a way to thoughtfully integrate Jesus’ teachings on this practice into the rhythm of our lives.

In this session, we set out to answer a few practical questions you might still have and to invite you to consider some best practices for building an architecture that can house a life of generosity.

Scripture —Proverbs 23v4-5; Do not wear yourself out to get rich; do not trust your own cleverness. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.

2 Corinthians 9:6-7; ⁶The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully^[d] will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver

Teaching summary

- If riches are sure to “sprout wings and fly off,” a generous life will require a plan.
- Start being generous now, even if you start small.
- You can begin by giving towards:
 - o The poor
 - o The church
 - o The advancing of the Gospel
- While generosity will look different depending on class and culture, there are five best practices to live into Jesus’ vision of the generous life:

- o First fruits
- o A generosity fund
- o Tithing
- o A graduated tithe
- o Radical class distinction

Discussion Questions:

- 01 What has God done in your heart through this Practice?
- 02 What have you changed in your life as a result of learning about generosity?
- 03 What challenges continue to surface in your heart when it comes to money and generosity?
- 04 Are there any next steps you sense God may be leading you to take in regards to money and generosity?

This Sunday is Pledge Sunday. Our practice invites us to consider:

What steps do you need to take or obstacles do you need to overcome to begin practicing generosity (i.e., secure employment, make a budget, get out of debt, pay down credit cards, sell your car and buy a cheaper model in cash, talk with a therapist about your financial fears, etc.)?

The three primary objects of generosity in the New Testament writings are the church, the gospel, and the poor.

How do you feel led to give to your local church?

What steps do you need to take to begin giving (i.e., set up automatic donations monthly, change your budget, research nonprofits, etc.)?

Of the five best practices named in this session, which one(s) do you feel your heart drawn to?

How do you want to adopt this practice (i.e., set aside \$50 a month for a generosity fund, begin tithing, stop eating out for lunch, etc.)?

Many followers of Jesus reach a point in their life where they set a “lifestyle cap,” a standard of living they do not go above. This enables them to give the extra away to what the Spirit is stirring in your heart. As Randy Alcorn says, “God blesses us to raise our standard of giving, not our standard of living.” If you have your basic needs met, do you want to set a “cap” on your lifestyle? If so, what do you feel is a joyful, peaceful, and appropriate way of life for you and your family in this season?

Are there any other ideas or invitations you sense the Spirit bringing to your mind and heart as you process ?

Mon Aug 3 – Sun Aug 9: Week 4 – Prayer Recap

Opening Questions

01 What emotions does the word “prayer” elicit in your heart?

02 What challenges do you face in prayer?

03 What invitation do you sense from God to go deeper in prayer?

The Lord's Prayer Luke 11:1-4;

11 Now Jesus^[a] was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” ²And he said to them, “When you pray, say:

“Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³Give us each day our daily bread,^[b]

⁴and forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

And lead us not into temptation.”

“Our Father” Think about the idea of God as your loving Parent, one who has good and kind intentions toward you. If you like, imagine him embracing you, or smiling at you. Picture his face. Make eye contact with him.

“in heaven” Think about the idea that God is all around you. Like oxygen, he surrounds and soaks your body, his Spirit abiding within you like oxygen. As you breathe, imagine that each breath invites God deeper into you, remembering that God loves living here, in you.

“Hallowed be your name” Sit with your Father in joyful, grateful worship. You might want to sit in silence for a few moments. Or sing a chorus. Or rattle off a list of things you’re grateful for. Or praise God with specific things you love about him. You may just want to imagine your whole being caught up into his, and what it feels like to be mingled with the God of love.

If you are in a group, encourage people to make their expressions of praise and gratitude out loud, one at a time. (E.g., “Father, thank you for your kindness.” “Father, thank you for loving me.”)

“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” As we experience God’s heart, allow it to inspire prayer for your city/church/community/life. Pray from this place of parental love. Allow the Spirit to lead you towards people, places, and situations that he longs to deliver, heal, and provide for. This type of prayer is referred to as intercession.

If you don't have a sense of God's leading, that's okay, think of specific things you're aware of in your life and others to pray for.

If you're in a group, one at a time, spend time as a group verbally giving to God specific things in your life that you're wrestling with control over. A simple prayer of, "Your will be done in," is a great place to start.

"Give us each day our daily bread"

Now spend some time asking God for things you need. Remembering that God is your Father, bring to him the provision, healing, and understanding you need, asking him to intervene. Your daily bread may be physical, relational, financial, emotional, or spiritual. Think of all the places you need him, inviting him to arrive there.

If you are in a group, do this with each person praying silently, out loud one at a time, or all together at once.

"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"

Knowing that God sees you and longs to heal every part of you, spend a few minutes now in quiet asking God for forgiveness in specific areas in your life. You can do that by speaking out loud the specific areas of sin and shame in your life, or by asking the Spirit to search your heart and reveal them to you.

Once you're done, ask the same for those who have sinned against you, asking the Spirit to help you to continue to forgive them, releasing them to God.

If you are in a group, break into groups of 2-3 to confess sin to each other, only as you feel comfortable, or sit in a few moments of silence together

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil"

Ask for God's strength and resolve to resist temptation in the three enemies of your soul: the World, the Flesh, and the Devil.

The World: its ideologies, consumerism and materialism, promiscuity, escapism, addiction, and greed. The Flesh: its pride, self-gratification, lust, and prejudice. The Devil: his lies, shaming, hatred, violence, and accusing.

Ask for the Spirit to save you from giving into the temptation of all three, even from what you're unable to see in your life. Ask for God's positive blessings in these spaces, inviting his goodness to lead the way and make itself evident in your every moment.

"For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen"

Take a moment to verbally declare the reality of this in your own language. Attributing with love all glory to God in your body, your life, and the world around you.

Finish with a prayer of thankfulness and gratitude for God's presence with you during this time.

Prayer is tied to intimacy with God. During this practice we were invited to move through a series of practices, that takes us from talking to God, ... to communing with God.

For some of us, being with God, is something we've become attuned to... It's a downstream practice, swimming with the current... we're deeply connected to and aware of God's Spirit. For some of us, this is an upstream practice, our prayer life consists of short bursts of 'talking to God', when we have a brief moment.

Practice:

Decide on a time and a place to pray, if possible, every day this week.

Decide on and commit to a time duration. Don't overreach. Start where you are. If you don't pray daily, aim for 10-15 minutes. If you pray for 10-15 minutes, consider upping it to half an hour. Just take the next step.

Create routines or rituals you actually enjoy to make your daily prayer habit something you look forward to all day long — light a candle, make yourself coffee or tea, sit by a window you love, go outside, savor the quiet, or put on worship music.

Those of you who are more kinesthetic may find it helpful to pray while walking, inside or in nature, or with something to keep your hands busy, like knitting or drawing.

Ultimately, work with your personality, not against it.

This session's Reach Exercise is to utilize the Lord's Prayer as a template for a longer time of prayer by praying through each line. This should take around 15 minutes to pray, but feel free to take it at your own pace, listening to the Spirit's prompting.

Note: You can do this exercise alone or as a group.

You can follow this QR code to a video tutorial from Strahan Coleman that will guide you step by step, using prayer prompts.



Mon Aug 10 – Sun Aug 16: Week 5– Witness Recap

This practice invited us to consider that God is already at work in the world, drawing people to himself, if we listen to the Holy Spirit and invite people to discover community at Christ. Ultimately sharing the Good News of Jesus, and how he has changed our lives as an authentic answer to our friends curiosity.

Session 01: Begin with Love

There is an impulse of the Spirit of Jesus in the hearts of all his followers to let the love and light of God come through our lives to those around us. This is not a fringe practice for the extroverted “evangelists.” It’s core to the way of Jesus. And if we suppress it, we halt our spiritual growth.

The Five Thresholds

Don Everts and Doug Schaupp write about five thresholds that Western people need to cross in order to become followers of Jesus:

1. Trusting a Christian
2. Becoming curious
3. Opening up to change
4. Seeking after God
5. Entering the Kingdom

We were asked to pray for one person that we desire to see come to know Jesus.

In session 02, we considered practicing Hospitality.

We are now living in a post-Christian culture with rising hostility toward the gospel of Jesus, making others suspicious or resistant to the Gospel.

Good news: Through the practice of hospitality — expressing the welcome of God the Father to all through tangible acts of love, ideally through giving food, shelter, and relationship — we can cut through the polarization of our culture and open people to God.

We were asked to invite someone over for a meal – practice hospitality!

In Session 03: we were invited to Partner with the Holy Spirit

When we start with the assumption that we need to bring God to people, witnessing can feel like it’s all on us to convince people to follow Jesus.

Good news: God is actively drawing people to his Son right now, so our role is simply to join God in what he is already doing

In this practice, a key Scripture Passage was:

Acts 8v26-39

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south[▫] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?"[▫] ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch This demonstrates the pattern of partnering with the Holy Spirit through *listening, looking, asking, and risking*.

Reflection Questions:

01 How does reframing witness as joining God in what He is already doing, rather than bringing people to Him, shift your perspective or approach to sharing Jesus with others?

02 Which of the four movements from the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch do you most want God to strengthen in your life — listening, looking, asking, or risking? Why?

03 What has your experience been like in learning to discern and pay attention to the Holy Spirit's promptings? What are you learning through that process?

04 When was the last time you found yourself in a position where you needed God to show up in power? How did He show up, or how do you wish He had?

The final session of this practice revolved around sharing Good News

In our post-Christian culture, the dominant cultural atmosphere at times feels hostile to the message of Jesus, and we've been socially conditioned by our culture to stay silent.

Good news: When we live a beautiful, counter-cultural life in proximity to others and share the good news of Jesus with gentleness and respect, our life can become a kind of proof of the faith itself, sparking conversations that bring people to God.

You were asked to consider how you might share *your story* of experiencing with God as an answer to a friend who might be curious as to why you live, as a Christian. Your story has power and authenticates your life – tying works and deeds together.

You might like to take time to practice sharing your story together.

Closing questions:

What aspects of your life in Jesus do you consider beautiful and worth inviting others into?

Do you tend to want to share the good news of Jesus more through your life or words? Why do you think that is?

If someone was to ask you to tell them how can they get right with God, what would you say? Do you feel you can confidently share the basics of the gospel ?

You may like to check out <https://thefour.au> which helps translate the four symbols (below) into a simple 'recap' of the gospel story.



Mon Aug 17 – Sun Aug 23: Week 6– Scripture Recap

In this Practice were invited to consider how we read Scripture, and allow ourselves to be formed by it. The daily meditative practice of reading Scripture – over a lifetime – changes our view of God, His world, and our place in it.

The first Session of the Scripture practice invited us to **Read Scripture**.

The Scriptures are no ordinary book — in the Reformation, many believers were martyred to make them accessible to the everyday apprentices of Jesus. But despite the power of Scripture to form us into Kingdom people, many of us don't even read it.

Good news: When we learn to view Scripture as Jesus did, and read it as a spiritual discipline, we can read in such a way that we meet Jesus himself on the page and are deeply formed to be like him.

In other words, Reading Scripture forms us as apprentices of Jesus – to become like Him.

In the second session of the Scripture practice, we were invited to SLOW DOWN and **Meditate on Scripture**.

The fast-paced, click-bait-y reading that proliferates our modern experience has neurobiologically malformed our brains to read in a way that is fundamentally at odds with how Scripture was designed to be read.

•**Good news:** By slowing down and meditating on the Scripture, we can come to truly delight in reading it.

The Hebrew word Hagah (meditate) conjurs up an image of a Dog chewing over a bone, day after day after day... coming back to the same bone and savouring it.

In the third Session, we were invited to consider the **Study of Scripture**

For us in the modern West, the library of Scripture has become a problem — an intellectual enigma or a moral stumbling block or yet another item on our “good Christian” to-do list — instead of the pathway to God it's designed to be.

• Good news: By studying the Scriptures, we correct misreadings that would deform us from the life of love God intends for us.

How to Study

1. **Place yourself under gifted, trusted teachers.** Teachers play a key role in the Church of Jesus. Find teachers with good theology and way of life, and listen.
2. **Build a library.** Collect your own resource books to study from.
3. **Pick an area of study in your season.** This could be a book or it could be a biblical theme. Pick something and dig deep into it.

4. **Don't go it alone.** Read alongside others or in community.

The final session invited us to consider **Memorizing Scripture**.

Many of us don't bother to memorize Scripture, thinking of Scripture memorization as what you do as a child, or as an unnecessary practice in light of technologies like Google.

- Good news: Through memorizing Scripture, we are empowered to meditate on God's truth all day long, forming our minds and hearts into the image of Jesus.

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

The Temptation of Jesus

4 And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ²for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. ³The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." ⁴And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" ⁵And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, ⁶and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸And Jesus answered him, "It is written,

"You shall worship the Lord your God,
and him only shall you serve."

⁹And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you,
to guard you,'

¹¹and

"On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone."

¹²And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ¹³And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Key Questions

01 What is one word to describe your initial feeling toward the idea of studying Scripture (e.g., duty, curiosity, overwhelm, etc.)? Why did you choose that word?

02 Who is an example of someone in your life who has been positively formed through the study of Scripture? What do you want to consider from their example as you approach studying Scripture this week?

03 If studying Scripture risks becoming about intellectual curiosity rather than fostering a deeper love for Jesus, what signs can help us recognize when we are leaning toward one or the other?

Application:

This practice encouraged us to grow in our love for God’s word, through reading, meditating, studying and memorizing Scripture. This is a life-long formation process that builds slowly – over ones whole life – and as such takes deep commitment to sit with difficult texts from another language, culture, time and unpack them using hermeneutical tools – and community.

Reflection Questions:

01 How do I feel God challenging me to grow through this practice of daily reading Scripture ?

02 How have you experienced the truth of “you are what you contemplate” or “you become what you meditate on”?

03 How can I cultivate more joy in my times of study?

04 In what ways did I experience God’s presence as I memorized Scripture?

05 If you could share only one insight or reflection that you want to internalize going forward from this Practice, what would it be?

06 Reflecting on this Practice, how has your relationship with Scripture changed?

For those who wanted to go deeper in this practice, we were invited to consider the bible project as a resource, which includes a video series on “how to read the bible”.

[Learn How to Read the Bible | Watch Animated Explainer Videos](#)

Mon Aug 24 – Sun Aug 30: Week 7 Community Recap

The community Practice invited us to gain a deeper understanding of what community is, how it is formed, and to practice being vulnerable, celebrating joys, sharing our sorrows, confessing our sins, and resolving conflict with each other. In community we can be encouraged, accountable, and have authentic relationships, into which we can invite people to come and discover the joy of community in Christ.

Our first session revolved around a shared meal. We were encouraged to invite someone to dinner. As we practiced **Being a family around the table**.

In the modern West, we have more material wealth than kings and queens did in generations past, yet many of us feel deeply alone. This epidemic of loneliness is sabotaging our formation into people of love.

Good news: Through practicing community intentionally and eating together, we learn to love others and live as the family of God

1. Intimates Our inner circle: 1-5 people (max). Those who deeply know us as we are and who, ideally, love us as we are.

2. Kin Our family and friends who are like family. For Dunbar, this is about 15 people. But others say it can be up to 50. These are the people we do life with.

3. Village This is around the 150-person mark. We need this wider social network for all sorts of things: it's how we need access to a network of relationships to call on when we need to find a new job, get help with a project, etc.

4. Tribe The larger people group we identify with and belong to. We don't know all these people personally, but this group is where we get a vision of life and a call to live with meaning and purpose.

We need relationships in all four circles.

And our deepest formation, healing, and growth all happen in the smaller circles.

In our **second Session, we were invited to share our joys and sorrows** – or at Emmanuel we say “our highs, lows and buffalo's”

Even when we come to the table as a community, it's easy to stay in the shallows and engage superficially, being present but feeling totally alone.

Good news: When we learn to share our joys and sorrows with one another, our time with our community can become communion with one another and with God

In our third Session we were invited to practice **confessing our sins to one another**.

There are many challenges to living in community in our time, but the deepest problem you will face is shame: a deep fear that you are unloveable; that if people knew who you really were, they would reject you and cast you out.

Good news: Jesus the Messiah has come to set us free from sin and its corollary of shame, to reconnect us to God and to each other in a thick bond of love.

Our final session identified some key **Challenges to Community**

1. Busyness
2. Transience
3. Digital Distraction
4. Flakiness
5. Decreasing relational skills
6. Shame

Key Scripture Passage —Acts 2:42-47

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe^[a] came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Context:

This is the Gospel, or good news: Through Jesus' coming, his life and teaching and Way, his death and burial and resurrection, his ascension to the Father's side to lead the world into a new future, and the pouring out of his Spirit upon his followers, freely giving us grace to be and do all we were made to be and do, we can live in restored relationships with God, and each other.

"Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."
James 5v16 (ESV)

Our final session encouraged us to **stay together to grow.**

Our tendency to idealize community often causes us to live alone and when we can't find the ideal community, we end up with no community.

Good news: When we learn to stay and re-engage when we're frustrated with community, we make space for deeper and transformative relationships.

Community only works with a shared commitment to apprentice after Jesus, and to softly, gently, but firmly, never stop growing in God. This means we will have to deal with conflict and forgive one another.

Reflection Questions:

01 Does the act of celebrating – whether it is celebrating yourself or someone else – feel natural or unnatural to you? Why?

02 On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 represents complete transparency and 1 represents no transparency, how transparent are you in your current relationships? Why do you think that is?

03 What would need to happen for you to make confession a more regular rhythm in your life?

04 What would be the primary challenges or temptations you face to staying in community?

05 How have you experienced the consequences of idealizing community, either personally or from someone else?

06 Reflect on a positive and a negative experience you have had sharing your burdens in a relationship or group. What made the difference?

07 How do I sense the Spirit inviting me deeper into honesty in community going forward?

Mon Aug 31 – Sun Sep 06: Week 8 Fasting (and feasting) Recap

As an added bonus this week – there is a podcast that is now on bibleproject.com of Tim Mackie sharing his reflections on the biblical rhythm of fasting and feasting.

<https://bibleproject.com/podcasts/practicing-faith-part-2-feasting-fasting/>

The four sessions of the fasting practice invited us to consider this ancient practice which is relatively forgotten in western churches. Across this practice we were invited to fast, culminating in a day of corporate prayer and fasting (which took place on Easter Saturday). During the fasting practice, we learnt that:

01 – Offering ourselves to God

Jesus taught about fasting in Matthew 6:16, assuming that his disciples would incorporate it into their lives as a standard practice.

- Many Western Christians rarely fast, even though it was a common practice for over a millennium within the church.

Good News: Fasting helps reintegrate our minds with our bodies, allowing us to offer our whole selves to God in surrender and deepening our spiritual formation.

02 – To Grow in Holiness

Fasting does at least four things to our bodies and souls. 01 It's weaning us off the pleasure principle. 02 It's revealing what's in our heart. 03 It's re-ordering our desires. 04 It's drawing on the power of God to overcome sin.

Drawing from the teaching of the early church Father Augustine, we were reminded that:

Our fight is not against the body — the body is broken, but it's a good gift. Our fight is for the body. It's against the flesh, or sinful appetites within us all. And fasting is one of the most powerful disciplines of the Way to free our bodies and souls from the chains of sin and the prison of shame

Good News: Fasting is viewed by many followers of Jesus as a way to nourish the spirit while suppressing sinful desires.

03 – to amplify our prayers

While it's possible to pray without fasting and vice versa, combining the two amplifies the effectiveness of our prayers. Prayer encompasses both speaking to God and listening for his guidance, with fasting enhancing our ability to do both.

Good News: Fasting also facilitates being heard by God, breaking down barriers that hinder the release of His plans and power, as seen in numerous biblical and historical accounts. (we reflected on the story of Dunkirk)

04 to stand with the poor

Give to the hungry what you deny your own appetite. —Saint Gregory of Nyssa. In the

West, many face an abundance of food, leading to waste and constant battles with diet trends and overindulgence. In contrast, many people around the world and within our own communities experience food scarcity, often hidden in plain sight. Fasting serves as a bridge between the "haves" and "have nots," rooted in biblical justice as seen in Isaiah 58. Historically, fasting has been linked to "almsgiving," where Christians would donate the food or money saved from fasting to help those in need.

Good News: This practice not only transforms the lives of the poor but also enriches our own lives and strengthens our communities.

Key Scriptures:

Isaiah 58:5-7 ⁵Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

⁶“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Matt 6:16-18

¹⁶“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

In this practice we were asked to start fasting, up to one full day a week.

Reflection Questions

01 What did you just learn that was new or provocative to you?

02 What surprised you about fasting? What did you notice about yourself when hungry?

03 What do you think about the idea of using your body to change your heart toward God and sin?

04 Do you have any stories of clear answers to prayer from / during fasting?

05 What am I longing for God to do with my heart, soul, mind, and body?

06 Do we know of any practical needs that we could meet together as a community?

Mon Sep 07 – Sun Sep 13: Week 9 Service Recap

In a culture dominated by consumerism and individualism, the message — not just being told to us, but forming us — is that we must “look out for number one.” We are taught, both implicitly and often explicitly, not to “value others above ourselves,”* as the Apostle Paul once wrote, but to do the opposite.

In this time of self focus and overwhelming need, the practice of service, as taught and modeled by Jesus, is vital. Jesus, “the Son of Man [who] came not to be served, but to serve,” invites us to follow him in radical service that moves us beyond ourselves and into love. Service that follows compassion, surrendering plans, and expectations. Service that goes unseen in hidden places. Service that befriends those we perhaps thought we were above. Service that, in love, embraces a great cost to ourselves.

In this practice we came to understand that:

Session 01: Love. Our Service is rooted in Love. We often look to our moral decisions and spiritual disciplines to measure our spiritual maturity, but when the how of spiritual formation outruns the why of spiritual formation, it leaves us fruitless.

Good news: When we reorient our lives and disciplines around becoming people of love, expressed practically as service, we become fruitful and the promising “firstfruits” of the new creation.

Session 02: Hiddenness. It’s easy to practice service with the wrong motive — “to be seen by men” — which deforms us from becoming people of love.

Good news: When we practice service in hiddenness — often in the context of our ordinary, everyday activities and relationships — we make space for the Holy Spirit to reshape our hearts to mirror the self-giving nature of Jesus himself

Most of us are better at doing “projects” of love than becoming “people” of love. The challenge is: can we drag that way of being back into the ordinary? The whole point of intentional environments of service is to become people of love in the ordinary environments of everyday life

Session 03: Availability. Our spiritual rhythms often make us intentional but not interruptible. This leads us to “pass by on the other side” of needs around us, stifling the compassion of God.

Good news: Jesus models for us that loving our neighbor means embracing service in the midst of interruptions and heeding God’s compassion for the needs of others around us

Session 04: Kinship. It’s easy to think service is just meeting needs or doing charity from a distance, but that keeps people as “projects” rather than as family.

Good news: Jesus shows us that the true destination of service is kinship. When we embrace others not as statistics or causes but as family at the table, we make space for their full redemption and our greatest transformation.

Jesus claims to be the King of a new Kingdom, only authority in his Kingdom is upside down according to the social order of the world. Jesus has structured his Kingdom in a way that very intentionally erases divisions by bringing the marginalized to the center, so those at the center come into fellowship with the marginalized.

We were invited throughout this practice to become people of service; loving people and bringing them into the family of God, through our hidden acts of service – being consistently available.

Key Scripture: —Luke 10v25-37

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Reflection Questions:

01 Share about a time when someone loved you by meeting one of your practical needs, whether big or small. What made that experience memorable for you?

02 How have you typically measured your spiritual “temperature” or health? How is this the same or different from Jesus’ metric of “love expressed through service”?

03 Why do you think we often associate service with more distant contexts rather than with our closest relationships and immediate surroundings? Do you see this tendency in your own life, and why might that be?

04 In what ways have you personally experienced the tension between serving for recognition versus serving out of genuine love?

05 On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not interruptible and 10 being very interruptible, where would you place yourself today? What reflections do you have on the number you gave?

06 The invitation here is not to try to meet every need around us. With that in mind, what need(s) do you feel compelled to begin “crossing to the other side” to meet?

07 How does Jesus’ vision for service, not as distant charity but as kinship, inspire or confront you?

08 In what ways can you develop a deeper, more relational approach to serving those who are typically seen as “other” in your life?

FOR NEXT WEEK – read on

Mon Sep 14 – Sun Sep 20: Week 10 Spiritual Disciplines “rule of life”

Practicing the Way offers a really helpful tool called ‘the rule of life’, which is essentially a personal organiser that allows you to thinking about practices in terms of weekly, monthly and seasonally (annually).

As you are able this week – login to practicingtheway.org and build your own “rule of life”, by clicking on the rule of life, and then selecting practices from the seven disciplines which we have covered

- Prayer
- Fasting
- Generosity
- Community
- Scripture
- Service
- Witness

This will create a “Rule of Life” which you can then – click on the print button – and it will download as a PDF document, which you can either save to your device or print out and put on a fridge, or somewhere else that you can reference frequently.

You may like to share your rule of life with your small group –perhaps join together for a meal and chat through – and see whether there were some similarities, some differences.

An example of the rule of life PDF is over page.

Rule of Life

A Rule of Life is a helpful tool to organize your life in order to live intentionally in your apprenticeship to Jesus.

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly, Seasonally, or Annually
Prayer	Pray the Examen (a prayerful reflection on the events of the day)	Pray with your family or community	
Fasting		Fast for a full 24 hours (from dinner to breakfast two days later)	Take a solitude day for prayer and fasting
Generosity		Budget a weekly gift to church or those in need	Give to a ministry, charity, or cause
Community	Schedule time of emotional connection with spouse or close friend	Date or family night Eat a meal with your community	
Scripture	Listen to Scripture	Listen to a teaching	
Service	Embrace your work or parenting as service	Look for ways to intentionally bless or serve your neighbors Practice hospitality toward those in need	
Witness		Invite someone who doesn't know Jesus over for dinner	