1 CORINTHIANS 13

LOVE

INTENTIONALLY

Because it doesn't happen by accident

by Rick Melick

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Love Intentionally: Because it doesn't happen by accident

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INTRODUCTION

Knowing It Is Fine, but Doing It Is Love

1 Corinthians 13:4–8

Read this first

THE BIG IDEA

Love doesn't happen by accident.

like to look at life through the lens of Scripture. When you do, you start finding sermons everywhere. So one day I asked my wife to try it. "See if you can find any stories this week," I said. "Look at life through the eyes of the Bible."

A few days later we were driving down the freeway, and in front of us was a sketchy minivan with no license plates and one enormous ladder strapped to the roof. With one ratchet strap. Not even a good one. One of those thin ones you pull by hand.

Now, you need to know two things about my wife. First, she hates ladders on the freeway. We've had ladders fly off trucks in front of us more than once, and she's convinced they're trying to kill us. Second, she is a two-ratchet-strap kind of person. Maybe three.

That minivan was doing about seventy-five, and the ladder was pulling sideways against that one little strap. She wanted to get as far away from it as possible. I, of course, pulled in right behind it. I wanted her to feel the tingle.

And she said, "We need to tell the church this story."

I said, "What sermon would you preach with that?"

She said, "Oh, it's simple. I'd tell them the story, and then I'd say, *Don't do stupid stuff.* Then I'd say, *Go to lunch.*" And then she added, "The best part is, they wouldn't know if I was talking about you or the guy in the minivan."

I decided it didn't really fit what I wanted to say. But she wanted me to tell it, so there you go.

The Chapter Everybody Knows

This book is about 1 Corinthians 13. My biggest fear is that you'll think you already know it.

You've heard it at weddings. Every pastor reads it at weddings. Maybe a friend has it framed on the living room wall. *Oh yeah, the love chapter. I know that one.*

Let me promise you something, friend. You may be *familiar* with it. But you probably don't *do* it. I know I don't, not consistently. And that's what we're going to work on together.

> **"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."**
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4–8

Right before that, in the first three verses, Paul says that without love you're no good. You can be as gifted, as smart, as generous and as opinionated as you want, but without love you're just a noisy cymbal. Nobody wants to listen.

Here's something I've come to believe after years of teaching this chapter. The descriptions in 1 Corinthians 13 aren't things we don't understand. They're things we refuse to do.

NOTES

Three Kinds of Love

The New Testament world had three main words for love.

- **Phileo** is friendship love. The love of camaraderie. *I really enjoy you, so we hang out.* Nothing wrong with it.
- **Eros** is romantic, physical love, a good gift from God, meant for a husband and a wife in a committed marriage.
- **Agape** is the love Paul is talking about here. When the Bible says *God is love*, this is the word.

Here's something interesting. The Bible never really *defines* love. It *describes* it. And in English, the descriptions in 1 Corinthians 13 are adjectives: patient, kind, not proud. But in Greek, they're verbs. Love is never meant to be understood any way except in action.

Agape isn't a love of convenience. It isn't the love that sticks around as long as you're adding value to my life and bails the moment you get difficult. Agape says, *No matter what it takes, for as long as it takes, because my preferences aren't as important as loving you like Jesus loves me.*

We live in a world where commitment is transactional. We're impatient. We want everything now, and the moment we don't get it, we move on to something or someone else. Agape is countercultural. It isn't natural. It isn't even normal. It's the kind of love the Holy Spirit has to grow in you.

You Can't Drift Into It

That's why I called this book *Love Intentionally*. Love doesn't happen by accident.

A friend from our church once committed to a ten-week citizens' police academy: three hours every Tuesday night, thirty hours in all, on top of a full-time job. He serves on our team that cares for local police officers, and he wanted to understand what they go through. For nine weeks he got home after his three kids were in bed. Some nights he was exhausted and wanted to skip it. He went anyway, because he wanted to finish.

We all understand that. If you want to get somewhere, you set a goal and you sacrifice for it. But spiritually we act like it should be easy. *I want to be more like Jesus, so I'll just wait for it to happen.* What relationship in your life has ever just happened without any effort? Anybody married?

Paul says, *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* (Romans 12:2) I picture two currents. There's the current of the world, the one we're born into and comfortable in, and it pulls us away from God. And there's the current of the Holy Spirit. We aren't born into that one. We have to choose to step into it. Once we do, God starts doing something in us that's supernatural.

It's really 100 percent God. But for our purposes, think of it as 80/20. Your 20 percent is putting yourself in the current. God's 80 percent is everything else.

NOTES

Love Through a Prism

When I taught this series, I brought a prism on stage, a cheap one from Amazon, and asked a friend to shine a flashlight through it. Let me be clear about what that was and wasn't. It wasn't a crystal. It has nothing to do with energy, vibes or anything New Age. Somebody joked that I could use it to see the score of the Iowa women's basketball game. I couldn't. It's just a piece of glass that does what light does. It's a simple picture of something Scripture already says: *"God is light"* (1 John 1:5), *"God is love"* (1 John 4:8), and Jesus is *"the light of the world"* (John 8:12).

Picture a beam of light hitting a prism. It comes out the other side split into colors. That's what Paul does with love in 1 Corinthians 13. He takes one beam, agape, and splits it into fifteen colors: patient, kind, doesn't envy, doesn't boast, isn't proud, isn't rude, isn't self-seeking, isn't easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, doesn't delight in evil, rejoices with the truth, protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres. And all of it adds up to this: love never fails.

One color per chapter. Each one ends with five days of application, a few minutes a day, because hearing about love isn't the same as doing it.

Where This Book Comes From

I want to be clear about something from the start. This book isn't my opinion about love. It's an exposition of Scripture: we're going to walk through 1 Corinthians 13:4–8 one phrase at a time, the way Paul wrote it, and let the rest of the Bible help us understand it.

So every chapter starts with the words of 1 Corinthians 13. We'll look at what Paul's words meant to the church he wrote them to, what the original language tells us, and how other passages shed light on them. Then we'll talk about what it looks like in your life on Monday morning. My stories are there to help you see it. The authority is God's Word.

If I ever say something that doesn't line up with Scripture, go with Scripture.

So let me ask you before we start. Are you known as a patient person? If I asked the person who knows you best, would they say amen? Or would they call you out?

Let's find out.

NOTES



CHAPTER

1

Love Is Patient

“Love is patient…”

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4 · GALATIANS 5:16–25 · 2 PETER 3:8–9

THE CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

1. **Love is patient with people.** You could fire back, and you choose not to. *1 Corinthians 13:4*
2. **Jesus is patient with us.** He’s playing a long game, and salvation is at stake. *2 Peter 3:8–9*
3. **Patience grows when you walk with the Spirit and keep in step.** *Galatians 5:16–25*

THE BIG IDEA

You worry about your character, and let God worry about your reputation.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4

“Love is patient…”

READ FIRST

Galatians 5:22–25

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,
forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things
there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus
have crucified the flesh with its passions and
desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in
step with the Spirit.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

The Door That Wouldn’t Open

had to go to the county courthouse to renew my car tags. You can do it by mail. I didn’t. So I found a parking place downtown, which is its own miracle, and pulled in behind a pickup truck that had to cost a hundred thousand dollars.

Out climbed a guy in work overalls. I decided on the spot that he probably owned every cornfield from here to Ames. That was just an assumption. Not a judgment. Mostly.

We were headed to the same place, so I followed him in. The courthouse has those automatic doors, the kind with a pressure mat. You step on the mat and the door opens. Except the courthouse doors are slow. I figure that’s to give the deputies inside time to decide about you.

The farmer stepped on the mat, and before the door could open, he waved both arms in front of it like he was flagging down a plane. The door opened. Two steps later, at the second door, same thing: stepped on the mat, waved his arms, and the door opened.

I’m pretty sure what happened is that one day, a long time ago, a door didn’t open for him. He stomped a couple of times. Nothing. So he waved his arms, and the door opened. And from that day on, that’s how doors work.

We all do this. At some point in your life you formed a conclusion about how love works, about how much patience is reasonable, about what people deserve from you. And you’ve been waving your arms ever since. Not because it works, but because that’s what you decided the last time you thought about it.

So before we go any further, I want to ask you to consider that the way you’ve been doing it might not be the only way. It might not even work.

Two Words for Patience

I don’t usually take you into the Greek. Sometimes pastors do it to sound smart. But here it really matters, so stay with me.

The New Testament has two different words that our English Bibles translate as patience. Sometimes they’re translated *forbearance*, *long-suffering* or *gentleness*. Unless you look them up, you’d never know which one you’re reading. I grew up around Greek scholars, my dad among them, and I learned to use the tools, so let me save you the trouble.

NOTES

- **Makrothumia** is patience with *people*.
- **Hypomone** is patience under *circumstances*.

We'll get to the second one at the end of the book, when we talk about love that perseveres. In 1 Corinthians 13:4, Paul uses the first one. Love is patient with people.

Here's what makrothumia means. You have the ability to avenge yourself. You have the ability to stand up for yourself, to talk back, to give the look, to smart off, to be a little chippy. And you consciously choose not to. It's slow-burning. Slow to defend yourself. Just less prickly.

Think about where Paul is when he writes this. For twelve chapters he has been telling the church in Corinth, *Stop it. Stop doing that. You're better than this.* Then in chapter 13 he shines a light through the prism of love. And the very first color that comes out is patience.

◆ Start With the Person Who Wakes Up Next to You

When we talk about patience with people, I don't want you to think about the guy who cut you off in traffic. Not yet. I want you to think about the people closest to you.

The person who wakes up next to you, if someone does. Your kids. Your parents. Your roommate. Your best friend. The coworker you see every morning. Your inner circle.

Now ask yourself honestly: *Am I slow-burning with them? Or do I right every wrong, meet every challenge with a challenge, address every infraction and set every record straight, for the sake of my pride?*

Would they say you're patient? Would they say, "Even though you could fire back, you usually don't"?

That's hard. Here's another way to put it. *Can you just let it go?* Can we close our mouths and let it go? Is it really that big a deal?

In thirty-some years of doing this, I've learned a principle that has saved me more than once. **You worry about your character, and let God worry about your reputation.** You don't have to meet every insult with an insult. You don't have to correct every infraction.

◆ Could, but Won't

One of the early church's great preachers, John Chrysostom, described this word this way: it's what you call a person who has been wronged, who could easily get even, and who never does. That's makrothumia. Not the absence of power. The decision not to use it.

Paul says it this way in Romans: *"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."* (Romans 12:17–18)

As far as it depends on you. You can't control what they do. You can control what you send back.

◆ Why Jesus Is Patient

Why should we do this? Because Jesus does it for us.

NOTES

> **"With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."**
>
> 2 PETER 3:8–9

The word Peter uses for patient is the same word: makrothumia.

Jesus is patient with us. With our sin and our failures, over and over and over. He's patient with our country, our world and our government. He's patient with all the ideas and currents that chip away at the things he holds dear. He's slow-burning and long-suffering because he's playing a long game, and the salvation of the world is at stake.

So Paul says, in effect, *Look what Jesus has done for you. Won't you do this for each other?*

Seven Times Peter Tested Jesus

If you want to see what patience with people looks like, watch Jesus with Peter. Here's a short list. I could make it longer.

1. Peter and the other disciples tried to keep the children away from Jesus. (Mark 10:13–14)
2. Peter walked on water, then looked at the waves and started to sink. (Matthew 14:28–31)
3. Peter argued with the others about which of them was the greatest. (Mark 9:33–34)
4. Peter promised the temple tax collectors that Jesus would pay, without asking Jesus. (Matthew 17:24–27)
5. Peter refused to let Jesus wash his feet. (John 13:8)
6. Peter fell asleep in the garden when Jesus asked him to keep watch. (Matthew 26:40)
7. Peter denied Jesus three times, with oaths and curses, in public. (Matthew 26:74)

And after all of that, Jesus met him on a beach, cooked him breakfast and gave him a job. (John 21) That's patience. Jesus could have fired back every time. He never did.

He's done the same with me. He's done the same with you.

Patience Is a Fruit

Paul uses the same word in Galatians, where he lists the fruit of the Spirit:

> **"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."**
>
> GALATIANS 5:22–23

Forbearance there is makrothumia again. And right before that list, Paul tells the Galatians that they're free, but not to use their freedom to live for themselves. Don't use your freedom to settle every score, to be chippy, to cause friction, to be so grouchy nobody can stand to be around you.

NOTES

Here's why it matters so much. Who wants to hear about Jesus from someone who's a flat-out jerk? We all know people like that. You don't want to be around them, but they're quick to tell you about Jesus. And everything in you says, *If that's the kind of Jesus you've got, I don't want it. I don't want to be like that.*

I don't think you do either.

◆ Myth: Patient People Are Doormats

Some of you are thinking, *Pastor Rick, if I just let everything go, people are going to walk all over me.*

No. Makrothumia isn't weakness. It's strength on a leash. The patient person *could* fire back, and chooses not to. That's not a doormat. That's somebody in control.

And I'm not talking about things that are dangerous. If someone is threatening you or your family, patience doesn't mean you stand there and take it. We're talking about the everyday stuff: the comment, the look, the tone, the thing your spouse said before coffee. That's where most of us lose it, and that's where love is patient.

◆ How Patience Grows

So how do we become patient? Paul gives us two phrases in Galatians 5. I promise these are the last two Greek words in this chapter.

The first: *"Walk by the Spirit."* (Galatians 5:16) The word is **peripateo**, and it means to live in the realm of the Spirit. That sounds a little *Star Wars*, I know. But think about it this way. In Paul's day, students called *peripatetics* paid to follow philosophers like Aristotle around. They didn't just attend lectures. They watched how their teacher treated people, how he talked, how he bought and sold. They put themselves where something could rub off on them.

That's what walking by the Spirit is. If you want to lose a few pounds, you don't wake up and say, *I hope I'm not hungry today.* You have a plan. If you want to get stronger, you don't walk into the gym and say, *I'll do whatever I feel like.* But spiritually, we do exactly that. We stand around hoping we'll feel patient.

Walking by the Spirit means making space every day for God to work: opening your Bible, praying, showing up. Any long-distance relationship takes a little intentionality and a little time. Not a lot. Just something on purpose.

The second phrase: *"Keep in step with the Spirit."* (Galatians 5:25) That word is **stoicheo**, and it's a military term. When you're in the army and you're told to march, you march. Why? Because you were told to. It's an act of the will.

Some days you won't feel patient. So what? *I don't feel patient, but I choose patience.* It has very little to do with emotion, and nothing to do with whether the other person deserves it.

Those two work together. You put yourself in the current of the Spirit, and you choose, one step at a time. And somewhere along the way something miraculous happens. You stop just *acting* patient and start *becoming* patient. The urge to avenge yourself, to mouth off, to be chippy, starts to go away.

NOTES

It might sound impossible. But God promises it, if we cooperate. If we don't cooperate, it isn't going to happen.

Walked by the Spirit, Led by the Spirit

Galatians 5 gives us one more phrase I don't want you to miss. *"But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law."* (Galatians 5:18)

Walking by the Spirit is about the outside: what I choose to say and do. Being led by the Spirit is about the inside: what God changes in how I think and feel.

Here's how I picture it. On Monday, someone pushes my buttons and I choose not to react. That's walking. Some days later, the same person does the same thing, and I notice something. I'm not even irritated. That's being led. I didn't make that happen. God did. My part was to keep putting myself in the current.

One Labradoodle, Four Couches

Sometimes patience means waiting someone out.

When my boys were younger, my wife and I decided to get a labradoodle puppy. Our assumption was that he'd get the best parts of a poodle and the best parts of a Labrador.

I think he got the opposite.

We brought him home and quickly realized he was a wild puppy. How wild? He ate a couch. The boys were at school, my wife and I were at work, and we came home to stuffing all over the house. He had literally shredded it. Beyond repair.

So instead of getting a new dog, we got a new couch.

Four or five days later, same thing.

A week or two after that, we bought a used couch online. A few weeks went by with no incident. And then, sure enough, one day while we were gone, he tore that one up too.

By then we needed something to sit on, so we brought home a couch from the youth room. You know the kind. One of those old youth group couches that smells like it's spent far too long in somebody's basement.

He tore that one up too.

We were on our first labradoodle and our fourth couch.

So we made a decision. No new couch. We were going to wait him out.

At first it was hideous. We'd walk past that shredded youth group couch and couldn't stand to look at it. After a while, we'd walk past and not even notice it. Finally we threw a blanket over it and used it for what it was made for, a long time ago: sitting.

One day my wife and I looked around the living room and realized, almost at the same time, *We've been sitting on a youth group couch with a blanket over it for three months.*

The dog finally grew up. We got a new couch. He turned out to be a pretty good dog.

And we liked the couch.

NOTES

Patience is a slow burn. Sometimes love doesn't fix the other person. It waits them out. People grow up too. And sometimes, while you're waiting, God is growing you.

NOTES

Try It This Week

I'm working on this right along with you. A few minutes each morning.

MONDAY

Keep your mouth shut. Somebody close to you is going to flip your switch today. When they do, commit to this one thing: *I won't say what I want to say.* Read Galatians 5:22–23 and pray, "God, help me be patient today, or at least help me not act out."

Read Galatians 5:13–16. Walking by the Spirit starts on the outside. Don't worry yet about how you feel when someone tries your patience. Focus on how you react.

Pray: "God, someone close to me is going to push my buttons today. Help me control my mouth, my eyes and my body language. Today I give you my responses."

TUESDAY

Change your reactor. Someone will trigger you again. Today, pray that God will change what happens inside you, so you're not nearly as irritated or combative, and the need to be right starts to fade.

Read Galatians 5:16–18. Being led by the Spirit is God changing the inside. You can't make it happen, but you can pray for it, expect it and make room for it.

Pray: "God, would you keep me from even wanting to react badly? Replace my irritation with love, and change the way I think. I can't do this myself."

WEDNESDAY

Clear the way. If this is hard, something may be blocking the Spirit's work in you: a thought, a habit, an attitude. Ask God to show you what it is, and confess it.

Read 1 John 1:9. If something keeps getting in the way, it may be sin you've let slide: a habit, an attitude, a belief that isn't what Jesus wants for you. God promises to forgive and clean it up.

Pray: "God, I don't want anything standing between me and becoming loving like Jesus. Show me what's in the way, and I'll confess it."

THURSDAY

Pray for the hardest people. Name the people who are hardest for you to be patient with. Then pray for them. Not "God, keep them from irritating me." Pray that God will bless them, help them with whatever they're facing and draw them close. God may not change them at all. But he'll change you.

Read Galatians 5:14. Don't pray that your person stops irritating you. Pray for them, by name. It probably won't change them. It will definitely change you.

Pray: "God, help me pray for _____. Be with them in what they're facing. Help them know you love them. And give me a chance to love them today, the way Jesus would."

NOTES

FRIDAY

Celebrate, apologize, go public. Name one time this week you got it right, and thank God. Name one time you blew it, and go make it right, no excuses: "I wounded you with my words and my attitude. I didn't love you patiently. I'm sorry." Then tell the people closest to you, "I'm working on loving you patiently. If I blow it, tell me."

Read Galatians 5:22–26. Our relationship with Jesus is always personal, but it should never be private. Telling the people closest to you brings accountability, and it's a little inspiring too.

Pray: "God, give me the courage to own my failures this week and to apologize. And don't let this end because it's Friday. Keep me in step with your Spirit."

NOTES

KEY TRUTHS

- Love is a verb. Patience is something you do.
- Makrothumia is patience with people: you could fire back, and you choose not to.
- Jesus is patient with us because salvation is at stake (2 Peter 3:9).
- You walk by the Spirit, and you keep in step by choice. God does the heavy lifting.

For Reflection

CHAPTER 1 · 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4

1. Where have you been "waving your arms at the door": doing something a certain way just because you decided long ago that it works?
2. Who in your inner circle tests your patience most? What usually sets you off?
3. "Worry about your character; let God worry about your reputation." Where do you need to hear that right now?
4. Where do you need to wait someone out instead of trying to fix them?

LET'S PRAY

Father, some of us decided long ago what love looks like and how much patience people deserve, and we've been waving our arms at the door ever since. Show us a better way. Teach us to love patiently, like Jesus. Our trying isn't nearly enough, but your strength, through your Holy Spirit, is more than we need. In Jesus' name, amen.

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NOTES



CHAPTER

2

Love Is Kind

"...love is kind."

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4 · MATTHEW 11:28–30

THE CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

1. **Patience takes almost anything. Kindness gives almost anything.** *1 Corinthians 13:4*
2. **Following Jesus is a kindness to your soul.** The word for "easy" in his yoke is the word for kind. *Matthew 11:28–30*
3. **Kindness starts at home,** with the people you see first every day.

THE BIG IDEA

I will live my life for the benefit of others, and I will be careful not to use other people's lives for my benefit.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4

"...love is kind."

READ FIRST **Matthew 11:28–30**

[28]Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. [29]Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30]For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

"It's Easy"

Let me tell you how I prepared to teach you about kindness.

It was early in the morning, and I was sitting in bed next to my wife, writing devotionals about kindness. I'm a church leader, remember. I'm on my tablet, probably with the news on, writing about how we're supposed to meet people in their weaknesses and see those weaknesses as opportunities to lend some strength.

Meanwhile my wife is trying to sync her earbuds to her phone.

Now, in the interest of full disclosure, it was my fault she had to sync them at all. I had taken her earbuds to the gym. But she didn't know how to sync them, so she sat there opening the little case and shutting it. Opening it. Shutting it. Opening it. Shutting it.

Every time you open the case, the phone pops up a message that says, in so many words, *Tap here to connect.* The instructions are right there. And she kept opening and shutting the case.

What a moment for a church leader to practice what he preaches. Because if it doesn't start at home, what good am I out here?

Instead, I got irritated. I looked at her and said, "Just touch the screen on the phone." And then I said this: "It's easy."

And I didn't say it nice. I said it like, *Woman, you are interrupting me while I teach my church about kindness.*

That's my point.

It's not that we don't *understand* kindness. We learn it in kindergarten. It's that we don't *do* it. And for way too long, a lot of churches have been so focused on teaching the world about kindness that they forgot to be kind.

Come to Me, All

Jesus said some of the most beautiful words in the Bible right between two hard moments. Just before them, he warned the towns that had seen his miracles and still didn't believe. Just after, he took on religious leaders who had forgotten all about grace. And sandwiched in between, he said this: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened."*

The first word after *come to me* is important. **All.**

NOTES

The religious system of Jesus' day said you had to be smart enough, behave well enough, know the right people and give enough. The standard was always shifting, and nobody ever felt like they measured up. Jesus was done with it. *Come to me, all.* By the way, all means all.

Some people say, *I can't come to Jesus. I've done too much. If he knew who I really was, he wouldn't want me. I can't even come to church.* And Jesus says, *Come to me, all.* No matter what you've done, thought or said.

Two Words Worth Knowing

The word Paul uses for kind is *chrēstotēs*. It means compassion in action. Useful. Helpful. Kindness isn't a feeling about someone. It's something you do for them.

And look at Jesus' words for the people he invites. *Weary* means worked to the point of exhaustion, with nothing left. Jesus knew that feeling. John tells us he sat down at a well in Samaria, *"tired as he was from the journey."* (John 4:6) *Burdened* means a heavy load that keeps getting dumped on you. Later, the apostles would call the religious rules of their day a yoke that *"neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear."* (Acts 15:10)

That's who Jesus calls. People who are tired, and people who've been loaded down. Which is most of us, most days.

Weary and Burdened

Anybody a little tired? There's tired, and then there's weary.

One Sunday a student from our youth group dragged into the first service. I said, "My goodness, do you need some coffee?" She said, "I'm just really tired." I said, "Yeah, but you're here," and she smiled big. She was tired. She wasn't weary.

Jesus himself was weary once, when he sat down by the well in Samaria. (John 4:6) That word means *I've worked so hard, I'm exhausted in my body, my mind and my emotions. I've got nothing left.* Maybe you've been there.

I believe Jesus is also talking about people worn out by religion: the legalism, the judgmentalism, the hypocrisy. In a sense, we're all born a little weary. There's a condition in our soul that needs rest.

Then there's *burdened*. That's the weight life piles on you. Picture being born carrying one weight. It's heavy, but you manage. Then the world starts stacking more on you. And more. Until you're walking around with four hundred pounds on your back.

Jesus says, *"Come to me… and I will give you rest."* And then, *"You will find rest for your souls."*

Your restless soul. The one that knows deep down it doesn't measure up. The one that searches for meaning. The one that tries to numb itself with distractions, whether that's something as damaging as an addiction or as quiet as working all the time, buying things, collecting things. Jesus offers a rest that isn't temporary. It's permanent. Rest that lets you make peace with your past. Rest that comes from forgiveness. Rest that sets you free to live your purpose. Rest that guarantees heaven when this life is over.

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His Yoke Is Kind

Now here's where it connects to 1 Corinthians 13. Jesus says, *"My yoke is easy."*

The word translated *easy* in Matthew 11:30 comes from the same root as the word Paul uses for *kind* in 1 Corinthians 13:4. You could almost read it, *My yoke is kind.*

Taking Jesus' yoke just means saying, *I'll believe in you and follow you.* And when you do, he does a kindness for your soul. He lifts the weary, burdensome weight you've been carrying your whole life.

The ultimate act of kindness is Jesus offering you rest through salvation.

Love is patient. And love is kind.

Myth: Kindness Is Kid Stuff

My biggest fear in teaching this is that you'll dismiss it. *Kindness? We learned that in kindergarten.* I know. My two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter, Emery, is learning to be kind right now. The rest of us are still working on it.

I'm responsible for my generation of believers, and I'll be honest with you. Too many of us who call ourselves Christians spent too many years not acting very Christlike. Instead of drawing the world toward Jesus, we drove the world away from him, often because we were so busy fighting for our rights that we forgot to live right.

There's nothing wrong with protecting what's right. There's something very wrong with not living right while you do it.

It's much easier to preach about what's wrong *out there* than to preach this, because this requires you to do something. This requires an accountability that starts at home before it starts anywhere else.

You could paraphrase 1 Corinthians 13:1–3 this way: *You can change the entire world, but without love you're wasting your time.*

Kindness Starts at Home

That's why I keep coming back to the people closest to you. The closest six. Maybe the closest three. Families walk into church every Sunday looking bright and shiny on the outside, and you might be surprised how many are anything but on the inside.

But when Jesus is invited into a family, the family starts to operate differently. When those families come together as a church, the church operates differently. And when that church moves out into the community, the community starts to wonder why. And they see Jesus.

It isn't natural for me to be gentle and help my wife sync her earbuds. But it's right. She deserves it. And in some small way, it shows her Jesus, and anyone else who might be paying attention.

Patience Takes, Kindness Gives

Here's the difference between the first two colors in the prism.

Patience takes almost anything from somebody without retaliating. **Kindness gives almost anything** to somebody.

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Kindness is a verb. It's a simple commitment: *I'm willing to be useful to you. I'm willing to share your burden. I'm willing to be a helper. I'll give you a little of my time, a little of my attention, a little more of my heart.*

It can be as small as syncing a pair of earbuds. As ordinary as doing the dishes after dinner, helping your child with homework, or listening to your spouse talk about a long day, even when the details are exhausting, because they deserve to be heard.

Here's the line I've had to put in front of myself:

> **I will live my life for the benefit of others, and I will be careful not to use other people's lives for my benefit.**

That's hard. But that's kindness.

Kindness Includes Your Expectations

Here's a burden we don't think about. Sometimes the heaviest thing someone carries is what we expect of them.

Ask yourself honestly:

- Is my happiness with someone in direct proportion to how happy they make me?
- Are there things they have to do to keep our relationship "right"?
- Do I expect people to read my mind?
- Do I get frustrated when the people closest to me don't do what I want?

Paul says, *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."* (Philippians 2:3–4)

And humility isn't thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less often. (Romans 12:3)

Carry Some of the Weight

I once asked a friend to help me show this on a Sunday. I handed him a weight. *You were born carrying this,* I said. *We all were. Born weary, separated from God, trying to figure out how to ease the ache in our soul.* Then I stacked more weights on him, because life does that. The longer you live, the more you carry.

Your spouse is carrying weight, some you see and some you don't. Your kids are carrying weight. Your friends, your coworkers, the people sitting near you at church, all carrying weight they may never talk about.

Kindness comes alongside somebody you love and carries part of the weight for a while.

Maybe I can carry one of his. Maybe two. Maybe I can't, but somebody else in his life picks up another one. And then one day he picks up one of mine. Pretty soon we're so busy carrying each other's burdens that we don't look anything like the world around

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us. Because the world piles on: *Here, carry some more. And when you fall down, I'll find somebody else to carry it.*

Kindness is lending somebody your strength in their moment of weakness.

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Try It This Week

Start with the person you wake up next to, or the first people you see each day. Don't try to change the world until you've loved the people God holds you most responsible for.

MONDAY

The hardest one first. List the people closest to you, no more than six. Skip the easiest one. Pick the most difficult: the one who won't say thank you, the one you don't want to help. Do one kind thing for them today.

Read Ephesians 4:32. Kindness is different from patience. Patience takes. Kindness gives. And Jesus said all, so the difficult people on your list count too.

Pray: "God, I'm usually kind to people who are easy to love. Today help me see a chance to be kind to someone who isn't, and help me follow through."

TUESDAY

The most burdened. Who in your inner circle is carrying the most right now? Sick, stressed, facing exams, overwhelmed. Come alongside them today and carry some of the weight.

Read Matthew 11:28–30. Kids get tired. Parents get overwhelmed. Spouses get stressed. Friends get overloaded. Make your kindness significant today. Think it through, then do it.

Pray: "God, help me notice how tired the people around me really are. Show me one or two who need kindness today, and help me lighten their load."

WEDNESDAY

Drop the weight you added. One of the heaviest burdens we put on people is unrealistic expectations, that quiet tension under the surface when they don't treat us the way we think they should. Ask God which expectation you need to let go.

Read Philippians 2:3–5. Our unrealistic expectations can quietly pile weight on the people we're supposed to love most. Ask yourself whether anyone close to you feels you're impossible to please.

Pray: "God, it's not all about me, but I make it that way. Free me from being demanding and entitled. Help me be accepting, gracious and grateful."

THURSDAY

Listen. This one's hard for me. Today, be kind by listening, no matter what they say or how long it takes to get to the point. Don't interrupt. Don't point your feet at the door. Don't sigh.

Read Romans 12:3. Listening is humility in action. Being heard is a need we all have. Today, no rushing, no interrupting, no finishing their sentences.

Pray: "God, you listen to me even when what I say isn't that important. Help me listen like that today, with real interest, all day long."

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FRIDAY

Go public. Do something kind for someone who can't possibly pay you back.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:9. Everyone has weak spots: personality, health, technology, a busy season. Instead of being irritated by someone's weakness, lend them your strength.

Pray: "God, today is a day of helping. Remind me I'm not doing this for a thank-you. I'm doing it for you, and for what it changes in me."

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KEY TRUTHS

- Patience takes almost anything. Kindness gives almost anything.
- Jesus' yoke is kind. Following him lifts the weight off your soul (Matthew 11:28–30).
- Kindness starts at home, with the people God holds you most responsible for.
- Kindness lends your strength to someone in their moment of weakness.

For Reflection

CHAPTER 2 · 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4

1. Where are you weary right now? Where are you burdened? What would it look like to bring that to Jesus this week?
2. When was the last time you said "It's easy" (or something like it) in a way that wasn't kind?
3. Who in your closest circle is carrying the most weight right now? What could you carry for them?
4. Read the line again: "I will live my life for the benefit of others, and I will be careful not to use other people's lives for my benefit." Where does that hit closest to home?

LET'S PRAY

Father, too often we've been right, but unkind. And rightness without kindness isn't what you had in mind. Thank you for the kindness of Jesus, who took the weight we couldn't carry. Make us kind, starting at home, then in our church, our community and all over the world. In Jesus' name, amen.

‹ START OF CHAPTER CONTENTS PAUSE AND PRAY ›

NOTES

A STRATEGIC PAUSE

Pause and Pray

A strategic pause between kindness and the rest of the list

When I taught this series, after two weeks on patience and kindness, I didn't move on to th
of us had those two down yet. So we stopped and prayed.

I'll be honest. Growing up, I didn't have great experiences with prayer services. A lot of pec
couldn't connect with. It felt excruciating. But I'm convinced that prayer should never be l
greatest tools God uses to change us.

The night before that prayer service, our granddaughter, Emery, FaceTimed us. She was tw
button herself and holds the phone. I saw it was my daughter-in-law's number, so I knew
answered with my biggest smile and said, "Emery!"

She took one look at my face, screamed, dropped the phone and ran the other way yelling,
want to talk to Grandma Joy!"

That was humbling. My wife said it would help me understand her better. That was a who

Here's the good news: God never looks at you and runs the other way. When you come to h

So before you turn the page, pause here. Take a few minutes and pray through what you've

> **Patience:** *God, who in my inner circle needs me to be slow-burning this week? Change r*

> **Kindness:** *God, whose weight can I carry? Where have I been right, but unkind?*

> **Your next step:** *God, what are you asking me to do before I read any further?*

If you're reading this with a group, pray for each other by name. Then turn the page.

‹ CHAPTER 2 CONTENTS CHAPTER 3 ›

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CHAPTER

3

Want It, Got It, Flaunt It

"It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud."

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4 · LUKE 15:11–32 · EPHESIANS 2:8–10

THE CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

1. **Envy is the thought, bragging is the words, pride is what you become.** *1 Corinthians 13:4*
2. **Envy makes you forget what you already have.** *Luke 15:31*
3. **The ground is level at the foot of the cross.** We're saved by grace, so no one can boast. *Ephesians 2:8–10*

THE BIG IDEA

Envy makes you forget what you already have.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4

"It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud."

READ FIRST

Luke 15:25–32

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 31 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

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My Confession

I'll go first. I'll confess my envy right here.

I am jealous of women. Not for the reason you think. I'm jealous because women get to carry purses.

Think about it. Phone, keys, wallet, glasses, charger, gum, a pen, a granola bar, the receipt you might need someday. Ladies, you have a place for all of it, and nobody looks at you twice. I have pockets. And my pockets are full.

Now, I'm a bag collector. I love a good bag. Backpacks, briefcases, travel bags, I've got them. But a man purse? Culturally, for me, that's a stretch. I just can't pull it off. I've tried. I still need a place to put my stuff, and every time I see a woman reach into her purse and pull out exactly what she needs, I feel a little twinge.

That's funny, and it's harmless. But that little twinge, *why do they get that and I don't?*, is the same seed that turned two brothers against each other in one of the most famous stories Jesus ever told.

Love is patient. Love is kind. And then Paul turns a corner. He stops telling us what love does and starts telling us what love doesn't do: *"It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud."*

I'm taking these three together, because they never travel alone. Envy is the thought. Bragging is the words. Pride is what you become. **Want it. Got it. Flaunt it.**

The word Paul uses for proud means *puffed up*, like a balloon. Big on the outside, nothing but air on the inside. And he uses it six times in First Corinthians. Five of those are aimed straight at the church in Corinth before he ever gets to chapter 13. (1 Corinthians 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4) Factions fighting over which leader was best. Rich people eating first at the Lord's Supper while the poor went hungry. Christians competing over whose spiritual gift was more impressive. That's not a church with a little love problem around the edges. That's a church puffed up all the way through.

And friends, before we shake our heads at them, let's be honest. We have a lot of air in us too.

Want It: Envy

Envy isn't just wanting something. Wanting is fine. I want a lot of things. Envy is wanting what *you* have, and resenting you for having it.

It has two halves. The first half says, *I want what you've got.* The second half is darker: *And if I can't have it, I don't want you to have it either.*

The stuff is the easy part to spot: the truck, the house, the boat. But most of us envy things we'd never say out loud. Someone's marriage. Someone's kids. Someone's health. Someone's influence, or the way people light up when they walk into a room. And now we carry a device in our pocket that shows us, all day long, everything everybody else has that we don't.

Jesus told a story about envy. You know it as the story of the prodigal son, but look at the other son, the older brother. When he hears the music, *"the older brother became angry and refused to go in."* That's the second half of envy: *You can have your party. I'm not coming.* Then he says, *"You never gave me even a young goat."* That's the first half: *I wanted that. Why does he get it?*

Envy didn't make the older brother any richer. It just made him the one person standing outside the party.

Two Kinds of Envy

The word for envy here is *zēloō*. It's where we get the word zeal. A boiling, burning desire. And the Bible shows us two kinds.

The first kind wants what you have. Jesus told a story about workers hired at different hours of the day. At quitting time, the boss paid everyone the same. The ones who'd worked all day were furious. Not because they were cheated. They got exactly what they agreed to. They were angry because somebody else got something they didn't think he deserved. The owner asked, *"Are you envious because I am generous?"* (Matthew 20:1–15)

The second kind wants you not to have it. Two women came to King Solomon, both claiming the same baby. When Solomon offered to cut the child in two, the real mother cried out, *Give her the baby.* The other said, in effect, *If I can't have him, neither can you.* (1 Kings 3:16–27)

That second kind is darker than selfishness. It's wanting something bad to happen to someone else. And if we're honest, most of us have felt a little of it.

Got It: Bragging

Envy lives on the inside. Bragging is what leaks out.

Listen to the older brother: *"Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders."* Look at me. Look at my record. And then: *"But when this son of yours…"* He doesn't say *my brother*. He says *this son of yours*.

That's how bragging works. It's never just "I'm good." It's "I'm good, and he's not." It builds me up by tearing you down.

Years ago I lived in Marin County, California, and I was trying to get in shape. Not stay in shape. Get in shape. And for some reason I decided sprinting would be a great way

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to do it. I'm not sure why anybody would ever think that, but I did.

So I went to a running store to buy some track spikes. I didn't want to spend much money, because I'd been here before and I knew I wasn't going to need them for long. The owner went to the back and came out with a box. The spikes were multicolored, with silver and gold on them, in a very particular design. Anyone who knew track would recognize them. Flashy. I bought them.

I drove to the track, sat on the tailgate of my truck and started lacing them up. A car pulled up, and four guys got out. It was obvious they were not there to get in shape. They looked like they belonged on a track. They looked at my shoes, and I saw recognition in their eyes. Then they asked if I wanted to warm up with them.

I should have known better. But I was flattered, so I said yes.

We started running, and I quickly realized they were in a whole different class. So I did what any of you would have done. I faked a calf injury, limped over to the side of the track and sat there watching them work out.

I found out later they were training for the U.S. Olympic team, alongside Michael Johnson. That made me feel a little better. And I finally understood why they'd invited me. Those spikes were only given out to world-class athletes. The store owner supplied them to the track team, and he'd had a few pairs left over from a couple of years before. I bought them without knowing their pedigree. When those guys saw them on my feet, they figured I was one of them, someone who could run with them. I wasn't. I'd just bought the leftovers.

The shoes said one thing about me. The truth said something else. That's what puffed up looks like: dressing the part, enjoying being mistaken for something you're not, and then faking an injury so nobody sees what's really under the shoes.

Only Once in the Bible

The word for boast, *perpereuomai*, shows up exactly once in the whole New Testament. Right here. It means to brag, to talk yourself up, to be a windbag.

Bragging puts me first, and God and everybody else second. And Jesus did the exact opposite. *"He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross!"* (Philippians 2:8)

James gives us the way out: *"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."* (James 4:10) You don't have to lift yourself up. That's God's job. He's better at it.

Flaunt It: Puffed Up

Put envy and bragging together long enough and you get pride. And Paul asks the Corinthians a question that pops the balloon:

> **"What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"**
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 4:7

You didn't choose where you were born. You didn't choose your parents. You didn't pick your brain, your body, your personality or the people who opened doors for you.

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Your next breath is a gift.

I know this one personally. My dad is a scholar. Not a guy-who-reads-a-lot scholar. A real one, a world-class one. PhD. Professor. Author. He's spent his entire life educating people.

So when I was growing up, everybody assumed I'd follow in his footsteps. They also assumed that, being his son, I was a world-class scholar too.

It did not take me long to clear that up.

Some kids inherit their dad's brains. I inherited his last name. Same genes, different download. Somewhere along the way the scholar part got lost in shipping.

But here's what I did get. Doors opened for me early in life that never would have opened without him. Opportunities I didn't apply for, didn't study for and definitely didn't test into. People gave me a chance because of who my father was. I didn't earn any of it. I inherited it. I tried to make the most of it, and I hope I made him proud.

The older brother thought he had earned everything. But he was born into that family. The farm, the house, the work, the inheritance were all gifts from his father before he ever lifted a finger. He was so busy keeping score that he forgot he was a son.

◆ Myth: I'm Self-Made

None of us is self-made. Not one.

That's not a popular thing to say. We love the story of the person who pulled himself up by his own bootstraps. But Paul's question still stands: *What do you have that you did not receive?* Even the ability to work hard is a gift.

The older brother believed his own press release. He'd been faithful. He'd followed the rules. And somewhere along the way he decided the gifts were wages.

◆ Everything I Have Is Yours

Now watch the father. He doesn't stay at the party and let his older son sulk. He leaves his own celebration, walks out into the field and pleads with him. And then he says the most beautiful thing in the story:

> **"My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."**
> LUKE 15:31

The older brother was envious of a goat while standing on a ranch that already belonged to him. That's what envy does. It doesn't just make you want what someone else has. It makes you forget what you already have.

And don't think envy is a small sin. It's at the root of so much in the Bible.

- Cain envied Abel, and the first murder followed. (Genesis 4)
- Joseph's brothers envied him, threw him in a pit and sold him. (Genesis 37)
- When the religious leaders handed Jesus over to be crucified, Pilate knew why: *"For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him."* (Matthew 27:18) The Greek word there is envy.

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James says it plainly: *"For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice."* (James 3:16)

Envy is a seed. Give it a little room and it grows into bragging, then pride, then division, then every evil practice. That's why we deal with it at the seed.

The Ground Is Level at the Foot of the Cross

So how do we let the air out? Paul answers it in Ephesians:

> **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."**
>
> EPHESIANS 2:8–10

Read that middle line again. **So that no one can boast.**

The person with perfect attendance and the person who just walked in for the first time were saved the exact same way: by grace. It doesn't matter what's in your bank account, what you drove up in, what neighborhood you live in or how many degrees are on your wall. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.

And then Paul tells us who we are: God's *handiwork*. His masterpiece. If you're God's masterpiece, you don't need to be someone else's. If God has prepared good works for you, you don't need to want theirs. Nobody's in competition.

So instead of envy, we get to do what Paul says in Romans: *"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."* (Romans 12:15) And instead of bragging on ourselves, we get to brag on God.

When You Get It Wrong

Here's the thing about envy, bragging and pride. They hurt the people closest to us first. Jesus said, *"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."* (John 15:12) That means we're accountable to love the people closest to us. And when we don't, we need to make it right.

I've learned a few things about apologizing.

- **An apology doesn't have to be accepted to be right.** You do your part. Their response is theirs.
- **When someone really owns it, let it be over.** Don't make them earn it back for a month.

And here's a simple way to remember what a real apology sounds like. Spell it out:

- **A**dmit it. *I was wrong.* No "if I hurt you."
- **P**ut it right away. Don't let it sit for days.
- **O**ffer understanding, not excuses. *Here's what was going on with me*, without making it their fault.
- **L**ose the "but." *I'm sorry, but…* isn't an apology.
- **O**nly say what you mean. Don't promise what you won't do.
- **G**et specific. Name what you did and how it landed.

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- You matter to me. Say it. That's why you're apologizing in the first place.

Celebrating While She's in Denial

Like a lot of wives, mine decided at some point that she was done celebrating birthdays. Now, to be fair, she doesn't mind a party. She loves a party. She just doesn't want to talk about the number.

Recently she had a big one. I'm not going to tell you which one. I like being married.

So we celebrated, and I learned something. One person can celebrate while the other person is in complete denial, and it can still be a party. I was rejoicing. She was pretending it was a regular Tuesday. Both of us had a great time.

That's what rejoicing with others looks like. You don't have to feel exactly what they feel. You don't have to be the one getting the gift, the promotion, the attention or the cake. You just have to be glad for them, and show up to the party.

The older brother could have done that. The father wasn't asking him to pretend his brother hadn't messed up. He was just asking him to come inside. And the party went on with or without him.

So here's my question. When God does something good for someone else, are you in the room celebrating, or standing out in the field with your arms crossed?

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Try It This Week

MONDAY

Notice the twinge. Somebody will post, announce or receive something today, and you'll feel it. Don't scold yourself. Just name it: "That's envy." Then thank God for one thing he's already given you.

Read James 3:16. Envy is a seed. Left alone, it grows into bragging and pride. Catching it early is half the battle.

Pray: "God, when I feel that twinge today, help me name it, and then help me thank you for what you've already given me."

TUESDAY

Rejoice with someone. Find one person who has something to celebrate, and celebrate them out loud, especially if it's something you wish you had.

Read Romans 12:15. Rejoicing with someone else is the fastest way to starve envy. It feels backward. Do it anyway.

Pray: "God, help me celebrate someone today, especially if they have something I wish I had."

WEDNESDAY

Count your gifts. Read 1 Corinthians 4:7. Write down five things you have that you didn't earn.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:7. Nothing you have came from you. Not your breath, your mind or your opportunities. Grace levels the ground.

Pray: "God, everything I have is a gift. Forgive me for acting like I earned it."

THURSDAY

Brag on God, and on someone else. No stories about you today. Tell someone what God has done, and tell someone else what you admire in a third person.

Read Jeremiah 9:23–24. If you're going to brag, brag about God. And brag on someone else. Watch what it does to the room.

Pray: "God, let the story I tell today be about you, not me. Help me notice what's good in someone else and say it out loud."

FRIDAY

Ask the hard question. Ask someone close to you, "Where do you see envy, bragging or pride in me?" Then don't defend yourself. Just say thank you.

Read Ephesians 2:8–10. Ask someone close to you where they see envy, bragging or pride in you. Then don't defend yourself. Just say thank you, and if needed, apologize.

Pray: "God, give me the courage to ask, the humility to listen, and the grace to make it right where I need to."

Read Ephesians 2:8–10 every morning this week.

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KEY TRUTHS

- Envy is the seed, bragging is what leaks out, and pride is what grows (1 Corinthians 13:4).
- Everything you have, you received (1 Corinthians 4:7).
- We're saved by grace, so no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8–9).
- Love rejoices with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15).

For Reflection

1. What's your "purse": something harmless you envy? What's something not so harmless?
2. Where are you tempted to dress the part, like a pair of flashy track spikes?
3. Name three things you have that you didn't earn. Who gave them to you?
4. Whose good news do you need to celebrate, even if part of you would rather stand outside the party?

LET'S PRAY

Father, thank you that everything we have is a gift from you. Forgive us for the times we've stood outside the party, keeping score, wanting what you gave someone else, while everything you have was already ours. Let the air out of our pride. Make us people who rejoice when others rejoice and who brag only about you. Thank you that the ground is level at the foot of the cross, and that we are your handiwork. In Jesus' name, amen.

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CHAPTER

4

Love Isn't Rude

"It does not dishonor others…"

1 CORINTHIANS 13:5 · HEBREWS 10:22–25

THE CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

1. **Love isn't rude.** It cares about the wake it leaves behind. *1 Corinthians 13:5*
2. **Draw near, hold on, and consider each other.** Faith, hope and love in a Christian family. *Hebrews 10:22–25*
3. **One of the rudest things we can do is take each other lightly.** *Hebrews 10:25*

THE BIG IDEA

God does things in you when you're with his people that he will not do in you when you're by yourself.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:5

"It does not dishonor others…"

READ FIRST

Hebrews 10:22–25

22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and
with the full assurance that faith brings, having
our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty
conscience and having our bodies washed with
pure water. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope
we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And
let us consider how we may spur one another on
toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up
meeting together, as some are in the habit of
doing, but encouraging one another—and all the
more as you see the Day approaching.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

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Don't

My wife and I were at a Walmart in Arkansas. Consider that for a second. We were driving down an aisle in the parking lot looking for a spot, and there was a lady walking to her car right down the middle of the aisle. Slowly. Doing the shuffle. That's fine. I'm glad she was out shopping.

Then she stopped. Right in the middle of the aisle. And looked down at her phone. I guess she was answering a text.

I waited five seconds and looked at my wife. And my wife said one word: "Don't."

I don't know what she thought I was going to do. But she was probably right.

Now, kindness gives ten seconds, so I gave ten seconds. She didn't move. Twenty seconds. I may have revved the engine a little. She didn't hear it, or didn't care. And I said, "That was rude."

Later my wife and I talked about it. My take was, *Surely she had no idea anybody was waiting.* My wife, who is more realistic and, as usual, probably right, said, *Oh, she knew exactly what she was doing. She just didn't care.*

There's a difference between not knowing and not caring. But either way, somebody else pays for it.

This one is so simple I almost skipped it. A lot of people who teach 1 Corinthians 13 lump it in with the others. Don't skip it. It'll land if you give it time.

"It does not dishonor others." That doesn't mean you're insulting someone's mother or challenging them to a duel. The word means to behave in an unseemly way, to act without grace or courtesy. Put simply: **love isn't rude.**

And friends, we're living in a renaissance of rudeness. We're a rude, friction-filled society that pushes people away with our behavior, our attitudes and our sense of entitlement. And it isn't just out there. It's in the church too.

The Wake You Leave

I picture each of our lives like a boat crossing a lake. You can't drive a boat across a lake without leaving a wake. The wake is biggest right behind the boat, where it hits the people closest to you. But the ripples keep going, all the way to the shore, and they're felt for a long time.

Love is concerned about the wake.

The Top Five

I Googled the rudest behaviors in America, so you know it's true. Here are the top five. You may find yourself on this list.

1. **Using your speakerphone in public.** Especially when the person on the other end doesn't know they're on speaker.
2. **Interrupting.** Finishing somebody's sentence for them. *Oh, I know what you're thinking.* Stop it.
3. **Talking with your mouth full.** Chewing like a cow. Elbows on the table. My grandmother was a big manners person. She taught me which fork goes where. I forgot all of it, which is rude of me, but at least I knew better.
4. **Standing too close.** In line, or when you're talking. You step back, they step forward, and pretty soon you're pinned against a wall and you know what they had for dinner yesterday.
5. **Being late.** When I asked friends what bugged them most, almost everybody said this one. *Your time is more important than my time?*

I'd add one that isn't on the list: blowing your grass clippings into the road. When you ride a motorcycle, like I do, grass clippings on the road are like ice. When you drive a Jeep with the top off, like I do, the car in front of you kicks them up and they land on you. I'm wearing your yard, and all I did was drive by your house.

We laugh, but here's the thing. Someone once said that when you're dead, you don't know you're dead, but everyone around you grieves. Rudeness is the same way. Sometimes we don't know we're rude, but everyone around us pays the price.

Why does that matter so much? Because the gospel is buried inside us, and it shows best through the cracks of an ordinary life. The more friction we cause, the harder it is for anyone to see Jesus. So we try to live as frictionlessly as we can.

Personal, Practical, Public

The book of Hebrews was written to believers learning to live together after coming out of religion, legalism and judgment. In Hebrews 10, the writer gives them three instructions. One is personal, one is practical and one is public. The last one is where rudeness lives, but you need all three.

Personal: draw near. *"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings."* (Hebrews 10:22) The first readers were counting on their good works, their intelligence or their family pedigree. *I was born into a religious family, so I'll probably be fine.* The writer says, *No. Remember, it's by God's grace and your faith that you've been set free.* That's the organizing principle of your life. What do you want to be known for? I want to be known for my faith, and I hope you do too.

Practical: hold on. *"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."* (Hebrews 10:23) Life gets hard. Sometimes a person wounds you. Sometimes a circumstance blindsides you. Sometimes it seems to come out of nowhere. And we look at God and say, *If you loved me, this wouldn't be happening.* The writer knows that. Biblical hope isn't "I hope it doesn't rain." It's a reality built on

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facts: you've been saved by grace, your sins are forgiven, your life has meaning and your future is guaranteed. So don't swerve.

Are you tempted to swerve right now? Tired? Disillusioned? God gets it. Draw near in faith, hold on to hope, and don't swerve, because he is faithful.

Public: consider each other. *"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds."* (Hebrews 10:24) That's where we're headed next.

◆ Spur One Another On

I've ridden horses, but nobody has ever trusted me with spurs. If you've seen someone use them, you know it doesn't look particularly pleasant for the horse. The word in Hebrews 10:24 is a prodding word, an irritant. But here it's used for something good: *consider how you can be so considerate of each other that you're in a position to nudge each other toward love and good deeds.*

When you become a believer, you're adopted into a family. Sometimes we act like we're God's only child, and all that matters is me and Jesus. But God made us interdependent. That's not a guilt trip to grow a bigger church. It's the blueprint for how you become who God made you to be.

Some people feel like something is missing spiritually, and they can't figure out what. Sometimes the problem isn't only between them and God. It's that they're living disconnected from God's family, as if they don't need anybody.

◆ Myth: Church Is a Place I Go

The writer of Hebrews says, *"not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another."* (Hebrews 10:25)

Church isn't a place you go to get what you want, and if you don't like it, go somewhere else. Church is an identity you embrace. We are the church.

Here's something I know is true, even if I can't fully explain it. **God does things in you when you're with his people that he will not do in you when you're by yourself.**

Remember the Corinthians? They turned the Lord's Supper into a popularity contest. They yelled over each other to show off their spiritual gifts. Inconsiderate. Rude. But one of the rudest things I can do to you is take you lightly. And one of the rudest things we can do to God is take his family lightly.

When we drift from God's people, we start to swerve. Our salvation is still intact, but our faith becomes a distant memory. The things that used to make sense don't anymore, because the organizing principle of our life has slipped away.

◆ Present, Engaged, Polite

So how do we love each other in a way that isn't rude? Three simple steps.

1. **Be present.** Show up. Presence matters for two reasons: you need it, and even more, the people around you need it.
2. **Be engaged.** Ever talk to someone who keeps looking over your shoulder for someone more important? A friend told me one of the rudest things a family

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member does is talk to him on the phone while obviously cleaning, lobbing answers back and forth. He finally says, "Call me back when you have time." Engaged means you walk in saying, *God, I'm available today. If someone near me is starting to swerve, show me.*

3. **Be polite.** Look for ways to make things better for the people around you.

My wife and I once spent a week in Arkansas taking care of our granddaughter, Emery, while her parents went on vacation. She was two and a half. Their instructions were simple: *Keep her alive, and return her in the condition we gave her to you. No scratches. No dents.*

Now, parents, I know. You do this every day. For you it's no big deal. For us, it was a big deal. Two-and-a-half-year-olds are fast, and we were out of practice. We did tea parties. We watched every princess movie ever made. I went to gymnastics. I also learned that a two-and-a-half-year-old negotiates like a terrorist. I'd say, "If you do this, I'll do that." She'd say, "Okay." I'd keep my end of the deal and say, "Your turn." And she'd say, "Uh-uh." I fell for it three or four times.

About three days in, I looked at my wife and asked, "What do you want to do today?" She said, "It doesn't matter what I want to do today." Not with a chip on her shoulder. Just matter-of-fact. Then she said, "It doesn't matter what you want to do either. We came here on a mission. We came to invest in this little girl."

So when Emery wanted to talk, even when it was mostly jibber-jabber, I didn't look past her. I got down on her level, asked questions and told her how wonderful she was.

My wife was right. By giving ourselves away that week, we ended up tired, but the best kind of tired in the world.

That's us. We're on a mission. Love is a lot more than not being rude. But it's never less.

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Try It This Week

Before anything else: think of someone who may be starting to swerve. Send them a text right now. Don't make it churchy, and please don't make it weird. Something simple, in your own words: I see you. I love you. I'm praying for you.

MONDAY

Draw near. Write down three things you're thankful for about your salvation.

Read Hebrews 10:19–22. Before you can be considerate of others, remember what God did for you. You didn't earn your way in. You were brought near.

Pray: "God, thank you for saving me. Let that gratitude change how I treat the people around me today."

TUESDAY

Hold on. If you didn't send that text, send it today.

Read Hebrews 10:23. Hope isn't wishful thinking. It's holding on to what's true when life is shaking. Someone near you may be starting to swerve.

Pray: "God, show me who needs to hear from me today, and give me simple words: I see you, I love you, I'm praying for you."

WEDNESDAY

Your rude list. Look at the top-five list. Add your own. Ask someone close to you which ones you do.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4–5. Rude is usually unaware. Everyone else notices but us. Ask someone you trust which items on the list fit you.

Pray: "God, show me where I'm making life harder for people without even knowing it. Help me leave a smaller wake."

THURSDAY

Take your place. What's your next step in God's family: showing up, joining a group, serving, inviting?

Read Hebrews 10:24–25. Church isn't a place you go. It's a family you belong to. Being there for each other is how we spur each other on.

Pray: "God, show me my next step in your family, and help me take it this week."

FRIDAY

Why it's worth it. Read Psalm 92:12–15. What does God promise to those planted in his house?

Read Psalm 92:12–15. People planted in God's house flourish, even in old age. Showing up is worth it.

Pray: "God, plant me deep in your family. Make me someone who makes others want to stay."

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KEY TRUTHS

- Love doesn't dishonor others. It cares about the wake it leaves (1 Corinthians 13:5).
- Draw near in faith, hold on to hope, and consider each other (Hebrews 10:22–24).
- Church isn't a place you go. It's a family you belong to (Hebrews 10:25).
- Be present, be engaged, be polite.

For Reflection

CHAPTER 4 · 1 CORINTHIANS 13:5

1. What's on your personal rude list, things you do without realizing it?
2. Who feels the biggest part of your wake?
3. Have you ever been tempted to swerve? What helped you hold on?
4. What's one way you've been taking God's family lightly?

LET'S PRAY

Father, the church isn't a place we visit and leave when we want to. It's who we are, your family. Make us present, engaged and considerate. Show us the people around us who are starting to swerve, and use us to spur them on. Make our lives smooth enough that people can see Jesus through the cracks. In Jesus' name, amen.

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CHAPTER

5

What Do You Need, What Can You Give Up?

"...it is not self-seeking..."

1 CORINTHIANS 13:5 · 1 CORINTHIANS 6:9–11 · 1 CORINTHIANS 10:24

THE CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

1. **Love isn't self-seeking.** It asks, *What do I need, and what can I give up? 1 Corinthians 13:5*
2. **It's okay to be new. It's not okay to stay new.** *1 Corinthians 6:11*
3. **Read 1 Corinthians 13 through Corinth's eyes,** and it stops being a wedding reading and starts being a plan. *1 Corinthians 10:24*

THE BIG IDEA

It's okay to be new. It's not okay to stay new.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:5

"...it is not self-seeking..."

READ FIRST **1 Corinthians 6:9–11**

[9]Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men [10]nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. [11]And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

The Hand at My Plate

The week my wife and I took care of our granddaughter, Emery, we learned a lot about mealtime.

Emery is two and a half, and she didn't love what I fed her. I eat chicken and lean pork. Two-and-a-half-year-olds do not eat chicken and lean pork. So at mealtime she would walk around the table, her eyes just barely above the edge, checking out everybody's plate. When she saw something she wanted, she'd stick out her little hand, palm up, and wait for you to put it there.

So I did. Then she went to my wife's plate, and my wife did too. She circled that table like a shark. She was self-seeking. She didn't give up a thing. She demanded everything.

And that's okay, because she's two and a half. You expect a two-and-a-half-year-old to act like one.

It's a problem when she's fifteen and still walking up to your plate with her hand out.

Love *"is not self-seeking."* (1 Corinthians 13:5) It isn't preoccupied with serving itself. Paul says it even more directly a few chapters earlier: *"No one should seek their own good, but the good of others."* (1 Corinthians 10:24)

In this chapter I want to do something a little different. I want to take you to Corinth. Because when you understand the city and the church Paul was writing to, 1 Corinthians 13 stops sounding like a wedding reading and starts sounding like a rescue plan.

Welcome to Corinth

Paul arrived in Corinth on his second missionary journey and planted a church there around AD 51.

Corinth sat on a narrow strip of land, an isthmus, connecting northern and southern Greece, about forty-five miles from Athens. Sailing around the southern tip of Greece was so dangerous that ship captains told their crews to get their affairs in order. So instead, crews dragged their ships across that four-mile strip of land and stopped in Corinth to resupply. And to party.

Corinth was the Las Vegas of the ancient world. Rome had destroyed it and rebuilt it, so Rome ran the government, but the culture was Greek. The streets were full of

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Roman officials, ex-soldiers, freed slaves, a handful of Jews, and travelers from everywhere: traders, thieves, storytellers, teachers and every religion you can imagine. There was a temple for every god. Above the city, on a 2,000-foot plateau, stood a fortress and a temple to the goddess of love, and ancient writers say temple prostitution was part of the worship there. The city held athletic games in honor of Poseidon. Its reputation was so bad that people coined a phrase: *living like a Corinthian.*

Can you imagine how hard it was to follow Jesus there?

And then Paul showed up, started telling people about Jesus the Messiah, and a church took root. A little spark. Paul spent a few years fanning that spark into a flame. Then he left, and word came back that the church was in trouble.

That Is What Some of You Were

Read the list in Read First again. Paul isn't saying that anyone who ever does wrong goes to hell. I'm a wrongdoer. So are you. He's describing a life of known, unconfessed sin with no conscience about it and no desire to change. That's the life many of the Corinthians came out of.

And then he says the most hopeful sentence in the paragraph: *"And that is what some of you were. But you were washed."*

Nobody in that church had been a Christian more than three or four years. Paul didn't expect them to be perfect. He expected them to make a break from the old life and start living a different way. **It's okay to be new. It's not okay to stay new.**

I love that little church in Corinth. I helped start a church on a university campus in British Columbia once, because students came there from all over the world, earned their degrees and went home. Reach them, and you reach the world. That's exactly what Paul was doing in Corinth. Travelers came through from everywhere, caught the gospel and carried it home.

Going on a Bear Hunt

If you've raised a toddler, you know "Going on a Bear Hunt." Emery and I have been on bear hunts, unicorn hunts and Bigfoot hunts. Every time you come to an obstacle, you sing it: *Can't go over it. Can't go under it. Can't go around it. Gotta go through it.*

That's how you read the Bible. When you hit something hard to understand, something countercultural, something you don't like, you don't go over it, under it or around it. You go through it. And First Corinthians has some things you have to go through.

When you read the whole letter, you'll find Paul dealing with about ten problems in this church. Here they are, roughly in order:

1. **Fighting over leaders.** They split into camps behind their favorite preacher. (Chapters 1–4)
2. **Tolerating sin.** A man was in an ongoing relationship with his stepmother, and the church shrugged. Paul said even the pagans wouldn't put up with that. (Chapter 5)

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3. **Suing each other in public.** Lawsuits were a spectator sport in Greek culture. Paul said, in effect, *Handle it among yourselves. Stay off Facebook.* (Chapter 6)
4. **Treating sex as "just physical."** The culture said it was an urge, nothing more. Paul said it's a beautiful picture God gave for a husband and wife, and it matters. (Chapter 6)
5. **Confusion about marriage and singleness.** Some thought everyone should stay single; Paul said singleness is a gift for some, and marriage is good. (Chapter 7)
6. **Food offered to idols.** Paul's answer: watch out for the brother or sister with a weaker conscience. (Chapters 8–10)
7. **Head coverings.** A local custom; the timeless principle is to be modest and considerate of one another. (Chapter 11)
8. **Cliques at the Lord's Supper.** The rich ate first and the poor went hungry. (Chapter 11)
9. **Competing over spiritual gifts.** Paul's answer: decently and in order, because nobody wins unless we all win. (Chapters 12–14)
10. **Confusion about the resurrection of the body.** Paul's answer: your body is a tent, and one day it will be raised and made perfect. (Chapter 15)

Read that list again and ask what's at the root of almost every one of them. *Me first.* My leader. My rights. My appetite. My freedom. My status. My gift.

◆ Read It Again, Through Corinth's Eyes

Now read 1 Corinthians 13 knowing all that. Paul isn't writing a greeting card. He's applying love to a church full of friction, misunderstanding and brand-new believers who'd never seen any of this modeled.

Love is patient: be patient with each other, the way I've been patient with you. *Love is kind:* just be kind. *It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud:* I'm not better than you, and you're not better than the person next to you. It doesn't matter what's in your bank account, what you drove up in or how many degrees you have. *It does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking.*

And I picture the Corinthians reading that and saying, *Paul, this is hard.* And Paul answering, in my paraphrase: *Yes, it's hard. But it's worth it.*

◆ Myth: Love Means I Get What I Need

Our culture says relationships are about getting your needs met. Find someone who completes you. If they stop meeting your needs, find someone else.

Love that isn't self-seeking flips the question. Not *Am I getting what I need?* but *What do I need, and what can I give up?*

My wife loves exotic food. The more exotic the better. I'm a plain eater with a sensitive stomach. When we lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, we knew we were surrounded by food from all over the world that you can't find in a lot of the country. So I agreed that every week we'd try a different cuisine from a different country.

About three weeks in, I started keeping a bottle of Pepto-Bismol in my glove compartment.

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During dinner I'd excuse myself, sneak out to the car and do shots. Not that kind of shot. Shots of the pink stuff. Just so I could stay at the table with her while she enjoyed her food.

Indian restaurants rate their dishes with stars for how spicy they are. My wife wanted all the stars. I wanted no stars. Just Pepto.

Sometimes love looks like a bottle of Pepto in the glove compartment.

The Big Sister Strategy

My grandson, Roecker, is still very young. And the biggest thing he's taught me about love is something I learned watching his big sister love him.

For a while we were all a little worried. He seemed late to walk. Late to talk. Then we figured it out. He didn't need to. Emery did everything for him. She fetched, she carried, she talked for him. All he had to do was sit there and be the center of the universe.

Honestly, if you can sit still and let the world come to you, that's a pretty good strategy.

It just doesn't work long term.

In every family there's someone who serves and someone who gets served. Love isn't self-seeking. Be the big sister.

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Try It This Week

Read all of First Corinthians this week, three chapters a day, four on Friday. Keep the ten problems in mind as you read. When you hit something hard, go through it.

MONDAY

Chapters 1–3. Where do you see "me first" in the church at Corinth? Where do you see it in you?

Read 1 Corinthians 1–3. Corinth was a church full of new believers still acting like Corinthians. It's okay to be new. It's not okay to stay new.

Pray: "God, show me where I'm still living me-first, and help me grow up in you."

TUESDAY

Chapters 4–6. Read 6:11 out loud: *"But you were washed."* Thank God for what you used to be.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:11. Paul reminds them who they used to be, and who God made them. Your past doesn't get the last word.

Pray: "God, thank you for washing me. Help me treat others the way you've treated me."

WEDNESDAY

Chapters 7–9. Ask, "What can I give up so someone else can enjoy this?"

Read 1 Corinthians 8:13. Sometimes love means giving up something that's fine for you so it doesn't trip up someone else.

Pray: "God, show me one thing I can give up this week so someone else can do well."

THURSDAY

Chapters 10–12. Read 10:24. Do one thing today for someone else's good instead of your own.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:24. "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others." One act today, for someone else's good.

Pray: "God, help me notice where I'm reaching for my own good, and turn my hand toward someone else's."

FRIDAY

Chapters 13–16. Read 1 Corinthians 13 again, as a letter to a real church. What does it say to yours?

Read 1 Corinthians 13. Read the love chapter as a letter to a real, messy church. Then read it as a letter to yours, and to you.

Pray: "God, I want to love like this. Not just know it. Do it."

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KEY TRUTHS

- Love isn't self-seeking (1 Corinthians 13:5). It seeks the good of others (1 Corinthians 10:24).
- It's okay to be new. It's not okay to stay new (1 Corinthians 6:11).
- When Scripture is hard, don't go around it. Go through it.
- Sometimes love looks like a bottle of Pepto in the glove compartment.

For Reflection

CHAPTER 5 · 1 CORINTHIANS 13:5

1. Where are you still walking around the table with your hand out?
2. Which of the ten problems in Corinth looks most like our churches today?
3. What's your "Pepto in the glove compartment," something you give up so someone you love can enjoy something?
4. In your family, are you more often the big sister or the little brother?

LET'S PRAY

Father, so many of us are new, and we're grateful for the room to learn. For those of us who aren't new, we confess how self-serving we can be, giving up nothing, wanting the first, the best and the win. Make us a church that loves each other the way Paul taught that brand-new church in Corinth, so the world can see the difference you make. In Jesus' name, amen.

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CHAPTER

6

I'm Not Angry, I'm Just...

"...it is not easily angered..."

1 CORINTHIANS 13:5 · MATTHEW 5:21–24 · EPHESIANS 4:26–27

THE CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

1. **Love isn't easily provoked.** We all have reasons. None of them are excuses. *1 Corinthians 13:5*
2. **Jesus takes anger as seriously as murder,** because of what it does to the heart. *Matthew 5:21–24*
3. **Don't give the devil a room in your heart.** Unchecked anger divides, distracts and discredits. *Ephesians 4:26–27*

THE BIG IDEA

We all have reasons. None of them are excuses.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:5

"...it is not easily angered..."

READ FIRST

Matthew 5:21–24

21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. 23 Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift."

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

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Reasons Aren't Excuses

Do you get irritated easily? If you said no, you might be lying, and that's a different chapter.

We all have excuses. My blood sugar's too high. My blood sugar's too low. Too much testosterone, not enough testosterone. Menopause. I had pizza last night. I didn't eat enough. Too much time with the kids. Not enough time with the kids. Too much time with my spouse. Not enough.

I'll tell you mine. A few years ago I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Part of my treatment is a medication called levothyroxine, at a dose that keeps me hyperthyroid. For someone without cancer, that level would be considered dangerous. One of the side effects is that I run right on the jittery, irritable edge, pretty much all the time.

So I could say, *The Bible doesn't apply to me. Paul doesn't apply to me. I've got a reason to be irritable, so look out.* And I could ruin my marriage. I could make my kids not want to talk to me. I could make my staff dread coming to work. How many of you want to listen to an angry pastor? Not fun.

All of us have reasons, genetics or circumstances that explain why we run on the irritable side. But none of them are excuses. At the end of the day, love is not easily angered.

Two Words for Anger

In English we use one word, but the New Testament uses two different words, and they mean very different things.

The word in 1 Corinthians 13:5 means *to be provoked*. Easily irritated. Prickly. Some translations say *love is not easily provoked*. It's the friend who told me after church, "I drive angry." Nobody even has to cut him off. He grabs the steering wheel, backs out of the garage and he's going to war. I get it. I kind of drive that way too.

Love doesn't do that. Love chills out. Love expects the best. Love gives the benefit of the doubt.

My wife didn't wake up this morning, look at her to-do list and see *Make Rick miserable before breakfast* at the top. And whoever you live with probably didn't

either. Assume the people around you mean well. They live in a hard world, just like you do. We need softer hearts, slower reactions and gentler spirits.

We'll get to the second word in a few pages. It's the one that comes from letting the first one go unchecked.

◆ Myth: My Anger Is Righteous Anger

We Christians know how to use the Bible to our advantage. *My anger is righteous anger.* Yours isn't, of course. But mine is, so I can do what I want.

Righteous anger isn't being angry because you're right. It has almost nothing to do with how you feel about yourself. It's being angry about the things God cares deeply about, the things that hurt people he loves. And even then, Scripture says, *"In your anger do not sin."*

The Bible says, *"Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly."* (Proverbs 14:29) And, *"Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil."* (Psalm 37:8)

Think of all the terrible things people have done in God's name because a leader said, *God is angry at them, so we can be angry at them.* Wars. Crusades. Violence of every kind. We don't fight God's battles with the devil's weapons. Righteous anger isn't a loophole for bad behavior.

◆ As Serious as Murder

In Matthew 5, Jesus shows us how seriously God takes this. The religious leaders of his day reasoned, *I've never murdered anybody, so it doesn't matter how I treat people.* I've never killed my wife, so it doesn't matter how angry I get at her. I've never hurt my kids, so it doesn't matter how I yell at them.

Jesus says, *Not so fast.* What you do matters. But who you are on the inside matters just as much.

Raca is almost impossible to translate. It's a word of pure contempt, like erasing someone from existence: *You don't matter to me.* And *"You fool!"* was about the worst insult you could hurl. When we look at a person, or a whole group of people, and decide their opinions are worthless and their existence is insignificant, something is badly wrong in our hearts. Jesus says that kind of contempt puts us in danger. It may even be a sign that grace has never really taken hold in us.

Then he says something remarkable. If you're on your way to worship and you remember that someone has something against you, stop. Leave your gift at the altar. Go make it right, as much as you can. *Then* come back and worship.

God takes our relationships with each other so seriously that he says, in effect, *Until you've done your best to make that right, I don't want your offering.* Paul says the same thing another way: *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."* (Romans 12:18)

◆ The Gift You Can Give God Today

Anger is confusing. Our reasons, our history with people, whether it's righteous or not: it all turns into a jumbled knot.

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So here's the gift I'd ask you to bring God today: your anger. Your frustration. Your disappointment, with people and maybe with him. Life isn't the way you think it should be, and a lot of anger comes from that.

Tell him, *This is a burden I can't carry. It's dividing my relationships. You sort it out.*

Don't Give the Devil a Room

Now the second word. Paul writes, *"'In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold."* (Ephesians 4:26–27)

This anger isn't the quick flash. It's what happens when you let the flashes go unchecked. It settles into your character. It becomes a pair of tinted sunglasses, and everything you see is colored by it.

Don't let the sun go down while you're still angry is often misunderstood. It's good to work things out with your spouse before bed. But Paul is almost certainly echoing Psalm 4:4: *"When you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent."* He's talking about anger that sits there day after day until it becomes part of who you are.

And *foothold* doesn't mean a little place to put your foot when you're climbing. The word means a *place* or a *room*. Paul is saying, *If you let that anger stay, Satan will set up an office in your heart.* We are not unaware of his schemes. (2 Corinthians 2:11) Here are three of them, and he uses our anger for all three.

He divides. Families. Friendships. Churches. Often over something so petty that, years later, nobody even remembers how it started. An offense is given, an offense is taken, lines are drawn, and there's a tension underneath everything. From a gentle breeze to an F5 tornado.

He distracts. We get so angry at the world that we forget we're not supposed to be angry at the people in it. We lob truth bombs over the walls in all capital letters, from as far away as possible, so we don't have to get any of them on us. Can you imagine being someone who doesn't know Jesus, watching an angry Christian and thinking, *What I really need is more anger in my life?*

He discredits. Nothing discredits you faster than being unsafe to be around. Unpredictable. Always ready to fight, never ready to unite. Disguised as righteousness, our anger makes us irrelevant.

Rules for a Fair Fight

My wife and I learned some of these from someone else years ago, and they've helped us. If you're in a close relationship with anyone, they're just wise.

1. **Never call names.** Not your spouse, your kids, a former friend, a group you disagree with or a politician on the other side. Names stick. Call your spouse something often enough and they start to believe it. If you want to call your kids something, call them who you want them to become.
2. **Never raise your voice.** I'm bad at this one. I'm passionate, so that's my excuse. My mom and I used to debate when I was in high school, and everybody around us thought it was a reality show. I brought that into my marriage, and it freaked my wife out, because her family didn't communicate that way. She finally told me,

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"When you get passionate, people think you're yelling." And here's the thing: it doesn't matter whether I think I'm yelling. I'm responsible for my wake.

3. **Never say never, and never say always.** *You're always like this. You'll never change.* You're building a fence around somebody that's impossible to climb over. It's never true, and it's not how Jesus sees them.
4. **Never threaten divorce.** If you're married, that's the nuclear option. The one thing a spouse and kids should be able to count on is that this is permanent, and whatever comes, you'll get through it together.
5. **Never quote your pastor in an argument.** I love you both. You're both probably right.

The day of your hurt could be the day of your healing. Take Scripture seriously, and anger never has to gain a foothold in your life.

What's Under the Anger

Here's something I've noticed in myself and in a lot of people I've counseled. Underneath most anger is fear.

Fear of being wrong. Fear of being taken advantage of. Fear of losing control. Fear of facing the truth. Fear of looking weak.

When I get angry, it helps to stop and ask, *What am I actually afraid of right now?* Most of the time it's one of those five. And once I can name it, I can hand it to God.

A few things that help:

- **Own it.** Nobody makes me angry. Something happens, and I choose how I respond.
- **Use it to fix things, not break them.** Anger can get you moving on a problem. It's a terrible fuel for the long haul.
- **Don't act it out.** Slamming doors and throwing things doesn't release anger. It trains it.
- **Sit with it.** Pause. Pray. Ask what's really going on before you say anything.

And remember Paul's warning in Ephesians 4. The word in *"do not let the sun go down while you are still angry"* describes anger that has settled in and made itself at home. That's the anger Satan loves, because *"we are not unaware of his schemes."* (2 Corinthians 2:11)

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Try It This Week

MONDAY

What's the big deal? Read Matthew 5:21–24. Ask God to show you how seriously he takes the way you treat people.

Read Matthew 5:21–24. Jesus takes anger seriously enough to put it next to murder. Calling someone worthless isn't small to him.

Pray: "God, show me how seriously you take the way I treat people. Here is my anger. I offer it to you."

TUESDAY

Righteous or not? Think of the last time you were angry. Was it about something God cares about, or about you?

Read Proverbs 14:29. Righteous anger is about what God cares about, and even then it doesn't sin. Most of my anger is about me.

Pray: "God, help me tell the difference between being angry at what's wrong and being angry because I didn't get my way."

WEDNESDAY

Under the surface. Some anger never explodes. It festers and leaks out sideways. Ask God to show you any buried anger.

Read Ephesians 4:26–27. Buried anger doesn't stay buried. It leaks out sideways in sarcasm, silence and cold shoulders.

Pray: "God, show me any anger I've buried. I don't want to give the enemy a room in my heart."

THURSDAY

How do you express it? Look at the five rules. Which one do you break most? Work on that one.

Read Psalm 37:8. Under most anger is fear. Ask yourself what you're afraid of right now.

Pray: "God, help me name the fear under my anger, and trust you with it."

FRIDAY

Make it right. Think of someone you've hurt with your anger. Apologize, specifically, with no excuses, and tell them what you'll do differently.

Read Romans 12:18. A specific apology heals more than a general one. Name what you did and what you'll do differently.

Pray: "God, give me the courage to apologize today, no excuses. As far as it depends on me, help me live at peace."

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KEY TRUTHS

- Love isn't easily provoked (1 Corinthians 13:5). Reasons aren't excuses.
- Jesus takes contempt as seriously as murder (Matthew 5:21–22).
- Make it right before you worship (Matthew 5:23–24; Romans 12:18).
- Unchecked anger gives the devil a room in your heart (Ephesians 4:26–27).

For Reflection

CHAPTER 6 · 1 CORINTHIANS 13:5

1. What's your favorite excuse for being irritable?
2. Where are you most easily provoked: behind the wheel, at home, online, at work?
3. Is there someone you need to go make it right with before your next time of worship?
4. Which of the three D's, divide, distract or discredit, has your anger caused most?

LET'S PRAY

Father, we bring you this jumbled, knotted mess of anger: our frustration, our disappointment, our confusion. We give it to you. Sort it out. Bring order to the chaos, and show us the next step, starting today. Make us gentle, soft-hearted, patient and kind, so the world can see you in us. In Jesus' name, amen.

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CHAPTER

7

A Short Memory

"...it keeps no record of wrongs."

1 CORINTHIANS 13:5 · COLOSSIANS 3:12–14 · MATTHEW 5:38–42

THE CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

1. **Love keeps no record of wrongs.** It doesn't post offenses to a ledger to settle later. *1 Corinthians 13:5*
2. **Clothe yourself before the storm comes:** compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and over all of them, love. *Colossians 3:12–14*
3. **Let grace live in the gap** between the offense and your reaction. *Matthew 5:38–42*

THE BIG IDEA

The call ahead of you is so much more important than the offense behind you.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:5

"...it keeps no record of wrongs."

READ FIRST **Colossians 3:12–14**

[12]Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. [13]Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. [14]And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

Shake It

I'll confess right up front: this is one of the ones I struggle with. Not the long-term grudges. I've gotten pretty good at letting go of the big things. It's the short-term stuff. You push me, I push back. You say something, I say something. It pops up in my marriage and in my closest relationships, and it's just being prickly like a porcupine when there's no need for it.

When I taught this, a young friend from our church helped me with an Etch A Sketch. We had to teach him what it was. He wanted to know where you plug it in and where the screen was. He figured it out fast, and while I talked, he drew a picture. When he was done, there really was a picture on that screen. It looked a little like downtown Des Moines from the air.

Then I asked him, "How do you erase an Etch A Sketch?" And he shook it. Hard.

And the picture was gone. No record of it at all.

No Ledger

When Paul says love *"keeps no record of wrongs,"* he uses an accounting word on purpose. It means to keep track the way an accountant keeps track of dollars and cents, payables and receivables. And in accounting, you don't approximate.

Paul uses the same kind of word in Romans: *"Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them."* (Romans 4:8) God doesn't post our sins to a column to reconcile later.

Love does the same. When someone wrongs you, you don't put it in a column to bring up later. You look at it and decide, *You don't owe me anything.* And you don't decide it a week later, a month later or a year later. You decide it in real time, as it happens. You shake it.

I'm not talking about things that are dangerous, things that threaten your life or your family. I'm talking about insults, slights and the everyday friction of people living close together, the things that tempt you to tit for tat. Love has a short memory. A Teflon soul.

The Go-Bag

A while back Iowa had about twenty-eight tornadoes in one day. An F4 tore through a town near us, and people in our church lost trees and more.

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Neither my wife nor I grew up with tornadoes. I grew up in South Florida with hurricanes, and we weren't scared of those at all, which we probably should have been. A few days earlier my wife and I had talked about what we'd do. She said she didn't know how she felt about being stuck in a basement for five days with the house collapsed on top of us. Maybe it would be better to just go. I said, "All right, ride or die. We'll stay upstairs together, and if it comes, we go see Jesus together."

So the storm came. I went out on the front porch to film it, because after seven years in Iowa, that's what you do. The wind was blowing hard, the trees in the median were bent over, and I was fine. Then all at once the trees flipped and bent the other way. I thought, *Uh-oh*, and ran inside to find my wife.

She was already headed down the basement stairs. With a bag. Wearing two watches, hers and mine. I said, "What are you doing?" She said, "Going to the basement. I packed some clothes. If I'm stuck down there and end up on the news, I want to look presentable."

I said, "Weren't we going to do this together? Ride or die?" She had a plan. She'd just forgotten to include her husband.

But she had the right idea. She didn't know what was coming, but she knew she needed to be clothed and ready.

That's exactly what Paul says. *"Clothe yourselves."* Pack your go-bag before the storm, with the right things to put on, because you don't know what's coming next.

◆ What to Pack

Paul names five things to put on.

- **Compassion:** being moved by someone else's pain and circumstances, instead of only noticing how their behavior affects you.
- **Kindness:** mellowing anything in you that's harsh. Sanding down the rough boards.
- **Humility:** not thinking less of yourself, just thinking about yourself less often.
- **Gentleness:** being willing to take an injury rather than always choosing to inflict one.
- **Patience:** our old friend makrothumia. You could get even, and you're probably good at it. You choose to let it go.

Then he gives two instructions that make it possible.

Bear with each other. You can't really love someone with one foot out the door. If you're always looking for something better, you become critical of what you have. The grass looks greener on the other side, but most of the time you just need to water your own yard.

Forgive one another. *"Forgive as the Lord forgave you."* You have to deal with the past before you can live in the present. And then, *"over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together."* Love is the belt that holds the rest of the outfit together.

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The Gap

Between every offense and your reaction, there's a gap. Sometimes it's a split second. But it's there. I made it into an acronym. It's a little corny, but it works for me: **GAP. Gasp, Action, Plan.**

Something happens. My wife tells me how to drive. *I saw that truck! Doesn't she know I don't run into cars when she's not with me?* That's the **gasp**.

Then comes the **action**. The problem is that most of our actions are really reactions, fueled by hurry and temper. A reaction is an action without a plan.

The **plan** is where we prepare ahead of time. We pray, and we decide in advance that Jesus is going to be Lord of the gap. We're going to let grace live in the gap.

Now, I spent a whole week studying this and writing devotionals to help you get good at it. And on Saturday morning, the day before I taught it, my wife and I were getting ready for the day. Normal Saturday. Couple of cups of coffee. Everything fine.

She asked, "Are we going to Home Depot after we get ready?"

Perfectly normal question. But I heard it like a disagreeable person, and I said, "No. We ought to go to Home Depot *before* we get ready."

I don't know why I said it. I wasn't mad. I was having a good Saturday. It just popped out.

She didn't deserve it, and whatever came back to me, I would have deserved. Do you know what she did in the gap? She looked at me and said, "Well, that wasn't very nice." And she walked on. She didn't hold it against me. She didn't huff. She didn't make me pay for it. She didn't bring it up later. She just let it go.

I thought, *I want to be like that.* Where I deserved a slap, she let grace live in the gap.

Myth: An Eye for an Eye

Jesus said, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."* (Matthew 5:38–39)

"An eye for an eye" really is in the Bible. It shows up three times in the Old Testament, and similar laws go back to the Code of Hammurabi. It was a step toward fairness: the punishment had to fit the crime, decided by a judge. Before that, if you scuffed the wrong person's shoes, he could kill you. But it was a principle for courts, not a guide for relationships. It never meant, *If my wife calls me a name, I get to call her five. If you cut me off in traffic, I get to make a gesture.*

The religious leaders had turned it into exactly that. They were the prickliest people imaginable, and nobody could see God in them.

Now look at the slap. Most people are right-handed. If I hit you with my right hand, I hit your *left* cheek. To hit your *right* cheek, I have to backhand you. In Jesus' culture, a backhanded slap wasn't about injury. It was an insult, the most contemptuous thing you could do to someone. It meant, *You're not worth my time.* Some slaves said they'd rather be beaten than slapped that way.

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So Jesus isn't talking here about self-defense, protecting your family or war. Other passages deal with those. He's talking about insults. Don't pick a fight with everyone who picks a fight with you. Someone says something, and you don't have to say something back. *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."* (Romans 12:21)

You worry about your character, and let God worry about your reputation. Ask him for thicker skin.

Everyone Is Fighting a Hidden Battle

There's a term for something we all do: the fundamental attribution error. When I do something wrong, it's because of my circumstances. I didn't see you. I had a bad day. I didn't sleep. I have a headache. When you do something wrong, it's because of your character. *That guy's a jerk. Who raised him?*

Love gives the benefit of the doubt. Everybody you meet is fighting a hidden battle that maybe one other person knows about, and most likely nobody.

One of the most important things I learned as a parent is that kids are allowed to have a bad day. They're not allowed terrible actions, any more than adults are. But they can have a bad day. You don't have to drive them into submission every time they have that look on their face. Pick your battles. And it's not just kids. Your spouse is allowed a bad day. So are your friends, your coworkers and your staff.

Hurting people hurt people. I've lain awake at night wanting to fight back, defend my reputation and set the record straight. And after prayer, and sometimes a lot of lost sleep, I've realized it's not only futile. If I do it, what's lost is someone else's chance to see Christ in me.

> "
>
> **The call ahead of you is so much more important than the offense behind you.**

What Forgiveness Isn't

A lot of people won't forgive because they think forgiveness means something it doesn't. So let's clear that up.

- **It isn't saying it was no big deal.** Sin is a big deal. Forgiveness is costly because the wrong was real.
- **It isn't letting it keep happening.** You can forgive someone and still tell them, *This has to stop.*
- **It isn't pretending it didn't happen.** You were sinned against. Forgiveness starts by admitting that.
- **It isn't waiting for an apology.** Some people will never say they're sorry. You can still be free.
- **It isn't forgetting.** "Forgive and forget" isn't in the Bible. You'll remember. You just stop keeping the record.
- **It isn't the end of the hurt.** If it still hurts, that doesn't mean you didn't forgive.
- **It isn't one and done.** Sometimes you forgive the same thing again tomorrow.

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- **It isn't ignoring what's right.** Forgiving someone doesn't mean there are no consequences, or that you stay somewhere unsafe.
- **It isn't automatic trust.** Trust is earned back slowly. Forgiveness is given.
- **It isn't always reconciliation.** That takes two people. Forgiveness only takes one. *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."* (Romans 12:18)

What Holding On Costs You

Scripture is full of this.

> **"A person's wisdom yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offense."**
>
> PROVERBS 19:11

> **"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."**
>
> COLOSSIANS 3:13

> **"Mercy triumphs over judgment."**
>
> JAMES 2:13

Jesus even said that if you're on your way to worship and remember someone has something against you, stop and go make it right first. (Matthew 5:23–24) And he taught us to pray, *"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."* (Matthew 6:12)

Here's what unforgiveness does. It keeps you living in the past. It grows into bitterness. It puts distance between you and God. And it gives the devil a foothold. (Ephesians 4:26–27) The person who hurt you may have moved on years ago. Unforgiveness keeps you locked in the room with them.

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Try It This Week

MONDAY

What forgiveness isn't. Forgiveness isn't pretending it didn't hurt, excusing it or trusting someone unsafe. Ask: am I even willing to forgive?

Read Colossians 3:13. Forgiveness isn't pretending, excusing or trusting someone unsafe. It's choosing to release the debt.

Pray: "God, I'm not sure I'm willing yet. Make me willing."

TUESDAY

Pray for them. List the people you still haven't forgiven. Pray for each one by name.

Read Matthew 5:44. Praying for someone who hurt you is one of the hardest and most freeing things you'll ever do.

Pray: "God, today I pray for _____. Bless them. And heal what they broke in me."

WEDNESDAY

Check yourself. How do you know you've really forgiven? You stop replaying it, stop retelling it and can wish them well.

Read Proverbs 19:11. You'll know you've forgiven when you stop replaying it, stop retelling it and can wish them well.

Pray: "God, show me where I'm still keeping the record, and help me let it go."

THURSDAY

Plan for the gap. Decide now how you'll respond the next time someone close to you says the wrong thing. Make Jesus Lord of the gap.

Read James 1:19. The gap between an offense and your reaction is where Jesus wants to be Lord. Plan for it now.

Pray: "God, be Lord of the gap today. Let grace live there."

FRIDAY

Shake it. Every time something small happens today, picture shaking an Etch A Sketch. Let it go in real time.

Read Ephesians 4:32. Shake the Etch A Sketch. Every small offense today, let it go in real time.

Pray: "God, you've forgiven me more than I'll ever have to forgive anyone. Help me remember that today."

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KEY TRUTHS

- Love keeps no record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:5). God doesn't count our sins against us (Romans 4:8).
- Clothe yourself ahead of time (Colossians 3:12–14).
- Turning the other cheek is about insults, not danger (Matthew 5:38–39).
- The call ahead of you matters more than the offense behind you.

For Reflection

CHAPTER 7 · 1 CORINTHIANS 13:5

1. Are you more likely to hold long-term grudges or to push back in the moment?
2. Which of the five things in your go-bag do you most need to put on this week?
3. Describe a time someone let grace live in the gap for you.
4. Where do you need to give someone the benefit of the doubt?

LET'S PRAY

Father, something deep in us still pops up at the worst moments and shows the ugliness of our old nature. Get rid of it, for the sake of our relationships, and even more for the sake of our calling. The offense behind us isn't nearly as important as the mission in front of us. Free us, Lord, and keep us growing in love. In Jesus' name, amen.

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CHAPTER

8

Can You Handle the Truth?

“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.”

1 CORINTHIANS 13:6 · JAMES 3:5–6 · JOHN 2:1–11

THE CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

1. **Love doesn’t make wrong look right.** We delight in evil when we gossip and when we soak in what God hates. *1 Corinthians 13:6; James 3:5–6*
2. **Show me your friends, and I’ll show you the future of your faith.** *Proverbs 27:17*
3. **Jesus walked in with an open hand, not a fist or a megaphone.** *John 2:1–11*

THE BIG IDEA

A true friend wants what God wants for you more than what they want for you, or from you.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:6

"Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth."

READ FIRST **James 3:5–6**

[5]Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. [6]The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

Your Dogs Are Barking

I have to be careful how I tell this one. I either have, or once had, a neighbor who either does or doesn't live close enough to hear my dogs bark.

My wife and I were out running an errand when my phone buzzed. Somebody was at my front door. I opened the doorbell camera app, and the whole screen was one eyeball, right up against the lens. And the eyeball was yelling, "Your dogs are barking!"

I waited for him to finish and said, "Sir, we're not home. We're twenty-five or thirty minutes away. I can't do anything about it right now."

He said, "Come outside and tell your dogs to stop barking."

Now, my dogs don't bark. Everybody thinks their dogs are perfect, but mine are basically furniture. My big poodle might look up from her recliner and give you one *woof* to let us know you're there. They're not guard dogs. So I said, "If you'd stop ringing my doorbell, they'd probably stop barking." He did not appreciate that.

Some time later, my wife and I were out on our evening walk, and guess what? That neighbor now had two dogs of his own. And they were barkers.

I thought it was the best thing that had ever happened to me. I told my wife, "I'm going to go stick my eyeball in his doorbell camera and yell, 'Your dogs are barking!'"

I was so happy that something bad had happened to him.

That's the human heart. Something bad happens to somebody, and part of us is glad. We tell the neighbors. It grows into something bigger than it was.

Love "*does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.*" (1 Corinthians 13:6) Put simply, love doesn't make wrong things look right. And I'll confess again: this one had me thinking all week. Not because I'm comparing myself to you. Maybe I'm more loving than you, maybe I'm not. I'm comparing myself to Jesus, and when I do that, I always come up short.

Myth: "But It's True"

Most of us would say, *I don't delight in evil. I don't like sin.* But even after we follow Jesus, something in the dark places still pulls us toward what wants to destroy us. And one of the most common ways it shows up is in our mouths.

Christians are famous for gossip. *But it's true, so it's not gossip.* No, it's still gossip. Gossip is taking someone else's sin or shortcoming and passing it along, living a little

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vicariously through it, even enjoying it. Slander, a rumor that's too good not to pass on, a joke that isn't really a joke: *Hope they get out of bed long enough to get something done today.*

James says if you think you're religious but don't keep a tight rein on your tongue, your religion is worthless. (James 1:26) And he says the tongue is a fire that can set the whole course of your life on fire. (James 3:6)

God made that person. He wants to know them. When we steal or shred their reputation, whether it's true or not, it isn't our business. But it becomes God's business.

Wouldn't it be great if our words built people up instead of tearing them down?

Watch With Me

There's a second way we delight in evil, and it's sneakier. We don't do it, but we enjoy watching it. *It's not me, so it doesn't matter.*

We live in a world that doesn't share our values. It's a war zone, and Satan is a fisherman with the perfect lure, waiting for a weak moment. Peter puts it this way: "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8) So I want to ask you: are you willing to do an entertainment audit? If you're married, do it with your spouse. It helps to have the same guidelines.

It's simple. *God, when I watch my streaming service, watch with me. When I listen to music at the gym or in the car, listen with me. When I scroll social media, scroll with me. When I post, post with me. When I browse the internet, browse with me.* He's there anyway. We're just acknowledging it.

What series do you enjoy? What music sticks in your head? Which posts do you stop on? Which sites do you visit?

Now, I'm not the church lady. I'm not saying all TV is evil. There was a day when churches said music with a drumbeat was too much like the devil, Christians couldn't be seen in a movie theater, and then it was bowling alleys. We went a little crazy. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about your own conscience before God. Some of what we enjoy isn't designed to grow our relationship with Jesus, and we need to be honest about that.

Where Do You Get Your Truth?

Where do you get your truth? Facebook? Ever post a question and then check people's profiles before deciding whether to listen to their answers? Your family? Your friends? Things you used to believe?

Paul had friends he trusted with the truth. Chloe's people told him what was going on in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:11). Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus came and refreshed his spirit (1 Corinthians 16:17–18). He trusted those friends enough to write a letter based on what they told him.

How many of your friends would you trust that much?

If you want to know the future of your faith, show me the friends you keep closest. We become like the people we choose to spend our free time with. If your friends have

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strong marriages and talk well about their spouses, it rubs off. If they raise their kids with godly priorities, it rubs off. *"As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."* (Proverbs 27:17)

Here's my definition: **A true friend wants what God wants for you more than what they want for you, or from you.**

That doesn't mean you drop friends who don't know Jesus. We're supposed to love them. But if people who call themselves believers consistently live otherwise, Paul says to create some space, for the good of your own soul.

Choose Your Hill

We also have to rejoice in God's truth, which is always true. And that means we may have to unlearn some things we picked up along the way that aren't true. In some seasons, Christians have treated every issue as a hill to die on. We argued about everything and became irrelevant. And the people who become irrelevant are always the last to know.

Tradition is comfortable. Legalism lets us keep score. Theological elitism appeals to our egos. Knowing the truth and standing for it matters. But make sure the hill you're willing to die on is worth dying for.

An Open Hand

Here's how Jesus did it. He separated the sin, which he never delighted in, from the person, who deserves dignity because they're made in God's image.

Remember his first miracle? He was invited to a wedding for a couple nobody outside their little village cared about. He could have rolled a rock into the middle of town on day one, climbed up and shouted, *Stop it! You're all going to hell!* and then walked away thinking, *Boy, I sure witnessed to them.* Instead, he went to the party, and when they ran out of wine, he made more. (John 2:1–11)

Sometimes we think we can argue people into the kingdom, on social media or face to face. Jesus didn't run in with a fist or a megaphone or a giant Bible swinging at everybody within reach. He walked in with an outstretched hand. He befriended people, believed in them and saw them. And people asked, *Why are you so different?* He answered with grace and truth, and he'd earned the right to be heard.

The religious people were furious. *There he is, eating at a tax collector's house with a bunch of sinners. He's one of them.* And Jesus said, in effect, *I'm not delighting in evil. I'm delighting in people.* You can only do that up close, with an open hand.

The Hill Worth Dying On

The hill worth dying on is this. Hell is real. We were all born with a sinful nature, and *"the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 6:23) I deserve that death and separation. So do you. But God, in his mercy, didn't give us what we deserve. He gave us Jesus, who took on my sin and yours, died the death we deserved and rose again.

The things that aggravate us out there are symptoms. Sometimes they're bait, to distract Christians and keep us fighting. The real problem is that people need Jesus.

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Everyone has a “them.” For some of you it’s people on one side of politics. For some it’s the other side. But could there be a bigger issue at stake? How will you build a bridge between what Jesus has done for you and a world that desperately needs him?

> **Love doesn’t delight in evil. We delight in people. And love rejoices in the truth.**

Truth Loved Is Truth Lived

Isaiah warned, *“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil.”* (Isaiah 5:20) Love doesn’t make wrong look right. And it doesn’t celebrate when someone else falls.

That’s why gossip is so dangerous. A few things I’ve learned about it:

- Gossip that’s true is still gossip.
- Gossip is enjoying someone else’s sin from a safe distance.
- Spreading the news of someone’s sin has never once helped them.

Love rejoices with the truth. And the truth that matters most is the one people don’t want to hear. Jesus said, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* (John 14:6) Even the demons believe there’s a God. (James 2:19) Jesus said not everyone who calls him Lord will enter the kingdom, but the one who does the will of his Father. (Matthew 7:21)

So Paul says, *“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.”* (2 Corinthians 13:5) Truth loved is truth lived.

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Try It This Week

MONDAY

Call sin what it is. Read Genesis 3. Where did sin come from, what did it do and why should we hate it?

Read Genesis 3. Sin isn't a small thing that God overlooks. It broke everything. Love never pretends it's harmless.

Pray: "God, help me see sin the way you see it, starting with mine."

TUESDAY

Guard your mouth. Go a whole day without passing along anything about anyone that you wouldn't say with them standing there.

Read James 3:5–6. Gossip that's true is still gossip. Today, say nothing about anyone that you wouldn't say with them in the room.

Pray: "God, guard my mouth today. Let my words build people up."

WEDNESDAY

The entertainment audit. Watch with me, listen with me, scroll with me. Do it with your spouse if you're married.

Read Psalm 101:3. What you watch, listen to and scroll shapes what you think is normal.

Pray: "God, show me what I'm letting into my mind that doesn't belong there."

THURSDAY

Look at your friends. If your faith became like theirs, would it be stronger?

Read Proverbs 27:17. Show me your friends and I'll show you the future of your faith.

Pray: "God, give me friends who want what you want for me. And make me that kind of friend."

FRIDAY

Open hand. Think of your "them." Do one thing this week that builds a bridge.

Read John 14:6. Everyone has a "them." Jesus walked in with an open hand, not a fist. Build one bridge this week.

Pray: "God, help me love the people I disagree with the way Jesus loved me, and point them to you."

NOTES

KEY TRUTHS

- Love doesn't delight in evil but rejoices with the truth (1 Corinthians 13:6).
- Gossip is delighting in evil, even when it's true (James 3:5–6).
- A true friend wants what God wants for you (Proverbs 27:17).
- Jesus walked in with an open hand (John 2:1–11).

For Reflection

CHAPTER 8 · 1 CORINTHIANS 13:6

1. When was the last time you were secretly glad something bad happened to someone?
2. What would change if you did the entertainment audit honestly?
3. Who in your life wants what God wants for you more than what they want from you?
4. Who's your "them"? What would an open hand look like toward them?

LET'S PRAY

Father, when we compare ourselves to other people, sometimes we look better and sometimes worse. When we compare ourselves to Jesus, we always come up short. But we want to be more like him. Guard our mouths. Clean up what we watch and listen to. Give us friends who sharpen us. And help us walk into the world with an open hand, so people ask what's different about us, and we can introduce them to our friend, our Lord and our Savior. In Jesus' name, amen.

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CHAPTER

9

Love Protects, Trusts and Hopes

"It always protects, always trusts, always hopes…"

1 CORINTHIANS 13:7 · JOHN 8:1–11 · 1 JOHN 2:1

THE CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

1. **Love protects.** It stands between the people you love and whatever is coming at them. *1 Corinthians 13:7*
2. **Love trusts.** Not gullible, but it believes the best. *1 Corinthians 13:7*
3. **Love hopes.** It believes in who someone is becoming and lets them move past their past. *John 8:1–11*

THE BIG IDEA

Love believes in who someone is becoming.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:7

"It always protects, always trusts, always hopes..."

READ FIRST **John 8:7–11**

7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

The Brooding Hen

When my wife and I lived in Arkansas, we decided to become farmers. We had never been farmers. My wife grew up on a cattle ranch in Arkansas, so she knew ranching, but not farming. We tried pigs. That was a terrible decision. I almost gave up bacon, though that didn't last long. Just not bacon I raised.

Chickens were a different story. My wife loved her chickens. I even learned how to kick a rooster, which I never thought I'd do until a rooster comes at you with its spurs.

Chickens are pretty defenseless. Raccoons, hawks, coyotes: just about anything will eat a chick. But we had a brooding hen. She'd collect everybody's eggs and sit on them until they hatched, sometimes so many that they stuck out past her feathers and she'd shuffle around to keep them all warm. And when a threat came, she'd scoop those chicks into a pile, plop down on top of them, fluff out and spread her wings, and stare you down.

She couldn't really do anything. You could probably have bumped her and she'd fall over. No teeth. Just a chicken. But her point, and mine, is this: **love always protects.** It puts itself between the person you love and whatever is coming to hurt them.

The word means to cover, to shelter. And it's not just physical attacks. Sometimes it's words. Sometimes it's circumstances. If one of us has to take the hit, be inconvenienced or lose, love says, *It's going to be me.*

Most of us men get this one. *I'll protect my family, my boys, my friends.* But Jesus loved the world, the people we like and the people we don't. Protective love starts with the people closest to us, and works its way out to our family, friends, coworkers, church family and the world.

I Became His Lawyer

It's funny how two boys can have the same parents, grow up in the same house, eat the same food at the same table, and turn out so differently. I love them both. I wouldn't trade either one of them for anything.

But my youngest was... let's say a little more challenging to raise. We had a lot of fun. But there were times...

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When he was in middle school, I was on a first-name basis with his assistant principal. It seemed like she called me a couple of times a week. I'd see the school's number pop up on my phone and think, *Here we go. What did he do now?*

What she didn't know was that, almost no matter what she said, I was going to defend him. I became his lawyer.

"Did anyone actually see him do it?" "Is there a chance he was provoked?" "With all due respect, that sounds like circumstantial evidence."

If she wanted to make a case against my son, she was going to have to win it. Beyond a reasonable doubt.

Now, when she won, and the story turned out to be true, there were consequences at home. But here's what I wanted my son to know: whoever was on the other end of that phone call, his dad was on his side.

Love protects. It doesn't pretend the people we love are perfect. It rejoices with the truth, so it doesn't lie for them. But it stands next to them while the truth gets told.

Isn't that what Jesus does for us? *"If anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One."* (1 John 2:1) The case against us is airtight. We're guilty. And Jesus stands next to us anyway, not by pretending we didn't do it, but by paying for what we did.

◆ Myth: Love Is Gullible

Love always trusts. How does that make you feel? Gullible? *I've been lied to before. Why would I trust again?* Trust breaks easily and takes a long time to earn back.

The phrase can also be read *love believes all things*. But that doesn't mean love is naive. You can be a little skeptical. You can even be suspicious. You don't let yourself or your family be hurt or taken advantage of.

What Paul is asking is that you don't just believe *people*. You believe *in* people. Your basic posture toward others is to give the benefit of the doubt and assume they're probably trying to do the right thing.

Have you become so cynical and jaded that you don't believe in anybody anymore? If Jesus had been cynical, he'd have said, *Most of them won't believe me. They'll treat me badly and I'll end up dying. I think I'll sit this one out.* Instead, he saw something in us.

◆ The Roses

When I first got married, I was learning how to be a husband. I'm still learning, even though I've been at it a while.

My wife grew up in a small farming town in northern Arkansas. Practical. Frugal. I grew up almost the opposite. She's a saver. I'm a spender.

Early on, while we were still in college, I did something that upset her. I don't remember what it was. She probably does. But I was in trouble.

So I did what I thought any man would do. I stopped at a florist and bought her a dozen roses. We could not afford roses. I bought them anyway, because I was in trouble and I would have done anything to get out of it.

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I walked in the door with my dozen roses, and she was not pleased. She looked at the roses, looked at me and asked, “What did you do?”

I said, “I upset you, and I’m trying to apologize.”

But in her mind, the math didn’t add up. A man who can’t afford roses doesn’t buy roses for a little thing. A dozen roses meant this had to be a big thing. A really big thing. So she asked me, very calmly, “Where’s your girlfriend?”

There was no girlfriend. There was just an insensitive rookie husband with a checking account that was now one dozen roses away from overdrawn. When I finally convinced her of that, she politely asked me never to buy her roses again. Too much money for something that dies. She’d rather have a plant.

Live and learn. I made a note.

We laugh about it now. But all of us have done the math on someone’s kindness and decided it must be hiding something. Love believes the best. It doesn’t run every kind gesture through a background check.

◆ “I Could See That”

And love always hopes. Biblical hope isn’t *I hope I get a good parking spot.* It’s the promise of something guaranteed but not here yet. When it comes to people, love doesn’t just believe in who you are. It believes in who you’re *becoming*. And that means letting people move past their past.

I grew up in South Florida, where soccer was the sport everybody wanted to play and the drums were the goal for every kid in band. I idolized the drummers and the soccer players, and I worked hard to become both.

Then, in eighth grade, we moved to Tennessee. Different culture, different values. In the South, back then, soccer and band weren’t just unpopular. Either one was a social deal killer. So I decided to play football.

I didn’t hate football. I just wasn’t good at it. I was a late bloomer, and I spent a lot of time on the bench. I was also mischievous. I liked to cause good-natured trouble, and I made more than a few teachers and coaches wonder what I was up to on the weekends.

One summer day, after a two-a-day practice, we were sitting in the air-conditioned locker room drinking Gatorade and trying to recover. The coaches started asking us what we wanted to be when we grew up.

My friends went around the room. One wanted to be a doctor. One wanted to be an engineer. One wanted to be an accountant. I’m still not sure why anyone would choose that on purpose.

Then they got to me. I said, “I think I might want to be a pastor.”

The whole locker room burst out laughing. A couple of the coaches did too.

But one coach didn’t laugh. He looked at me and said, “I could see that.”

I’m sure he couldn’t actually see it from where I was sitting that day. But he believed in who I was becoming. And who knew? He was right.

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That's what Jesus did with the woman caught in adultery. Everyone else saw what she'd done. Jesus saw who she could be. *"Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin."* He didn't define her by her worst moment. Are you willing to do that for the people in your life? For yourself?

Love Covers

The word for protects is *stegō*. It's related to the word for a roof. Love is a roof over someone. It covers. It bears the weight so they don't get rained on.

> **"Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs."**
>
> PROVERBS 10:12

Love protects people from gossip, ridicule and harm. Hatred believes the worst. Love believes the best.

And love is optimistic. Jesus let Peter fail, and didn't give up on him. Paul let the Corinthians fail, over and over, and kept writing to them. Love isn't surprised when people stumble. It just refuses to believe the stumble is the end of the story.

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Try It This Week

MONDAY

Protect. Where can you stand in the gap for someone today, and take the hit so they don't have to?

Read Proverbs 10:12. Love covers. Where can you take the hit today so someone else doesn't have to?

Pray: "God, make me a roof over someone who's getting rained on."

TUESDAY

Trust. Who have you been running through a background check? Give them the benefit of the doubt today.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:7. Believe the best. Who have you been running through a background check?

Pray: "God, help me give the benefit of the doubt today, without being naive."

WEDNESDAY

Hope. Tell someone what you see them becoming.

Read Romans 15:13. Hope sees who someone is becoming. Tell someone what you see in them.

Pray: "God, show me what you see in the people around me, and help me say it."

THURSDAY

Let them move on. Is there someone you keep defining by their past? Let it go.

Read Isaiah 43:18–19. Stop defining people by their worst moment. God doesn't define you that way.

Pray: "God, help me let someone move on from who they used to be."

FRIDAY

Thank your coach. Who believed in you before you did? Tell them, if you can.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:11. Someone believed in you before you believed in yourself. Thank them.

Pray: "God, thank you for the people who saw something in me. Help me be that for someone else."

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KEY TRUTHS

- Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes (1 Corinthians 13:7).
- Jesus is our advocate. He stands with us while the truth is told (1 John 2:1).
- Love believes in people without being naive.
- Love believes in who someone is becoming (John 8:11).

For Reflection

CHAPTER 9 · 1 CORINTHIANS 13:7

1. Who has been a brooding hen in your life?
2. Where are you most likely to assume the worst about someone's motives?
3. Who believed in you before you did? What did they see?
4. Whose past do you need to let them move past?

LET'S PRAY

Father, thank you that you protect us, that you believed in us before we believed in you, and that Jesus stands beside us as our advocate. Make us people who shelter the ones we love, believe the best about others and see who they're becoming. In Jesus' name, amen.

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CHAPTER

10

Love Sticks Around

"...always perseveres. Love never fails."

1 CORINTHIANS 13:7–8 · GENESIS 50:15–21 · MATTHEW 18:21–22

THE CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

1. **Love perseveres.** It holds the hill and doesn't leave too early. *1 Corinthians 13:7*
2. **Love never fails.** It never falls apart, because God is the one holding it together. *1 Corinthians 13:8*
3. **What others meant for evil, God can use for good.** So forgive, and lose count. *Genesis 50:20; Matthew 18:21–22*

THE BIG IDEA

Forgiveness doesn't keep score. Forgiveness loses count.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:7–8

"...always perseveres. Love never fails."

READ FIRST

Genesis 50:19–21

[19]But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? [20]You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. [21]So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

To the Stop Sign

recently committed to something I'm not sure I can do. I agreed to run a certain distance, in a certain time, with a group of people in their early twenties. For them, it's a test. For me, it's pride.

The problem is, I don't run. I walk. Every day I try to walk three miles, somewhere between fourteen and fourteen and a half minutes a mile, sometimes with a weighted vest. But running? When I run, I look like I'm fleeing the scene of a wreck.

I live on a street with an alley, and there are about seven houses between my house and a stop sign. Uphill. Not up a mountain, but uphill. So the first goal was simple: run to the stop sign. That's about three hundred yards. Off I went. I got to the stop sign and bent over, huffing and puffing. My neighbors asked if they should call 911. *Please don't. I'm doing this on purpose.*

The next day, same thing. Run to the stop sign. This time I got there and thought, *Maybe a few more houses.* Then a few more. Then the next stop sign. Bend over. Breathe. Don't call 911. The next day, a little further.

I haven't gotten there yet, but I know how this goes. One day you pass the first stop sign and think, *That wasn't so bad.* Then the second. Then the third. And then you're running.

I have to get up every day and go out there, even though I'm not good at it and I look a little silly. And spiritual growth works the same way. Your body adapts, and so does your spirit. As you give everything you have, which still isn't enough, the Holy Spirit does the heavy lifting and makes you a runner.

Hold the Hill

Love *"always perseveres."* (1 Corinthians 13:7) The Greek word is a military term. Picture a war movie. There's one strategic hill, and if you lose it, you lose the war. You're outnumbered. The odds are terrible. But you rally the troops: *We will stand on this hill, and we will fight, even if we die here. Nothing is more important.*

That's the power behind the word. Love refuses to quit.

Mark Twain said something like this: if you pick up a starving dog and take care of it, it won't bite you, and that's the main difference between a dog and a person. It didn't come from Scripture, but it's true. We're going to get bitten. Will we stick around anyway?

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Sometimes we leave way too early. We stand before a pastor and a room full of people and make promises: to love and to cherish, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer, till death do us part. And then we don't persevere.

I know sometimes there's no way to save a marriage. If that's happened to you, I'm not judging you. I haven't walked in your shoes. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm not looking at your past. I believe in who you're becoming. Let's put a period at the end of that sentence and say, *From today on, by God's grace, we stick around,* unless it's unsafe or unwise.

Not Dead to Me

This one grieves me. I've watched Christian parents whose kids made choices they found objectionable, a lifestyle or a belief, give them a couple of chances and then turn their backs, *for the sake of God*: *You're dead to me until you repent.* Often it's because they're worried about what other Christians will think.

You can set boundaries. You're responsible to protect your home, and in some cases a relationship really isn't safe or wise. But would Jesus turn his back on us because we've used up our chances, because we're living in a way that displeases him, because he's embarrassed? No. He believes in who we're becoming.

Love is demonstrated best up close, never with a turned back. You don't have to delight in evil to delight in people. Whatever they believe or celebrate, they can still be at your table for dinner. You can still celebrate the parts of their lives worth celebrating. They're still your kids.

Love sticks around.

Love Never Fails

And then Paul lands the plane: *"Love never fails."* (1 Corinthians 13:8) The word means love never falls, never falls apart. It holds all fifteen colors together.

I fail. You fail. We fail. Love never fails. God is love, and God never fails. He showed his love by giving us Jesus, who never fails. And Jesus gives us salvation, which never fails.

Myth: I Did the Best I Could

If you've gotten defensive anywhere in this book, *Get out of my business, Pastor Rick, you don't know what I've been through, I did the best I could*, I understand. Those are the thoughts I have when I look back at the ways I've messed up.

Here's something that was a revelation to me. It may not sound profound, but it was to me: **Just because you did the best you could doesn't mean you did it the best way.**

Being honest enough to say, *Even though I did my best, it may not have been right*, takes humility. Being willing to learn a different way is the mark of a true disciple.

Joseph

Joseph's story fills the last part of Genesis. He was born into privilege, and honestly, he was a bit of a brat. His dad's favorite. He got a special robe, which meant he didn't have to go out and work. Then he had a dream that his brothers, and even his parents,

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would someday bow down to him, and instead of keeping it to himself, he told them all.

One day his dad sent him out to check on his brothers, who were tending sheep far from home. Picture Joseph getting up off the couch and riding out on his air-conditioned camel with some sandwiches. His brothers saw him coming a long way off and decided to kill him. Then they decided to throw him in a dry well instead. Then a caravan of slave traders came by, and they thought, *Why let him die when we can make some money?* So they sold him.

In Egypt, Joseph was sold to Potiphar, who eventually put him in charge of his household. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him. Joseph refused. He loved God, and he was loyal to his master. So she accused him of trying to assault her, and he was thrown in prison. And still he trusted God.

In prison he interpreted the dreams of two of Pharaoh's officials. One of them was restored to his job and promised to remember Joseph. He forgot. Time went by.

Then Pharaoh had a dream nobody could interpret, and the official finally remembered. Joseph told Pharaoh, *I can't interpret it, but God can.* God revealed a coming famine, and Pharaoh put Joseph second in command of all Egypt.

Over about twenty years, Joseph went from being betrayed by the people who should have protected him, to being falsely accused, to being forgotten in prison, to a place of honor and authority.

Then the famine hit. Joseph's brothers came to Egypt for food, not knowing he was alive. Joseph held the keys to every grain bin in the country. When he finally revealed who he was, they were terrified: *Please don't kill us.* He had all the power of Pharaoh. They had walked in front of his car in the parking lot, and he could have hit the gas instead of the brake.

And Joseph said, *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."* (Genesis 50:19–20)

Sometimes the worst things that happen to you bring out the best things in you. That's a hard statement. But it's true.

◆ Forgiveness Loses Count

Peter, one of Jesus' best friends, asked him, *"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"* (Matthew 18:21) The religious teachers said three times was plenty. Peter more than doubled it and probably expected a pat on the back.

Jesus said, *"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."* (Matthew 18:22) Some translations say seventy times seven. Either way, he meant as many times as it takes. No matter what it takes, for as long as it takes, because Jesus has forgiven you.

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> **Forgiveness doesn't keep score. Forgiveness loses count.**

So forgive others. We've talked about that a lot, and some of you hate it when I bring it up, which is exactly why I keep bringing it up.

Then forgive yourself. Move past the defensiveness and the justifications. You blew it. You wish you hadn't. You've asked God to forgive you, and he has. Now let it go.

And for some of you, let me say this as your friend. You're still holding a grudge against God. He didn't act the way you expected. He let things happen. God didn't do anything wrong, but you need to let go of that grudge. Joseph could have held a grudge against God like you wouldn't believe. But God was bigger, and Joseph kept running from one stop sign to the next, even when it was hard and even when he looked foolish.

As we finish, here's my question for you: **Are you willing to love like you've never been hurt?**

Burning Coals

The word for perseveres is *hupomenō*: to stay under the load and not walk away. And Paul shows us how far that goes.

> **"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."**
>
> ROMANS 12:20–21, QUOTING PROVERBS 25:21–22

Not paying back evil with evil is good. But it's really just not doing anything. Love goes further. Love does good, on purpose, to the person who did wrong to you. That's what sticking around looks like when it costs something.

NOTES

Try It This Week

MONDAY

Hold your hill. What relationship are you tempted to walk away from too early? Decide to stick around.

Read Galatians 6:9. Hold the hill. Don't walk away too early from someone God has put in your life.

Pray: "God, give me the strength to stay when I want to leave."

TUESDAY

Run to the stop sign. Pick one small step of love you've been avoiding, and take it today. Tomorrow, go a little further.

Read Philippians 3:13–14. Love grows a little at a time. One more step than yesterday.

Pray: "God, show me one step of love I've been avoiding, and help me take it."

WEDNESDAY

Joseph's lens. Read Genesis 50:15–21. Where might God be using something someone meant for harm?

Read Genesis 50:20. What someone meant for harm, God can use for good.

Pray: "God, help me see how you might be working through what hurt me."

THURSDAY

Lose count. Forgive someone again, even if you've already forgiven them more times than you can count.

Read Matthew 18:21–22. Forgiveness doesn't keep score. It loses count.

Pray: "God, help me forgive again, even when I've lost track of how many times."

FRIDAY

Let go. Forgive yourself, and let go of any grudge you're holding against God.

Read Romans 8:1. There's no condemnation for those in Christ. That includes you. Let go of what you're holding against yourself, and against God.

Pray: "God, thank you that your love never fails. Help me rest in it, and pass it on."

NOTES

KEY TRUTHS

- Love always perseveres and never fails (1 Corinthians 13:7–8).
- Just because you did the best you could doesn't mean you did it the best way.
- What others intend for harm, God can use for good (Genesis 50:20).
- Forgiveness doesn't keep score. It loses count (Matthew 18:21–22).

For Reflection

CHAPTER 10 · 1 CORINTHIANS 13:7–8

1. Where are you running "to the stop sign" right now, spiritually?
2. What hill in your life is worth holding, no matter what?
3. When has something terrible brought out something good in you?
4. Are you willing to love like you've never been hurt?

LET'S PRAY

Father, thank you for this journey through your Word. In spite of our limitations, you have spoken to us. Our thoughts, our hearts and our relationships are changing, and part of us has no idea how, because you're the one doing it. We've committed to run, not one of us faster than the others, but all of us together, toward the same goal, for your glory. Give us focus. Give us strength. Transform us, not for our own good, but so the world around us can see the power of your gospel in weak lives like ours. Thank you for Jesus, who made a way for salvation, for meaning in this life and for the guarantee of heaven to come. In Jesus' name, amen.

‹ START OF CHAPTER CONTENTS SCRIPTURE IN THIS BOOK ›

NOTES

Scripture in This Book

Every chapter in this book comes out of 1 Corinthians 13. Here are the passages each chapter teaches from, so you can open your Bible and read them for yourself.

Introduction

1 Corinthians 13:4–8 · Romans 12:2 · 1 John 1:5 · 1 John 4:8 · John 8:12

Chapter 1: Love Is Patient

1 Corinthians 13:4 · Galatians 5:16–25 · 2 Peter 3:8–9

Chapter 2: Love Is Kind

1 Corinthians 13:1–4 · Matthew 11:28–30 · John 4:6

Chapter 3: Want It, Got It, Flaunt It

1 Corinthians 13:4 · Luke 15:11–32 · 1 Corinthians 4:6–7, 18–19 · Matthew 27:18 · James 3:16 · Romans 12:15 · Ephesians 2:8–10

Chapter 4: Love Isn't Rude

1 Corinthians 13:5 · Hebrews 10:22–25 · Psalm 92:12–15

Chapter 5: What Do You Need, What Can You Give Up?

1 Corinthians 13:5 · 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 · 1 Corinthians 10:24

Chapter 6: I'm Not Angry, I'm Just...

1 Corinthians 13:5 · Matthew 5:21–24 · Ephesians 4:26–27 · Psalm 4:4 · Proverbs 14:29 · Psalm 37:8 · Romans 12:18 · 2 Corinthians 2:11

Chapter 7: A Short Memory

1 Corinthians 13:5 · Colossians 3:12–14 · Matthew 5:38–42 · Romans 4:8 · Romans 12:21

Chapter 8: Can You Handle the Truth?

1 Corinthians 13:6 · James 3:5–6 · James 1:26 · John 2:1–11 · Proverbs 27:17 · 1 Peter 5:8 · 1 Corinthians 1:11 · 1 Corinthians 16:17–18 · Romans 6:23

Chapter 9: Love Protects, Trusts and Hopes

1 Corinthians 13:7 · John 8:1–11 · 1 John 2:1

Chapter 10: Love Sticks Around

1 Corinthians 13:7–8 · Genesis 50:15–21 · Matthew 18:21–22

How to Follow Jesus

1 John 4:19 · Romans 3:23 · Romans 5:8 · 1 John 1:9

All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

CONTENTS HOW TO FOLLOW JESUS ›

THE MOST IMPORTANT PAGE IN THIS BOOK

How to Follow Jesus

This whole book has been about love. So here's the most important thing I can tell you about it: God loved you first.

> **"We love because he first loved us."** (1 John 4:19)

Following Jesus isn't a magic formula. It's a commitment of the heart.

It starts when you realize you're part of the problem. You've sinned. You may not be a terrible person, but one sin or a million, it doesn't matter:

> **"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** (Romans 3:23)

If you've read this far, every chapter has probably shown you a place where you haven't loved the way God loves. It has for me.

Here's the good news. God didn't wait for you to clean up first.

> **"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** (Romans 5:8)

That's not love by accident. That's love on purpose.

So you confess your sin and ask forgiveness.

> **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."** (1 John 1:9)

If you ask, you receive it.

Then you make a simple commitment: I'm going to do my very best to follow Jesus, and I'm going to let his love change the way I love. Not perfectly. None of us does. But every day, on purpose.

If you've made that decision, tell someone. Tell a pastor, a friend who follows Jesus, or a church near you. You weren't meant to do this alone.

CONTENTS ABOUT THE AUTHOR ›



Rick Melick

Rick Melick has served as senior pastor of Capitol City Church in Des Moines, Iowa, since November 2016. A pastor and church planter for more than three decades, he planted congregations in San Anselmo, California, and Cotter, Arkansas, and has served churches in Texas, Tennessee and Washington. In 2017 he founded City Serve DSM, a nonprofit that partners with Capitol City Church to bring businesses, schools and community organizations together to serve the teachers, first responders and military personnel of Greater Des Moines. He also serves as a chaplain with the Iowa State Patrol.

Rick studied at The Criswell College and Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, and did doctoral work at San Francisco Theological Seminary and Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Joy, have been married since 1989. They have two grown sons, two daughters-in-law, and grandchildren who call him Bapo.

> *Rick wants what will be most important to him five minutes after he dies to be most important to him every day.*

1 CORINTHIANS 13

Love Intentionally

You know the love chapter. But do you do it?

You've heard 1 Corinthians 13 at weddings. Maybe it's framed on somebody's wall. It's easy to think you already know it.

In ten short chapters, Pastor Rick Melick walks through it one phrase at a time (patient, kind, not proud, not rude, keeps no record of wrongs) and shows what each one looks like at home on a Monday morning. It's honest, warm and often funny. Along the way you'll meet a ladder on the freeway, a dog that ate four couches, and a pair of track spikes he had no business wearing.

Every chapter ends with five days of application, a few minutes a day. Because love doesn't happen by accident.

RICK MELICK