

March 18-22, 2024 Edition

Following The Year^(s) Of ^ Jesus Part 116

Cultivating Love

March 16/17, 2024

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday :

"Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?" Jesus replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important. 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments." Matthew 22:36-40 (NLT)

Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets. Matthew 7:12 (NLT)

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples. John 13:34-35 (NLT)

Reflection: Last week we talked about the heart of Christianity in two practices - bet on Jesus and cultivate love. Grace is the vehicle through which we bet on Jesus, but how do we cultivate love? Well, the Israelites were instructed to love their neighbors as they loved themselves. This is similar to the golden rule, to treat others the way we want to be treated. But Jesus took it up several notches. He told his followers to love each other as he had loved them. Now if we humans weren't capable of fulfilling the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves, how on earth are we supposed to love as Jesus loved? The answer is that we can't- only Jesus could.

For the Israelites, loving your neighbor was one of two commandments they had to follow to earn eternal life. All of the instructions of the Old Testament could be summed up in two laws. The first was to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength. The second was to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Simple, but not easy. In fact, we humans found that to be consistently impossible. Yet we still longed for eternal life. We all desire lives of meaning and purpose. So Jesus came to fulfill both of the commandments himself. And instead of hogging the prize of eternal life, he generously handed it out to anyone willing to bet on him.

As Christians we bet on Jesus to show us how life was meant to be lived. We spent all last year looking at his life, his stories and his teachings. Jesus is our mastery model. He loved God and humans perfectly. But if we attempt to master Jesus' example, the result will be an epic fail. We didn't just need someone to show us how to do it, we needed someone to do it for us. We need him to earn the prize we can't earn for ourselves. To follow Jesus is life giving. To try to be Jesus is soul crushing.

For example, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is inspiring. Jesus, like the Good Samaritan, picks us up when life beats us down. He invites us to extend this practice to others, to follow in his footsteps. He doesn't, however, require us to be the Good Samaritan 24/7. We don't have that kind of time, money or energy. There are limits to how much we can do and give. Jesus wants us to follow his path even though we will never be 100% successful. We can't help everyone we see. It's huge progress for us as humans just to aspire to compassion and to find ways we can make positive differences in people's lives. We can engage in acts of kindness, but we can't heal all the world's wounds.

In the sermon on the mount Jesus taught that we should love even our enemies. And he did. As he died on the cross he asked his Father to forgive the very people who were crucifying him. He came to offer eternal life to everyone, even those who chose to oppose and kill him. As followers of Jesus we should aim to love our enemies, but we should also expect to fall short on a regular basis. The goal is to bring our failures and limitations to Jesus. He expects us to mess up. He is our safety net. He doesn't shame us or blame us. Instead he asks us to bet on him again and again, and to use his power to make progress. Perfection is God's business. This doesn't mean that we don't try. Jesus sees into our hearts and knows the extent to which we're betting on his path. We try and expect to some failure along the way. We trust that Jesus will cheer us on while we make progress, and pick us up and dust us off when we fall short. I guess you could say that we fail forward. We keep taking baby steps until what we're failing at today is much more advanced than what we failed at last year.

Loving as Jesus loves is a task we can never be 100% successful at. It's not for us to master or achieve. It requires supernatural power and a lifetime of failing forward. But we aren't asked to be successful. We're asked to be faithful. We're not asked to achieve. We're asked to cultivate. We're not asked to be perfect- we're asked to practice.

Tuesday :

"Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions. Matthew 7:15-20 (NLT)

Dear brothers and sisters, be patient as you wait for the Lord's return. Consider the farmers who patiently wait for the rains in the fall and in the spring. They eagerly look for the valuable harvest to ripen. You, too, must be patient. Take courage, for the coming of the Lord is near. James 5:7-8 (NLT)

The ways of right-living people glow with light; the longer they live, the brighter they shine. But the road of wrongdoing gets darker and darker- travelers can't see a thing; they fall flat on their faces. Proverbs 4:18 (MSG)

Reflection: We're all cultivating something. When God made Adam He put him in a garden and told him that it was his job to take care of it. We humans are designed for the care and feeding of life. Gardens need cultivation and so do our lives. Every one of us has an impact on the world around us. Our choices bear fruit. They have consequences. Jesus teaches that we can know a tree by its fruit. If the tree is healthy, it bears good fruit. If there is no fruit, or the fruit is bitter, then the tree isn't healthy. When we are intentional in cultivating our lives, and choosing the highest quality seeds to plant, we get a larger and healthier harvest. It doesn't happen overnight. We have to resist the temptation to dig up the seed in the first few days to check its progress. Organic growth doesn't work like that.

Cultivation takes time and energy and faith. To plant a seed and wait is to believe. We have to water and weed for some time before we see the little shoots emerge from the soil.

It takes seasons for our harvest to mature. James reminds us that we need to be patient. It's tempting to rush the harvest and take what we can get in our time frame, but if we wait for the seasonal rains, our harvest will swell. A seasoned farmer uses the years to hone his cultivation skills. He sets aside seeds from his best crops. He learns which weeds can wait to be addressed and which weeds will take over if you don't deal with them right away. He learns what he needs to nip in the bud. In prison I heard a gal misquote this saying as: nip it in the butt. "Yeah," she said, "it's like with puppies. If they're misbehaving then the mama has to nip them in the butt." I don't know about you, but I'd rather nip some temptations in the bud than let them take root and have life nip me in the butt ;o)

The Bible teaches that when we invest in good living, our lives become brighter and brighter. We are all on a journey of becoming. No one stays at the same level for long. When it comes to our self-management, we either use it or lose. We are either growing, or we're dying. It never ceases to amaze me how dark people's lives can get just by investing in a few unhealthy beliefs or habits. I've heard addicts remark that if they'd known the results of some of their choices they would never have taken the path they did. We all know people who seemed to have vastly more skill or intelligence than we did, and yet their lives became dark and discouraging. All choices bear fruit. It's not about how smart we are. The harvest isn't based on what we think. It's based on what we plant and water. It's the result of what we cultivate.

Wednesday:

Each of us did the work the Lord gave us. I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow. 1 Corinthians 3:5-6 (NLT)

Don't be misled... You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up. Galatians 6:7-9 (NLT)

The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, while he's asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not understand how it happens. Mark 4:26-29 (NLT)

Reflection: There are things we can control in this life and things we can't. Your hair was placed on your head partially to remind you that you can't control everything. The Bible doesn't say that but it's been my observation. We can do our best but in the end our hair is going to do what it wants no matter how much hair spray or Rogaine we use.

Our responsibility includes only those things we have the ability to respond to. We can only do what we can. The rest is God's business. If we try to address things that are outside of our control then we are attempting to handle God's business. But if we refuse to do the things that are within our responsibility, things we can control, those things will go undone. God doesn't do our part. That's our business. God doesn't interfere in our jurisdiction. Love is a

great respecter of boundaries. Instead He invites us to do our part faithfully and let Him do His part.

Not only will God not do our part for us- He won't even force us to do our part. We have been given this amazing gift of choice. We can choose to love God and trust Him and believe what He says is true or we can choose to reject Him. Why? Because of love. We've talked about this before but in order for love to exist we have to have the ability to choose the opposite. Rather than trust and devotion God will allow us to choose doubt and suspicion that He really doesn't have our best at heart. That's what happened to Adam & Eve- worse than the fact that they chose to go their own way was their belief that God was keeping something good from them.

Adam & Eve often get a bad rap and probably they deserve much of it but don't think you're superior to them. If you or I was in their place eventually we would have done the same thing. In fact- we have. And we do. Often. That's what sin is. And if we're not careful, rather than cultivating love we will cultivate the opposite of love. And guess what? God won't stop us. Why? Because of love. Love is the most valuable commodity in the universe. If we truly understand the value of love we'd be selling everything we have to buy it. Except as the Beatles so famously pointed out- money can't buy me love.

But I can cultivate it. And if I do then over time love will grow all around us. And if we choose to cultivate something other than love? Then whatever we plant and cultivate will also grow all around us and lead to a life that is toxic, destructive and dysfunctional beyond anything we could have imagined. Remember- you will **ALWAYS** harvest what you plant.

We can't control or comprehend the mystery of the seed within the soil or the secret of spiritual growth. That's up to God. Cultivation is the Goldilocks zone for humans - somewhere between control and complacency. No matter how valuable the seed, it won't grow if we don't plant it. We can show all our friends the internet reviews and the shiny label on the packet of seeds, but we'll have nothing to harvest if the seeds stay in their packet. We have an important role to play. We're not complacent observers. We're essential partners in God's miracle of growth. We're on God's team- but we're not God. It's tempting to try to be. Being like God will always appeal to us. But attempting to do God's part, and manage events beyond our control or comprehension, will only frustrate and exhaust us.

Thursday:

If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love. 1 Corinthians 13: 1-4 (MSG)

Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 1 John 4:7-8 (NLT)

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples. John 13:34-35 (NLT)

Reflection: As human beings we spend our lives doing two things: choosing and cultivating. That's the faith - faithfulness continuum. Each of us chooses what to bet our time and energy on. That's the faith part. For Christians, faith is betting on Jesus which then connects us to grace which brings us into God's family as His dear children. Then grace empowers us to live out the values of our new family. We are asked to practice our faith through faithful cultivation of love.

In the final hours that Jesus spent with his disciples he gave them one task. He instructed them to love each other as he had loved them. He didn't give them an instruction manual filled with rules and procedures. He asked them to do one thing - to love. Love, as Jesus displayed it, became the standard for evaluating every decision in the Christian life. Love does what is most loving. Again, super simple, but in no way easy. But apparently Jesus believed that love is worth our (and His) investment. Why?

Paul told the Corinthians that nothing was more important, more powerful or more eternal than love. Even if we accomplish amazing feats, they are empty without love. No other standard for living can provide us with the meaning we seek. Nothing less than love can make the stress and suffering of this life bearable for ourselves and those we care about. Sure, it would be more comfortable for us if God ushered us up to heaven the moment we bet on His son. No more weakness, no more tears, no more frustration. But instead God entrusted us with a sacred task - to live lives centered on love. In that way we become coworkers with Jesus in his mission to redeem this lost world. We become voices of hope. We model lives that have bet on love and are cultivating love even though we are FAR from perfect at it. The real miracle lies in just how far cultivating a life of love will take us despite our massive imperfections.

John tells us that God is love. Love is God's nature and character. Love, as Jesus practiced it, is a supernatural virtue. We can't accomplish love. We can only bet on love and cultivate love. Yoda, like Nike, told young Luke Skywalker to "just do it." "Do or do not. There is no try." Well that may work for a Yoda. According to the Mandalorian, those little guys can use the force while they're still toddling and cooing. It comes naturally to them. It's within their capacity. It is in our capacity to aspire to love, but we don't have the ability to "just do it." For humans, love involves a journey of becoming. A fact that is illustrated by the verb Paul uses in this verse:

Become more and more in every way like Christ. Ephesians 4:15 (TLB)

The verb Paul uses is a strange one. If it were literally translated as a Greek reader would understand it the English translation would read, "Be becoming more and more like Christ..." The idea is that this is an ongoing process that won't be finished anywhere on this side of eternity. Cultivating love, as it turns out, is the job of our entire lives.

Now you don't have to be a Christian to cultivate love. To love and be loved is the deepest longing of every human heart. The dark side seems more powerful, seducing many to take the easy path, but it cannot satisfy us for long. No counterfeit of love can fill our hungry hearts. We can cultivate love without being Christians, but we can't be Christians without cultivating love. I'm going to say that again- you can cultivate love without being a Christian, but you can't be a Christian without cultivating love. Love is the only true identifier of a Christian life. That's the litmus test. Read 1 Corinthians 13 again- the love chapter. Paul lists out most of the Christian virtues there and finishes up by saying that even were we to express amazing aptitude at those virtues (many of them the "showy" ones) without love it's all for nothing.

But if we bet on Jesus we will cultivate love. Jesus, like God, is all about love. If we spend our lives investing in anything else instead of love, we haven't really bet on Jesus. When we put our faith in Jesus we are putting our faith in the supremacy of love.

Friday Reflection: On Wednesday we mentioned the concept of the Goldilocks Zone- today I want to spend a few minutes expanding on that concept. All of us know the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Goldilocks lawlessly breaks into their home and tries each ones porridge and bed. In each case she finds what she proclaims to be "just right". Not too hard, not too soft. Not too hot, not too cold.

Turns out the earth is in what scientists call a Goldilocks Zone. If we were just a smidge closer to the sun it would be too hot for life to exist on this planet. If we just a smidge further away it would be too cold and the earth would be encased in ice and no life could survive. But we are exactly where we need to be. Both our distance and attitude from the sun is "just right".

Turns out there's a Goldilocks Zone for the Christian life too. It lies in between two extremes- control and complacency. Control is the idea behind the quote, God helps those who help themselves. That's a real catchy quote and there's some truth to it but it's not a quote from the Bible. It's a quote made up by people who want to control their own destiny and look down on others who aren't as successful at it as they are. If you want an example of this in the Bible look no further than King Saul- Israel's first king. There are several times where Saul doesn't want to wait for God so he blunders in where angels fear to tread. And it cost him dearly. Sometimes there was what seemed to be immediate success when Saul reached out and took what he thought he deserved but over the course of his life it cost him his peace, his family, his friendships and eventually his kingdom.

On the other end of the continuum is complacency. This is the idea that God will take care of everything. All I have to do is sit back and do nothing and God will make it happen for me.

Somewhere in between those two extremes lies the Goldilocks Zone of the Christian faith. The place where I recognize that God's got His department (what I can't do for myself) and I have my department (what God won't do for me because that's my sacred responsibility). The Goldilocks Zone is where I don't do too much and wander into God's jurisdiction and I don't do too little and abdicate my sacred responsibility given to me by God and instead recognize where my jurisdiction ends and God's begins. Will God allow me to step over that line. Yes. And in the short term we might think we've done well but over time consistently

stepping into God's jurisdiction will leave us in a very dark place. When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth he addresses a popular saying that some Christians in Corinth had adopted. The saying was, "I am allowed to do all things." The idea was that since they are free in Christ it doesn't really matter what they do- God will forgive them after all and in the end what will it matter. Here's Paul's rebuke of that idea:

You say, "I am allowed to do anything"-but not everything is good for you. And even though "I am allowed to do anything," I must not become a slave to anything. 1 Corinthians 6:12 (NLT)

I find it fascinating that he doesn't disagree with them and tell them, "no! You're NOT allowed to do anything!" But he doesn't. He just tells them going their own way is not good for them. And it's not for us either. Will God let us step over the line into His jurisdiction? Yes. Should we? Nope.

Now if you're really thinking about this you've probably got one question running through your mind- how do I know where my jurisdiction ends and God's jurisdiction begins? Knowing the answer to that question is what the concept of wisdom is all about and it's not an easy thing to know. Just like everything else we've been talking about this week- you'll be imperfect at it. VERY imperfect. You will be constantly stepping out of the Goldilocks Zone and either doing too much or too little. What God is looking for is not perfection but an attitude that wants to find the Goldilocks Zone and is constantly course correcting as we go through life. And as we do that we gain wisdom that will help us in the future as we continue to seek the Goldilocks Zone:

The Lord says, "I will make you wise and show you where to go. I will guide you and watch over you. Psalm 32:8 (NCV)

The word in Hebrew for wisdom is an interesting one. It's basically the word "rope". But not just any kind of rope- the Hebrew word for wisdom conjures up the image of the ropes sailors use to steer their ships but changing the angle and attitude of the sails. So the biblical concept of wisdom is that wisdom is the mechanism by which God steers His children. It's not measured by IQ (intelligence quotient)- it's measured by OQ (obedience quotient). Wisdom is the willingness of one of God's children to be guided and corrected when we get off course and steered back into the right way. And as we practice our OQ we are given more wisdom. But for us to ask God for wisdom is kind of a misnomer. You want wisdom? Then you're standing in it. The more you practice it the clearer God's directions become. And the clearer the Goldilocks Zone will become to you. Will you still mess up? Oh yeah. But that's part of being human and God knows this. He knows you better than you know yourself. And He loves you anyways. Isn't that the coolest thing you've ever heard?

So then what does this look like? It looks like this:

But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint. Isaiah 40:30-31 (NLT)

It looks like "waiting". But waiting-on-the-Lord is not complacency. Biblical "waiting" is all wrapped up in trust and commitment. It's doing everything I already know I should be doing (cultivating love) and taking care of what is in my jurisdiction (loving the unloveable, forgiving the unforgivable, accepting the unacceptable, growing in the fruit of the Spirit by

cultivating love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self control, etc.) and then when I get to the end of my jurisdiction waiting and trusting in the Lord to take care of the things I can't (and shouldn't try to) control. That's the Goldilocks Zone. Stray from that "just right" place and you'll start to feel God trying to "steer" you back into your place of sacred responsibility. Resist that and eventually you will end up in a pretty toxic, destructive and dysfunctional place.

So do your part. Cultivate love.