

KINGDOM BRIDGES

Relating to God, the Church, and the World

Edited by

A. M. Cartagena

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the wonderful congregation that is known as Bridgeway Community Church. We especially want to celebrate all of those volunteers, who week in and week out, give of themselves generously to make Bridgeway the amazingly special church community that blesses all who come to us. Thank you and God bless you!

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To my Beloved Bride – thanks for allowing me to write devotions and to edit this work during our Thanksgiving break. I owe you a few days of undivided attention.

PREFACE

This book, which you are either holding in your hands or have downloaded electronically, is a labor of love by pastors, ministers, and fellow workers who currently serve the Lord at Bridgeway Community Church in Columbia, Maryland. Bridgeway was planted in 1992, by Dr. David Anderson, as a non-denominational, multicultural, creative arts-based church seeking to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in a relevant, engaging manner and in a way that would attract people of all races, ethnicities, languages, ages, and backgrounds. In the almost 25 years the church has existed, God has entrusted to Bridgeway almost 5,000 souls representing 52 different countries in a church that demonstrates to the world the hope that can be found in the love and grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

One of the values Bridgeway adopted from its very inception is the commitment to make disciples of all believers under our care and leadership. We take very seriously the Lord's last words and command, as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20, when he said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." It is our goal to provide our congregation, and those wishing to participate, all of the tools and the teaching needed to fully equip them to serve the Lord and the Kingdom of God with all of their gifts.

This 21-day devotional is part of a campaign we have undertaken to encourage our people to focus "Up, In, and Out" in their lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.¹ You'll notice that the first seven days of the devotional focus on "Up," which refers to our individual relationships with God. In John 15:10, Jesus is quoted as saying, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." The core of our strength as believers lies in the state of our relationship with Jesus. Just as he abides in the Father, we are called to abide in Jesus. Keeping our soul means resting in Jesus as the sole source of our life.

The next seven days focus on "In," which concentrates on our relationship with fellow believers. The subtitle of our book says, in part, "relating to the Church" because the Apostle Paul says that believers are, collectively, the church of Jesus Christ.² And how much does the Lord care about how believers treat one another? There are 78 "one another" verses in the Bible, verses where believers are commanded to, among other things, bear with, pray, encourage, build, love, honor, serve, and

¹ The "Up, In, and Out" model of discipleship was developed by Mike Breen and was presented in his book, "Building a Discipling Culture" (Published by 3 Dimension Ministries in 2011). The model is based on *Micah 6:6,8*, which says, "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, and calves a year old? ... He has told you O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

² See, *Ephesians 5:30*.

submit to one another. Our prayer is that the seven devotional entries for “In” will encourage you to live out Paul’s command to the Philippians, who he encouraged and commanded by writing,

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.³

Jesus himself put this in perspective when he said to his disciples, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”⁴

The final seven days in this devotional focus on “Out” – how we as disciples should relate to the world given the Great Commission commanded by Jesus as recorded at the end of both Matthew and Luke’s gospels. To use Luke’s words, “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations ...”⁵ We have been commanded to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to all of the world and this preaching starts through our witnesses – how we behave and live in the presence of the world. I am reminded of a quote by Francis of Assisi, who once said, “Preach the gospel constantly and, when necessary, use words.”

For those of you reading this book, who belong to the congregation at Bridgeway Community Church, we remind you that discipleship is one of our core values. It is our prayer that this devotional will help deepen your commitment to grow daily in your Christian walk so that all those you encounter will know, without hesitation, that you are His. If you are not part of Bridgeway’s congregation, we wish to welcome you to the pages of this book as a way to get to know us.⁶ Our prayer for you is that you will grow mightily as a result of spending these 21 days meditating and praying on your relationship with God, the Church, and the world. God bless you and keep you.

³ *Philippians 2:1-4.*

⁴ *John 13:35.*

⁵ *Luke 24:47.*

⁶ If you want to know more about us, you can visit our website at www.bridgeway.cc or you can watch our Sunday services at 8am, 10am, or Noon on www.bcctv.org.

John 17:1-5

When someone is preparing to die, you lean in a little closer to listen to them speak. If you have ever spent time with someone, in their final moments, you know what I'm talking about. Even if you haven't physically been in the room when someone is dying, you've probably seen enough sentimental movies to get the idea. When my Mom was dying I remember her writing down all of the recipes that had been stuck in her head for years, her countless expressions of "I love you," and her sharing things she never told me about her life and our family. She told me how proud she was of me and what to watch out for in this life. People anticipating the transition from earthly life usually have a great deal to say – and they want to make sure they say it, while they are still sufficiently coherent, so the people they love can fully understand what they are trying to say.

This is where we find Jesus in chapters 12-17 of the Gospel of John. Jesus knows that he is going to be arrested and crucified. He knows it's coming. He already knows his fate. In these chapters, Jesus wants to serve his friends – his disciples – and to make sure he tells them everything they need to know before his departure. They are Jesus's last words to his inner circle, his family. In chapter 17 specifically, we find Jesus praying. Knowing what is coming, Jesus looks up and talks to God, his Father. Verses 1-5 say,

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."

In the midst of suffering and despair, Jesus looked up. Can you imagine what it must have been like for Jesus to pray to his Father knowing that he would be crucified? Because Jesus was fully Divine and simultaneously fully human also, it is probably safe to assume that he was apprehensive about praying these prayers. Prayer is an intimate act that requires faith and trust. How do you pray to the very One who you know will be sending you off to be tortured and killed?

Jesus knew his Father. This is how he was able to look up and pray. Because Jesus knew who God the Father was in that moment. He trusted the character of the One who sent him. When Jesus opens his mouth to pray, he begins with an affirmation not only to God the Father, but also to

his own mind and spirit and confirms that God can be trusted even when the circumstances are challenging.

Jesus believed the truth of who HE was. How else would Jesus be able to look up into the face of Judas, his betrayer, and wash his feet in the Upper Room prior to this prayer? Jesus was assured in this moment of the work he was called to do. As he prayed in verse 4, “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.” He knew why he was sent to earth in the first place. If Jesus wasn’t clear on his mission on earth, this may have been a very different prayer.

REFLECTION

- When challenges come, what is my first response?
- Read John 14-17. What do these chapters tell you about Jesus?
- What will I plan to do, to live out this particular model of Jesus, in my life today?

APPLICATION

- Choose to believe God when He tells you who you are. Meditate on these truths daily. Fight for the mindset of receiving the truth of Jesus Christ. Look up, immediately, like Jesus did. Go to God and His wisdom in your thought life and your prayer life. As Jesus said, *know God, the only true God, and Jesus Christ his son* — it is there you will find eternal life.

NOTES

Psalm 91:1-2; 14-15

Have you ever loved or had a serious “crush” on someone who acted as though you didn't exist? Perhaps they acted like they knew you, but ignored you, or they simply treated you as just one in a crowd of casual friends and acquaintances. It is tough, or even painful, to be publicly denied in such a manner. If you have been treated in this way, then you know what I mean. I experienced it myself as I watched the one I loved date others. I just persevered until she “caught me!”

I've often wondered how our God feels in dealing with us. He created us in His image and also to be with Him. Yet God cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden because of their sin, because that sin excluded them from being in relationship with Him. We can only imagine the pain He felt because He has a one-of-a-kind, serious “crush” on mankind. He wants to be with us. He wants us to want to be with Him.

Both the Old and New Testaments reveal a God who relentlessly seeks an intimate relationship with us. He never stops knocking on the doorway to our hearts, constantly seeking to enter into an everlasting relationship. And when that relationship starts, He wants it to grow!

I don't know about you, but when I have a serious crush on someone, I want to stay close to them. I want to be with them constantly, inventing creative ways to ensure that closeness happens. Because when I'm close things just feel right! It's sweet! It's better than anything else! It makes me feel like I could conquer the world for them! That's the way it should be in our relationship with God. Is it that way with you today? Do you feel this way about your relationship with God? If not, why not?

In this kind of intimacy we rest, have peace, joy, strength, wisdom, protection, faith, health, and wholeness. Let's call it “prospering” or “being sheltered.” God describes it this way in today's passage, “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, ‘My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’” (vv. 1-2) This is talking about where you “hang out.” Is it where your “crush” lives? If this is so, and if it's God, then all is well and you benefit. If you're not hanging out with God, He is saddened by that, but you lose a wealth of possibilities, grace, mercy, and blessings.

In verses 14-15, God is quoted as saying, “Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him.” God is telling us that if we “hang out” with Him, He's got our back. There is nothing we need that He cannot supply or do. Our intimate love relationship places this kind of obligation on Him because His very essence is love and love always responds appropriately and always conquers.

Psalm 139:1-6

There are a few psalms Christians around the world would call iconic. These psalms are so well known that even many atheists are, at the very least, familiar with the language and know that it comes from the Bible. Psalms such as: Psalm 1; Psalm 23; Psalm 119; and Psalm 51. Psalm 139 would certainly be included on the “Psalms Greatest Hits” charts. So many of the phrases here are very familiar: “you know when I sit down and when I rise up”(v. 2); “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me” (v. 6); or “you knitted me together in my mother’s womb” (v. 13). Yet sometime the notoriety of *anything* can cloud over its true meaning and significance. I suspect this is often true of Psalm 139.

This psalm uses very deep theological ideas to answer equally deep personal struggles we all have from time to time. We have a tendency to think that theology is just about great ideas, but has no practical meaning for us today. This psalm debunks that false idea. In fact, author and pastor Charles Swindoll created an outline that provides a very handy way to discern all of the lofty ideas voiced in Psalm 139:

| | | |
|-----------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| vv. 1-6 | How well does God know me? | The problem of identity |
| vv. 7-12 | How close is God to me? | The problem of loneliness |
| vv. 13-18 | How carefully has God made me? | The problem of self-image |
| vv. 19-24 | How much does God protect/help me? | The problem of fear ⁷ |

Today we will dive into the first section of this outline and then we’ll do the next two sections over the next two days. Verses 1-6 are dealing with the theological idea of omniscience, meaning God knows everything, and specifically here, about who we are individually.

Using vv. 1-4 as your guide, what are some of the things mentioned that God just naturally knows about us because he is God?

⁷ Charles Swindoll. *Living Beyond the Daily Grind Book 2*, Nashville: W Pub Group, 1988, pp. 357-358.

Verse 5: “**You hem me in ...**” Translators have a difficult time with this phrase; notice how different versions try to put it into English:

“You go before me and follow me.” (NLT)

“You have enclosed me behind and before” (NASB)

“You have encircled me” (HCSB)

“with your powerful arm you protect me from every side” (CEV)

“You are all around me—in front and in back” (EXB)

We assume this phrase is suppose to have a positive meaning because the rest of the psalm is positive in tone, but how it fits into the context of verses 1-6, and the psalm as a whole, is a little mysterious.

“... and lay your hand upon me” This phrase very clearly refers to a blessing from a superior, like a father or a monarch, to a subordinate, like a son, daughter, soldier, servant, etc. (See, Genesis 49 for an example).

Pastor Dan’s translation of v. 6: “God, all of this about you just blows me away!”

REFLECTION

- How does what you learn about God in verses 1-6 combat the problem of our identity, of who we are?

- How does God having this intimate knowledge, of who you are, make life easier? Make life harder?

Psalm 139:7-12

Have you heard of the term “personal space?” How close can someone you just met get to you before it is too close? When our personal space gets too short, we can get really uncomfortable, really fast. If you think people can get too close, wait till you learn how close God is!

Picking up from the previous devotion we are continuing our exploration of Psalm 139. Today we will look at verses 7-12 and will learn what these verses tell us about our connection and relationship with God by learning specifically about Him. These verses are explaining the theological idea of omnipresence – meaning God is everywhere – and how that impacts our relationship with Him. We will continue referring to the outline on p. 5 of this book.

Verse 8: “Sheol” The Hebrew word, *Sheol*, is actually referring the place of the dead; other translations use the word “grave” (NLT), “hell” (KJV). David in this verse is using the description of extremes to make his point – whether I’m on earth (v.9), in heaven, or even hell, I can’t escape the presence of God.

In the first section of Psalm 139 (v.1-6), we learned that God KNOWS us, but that COULD BE impersonal – like we are a file in God’s big database computer. In today’s verses, however, we learn that God is CLOSE ... REALLY close. Even if you want to get away from him, it is impossible!

- Why is trying to “flee from” (v.7) God’s presence an option we would like to have?

- What is the upside, the benefit, of NOT being able to escape God’s presence?

To me, the most amazing statement is in verses 11-12. I think most of us have had those nights when literally the darkness seems to close in on us, not physically, but emotionally, mentally, and

spiritually. Just as the sun has left us, we can sometimes feel like God has left us to the darkness and demons of our hearts and minds ... but he hasn't. It is more about our perception, then the reality of who God is. It is darkness to us, but it is not darkness to him: *For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.* (1 Thessalonians 5:5) We can allow the physical darkness to overwhelm our spiritual senses. But we are NEVER in the dark.

REFLECTION

- How afraid of the dark are you? Write out an experience you have had struggling in the middle of the night.

- What could you do at night to remind you that God is with you and you actually are NOT in the dark but in the light of his presence?

Psalm 139:13-18

Any thinking Christian will somewhere, in his or her spiritual journey, question God. Why was (FILL IN THE BLANK) born with ... Down Syndrome, blindness, ADHD, Autism, a heart defect, etc. I'm not going to try to tackle this complex question in this devotional entry, but will simply acknowledge that it can be a hurdle to our faith from time to time. Despite the situations covered by these questions, however, God is still an amazing creator.⁸

I am totally addicted to shows like “Wild China,” “Aerial America,” “Into the Inferno,” “Blue Planet, Terra,” and “Edge of the Universe” ... you get the idea. I never get bored learning about the amazing physical creation, whether it is in the deepest sea, the surface of a meteor, Lewis and Clark’s exploration of the Louisiana Purchase, or dark matter. Every country on our planet seems to have its piece that is unique and beautiful.

The older I get, though, I am finding beauty closer to home. In watching my wife nap on the couch or see her laugh until her face turns red. When I catch my son looking into the eyes of his fiancé. My mom lighting up when I give her a piece of chocolate cake. The tears at a wedding, hugs at BWI airport, the joy of a Chicago Cub fan in watching that team win its first World Series in over 100 years – never thought I’d see that!

Thousands of years before me, the psalmist was blown away by creation too, but it was the creation of himself! Picking up from the previous devotion, and continuing to rely on our outline from p. 5 above, we are resuming our exploration of Psalm 139 by looking at verses 13-18 today and learning about God as our creator.

In our day we know so much more about the developing fetus inside of a mother’s womb where, to King David and his generation, it was still an amazing mystery. Yet the more we learn, the amazement doesn’t go away! In 2016 we can say the exact same words as the psalmist has in Psalm 139.

Verse 15: “*depths of the earth*” Don’t interpret this statement to mean a view of human development; it is poetic description of what the ancients did not know, not a biological explanation. David is emphasizing that before ANYONE else could see us or know us, God did. What else about you does God know? (See v.16)

⁸ If you can, checkout the YouTube video titled **Louie Giglio on the Star Maker** to get a small glimpse of God as creator of the solar system.

REFLECTION

- What kind of relationship should you have with someone who knows you like God does?

-
-
-
- The psalmist takes the possibly impersonal fact of God as a creator and a makes it intensely personal about his own person being created and what it means. Have you ever really thought that God is not creator in general of EVERYONE, but was directly involved in YOU being created the way you are?

NOTES

Ecclesiastes 3:9-14

My wife is an amazing cook. She has that gift few people have of tasting what she's cooking and knowing exactly what it needs to make it an incredible culinary experience. Sadly, most of us do not have that gift and, consequently, we depend heavily on recipes to prepare a good meal. Do you know what's even sadder? People who purposely refuse to follow recipes and then complain when the dish they cook ends up tasting awful. It's almost like they deliberately rail against the idea that a professional cook took the time to develop that recipe so that anyone following it could produce a delicious, enjoyable meal.

Our text for today instructs us that God has a recipe for the well-lived life. If we want to make the most of our individual lives, then we need to be mindful of three truths:

God is the professional cook. Verse 14 of today's passage says "whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it." If the recipe calls for mustard, why add mayonnaise? If it calls for garlic, why add onions? Just as that professional cook knows exactly what your dish needs to taste good, God knows best. He created everything and is the only One who knows how the universe, and all of its parts, are supposed to work together. This is why He gave us His Word – which instructs us how to live our lives – and He sent Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Savior.

God knows what to add and when to add it. There are ingredients in the recipe that should be mixed together as you start to cook the dish. There are others that are added once the dish has been cooked. Verse 11 of today's passage says, "He has made everything beautiful in its time." Remember that Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 is one of the most well-known passages of Scripture throughout the world. It is the one that starts by saying "For everything there is a season" and tells us that there is a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to harvest, and so forth. The point here is that God is the one who dictates the seasons of our lives. And you know what? God has also provided for those seasons. There are things we are supposed to enjoy while we are on earth (vv. 9-10, 12-13), but there are also things we should be looking forward to after our earthly death (v. 11). Regarding the latter, v. 11 says that God "has put eternity in man's heart." He is the one that placed our desire for Him and to be with Him in our hearts.

God has a reason for his recipe. Any cook that takes the time to develop and share a recipe does so because he or she wants others to experience the pleasure of that dish. After telling us that what God does endures forever, and that nothing can be added to it or subtracted from it, the author of Ecclesiastes tells us that there's a reason for why He did this – God does it so that we will fear Him

(v. 14). The idea of fearing God is not about being scared of Him, but of reverencing Him. Of knowing and understanding that He is our King and Lord, the source of life and everything in it. That reverence should lead us to love Him, to obey Him, to trust Him, and to honor Him in all that we do.

REFLECTION

- Verse 11 says that God puts eternity in our hearts, but that He does it so that we “cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” Why did God do this? Is God being selfish or is He trying to cultivate trust? How would you answer this question in light of Deuteronomy 29:29?
- What does it mean, in v. 13, when today’s passage says that eating, drinking, and work are God’s gift to us? Have you ever thought of work, or even your particular job, as a gift from God?

APPLICATION

- Write down at least three ways that you are grateful for your life and then thank God for those things.
- If you are in the habit of complaining about your life, ask God to forgive you and to show you how you can begin to enjoy your life.
- If you are not happy with your work, pray to God and ask Him to show you whether you should be doing something else.

NOTES

Hosea 13:4-6

A large part of my duties as a pastor is providing care to the faithful in our congregation. The issues that have come across my office threshold range from the loss of a family member, the inability to pay bills because of health challenges or unexpected unemployment, and even the inability to function because of emotional distress caused by childhood abuse. One issue that pains me deeply is whenever I have had to counsel an elderly congregant who feels lonely and abandoned. I remember one particular woman's anguish as she explained that her feelings of abandonment were intensified whenever she thought of all that she had sacrificed to raise her children and to send them all to college. Now, as successful professionals, those three adult children barely call her to check in on her and even express dismay when she asks them to visit her during holidays. To hear her tell it, these children are completely devoid of gratitude for all that she did to provide for them along the way.

I would imagine God feels like this with many of us. Even though He has blessed us with good health, steady employment, and a comfortable lifestyle, we rarely express our gratitude to Him. We fail in following His commandments, we don't often go to church so that we can publicly praise Him for His goodness, and we even refuse to give any of our time, talent, or treasure to serve others in His name. For many of us, we aren't even mindful of Him as we enjoy our many blessings. How do I know all of this? Because God revealed, through the prophet Hosea, that this is exactly what the children of Israel did to Him.

In today's passage, God reveals how he blessed the people of Israel by delivering them from Egypt. He also provided for them abundantly during their 40 years in the wilderness. And, once they had their fill of food and blessings, how did they repay Him? God says "they forgot me" (v. 6). The sad truth is that there are many of us today who are exactly like those Israelites. God has blessed us, even in the midst of our own personal wilderness, and we forget to thank Him. In fact, like those Israelites, we simply forget Him. Is it any wonder that God finally had to send His one and only Son to die on the cross for the Israelites and for the rest of the world? The cross is a symbol that should regularly remind us of God's love for the world and of His love for us as individuals.

REFLECTION

- Are you in a regular habit of thanking God for all of the ways that He has blessed you?
- Can you think of a particular period in your life that you can describe as your own personal "wilderness"? How did God show up for you during your wilderness? Have you thanked Him for the way He showed up?
- In the midst of thanking Him for your many blessings, are you in the habit of thanking Him for sacrificing His Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, so that we might have eternal life?
- Does God need to take you to another wilderness to get your attention? (See, Hosea 2:14-15)

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

As I write this devotional entry, our nation is highly divided over the results of our 2016 presidential election. Many Americans feel alienated from President-elect Donald J. Trump after he ran what many believe was a highly divisive, racially charged, and devastatingly negative campaign. Students across the country have protested the election results daily since they were announced and there have been heated exchanges via social media, physical attacks by whites on people of color and vice versa, the desecration of churches and other houses of worship – the situation has devolved into utter madness. In the midst of this madness, however, I saw one Facebook meme that speaks sanity into the situation. It said, “Wanting Donald Trump to fail is like wanting the pilot of a plane we’re riding on to crash. We’re all on it together and, if it crashes, we all die.” It makes sense doesn’t it? If President-elect Trump fails as our leader we will all suffer the consequences of his failure. Regardless of how we might feel about him, or how he campaigned, it is in our best interest as a nation to pray for his success.

The Apostle Paul reminded the church at Corinth of this truth with regards to those of us who are in Christ. He likens us to the many parts of the human body, which are all needed for the body to accomplish what it is designed to do. Paul reminded the church in verse 26, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” The bottom line is this – we are all members of one body and our fates are tied together because we belong to this one body.

REFLECTION

- How does today’s passage compare us to the parts of the body? How are those parts supposed to work together? What does Paul say about “weaker” members in comparison to our “presentable” parts? What is supposed to tie the many members together so that they live as one body?
- How often do you actively think about how your fate and how your circumstances are tied to others around you? To those in your home? To those at work? To those in your church?
- Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt like one of the “weaker” parts of the body? Did anyone treat you with honor to protect you? How did that feel? Can you remember a time when you honored a weaker member of the body?
- How does God provide for you to be able to contribute to the body, as one of the members of that body?

APPLICATION

- The next time an issue comes up in your home, your church, or your job, sit down and write out how that issue affects everyone in your family, your church, or your job. Writing it out helps you to think through how everyone is touched by that issue.
- Get help writing the list by asking the others involved (in your family, church, or job) how they perceive they are being affected by the issue.

Ephesians 4:1-6

My good friend and brother-in-Christ, Jeff Friday, is on the coaching staff for the NFL's Cincinnati Bengals. I recently visited him to watch his team play the Miami Dolphins. After the game, Jeff invited me into the locker room to meet a number of the players. I was enjoying myself until one moment of slight awkwardness. Jeff introduced me to Bengals' quarterback, Andy Dalton, and as I shook his hand he looked me straight in the eyes and asked with deliberateness, "So. Are you a Bengals' fan?" Wanting to be truthful, but not offensive, I said a quick silent prayer and asked God for the right answer. You see, I am actually a Ravens' fan and the Ravens and Bengals are division rivals. I opened my mouth and these words came out, "Living in Baltimore, I really *like* the Ravens, BUT I *LOVE* this guy right here," as I put my hand on Jeff's shoulder. I was relieved when a big smile came across Andy's face, and he said, "Now *that's* a great answer!" When all is said and done, Jeff and I are united by something bigger than a football rivalry.

Did you know that your commitment to trust Christ comes with a calling to be connected to something bigger than yourself? If you read Ephesians 4:1-6, you can glean the following observations:

Unifying Command (v. 1): The Apostle Paul commands us, as followers of Jesus Christ, to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." In other words, live your life like you really believe, and have faith, in Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

Unifying Character Traits (v. 2): Walking in a manner worthy of the Lord means that we possess certain character traits – humility, gentleness, and patience – as we relate to the people around us.

Unifying Calling (v. 3): The possession of these traits have a purpose – to enable us to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." We are called to keep the unity in the community of Christ followers.

Unifying Cause (vv. 4-6): We don't keep unity for the sake of unity itself. We do it focused on the One we are following – Jesus Christ.

REFLECTION

- What grade would your spouse, kids, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and friends give you regarding the following character traits: (Circle one grade for each trait)

Humility A B C D F

Gentleness A B C D F

Patience A B C D F

Unconditional Love A B C D F

- What is the source, or the cause of your desire to be a unity-keeper? From where does it originate and what continues to fuel it?
- Ask yourself, “To what extent am I able to communicate my views and opinions, on touchy subjects, while exhibiting respect and keeping my relationships strong with those that may not hold my views? (Circle one)

| | | | | |
|-----------|---|---|---|--|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Game Over | | OK, but we won't be celebrating Christmas together | | We'll still be vacationing together |

Why do you think you responded as you did?

APPLICATION

- List 3 things you can intentionally do to “make every effort to keep the unity” with other followers of Christ:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

- What kinds of things do other Christ-followers (not you, of course) do, that have a tendency to create disunity in the body of Christ. List 3 and vow to avoid them.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

1 Peter 4:7-11

I assume you are familiar with Pez dispensers. They are small, narrow, hand-held plastic dispensers that have a recognizable head and face as its top – cartoon characters, presidents of the United States, movie characters, or even well-known sports figures. It dispenses a small rectangular piece of candy when you flip the head up. All dispense the same candy, but they are manufactured with thousands of different heads at the top. I believe today’s passage teaches us something very radical that makes me think of each of us as a Pez dispenser. Stay with me.

I want to focus on verse 10 of today’s passage:

“As each ...”: This part of the verse is referring to every person who is a part of the body of Christ. This means YOU, this means ME – no one gets a pass. This is not “extra-credit Christianity.”

“has received a gift, use it ...” This means *each one* has at least one gift they have received from God. Why? Check out the next part of the verse.

“... to serve one another ...” Those gifts have ONE sole purpose – serving one another. God gives us gifts for the benefit of others.

If you know, write down a few of the spiritual gifts you know you have received from God. If you are unsure, you need to take Pastor Dan Taylor’s SHAPE class at Bridgeway!

What should be the ultimate benefit and result of serving others? See the next part of the verse.

“... as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” This phrase might sound nice, but it is way more than nice if you really dive into its meaning.

First, you have to decide what grace is. If you comb through some Bible reference works, this is what you’ll get:

- Grace is the dimension of divine activity that enables God to confront human indifference and rebellion with an inexhaustible capacity to forgive and to bless.⁹
- Gracious or merciful behavior of a more powerful person toward another.¹⁰
- Grace can ... refer to the manifestation of such a disposition of kindness in the form of material benefaction, including the giving of gifts, the approval of one's request, the granting of freedom or mercy, and the deliverance or salvation from evil or harm.¹¹

Let me give you the Pastor Dan, non-technical definition: Grace is when ANYONE gives to ANYONE else something they don't deserve and can't pay back.

With that as our acting definition, notice what this verse says: WE are supposed to be giving out (*to serve one another*) God's grace! My assumption is that most Christians believe God's grace comes from one place: God! But that is not what this verse teaches us. WE are supposed to be dispensers (remember Pez) of God's grace when we serve others! It's the same "candy" (grace) but it's a *varied grace* (Pez heads). Wow!

Do the people deserve it? No. Ever serve someone or several people and thought to yourself, "They don't deserve this." You were pretty close to grace without even knowing it! Can they pay you back for it? No. But think of this: there is an expression of God's grace that this world will NEVER see if you don't use the gifts God has given you to serve others. How tragic if the world doesn't receive grace in the shape you give it out in!

We don't serve to get something out of it. We serve because of the awesome privilege to be a grace dispenser to the world when EACH ONE serves. Where have you been holding back? Where do you KNOW God wants you to serve, but you are resisting?

⁹ Walter A. Elwell, Ed. *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988, p. 898.

¹⁰ John D. Barry, Ed. *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

¹¹ Douglas Mangum, Ed. *Lexham Theological Wordbook*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014.

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12

A man was sitting on his front porch once when one of his children asked him, “Daddy, what does ‘family’ mean?” He called his other children together and challenged them to find as many sticks as possible. Once they returned to him, he took all of their sticks but left each of them with one stick. He said, “I want you to break the stick in your hands.” They were all able to easily break their respective sticks. He then proceeded to pull a rubber band out of his pocket and he used it to bind the sticks he had in his hand. “Now, children, I want each of you to take turns breaking these sticks without removing the rubber band.” Not one of the children could break the sticks. Finally, the man held the bundle of sticks up and said, “This, my children, is family.” You see, so long as the sticks are bound together, they cannot be easily broken.

During the creation story of Genesis, there was a time when man was alone. Up until this point, every time God created something the Bible tells us, “And God saw that it was good.” The very first time God said something was not good was when he saw that man was alone (Genesis 2:18). So God brought another into the story – Eve – to provide relationship with the man.

I have never observed a “lone ranger” Christian that was living a vibrant life of faith. Have you? We were built for relationship, and that is why we are better together than alone. Today’s passage gives us a glimpse at a few benefits of living in community. It starts by stating, in v. 9, “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.” It goes on to tell us that in community we can assist one another when we fall, we can help keep each other warm, and we can help defend one another. In fact, the text compares our living in community to being like a threefold cord – it is a strong rope that can hold together under much duress without being broken or damaged.

REFLECTION

- Please review the four benefits of “two over one” listed in today’s passage. Can you think of others?
- Can you remember a time in your life when you were able to overcome adversity because you were in community with others? Conversely, can you think of a time when you suffered because there was no one to help you?

APPLICATION

- In four sentences write down, how will you apply each of the four principles in your relationships this week?
- Make a list of those people who have been there for you in times of adversity and dedicate some time today to pray for them and to thank God for them. In fact, take the extra step of sending them a note thanking them for being in your life.

Ephesians 4:29

“Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” If you grew up in the United States, there’s a good chance you’ve heard and maybe even used this little refrain. This saying is meant to convey to others that we are not hurt by the pejorative names they call out to us. I grew up in a community that devalued learning and, as a result, was mocked because I was a good student. I was called names like “Poindexter,” “Brainiac,” and “Bookworm” in an attempt to insult me because I got good grades in school. I would often resort to using the “sticks and stones” refrain, but the truth is that it did hurt to be called these derogatory names.

God’s Word says, in Proverbs 18:21, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” The people of God must understand that what we say has the power to either build or to destroy. This is why Paul instructed the Ephesian church, through today’s verse, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” There are four principles we can derive from this verse as represented by the following four words:

Choice: The fact that we are commanded means that we have the power to choose what we say. We can’t speak hurtful words and then say we didn’t mean them or, even worse, blame the other person by saying, “You made me.”

Appropriate: The words must match the situation. Be careful not to speak out of turn or to raise subjects that would be hurtful in the moment. If you must speak to them about a difficult subject, ask God to give you wisdom about the best time and place to raise the subject.

Raise: Our words should raise people, elevate them, and build them up. Do people feel better after they have heard you speak to them?

Extend: Paul said our words should “give grace to those who hear.” In other words, like God we should look to extend grace to those who would receive it.

Do you see the acronym these words give us? C.A.R.E. We should show people that we *care* about them, and for them, by the way we speak to them, both in our tone and in the words we speak.

REFLECTION

- The Greek word for “corrupting” is *sapros*. It means “rotten, worn out, unfit for use, worthless, and bad.” Can you remember a time when you spoke to someone in language that can be described by any of these words? Did you end up regretting speaking those words?
- What kind of speech did your parents model for you? Did they use words that built you up or destroyed you? Do you find yourself repeating that pattern of speech in your own life now as an adult?

Acts 2:42-47

What do you think of when you hear the word church? Perhaps Bridgeway comes to mind and you think of what Bridgeway means to you. Maybe the church you grew up in is what your thoughts move toward. You might remember buildings where churches meet, or you might think of people you connected with, that were a part of a previous church you attended. There could be a million things that go through your mind when you think about church. There may be some negative things you associate with church, but I hope there are many more positive things that come to your mind.

With so many different people and so many different views on what church is, how do we “do church” well if we don’t have clarity? With clarity, and the church being what God wants the church to be, the church can be a world changer. Bill Hybels puts it this way, “The local church is the hope of the world.” Imagine that! When the church is what God has called it to be it is the hope of the world. Our hope isn’t in how much money we make or some political leader. The hope for this world is the church. The church is the continuation of Jesus Christ’s life on this earth. We are his hands and feet caring for each other and reaching out to a lost world.

For clarity on what church is, we must look to the original church as our model. The first church *was* the hope of the world, without which we would not be followers of Jesus Christ today. If they hadn’t started the church correctly, you and I might be living a very different reality.

If I had to sum up the early church in one word, based on today’s passage, it would be “community.” They were a genuine Christ-following community. They loved God and loved each other so much that they functioned as one unit. They shared everything, caring for one another selflessly. They were devoted to each other and to God. They lived life in dependence on God and saw God work to provide through others in their community. This was the early church. This is what the church should be today and always until Jesus Christ returns to get her.

REFLECTION

- Please read today’s passage again. What do you find most challenging, to live out, as a part of the church?
- Are you connecting with others at Bridgeway whom you can serve, love, and learn from? How can you grow in this area?

APPLICATION

- Being a church community takes intentionality. Who will you reach out to, to connect with, in true community this week?
- True community requires us to be vulnerable. It also requires selflessness. As you wrap up your devotional time today, pray that God would make you a catalyst for community. Pray that you would be an example of vulnerable selflessness to those around you.

Romans 12:9-21

I was once appointed head of a government agency for the District of Columbia that regulated utility services for our nation's capital. The agency had fallen on hard times, possessing a reputation for failure and unprofessionalism. There was a senior engineer working for the agency who was vehemently opposed to my appointment because, he believed, I was too young at 38 years of age to take this important responsibility. I took the position knowing that I did not have his confidence or support. I had several advisors who counseled me to relieve this man of his duties once I took office. I could not, however, given my knowledge of today's passage.

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans contains many of the best explanations, of Christian faith and theology, available to followers of Jesus Christ and those wanting to understand our faith. He spends the first 11 chapters teaching the Romans that we are all born sinners, that salvation comes only by faith in Jesus Christ and cannot be earned, and that Jesus's sacrifice on the cross was for both Jews and Gentiles. Finally, starting with chapter 12, Paul begins to explain what all of this means regarding how we worship the Lord and how we serve one another.

Today's passage specifically talks about love and how we should treat one another. And who is this love for? Not just the people who love us. Verse 14 says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." In verse 17, Paul wrote, "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all." And so what did this mean for me and this senior engineer? I gave him special assignments. I asked him to be my trusted advisor on technical matters beyond my knowledge as an attorney. I honored him in the presence of other staff members and the larger community outside of our building. And on my last day in office, he walked in and said, "Thank you Mr. Chairman."

"What for, Doc?"

"You made it possible for us to walk into any room in the country with our heads held high." Needless to say, I cherish that moment more than any other in my professional career as a government executive. More importantly, I learned to trust God in carrying out an important principle – God doesn't just call us to love the easy ones.

REFLECTION

- What do you think the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote, "Love must be genuine" to the Romans? (v. 9a)
- Can you think of at least one difficult relationship that could have used today's teaching? If the relationship is broken, is reconciliation possible?
- In v. 18, Paul wrote, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Can you think of at least one relationship where peace is not possible? Is it because of circumstances beyond your control?

1 Peter 2:11-15

When I was growing up in Newark, New Jersey, I had an uncle that loved fish. I don't know if he liked to eat much fish, but he certainly enjoyed their different colors, sizes, and shapes enough that he always had an aquarium in his house. When my parents would take my sisters and me to his house, I could sit in front of that aquarium for what seemed like hours. I would count them, watch them swim around and through the various objects in the tank – like sea shells and fake caves – and would love to see them rush to the top of the aquarium at feeding time. Occasionally, I would have a ringside seat when one of them decided to eat another one. During one of our visits, I remember my sister Jacqueline said, “I feel bad for these fish.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because they don't have any privacy. We can see everything they do.”

Like those fish, we also live in aquariums. Our aquariums carry labels like “neighborhood” or “community.” And, like those fish, we are exposed because we can be seen by everyone around us, including people who are not believers in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Peter knew this when he reminded the church – that body of people who are in Jesus Christ – we are being watched by those who don't know him. Peter specifically commanded the church in v. 12 of today's Scripture passage, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” God cares about our reputation with, and our conduct before, those outside of the church. He also wrote them, in v. 15, “For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.”

What would you say to those people who complain that the church looks too much like the world? If non-Christians can see no difference between their behavior and the behavior of so-called Christians, what incentive would they have to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior? What connection do you see between Peter's command in v. 12 that we should behave honorably before Gentiles and his command in v. 11 that we should “abstain from the passions of the flesh?” And what do you think is the relevance of Peter's instructions in vv. 13-14 on how Christians should relate to government leaders and institutions?

REFLECTION

- Please fill in the blank in the following statement: “If someone were to determine what God means to me, based on what I say and what I do, they would say that God is Number ____ in my life.” Now ask yourself, “If people wouldn't say Number 1, why is that?”
- Have you fallen into the trap of believing that you can love and enjoy the things of the world and still be a follower of Jesus Christ? Please read *1 John 2:15-17* and ask yourself, “Have I really chosen God over the world or the world over God? And can people in the world tell which of these I have chosen?”
- If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would the world have sufficient evidence to convict you?

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

Art conservation is the practice of restoring damaged or very old paintings created by great artists hundreds of years ago. The process of restoring a painting is done meticulously and with precise attention to detail. In the end, a great masterpiece like Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper" or Michelangelo's paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel are restored to luster and beauty once again.

Similarly, our transformation from a sinner, who is spiritually dead and under God's wrath, to a child of God who is fully redeemed and made into a new creation in Jesus Christ is a restoration of beauty. We are born spiritually bankrupt and can only be reconciled to God through the shed blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. In fact, the Bible says that we become God's masterpiece (Ephesians 2:10, NLT). Few words can adequately describe God's love for us and his amazing grace. God's grace is marvelously indescribable! Do you stand in awe of God in worship when you think of the transformation He made in your life? Just like a caterpillar who goes through metamorphosis and becomes a butterfly, you are different than who you used to be and it's evident to those who've known you all of your life. But this change that we experience isn't all about us. It's all about glorifying God. Our transformation requires more of us.

In addition to our new, restored, and redeemed existence in Jesus Christ, God also gives us the ministry of reconciliation to spread the message of God's love for us and His desire to be in relationship with us. This is such an incredible and humbling responsibility given to us by God. We are agents to bring reconciliation to the world. Every day, as we go out to do our work, we are to be ministers of this reconciliation by spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ and by making disciples. As Christ's ambassadors, there are four key things we must understand.

First, as Christ's ambassadors and his representatives on earth, we must be kingdom-focused in relying on the Holy Spirit to help us identify when evangelistic opportunities are present. We must also fully understand that we are set apart and must spiritually assess the state of our fallen world that will never be reconciled to God on its own. We must fully understand that apart from the finished work of Jesus Christ, there is no reconciliation to God.

Second, we must be compelled by the love of Jesus Christ. Second Corinthians 5:14 says, "Christ's love compels us..." Christ's love requires us, forces us, commands us to be burdened for those who are not reconciled to God and to share the message of reconciliation with those God places on our path with love, gentleness, and respect.

Third, as Christ's ambassadors, we must remain in constant fellowship with Him through prayer and the studying of God's Word. Then, we will be rightly aligned, armed with compassion, in position to share the message of reconciliation, and to reconcile the lost to God, so that they too can become restored, redeemed, and reconciled new creations in Jesus Christ.

Acts 8:26-40

This passage is one of the most fascinating in the Book of Acts, and that is saying something if you know all the amazing stories in Acts! Here are a few observations to think about today:

Verse 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.’*”¹² Notice Philip’s immediate obedience. As far as we know, he doesn’t ask any “why” questions. The angel doesn’t tell him the purpose of making a trip to a desert road, a place that is out in the middle of nowhere! Phillip simply does it.

Has God ever given you a clear direction and you were more interested in “why” than in obeying?

Verse 27: “*Candace*” This is a dynastic title of the Ethiopian queen. “Candace” was a title much like “Pharaoh” was for the king of Egypt. Pliny the Elder states that this name “passed from queen to queen for many years.” The Candace mentioned in Acts most likely ruled over a Nubian kingdom with its capital in Meroë, located ... in what is now Sudan.¹³

Verse 27: “*eunuch*” There is disagreement among scholars as to whether he was literally a eunuch, for this word was also used for trusted workers of a royal court. What we know for sure is that he was a high official – something like the finance minister – in Ethiopia.¹⁴

Notice that multicultural ministry is not some new post-modern trend of the past few decades; it is something that was going on in the early days of the Christian church! Philip didn’t let differences in culture make a difference in his obedience to share the truth.

What are the names of people that you interact with, either at work or during your week, that are from a different culture and that difference is a barrier that keeps you from reaching out to them? Write those names down and begin to pray!

1. _____ 2. _____

¹² “Philip immediately obeyed this somewhat strange command.” Ajith Fernando. *The NIV Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998, p. 283.

¹³ John D. Barry, Ed. *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

¹⁴ Fernando at p. 283.

3. _____ 4. _____

5. _____ 6. _____

Interestingly, the recorded dialogue between Philip and the eunuch are almost all questions! Write out the dialogue questions you find in this passage:

Question 1: _____

Question 2: _____

Question 3: _____

Question 4: _____

The point is that sharing your faith is not always about trying to convince or argue someone to your way of thinking. Perhaps a well thought-out question, and answering genuine questions about faith, might be a wiser way.

What are some questions you could ask people? By the way, “If you died in a horrific auto accident tonight, would you go to heaven?” is NOT the kind of question I think would be the best!

How about: “Do you think of yourself as a spiritual being, not just a physical one?”

“If God exists, what would you like to ask him?”

“How do you think someone develops character/becomes a good person?”

Okay, now your turn, come up with a few of your own:

Question 1: _____

Question 2: _____

Question 3: _____

Question 4: _____

John 1:35-51

The apostle John is named over 30 times in the other gospels and the Book of Acts, but he is not named in the Gospel of John. This is actually a clue that supports the long-held belief that he is the author of the gospel bearing his name. The apostle John was part of Jesus's inner circle of disciples with Peter and James (Matthew 17:1; Mark 5:37, 14:33; Galatians 2:9), so he should be mentioned in any telling of Jesus Christ's story, but he is not in the Gospel of John. Yet there is the mention of "the other disciple" (John 18:15-16) and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23). This can only be the apostle John. In vv. 35 and 40, only one of the disciples is named; the second one is most likely John.

In today's passage we learn how the disciples met Christ. Christ starts to show them little clues that he is God. First, he changes Peter's name; only God had done this to other Bible characters (Genesis 17:5; 32:28). Peter's name change indicates what Christ sees Peter can become because of what Christ will do in his life. Peter is impulsive (John 18:10), but will be a "rock" for Christ.¹⁵ Second, in his meeting with Nathanael, Christ tells Nathanael he saw him under a tree. This fact must have been something only Nathanael could know because of Nathaniel's reaction (v. 49). Nathanael goes from ridiculing Christ (v. 46), to declaring Christ as "the Son of God."

Verse 43: "Jesus decides to go to Galilee" If Jesus and his disciples were meeting and staying near where John the Baptist was baptizing people, around the village of Bethany (v. 28), then traveling to Galilee was a 65-mile walk! They were going to really get to know each other!

Verse 46: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" "[Current] estimates [are that Nazareth had] a population of only 200–500 at the time of Jesus. All evidence supports the view that Nazareth's primary industry was agriculture, including the production of wine and olive oil ... wheat and barley ... vegetables. The village ... was likely self-sufficient, though poor ... The town receives no mention in non-Christian sources from the Roman Period. It likely was known only at the local level, and perhaps enjoyed little esteem even there.¹⁶ "[Nathaniel] felt Philip's declaration that the Messiah was Jesus of Nazareth was a distinct anticlimax, for it was inconceivable to him that the ... caravan town of Nazareth should produce the Messiah.¹⁷

¹⁵ Both Cephas (Aramaic) and Peter (Greek) mean "rock."

¹⁶ John D. Barry, Ed. *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

¹⁷ M. C. Tenney, M. C. *John: The Gospel of Belief*. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976, p. 81

Verse 51: “you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Christ is comparing himself to God’s revelation to Jacob in Genesis 28:10-17; Christ would be the “stairway” to God.

REFLECTION

We get an early glimpse of how people met Jesus. It is one person who knows Jesus, introducing someone who does not know Jesus, to him. List the names of those who introduced someone to Christ and who they introduced.

- 1. _____ introduced _____
to Christ (v. 35-40).
- 2. _____ introduced _____
to Christ (v. 41-42).
- 3. _____ introduced _____
to Christ (v. 44-49).

APPLICATION

Pray right now and ask God to give you the names of three people who you might introduce to Christ. It could be family, a co-worker, or friend. Commit to pray for them every week for the next year, asking God to open a door to tell them how Christ has changed your life.

- #1 _____
- #2 _____
- #3 _____

NOTES

Romans 10:12-15

There have only been a few times in my life where I have been legitimately lost. I pride myself on knowing directions around some of the most obscure areas, so when I don't know where I am or how to get to where I want to go, there is a unique panic, bewilderment, and frustration that can overwhelm me. Now with GPS on almost every smartphone, we don't find ourselves in those situations anymore. We constantly have a road map at our disposal to get us wherever we want to go.

When we consider our pursuit to join God in his mission to reach the world around us with His gospel, I think that many of us can have a similar feeling of panic, bewilderment, and frustration as to how to direct another person toward Christ. We know where we are and we know where we want to see people go, but we have a hard time knowing how they get from here to there.

In the Book of Romans, Paul describes to his readers about his desire for people to be brought into a saving relationship with Christ. In these verses he gives them a roadmap to helping those around them come to salvation in Christ. Some of us look around and hope for our communities, our culture, and our world to be reached with the Gospel, but wonder how God might make that happen. The answer to that is found here in these verses.

List out all the steps outlined in vv. 13-15, of today's passage, that would lead to a person being saved:

1. A messenger is sent
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. The person is saved

Many of us are waiting for someone to be sent to our communities and to our world. We can tend to think that being sent looks like a supernatural moment where we hear the voice of God telling us to go someplace new. But the truth is, you have already been sent. As a follower of Christ, you are an ambassador for Christ; you have been sent to where you are right now.

REFLECTION

- As you think about where you have been currently sent, consider these specific areas:
Where you live (immediate neighbors, street, apartment complex)
Where you work
Where you play
Where you network
Where you learn

Where you serve
Where you shop
Where you get your hair cut/done
Where you relax
Where you travel

- Think about these different contexts and write down two or three areas where you, personally, are already close to and interact with people that don't know Christ. How might it change your mindset in those places if you saw yourself as already sent by God to bring his good news to the people there?

APPLICATION

- What is the name of one person in a context you listed above? Write his or her name as well as your name here:

How could _____ hear if _____ wasn't sent?
(their name) (your name)

- For many people it is difficult to envision the steps in between being sent and sharing the message of Christ with someone. What are some of the important steps between you being sent to the person you listed above and you sharing the gospel message with them?

You can add to some of these suggestions:

- Ask their name
- Find out something about them
- Share a meal together
- Hear their story
- Have a spiritual conversation
- Share Christ

- What two or three of these steps you could take over the next month?
- Spend a moment in prayer asking God to help you take one step this week in the direction toward sharing the message of Christ with this person he has laid on your heart.

NOTES

1 Corinthians 5:9-13

The development and unfolding of social media tools – like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram – have created a whole new world where people feel free to express their respective opinions. While I often enjoy reading why people believe what they do, or why they behave the way they do, there are times when I miss the old days when people kept their opinions to themselves. And if I am going to be completely honest, there are times I wish I had kept my opinion to myself. The times I am most shocked or dismayed, however, is when negative, destructive, and hurtful opinions are expressed by those claiming to be followers of Jesus Christ.

In this environment of freely accessible and openly communicated thought, followers of Jesus Christ are fully exposed and overwhelmed by all of the world’s vileness, depravity, and sin. Every day we are bombarded by words and images reflecting most people’s deep love for activities and practices that the Lord clearly condemns as sin. This tidal wave of immorality can be so stunning that it causes many, in the name of Jesus Christ, to lash out in judgment and condemnation. Today’s passage, however, should give us pause before we post something negative on social media.

The Apostle Paul is in the midst of instructing the Corinthian church, in the above-referenced passage, on how to exercise church discipline. In reading the passage, one should note that Paul makes an important distinction – between how we should treat those inside the church and those on the outside. He teaches the Corinthians that when it comes to sin, the church should judge and discipline those who call themselves believers. And what about the world? What about those outside of our faith? About them, Paul writes, “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ***God judges those outside.***” (vv. 12-13a) Did you get that? As followers of Jesus Christ we should refrain from judging outsiders because it is God who judges them.

REFLECTION

- Are you active on social media? Can you think of a time you might have posted something about those outside the church that was judgmental? Was it sufficiently judgmental that, given your reading of today’s passage, you wish you could take it back?
- Can it be that you haven’t shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with non-believers because you are judgmental toward them? Can you bring yourself to think toward them the way God thought toward you when He gave His one and only Son for you?
- Before judging those outside the church, do you ever think about what you were like before you accepted Jesus Christ?

APPLICATION

- Is there someone you have been judging because of their professed lifestyle or behavior? If you can do it in a way that is safe and respectful, would you consider having a cup of coffee

John 4:1-15

I want you to imagine that you and I happen to meet at the edge of one of the world's great deserts. As we're conversing, a man crawls out of that desert on his hands and knees. Burned by the sun, with parched lips, he crawls over to us. He looks up at us in obvious need of help, but he is so parched he can't even speak. I grab a canteen off of my belt and say, "Well isn't that interesting," and begin to take a long, gulping drink of water from my canteen. I stop drinking long enough to look at the man, then at you, and I return to taking another long, satisfying drink. You are in utter shock because I do not offer this poor man a drink of water when he so clearly needs it.

We live in a world that desperately needs Jesus Christ. Our nation has lost its way as it normalizes behavior that God clearly condemns in no uncertain terms. Our conversations on social media have no filter, the entertainment industry presents us with every perversion possible (even though studies show that media companies make more money when they make family entertainment), and we are bombarded daily with news stories of murder, abuse, and the victimization of the most vulnerable. Frankly, the United States currently looks very much like that godless society Paul describes to Timothy in his second letter to him (2 Timothy 3:1-5). We are surrounded by people who, spiritually, are like that man who crawled out of the desert – they have been burned and parched by lives full of sin and unrighteousness. They urgently need water.

In today's passage, Jesus describes himself as possessing "living water." He tells the Samaritan woman that he meets at the well, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (v. 10). He later goes on to describe this living water by saying, "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (v.14). Did you get that? As a follower of Jesus Christ you possess a spring of water within you. So let me ask you – Are you sharing this living water with the world? Are you telling people about Jesus Christ? Or are you like the one who drinks from the canteen while a sun-burned, parched world watches?

REFLECTION

- If you and I were really having that conversation by the desert, and you saw me deny that parched man water from my canteen, what would you really think of me? What should others think of you when you don't tell the lost about Jesus Christ?
- Are you in the habit of sharing your faith with others? If not, why not? Are you ashamed? Do you not fully understand that Jesus is counting on us to tell the world?
- Have you ever thought of yourself as possessing a "spring of water?" Will you ask the Lord, right now, to show you through the Holy Spirit what it means for you to have this spring of water?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

All of the authors contributing to this devotional are from the Bridgeway Community Church community. They are the following:

Cecil Bray – Cecil is one of Bridgeway’s elders and has given his life to serving others. He has done so through military service, government service, and as a full-time pastor.

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Gary Coiro – Gary is the director of Bridgeway’s In-Reach Ministry, which strengthens and maintains the relationship between the church and its various constituents, especially its partners. Gary is married to Tracey Tiernan Coiro, one of Bridgeway’s ministers and our programming director.

Dave Heiliger – Dave is one of Bridgeway’s ministers and its Student Ministries Director. He and his wife Julie are instrumental in solidifying the relationship between the church and our young people.

Nikki Lerner – Nikki is one of our ministers and our Director of Worship. She is a well-known international author, speaker, and teacher on multicultural worship.

Dave Michener – Bridgeway’s executive pastor, Dave leads our staff and is one of our teaching pastors. He is married to Donna Michener who is our director of Local Outreach.

Sandy Pope – Sandy leads our Points of Light Ministry and was recently licensed as one of our ministers. She exemplifies the many key volunteers that allows Bridgeway to provide excellent care and service to all those visiting our church.

Jared Sorber – Jared is Bridgeway’s associate pastor of Logistics & Events. As we continue to grow, he works to make sure that our world is ordered and functioning. Jared and his wife, Amie, have had a greatly positive impact on our church’s youth through our Family Ministry.

Dan Taylor – Dan is our associate pastor of Adult Christian Education, runs our main campus Resource Center, and is one of our key teaching pastors. Dan also teaches one of our most popular seminars, SHAPE, and is considered our church’s master teacher.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

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