

Chapter 21 – LOVE

KEY VERSE: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us” (1 John 4:10-12).

DEVOTIONAL VERSE: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:43-45).

HOUSEHOLD DISCUSSION: Listen to the following Haddaway song, “What is Love” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5G1FmU-ldg>). How do you define love? What makes love meaningful and true for you?

Read the following devotional reflection together:

What is love?

No word has been diluted and misinterpreted more regularly than “love.” Love has often been used to describe our latest infatuation, something seasonal and fleeting, something convenient or exciting. It is rare for us to really comprehend what love is.

Love, more than anything, is a commitment to see every person we meet as a fellow human, created in God’s image, a beautiful creation with God’s fingerprints all over him or her. Yet, we often find loving people different from us or, worse still, opposed to us, very difficult. The devotional verse for today is one of the most radical statements of Jesus. No one has taught me more about this concept of loving my enemy more than Carl Medearis. He spent ten years as a missionary in Lebanon and eventually forged meaningful friendships with people on both sides of the Israeli-Arab conflict. He would go on to have tea with Hezbollah. For many of us, it is unthinkable to love terrorists, to love those who seem to be our enemy in every way. Yet, love is something so powerful that it wills enemies into friends. I will leave you from a powerful quote from MLK: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

TANGIBLE FAITH ACTIVITY: As a household, pray about an individual who you think is overlooked or unloved that you encounter on a daily basis. It could be the school janitor, it could be your kid’s soccer coach, it could be the drive-through employee. No matter who it is, write them a short “thank you” letter and tell them that they are loved by God. Keep it short and simple.

Chapter 22 – JOY

KEY VERSE: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

DEVOTIONAL VERSE: “I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:11-13).

HOUSEHOLD DISCUSSION: Describe a few different “seasons of life” that your household has gone through: Busy seasons with lots of sports activities; fun seasons with lots of trips to the amusement park and community pool; or, sad seasons after losing a grandparent. How has your approach to life been defined by your circumstances? How well do you rise above your current problems and successes to discover godly contentment, no matter what is going on? Read the following from Habakkuk together as a way to challenge yourselves to not allow our joy to be stolen by present circumstances: “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation” (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

Read the following devotional reflection together:

Joy & contentment. These two concepts are truly challenging to embrace. It comes naturally to us to be happy when things are going well and sad when we are struggling. Yet, God calls us to a better and more abundant life. No, we don't simply ignore our problems or pretend they don't exist (no rose-colored glasses or sticking our head in the sand). Instead, we discover a new way of processing challenges in our lives. Let me give you a great example. Some of the best athletes in the world recently had their pain receptivity tested. The study discovered that these athletes had less pain receptors than the average person, enabling them to push themselves to train and perform better because they were not inhibited by pain. They still felt pain, but it was just less intense than most people would feel. I believe that life is full of trials and pain, but we must choose how we respond difficult situations (see James 1:2-4 for more).

TANGIBLE FAITH ACTIVITY: “Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come” (Proverbs 31:25). I don't like to be tickled, but I love to laugh. I am learning to be okay with people tickling me, because laughter is really good for me (I need regular reminders to not take myself too seriously). So, here's the activity. Get something super sweet, like a little honey or a small piece of candy. Also get something super bitter like horseradish or vinegar. Have everyone eat a little of each and immediately tickle them. We must learn to laugh in sweet times and bitter times. Finish with a prayer asking God for contentment no matter how sweet or bitter the circumstance. BONUS POINTS: read the book of Ruth and notice how Naomi changes her name from Naomi (literally, “sweet”) to Mara (literally, “bitter”) and back to Naomi.

Chapter 23 – PEACE

KEY VERSE: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

DEVOTIONAL VERSE: “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:9).

HOUSEHOLD DISCUSSION: Romans 12:18 says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” When were some moments in your life when you struggled to have a peaceful relationship with someone else? What made that relationship so trying? How do you handle situations that seem to “rob” you of your peace?

Read the following devotional reflection together:

“Inner peace...Inner peace...Inner peace...”

If we’re honest, we have attempted the mantra above. Likely, to no avail. Yet, we do have access to deep, meaningful peace. We cannot simply will ourselves to have peace in our disquieted souls. Instead, we must lean on the “God of Peace.” I had us continue a little further in Philippians in our devotional reading because I wanted us to capture that phrase, “God of Peace.” Too often, we ask for peace from God instead of seeking His presence, which is permeated by peace. We seek the abstract concept, the emotion or sensation, not the giver of peace. The more I seek God’s presence (the psalms use the metaphor of “seeking God’s face”), the more I discover peace saturating my life, inundating every crevice of my day-to-day-scene. Sadly, I can neglect my spiritual disciplines, get busy, overwhelmed, stressed and anxious, losing my vital connection to God and His lasting peace. That’s why Paul says the first part of verse nine: “what you have learned and received and hear and seen in me—practice these things.” Paul is speaking of the spiritual disciplines and practices that we discussed in chapters 11-19. These practices help us to align our souls to God’s rhythms. Like a metronome for souls, the spiritual disciplines create a healthy and sustainable tempo for our lives, as we allow God to gracefully move us from rest to work and back again to rest. For peace is not the absence of anxiety—as the world might want you to believe—peace is experiencing a tiny foretaste of presence of God that we will experience in its fullness when we “arrive on eternity’s shores, where death is just memory and tears are no more...where together we’ll sing...you’re beautiful.”

TANGIBLE FAITH ACTIVITY: Take a short trip out to a nearby pond or lake. It doesn’t have to be big. Find some rocks along the shore and toss them into the lake. Notice the ripples that surround the impact of the rock. Have everyone in your family try to trace with their eyes these concentric circles as far as each you can. Scripture often compares the rest and peace of God to the image of “still waters.” Ask each member of your household who/what is throwing rocks into your life that is disrupting the still waters that God would have for you. Ask each other how you might allow God to bring peace to even the troubled waters seasons of your life.

Chapter 24 – SELF-CONTROL

KEY VERSE: “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope---the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:11-13).

DEVOTIONAL VERSE: “Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control” (Proverbs 25:28).

HOUSEHOLD DISCUSSION: What temptations challenge your self-control more than anything (it can be seemingly harmless things like having a sweet tooth or really enjoying Netflix or it can be something more challenging)? How has replacing the temptation with something healthier helped this struggle (it is not enough to rid ourselves of an addiction, we must replace it with something better in its place when anxieties and stress trigger a temptation to return)?

Read the following devotional reflection together:

Self-control might be one of the most counter-cultural virtues today. Our world is filled with messages about “just do it.” Our culture continually beckons us to do whatever makes us happy, whatever brings us pleasure (i.e. hedonism). Yet, scripture offers a better way. Although self-control might on the surface seem like a buzzkill, self-control might be one of the most freeing virtues we can possess.

In ancient days, city walls were among the most important things in a person’s life. Without a city and wall and gate, normal life was impossible. City walls were powerful boundary markers that prevented a city from being easily invaded and plundered. I believe that healthy boundaries for ourselves and for others is among the most overlooked skills in the church. We think that we must always say, “Yes,” for fear of being labeled, “intolerant.” Check out the key verse, “it teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions.” Even as I reread that I am slightly unnerved. My salvation in Jesus teaches me to say, “No?” In our culture we have made the mistake of conflating being gracious to being a pushover. Jesus was not a pushover (remember when He turned over tables in the Temple?). Having self-control and not giving into peer-pressure is actually a way to love our neighbor. We love our neighbor too much to be careless about our lives, to live in a manner which is unhealthy and unsustainable.

TANGIBLE FAITH ACTIVITY: Psychologists recently did a study on self-control with small children. They gave them a choice. Have and eat one marshmallow now, or save that one marshmallow and receive a second one after waiting five minutes. The study showed that the children who were able to show self-control and wait the long and excruciating five minutes were happier and more successful later in life. Delayed gratification was central to their thriving and success later in life. Try to see if you can find a way to incorporate delayed gratification into your household’s weekly habits. Is there a treat you can save for yourself or your kiddos to encourage a healthy and focused lifestyle during the week?

Chapter 25 – HOPE

KEY VERSE: “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf” (Hebrews 6:19-20).

DEVOTIONAL VERSE: “Set your minds on things above, no on earthly things” (Colossians 3:2).

HOUSEHOLD DISCUSSION: Frazee notes the difference between faith and hope: “If faith begins the journey, then hope ends the journey. Hope is absolutely knowing where the road of faith will end; it is being confident of where the story concludes. Hope gives us the ability to endure the hardships and difficulties along the road of faith.” How does our hope of spending eternity with Jesus give us strength in our daily life?

Read the following devotional reflection together:

“Hold on. Hold on.”

That’s how REM’s song, “Everybody Hurts,” concludes. A plea to simply hold on. In the face of pain and struggle, scripture also encourages us to patiently endure, to hold on. We hold because we know how the story ends. We can endure because we know that the things of this world will not last forever; Ecclesiastes reminds us that they are “vanity.” So, when we set our minds on heavenly and eternal things, we are focusing on things that will last and lasting significance.

Hope is a beautiful virtue because it helps us transcend the pain and grind of everyday life. It is not about escapism or denying these realities. Instead, we believe that these realities are not the ONLY reality. We allow hope to help us see that there’s something to look forward to. Hope enables us to not fall into selfish and materialistic traps.

My challenge would be to listen to Christian music that places our final hope for Jesus making all things new as its pinnacle and focus. Nothing brings me greater clarity and peace than meditating on Jesus’ promises to make me whole.

TANGIBLE FAITH ACTIVITY: I am fond of Andrew Petersen’s “After the Last Tear Falls” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTbUhEHOaWs>) and “You’re Beautiful” by Phil Wickham (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGItzH9xkXQ>). They really help me see that God will not leave us or our world forever broken. Listen to one of these songs and ask God to help your mind to focus on heavenly things.

Chapter 26 – PATIENCE

KEY VERSE: “Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly” (Proverbs 14:29).

DEVOTIONAL VERSE: “These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13).

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

HOUSEHOLD DISCUSSION: Isn't it interesting that our most common use of the word patience is to describe our growing lack of it, like “You are trying my patience.” What tries your patience more than anything else?

Read the following devotional reflection together:

“Patience is a virtue.”

I remember parents, mentors, and teachers telling me this when I was being impatient growing up. Yet, impatience is among the easiest vices to succumb to. In our instant gratification fast-food and microwave culture, we struggle to wait for anything. If we can't wait for food to be prepared, then how are we going to wait on anything else? This idea of patience is closely tied to the previously discussed virtue of self-control.

God's timing is so different from ours. Peter reminds us that “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). The root of our impatience is usually mistrust. We think that God has forgotten about us or we believe that God will never get around to giving us what we want, so we take matters into our own hands. This approach is reckless and usually ends in pain and heartache. I encourage you to take heart and wait for the Lord. Although He may not operate on your timetable, God will never let you down.

TANGIBLE FAITH ACTIVITY: Spend the next five minutes waiting in silence. What do you notice about yourself? What kinds of distraction came up? Did you think about your to-do list and how this silence felt like a huge waste of time? How can we learn to see rest, silence, and meditation as productive and fulfilling, not wasteful or useless?

Chapter 27 – KINDNESS/GOODNESS

KEY VERSE: “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else” (1 Thessalonians 5:15).

DEVOTIONAL VERSE: “‘Why do you ask me about what is good,’ Jesus replied. ‘There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments’” (Matthew 19:17).

HOUSEHOLD DISCUSSION: How can we allow Jesus to redefine what goodness looks like? How can we learn from Him about true and lasting goodness?

Read the following devotional reflection together:

“Respond, don’t react.”

Although I normally give that advice to engaged couple in premarital counseling, it applies universally. I believe one of the greatest keys to healthy relationships is our ability to process our emotions and give a thoughtful response, not a knee-jerk reaction (the key verse shows that simply reacting and repaying evil for evil is not God’s way). The process of enabling couples to respond and not react is a slow and trying one. We work on conflict resolution and listening skills. We practice communication techniques and learn about each person’s expectations. Again, it is a lot of work. Yet, most couples find so much more enjoyment from the relationship when it is rooted in a kindness that constantly yearns to give thoughtful and loving responses. The reading in the yellow book helps to constantly remind us that kindness and goodness are not simply being kind or good occasionally. Instead, these virtues should become a part of our nature, a part of how we regularly live our lives. We have to let go of doing nice things because we hope other people will reciprocate. Instead, it should just be the default setting in our lives.

But, if I am honest, I struggle with these virtues the most with those that are closest to me. I find it easy to be nice to the checker at Kroger and ask about her day. It’s easy to smile and warmly greet an acquaintance at work. It’s much harder to be consistently kind to our spouse and children, especially when we feel like they are being unkind. I believe that our closest relationships actually offer the best opportunities to grow in this virtue, because we can’t wear a fake “nice mask” with these people (they would see right through it). Instead, we must learn to actually embody the virtue of kindness, not simply faking it.

TANGIBLE FAITH ACTIVITY: Get some baking soda and vinegar. Combine them in an empty 2 liter bottle in the sink. Watch the chemical reaction (due to the difference in base and acid levels). How can we learn to follow Jesus’ model of responding thoughtfully instead of reacting like baking soda and vinegar?

Chapter 28 – FAITHFULNESS

KEY VERSE: “Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man” (Proverbs 3:3-4).

DEVOTIONAL VERSE: “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52).

HOUSEHOLD DISCUSSION: Read the letter by McQuilken in the yellow book on pages 205-206. How does this committed and deep love this man has for his wife encourage and resonate with you? How does he show us that faithfulness shouldn't simply be a duty or chore, but something we get to do? Have you ever experienced this kind of committed love?

Read the following devotional reflection together:
Street Cred.

Jesus spent a majority of his life in relative obscurity. Yet, the first thirty or so years of his life were all about building his reputation, building his street cred. Jesus was full of wisdom and faithfulness. He was the son of a tradesman (likely in carpentry or masonry). Jesus lived in a small backwater region of Nazareth, so look down upon that many remarked about Jesus, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

Yet, people could not resist following him. His allure was palatable. Jesus drew faithful followers because he already proved himself to be faithful and trustworthy. So, how do we grow in faithfulness? How do we model our lives after Jesus'? The first thing is we must redefine success. We must let go of the worldly notion that “he who dies with the most toys/stuff wins.” Instead, the only barometer of success in this life is faithfulness. William Carey, one of the greatest missionaries ever who spent much of his time in India credited his success to the simplicity of remaining faithful: “I can plod...I can persevere to any definite pursuit.” He simply committed himself to keep at it, no matter what happened. This is my encouragement to you: define success in your life by being faithful to God and His calling for your life.

TANGIBLE FAITH ACTIVITY: Read the following summary of William Carey's remarkable life, here: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/missionaries/william-carey.html>. What do you learn from his example? How can we learn to be faithful and learn to “plod” along like he did his whole life?

Chapter 29 – GENTLENESS

KEY VERSE: “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near” (Philippians 4:5).

DEVOTIONAL VERSE: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such thing there is no law” (Galatians 5:22-23).

HOUSEHOLD DISCUSSION: Talk about people or things you have to be careful or gentle around (babies, small animals, fine china, etc.). Are you good at being gentle or is it hard for you?

Read the following devotional reflection together:

The word used for gentleness in the original language literally means to be “easy on your stomach” (as in mild medicine). This word is also used to describe a tamed animal. Whether it is taming an unruly stomach after eating too much Mexican food or a bucking bronco, the gentleness that pervades the quietness after each of these storms is quite transcendent. Implied within each of these images is a stillness that follows great turbulence. Where you would expect turmoil, you are greeted with blissful tranquility.

Of all the Christian virtues, practices and beliefs surveyed by Barna, gentleness came in DEAD LAST. Proverbs reminds us that this lack of gentleness is contagious: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1). The cycle of anger and wounding can only be broken with gentleness, not more anger.

The greatest gift we can give to any challenging situation is being calm. In the same way a mother calms her child and teaches it to not cry, we are also called to be a soothing presence in other people’s lives. We must learn to be secure in ourselves and not be defensive (even if the other person is way out of line). We don’t have to be pushovers, but we could learn to not so easily frustrated and angry, to become gentle.

TANGIBLE FAITH ACTIVITY: Try on this virtue like you might try on a new piece of clothing. Here’s three practical ways to be gentler (read page 212 in the yellow book for more). Be thoughtful (listen well and take more time to assess a situation). Be considerate (consider the situation from other people’s point of view, not simply your own). Be calm (don’t let passion, aggression or turmoil define your relationships).

Chapter 30 – HUMILITY

KEY VERSE: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

DEVOTIONAL VERSE: “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (James 3:13).

HOUSEHOLD DISCUSSION: Read the story about King Humbert on page 216. How does this story strike you? Do you think any modern world leader (like a Prime Minister or President) would risk their lives like this? Why or why not?

Read the following devotional reflection together:

“Who would want to read about your story? It’s not like you are famous like Kim Kardashian...”

My sister has never been impressed with me. Sometimes I think God placed her in my life for the sole reason of keeping me humble. The quote above is her reaction to me writing a personal memoir. She wondered about why someone would read about an everyday person, not a celebrity. We laugh about that exchange now, but at the time it was quite humbling and sobering. Please don’t misread this situation. I am not mad or bitter about the situation (though I probably still wish she would have compared me to literally any other celebrity). I am actually quite thankful for my sister’s brutally honest feedback. It is probably one of the things I treasure most in this world. To her, I am just Will, the nerdy and awkward brother that wore sweat pants growing up.

Who is that grounding person in your life that helps you never get too prideful, who seems to have an uncanny skill in keeping you humble? Here’s the beauty of humility: it’s honest. Pride needs a mask, but humility allows us to share who we are, flaws included, with no need for cosmetic coverings. I can really relax around my close friends and family because they keep me humble and honest with who I am and where God has placed me in this world. Like a good coach, they never let me get too high after a victory or too low after a defeat. Instead, they help me to root my identity in what Christ has done, not what I am trying to achieve today.

TANGIBLE FAITH ACTIVITY: Each of you get some quality time with a close friend or family member that has known you forever and you trust enough to speak hard truths into your life. Ask this person to share a couple of character growth areas in your life. Let them be brutally honest and encourage them to not hold back. We can only grow if we know where we are lacking. Friends and family can help us acknowledge our blind spots and help us avoid pitfalls.