



GOSPEL CULTURE

When Faith comes to Life

DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

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GOSPEL CULTURE

Devotions

These devotions are intended to be used alongside the sermons and community group material for the Gospel Culture series. They focus on the main passage that will be preached on the following Sunday.

According to Ray Ortlund: Gospel doctrine creates a gospel culture. The doctrine of grace creates a culture of grace, as Jesus himself touches us through his truths. Without the doctrines, the culture alone is fragile. Without the culture, the doctrines alone appear pointless.

Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®.

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DAY 1

WEEK 1

GRACE TO ALL

ROMANS 15:1-7 & 14

BUILD EACH OTHER UP

READ: ROMANS 15:1-2

REFLECT:

In these 2 verses Paul is speaking to those who are established in their faith and are not swayed by the opinions of others or by false teaching. He includes himself in this group and emphasizes their responsibility to those who are still struggling to grasp his teachings and are 'weak' in faith. He is not judging the weak, but rather encouraging the strong to care for and protect them. Those who have a strong relationship with the Lord should not please themselves and behave in ways that may undermine the faith of those who are battling to understand the gospel fully. In fact he goes even further and says that the stronger believers should aim to please others for their good and to build them up.

As believers we should always try to behave in ways that will build others up and draw them closer to God. Too often we are so involved in our own pleasure or fulfilment that we neglect to think about how our actions may affect or influence others. None of us are perfect and we all let God down at times, but we can ask the Holy Spirit to empower us to live in a way that generally builds people's faith rather than turns them away from God.

RESPOND:

Think about yourself. Are you a builder or a breaker? Ask for forgiveness for the times that you have put your own pleasure before your witness for God. Pray that the Holy Spirit will work in and through you to enable you to build other believers up.

DAY 2

LEARN FROM GOD'S WORD

READ: ROMANS 15:3-4

REFLECT:

The essence of the gospel is that Jesus gave up his position and came to Earth as a man and allowed himself to be crucified so that our sin could be forgiven. He bore the reproach due to us. He certainly did not please himself!

We too should be prepared to bear reproach for our faith and the instruction we find in God's Word can enable us to endure this and to be encouraged in our faith. In verse 4 Paul emphasizes that all of the Old Testament was written down for the instruction and encouragement of God's people. We are privileged to have all of God's Word available to us to enable us to endure whatever life brings and to encourage us and give us hope for the future. As we study God's Word he speaks to us and guides us and teaches us how to live a life that brings glory to him. We can't exhibit Gospel Culture if we don't know what that is and we can only learn that fully from reading the Word consistently and attentively.

RESPOND:

Modern culture lays a great emphasis on individual happiness and encourages us to 'please ourselves' as much as possible. This idea is the opposite of Gospel Culture where we are encouraged to put others first and to please them rather than ourselves. Are there some areas of your life in which you have been '*pleasing yourself*'? If so, bring them to God for restoration.

DAY 3

ONE MIND, ONE VOICE

READ: ROMANS 15:5-6

REFLECT:

Christianity today exhibits almost the opposite of what these two verses describe. There are divisions and disputes within and between the various churches and denominations around the world and Christians find themselves at odds with each other over many issues. This is not what Paul envisioned. He wrote of Christians who were so in tune with each other that they were of one mind and one voice – what a witness that would be to the rest of the world!

Paul speaks here of the God who gives endurance and encouragement to his people and requests that God also give us the same attitude to each other as Jesus had. If we saw each other as Jesus sees us our love for one another would know no bounds and we would accept each other without judgement.

A few years ago it was popular to wear a bracelet with the letters WWJD on it. The idea was that one would stop before acting/speaking and consider 'what would Jesus do?' and this would lead to a change in behavior. We don't need a bracelet but we do need to ask God to help us to change.

RESPOND:

It would be awesome to worship God with one mind and one voice on Sundays and to be part of a community in which we all loved one another as Christ loved us. What can you do to help to bring this into being at RUC? Are there things that you do/say that cause disunity? How can you focus on the positive and not the negative?

DAY 4

ACCEPT/WELCOME ONE ANOTHER

READ: ROMANS 15:7

REFLECT:

This short section headed '*The Example of Christ*' in the ESV ends with an instruction/exhortation for the strong and the weak in faith to accept one another just as Christ accepted them. The ESV translates '*accept*' in this case as '*welcome*' – we are to welcome one another as Christ welcomed us. Isn't that an amazing picture of what it means to be saved! We have been welcomed into God's family and are accepted as his sons and daughters. Thank you Lord!

If we accept/welcome one another this brings praise/glory to God. Don't you desire to bring glory to God? All you have to do is accept your fellow believers. Is that so hard? Unfortunately, it often seems to be the most difficult thing in the world. We are so quick to judge others or to think that we are better than they are in some way. Our human nature gets in the way and we need to repent and ask God to forgive us.

Many of the '*isms*' in society are based on the belief that one group/race/etc is superior to the rest – racism, sexism, etc. What God is telling us in this passage is that we are all equally valuable to him and we need to learn to treat each other in a way that shows that we know this. The world would be a very different place if we all did this.

RESPOND:

Be honest with yourself and God and acknowledge your feelings of superiority or inferiority. Think deeply about your attitudes to people who look and behave differently from you and ask God to help you to accept and welcome them.

DAY 5

TEACH EACH OTHER

READ: ROMANS 15:14

REFLECT:

This is the kind of testimonial we would all like to get. Paul tells the believers in Rome that he is convinced that they are full of goodness. I wonder how many of us would say that about ourselves? Then he goes on to say that they are filled with knowledge and competent to instruct each other. Most Christians feel that they lack knowledge and need to be taught and that they certainly aren't competent to teach others.

What Paul is talking about here is not teaching in the sense of lecturing or preaching, but rather giving one another practical, real-life wisdom and counsel. We learn from our experiences and we can pass on what we have learned to others who are going through similar experiences. One of the lecturers at Rosebank Bible College introduced me to the phrase 'the priesthood of all believers'. This means that not only the priests/pastors are in ministry – all of us have at least one spiritual gift and it is our responsibility to use our gifts to serve the body of Christ (the church).

Part of gospel culture is serving our fellow believers and those who are outside God's family by exercising the gifts God has given to us. Don't keep your gifts and talents to yourself – use them to benefit others and to bring glory to God.

RESPOND:

Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? If not please contact Pastor Ndaba on ndaba@ruc.org.za.

Think about some of the difficult times you have been through. Have you had opportunities to use those experiences to help others? If not, ask God to open opportunities for you.

Have you been helped by another believer who had been through a similar experience? Thank God for them.

DAY 1

WEEK 2

BEAR ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

GALATIANS 6:1-5

GENTLE RESTORATION

READ: GALATIANS 6:1

REFLECT:

Having spent some time teaching on living by the Spirit and the positives of the fruits of the Spirit, Paul turns his attention in this section of chapter 6 to how the church should deal with those who are battling with sin. He acknowledges that there will always be some believers who transgress. We have been forgiven and cleansed but we are still human.

Those who are living by the Spirit, in other words, those who know the Lord and are filled and empowered by the Spirit are to show love to the person who has fallen into sin and gently restore them. This process would entail pointing out the behavior that is displeasing to God and helping them to repent and turn away from it. This should be done without judging or condemning.

Depending on what the sin is, this may be a lengthy process and those in the guiding role must themselves be careful and aware so that they don't fall into temptation while they are helping the person.

Over the centuries of church history church discipline has been abused by self-righteous people and this has caused great hurt and damage. In a reaction to this many churches are now wary of disciplining members and allow unbiblical behavior to carry on to the detriment of their members.

RESPOND:

What do you think about church discipline? Does it still have a place or should individuals be allowed to carry on behaving in ways that are clearly unbiblical? Do you know of anyone in your church who is behaving in such a way? Have you brought this to the attention of the pastors/elders?

DAY 2

CARRY EACH OTHER'S BURDENS

READ: GALATIANS 6:2

REFLECT:

This verse is sometimes used to encourage Christians to help one another through times of hardship, but it is actually far more than that. We are being encouraged to help each other in dealing with sin in our lives by gently pointing out the areas that we need to bring to God in repentance for forgiveness. We should love each other so much that we want each other to live our lives as Christ would want us to live and encourage each other to do this by being burdened about one another's sinful behavior. However, this must be done out of love and without an iota of judgement.

When we do this in a Christ-like way then we *'fulfill the law of Christ'*. The letter to the Galatians is full of teaching about the Old Testament Law and explanations of why it is no longer necessary for us to obey that law. So what is this *'law of Christ'*? It could refer to all Christ's teachings, but here it most probably refers to the command to *'love one's neighbor as oneself'*. Obedience to this command is an essential part of Gospel Culture, but this love is not an airy fairy hippy like emotion, it includes caring enough to point out wrong behavior. If you have children you know that disciplining them is part of loving them because it enables them to live well in society and it is similar in the church.

RESPOND:

Ask God to enable you to love your neighbor as yourself and to guide you when it is necessary for you to bear someone else's burden of sin with them.

DAY 3

SELF DECEPTION

READ: GALATIANS 6:3

REFLECT:

This is a strange statement but it seems to warn us against thinking too highly of ourselves. Humility is one of Christ's qualities that we are encouraged to emulate. Jesus made himself of no reputation and took on human form in order to come to Earth and die for our sins, but we humans very easily inflate our own importance and begin to think that we are *'something'*.

The world we live in encourages us to think of ourselves as *'better'* than others and encourages us to strive for more stuff in the false hope that this will make us feel more important. Too many of us venerate worldly fame and fortune forgetting that our time on Earth is very short in the light of eternity. We are nothing in ourselves our value comes from the fact that God loves us.

Instead of thinking that we are *'something'* we should apply the teaching of Philippians 2:3 "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves..."

Be careful of self-deception and be realistic in your self-evaluation, but don't lose sight of the fact that you are valuable in God's sight. This is a difficult, but very important balance.

RESPOND:

How do you see yourself? Are you full of your own importance and derogatory about others? Or do you think you are worthless and of no use to God or anyone else? Neither of these extremes are healthy. Spend some time in prayer asking God to reveal to you how much he loves you. Then go out and live in the light of that amazing love.

DAY 4

TEST YOUR ACTIONS

READ: GALATIANS 6:4

REFLECT:

At first glance this verse seems to contradict some of what Paul has said previously, but when one looks more closely that is not the case. Each of us should examine our actions and behavior in the light of God's Word. We must be honest with ourselves otherwise this will be a waste of time. Look at the standards set by God in his Word and check to see how well you are keeping up to those standards. None of us have the right to be proud of our achievements, but if we are doing the best we can then we can at least be satisfied with that.

We are not to be proud of ourselves in comparison to others, but we can take pride in a job well done and a life well lived. This may seem a bit confusing, but doing something well or serving God as well as we can is pleasing to ourselves and God. Pride becomes sinful when it leads us to think of ourselves as better than those around us and to treat them as less than ourselves.

For the most part the more we examine ourselves in the light of God's Word the less proud and the more humble we become. Think of people you consider to be close to God. Aren't most of them filled with humility?

RESPOND:

Examine your life today. Are you living in a way that is pleasing to God? Are there areas of your life that need to be worked on? You are not required to live this Christian life on your own – you have God and your community to help you. Ask for help from them.

DAY 5

CARRY YOUR LOAD

READ: GALATIANS 6:5

REFLECT:

At the final judgement each will have to bear his own load. We will each be accountable for how we have lived our lives and used our gifts. No one else will stand in our place. Christ did that for us and took on himself the penalty for our sin so that we could be saved and be given the gift of eternal life with God, but what we have done with that wonderful gift is our own responsibility. We won't lose our position as God's children, but we may not get the 'well done, good and faithful servant'.

This is a very sobering thought. Most of us tend to blame others when things don't go according to our plans – we are reluctant to take responsibility, but here we are being reminded that this particular load is ours and we have to carry it to the end. Others can and do help us to bear our burdens along the way, but it is our load.

If we are to be '*judged*' by God in this way then surely we should be testing ourselves while we have time to change and making sure that we are living in a God-honoring way every day. This would impact our behavior and lead us to exhibit Gospel Culture in our everyday lives.

RESPOND:

God has plans for your life and he would love you to live out those plans in a way that brings glory to his name. Seek his face today and pray for his guidance for your life and for his assurance that you are walking the road he has set before you.

DAY 1

WEEK 3

CONFESSION/ VULNERABILITY

1 JOHN 1:1-10

PERSONAL TESTIMONY

READ: 1 JOHN 1:1-2

REFLECT:

The Apostle John, who wrote this letter, had had the privilege of knowing Jesus during the time when he was living in human form on Earth. He had seen, heard and touched the physical body of the Word of life who has existed from the beginning. What an amazing testimony John had! John goes on to proclaim that this '*eternal life*' who was with the Father appeared to him and others and they could testify to it.

Perhaps you are thinking that, if you had met Jesus face to face while he was incarnate, you would also have an amazing testimony to share with others. The truth is that if you have encountered Jesus and come to him in repentance and know he is your savior then you too have met him face to face. He is as much and, in fact more, present with you as he was with his first disciples when he was on Earth. He lives in you and reveals himself to others through you.

Does your life reflect Jesus' presence in you? Do people look at you and wonder what makes you different? Or is your behavior, language, etc no different from that of most people you encounter? Your non-verbal testimony is as important if not more important than your verbal testimony.

REFLECT:

Spend some time with God reflecting on your privileged position as his child who has his presence within you. Ask him to show you areas in your life that are not glorifying to him and then bring those areas to him in repentance for restoration.

DAY 2

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD AND MAN

READ: 1 JOHN 1:3-4

REFLECT:

In verse 3 John states that the reason for proclaiming to others what he and the other disciples had seen and heard was so that they too would believe and put their faith in Jesus. This would mean that they could have fellowship with the other believers as well as with the triune God. Fellowship or the Greek word *koinonia* describes the relationship that Christians have with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as well as the extension of that relationship to each other. This is a unique relationship as it is based on our mutual love for God and our relationship with him. We can have fellowship with Christians of diverse backgrounds and be aware of the common bond.

John promotes joy in this letter and here he notes that proclaiming the gospel and seeing others coming into fellowship makes his and their joy complete. He is filled with joy because more people have experienced the salvation of Jesus and they have the joy of becoming part of God's family. Do you feel joyous when you hear about non-believers coming to know Christ? Have you experienced the joy of leading someone to the Lord?

We all need relationships with others in order to thrive and Christian fellowship is vital to our spiritual growth. We need support and encouragement from our fellow believers.

RESPOND:

Are you connected to a Christian community? If so, think about how you can support and encourage others in your community and how you can deepen your relationships. If not, find out how you can get connected. Join a Community Group, offer to serve in some way, be intentional about your conversations with others.

DAY 3

NO DARKNESS

READ: 1 JOHN 1:5-6

REFLECT:

The message that John and others received from God and passed on to the early church was that God is light. In other words he is completely sinless and pure without an iota of darkness in him. It seems that there may have been some who were claiming to be Christians but who continued to live as they had always lived. John doesn't mince his words – he tells them that they are liars and are not living out the truth. Interestingly, he uses 'we' in this section – perhaps he is emphasizing that any of us can deceive ourselves and think we are living our lives the way God wants us to when in fact we are not.

All of us fall short of God's sinless perfection, but here John is talking about 'walking in darkness'. Not a momentary slip, but a consistent disobedience. It is not possible to keep on living in a sinful way if we are in fellowship with God. He will speak to us through the Holy Spirit and make us uncomfortable and we will either repent or abandon our fellowship with him. Many have claimed to be in fellowship with God but time has proved that they lied.

The NIV translates verse 6B '*we do not live out the truth*'. Being a Christian is not passive – we should show what we believe by the way we live. If the way we live our lives and the interactions we have with others reveal ungodly attitudes then we need to examine ourselves.

RESPOND:

Are you walking in darkness in one or some areas of your life? Are you lying to yourself about your relationship with God? Ask God in his graciousness to open your heart so you can see yourself and repent. Pray for insight and a deepening relationship with him.

DAY 4

WALK IN THE LIGHT

READ: 1 JOHN 1:7

REFLECT:

"Walk in the light means to reflect God's perfection in the human sphere and includes both correct doctrine and moral purity. Light is also a symbol of knowledge and here it implies that when Christians 'walk in the light' their lives will be known and will not contain hidden sins, falsehoods or deception. Such walking in the light results in deep divine and human fellowship and progressive cleansing from all sin." ESV Study Bible

I have a picture in my mind of one of those old bible illustrations showing Jesus on the mount of transfiguration with rays of brilliant light extending from him to those around him. The light of his purity reveals all our impurities and makes us aware of them, but it also lights our way and guides us to repentance and forgiveness and this in turn draws us into deeper fellowship with him. As we get to know him more so more of our dark places are revealed and the cycle goes on until we exit this earthly life.

In another sense 'walking in the light' could mean staying close to the light of God's Word and allowing him to speak to us through it and guide us away from the darkness of sin. Our fellowship with the Lord is deepened as we get to know him better through his Word.

RESPOND:

'Light of the World you stepped down into darkness ...'
Thank you Lord for taking that step so that we could be saved. Thank you that you are the light of each of our worlds and that you lovingly reveal our dark places so we can bring them into your light. Thank you for your forgiveness and compassion. Amen.

DAY 5

CONFESSION

READ: 1 JOHN 1:8-10

REFLECT:

John notes here that we each bear ultimate responsibility for our own sin. If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and are guilty of lying. While we are still alive on Earth there will be some sin in each of our lives because we have not yet been made perfect and we need to be aware of this and to keep short accounts with God.

We must confess our sins initially to receive salvation and then to maintain fellowship with God and with one another. When we confess our sins God will faithfully and justly forgive. God is *"slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression"* (Numbers 14:18). But he will *"by no means clear the guilty"* (Numbers 14:18). Persistent, unrepented sin is not the mark of a Christian.

If we deny that we have sinned we are calling God a liar because his Word tells us that *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23). If a person does this it may be that they have heard the gospel and intellectually agreed with it but until it brings them to acknowledge their sin it hasn't taken root. Salvation involves repentance.

If we are to exhibit Gospel Culture we need to learn to be open and vulnerable with each other and to confess and ask for forgiveness when we hurt one another.

RESPOND:

Is it hard for you to be open with others about what is going on in your life? This may be the result of pride or previous hurt or for other reasons, but it will cause your relationships to be superficial and will affect your fellowship with others. Think on this.



DAY 1

WEEK 4

Love

1 JOHN 4:7-21

GOD IS LOVE

READ: 1 JOHN 4:7-10

REFLECT:

This section in the ESV is headed '*God is Love*' and here John is encouraging Christians to love as God loves. "... *whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.*" John is not ruling out the need for a confession of Christ, but he is saying that love is a consequence of being born of God. Non-Christians can love others but not in the same way that God's presence enables Christians to love.

People who lack love reveal that they have not been changed at the core of their beings by the gospel message. There should be some signs of sanctification and growth in the area of loving others even if this takes longer for some than for others. After all '*God is love*' – this is not his only characteristic, but it is an important one.

God showed his love for mankind by sending his son into the world to be the 'propitiation' for our sins. (Propitiation is the biblical doctrine embodying the concept that the death of Christ fully satisfied the demands of a righteous God in respect to judgment upon the sinner.) And he did this long before we loved him. Our love for God is a response to his everlasting love and his love is the source of any love that we are able to display.

RESPOND:

Do your attitudes and actions reveal an attitude of love for others? Has God's love taken root in you to enable you to show his love to the world? Pray that you may grow more like God in this area of your life.

DAY 2

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

READ: 1 JOHN 4:11-12

REFLECT:

John addresses the people he is writing to as '*beloved*' revealing that he cared about them deeply and he was showing God's love to them. Our love for others flows from our experience of God's love in salvation. No one has actually seen God in all his glory, but the love we show to each other reveals him to those around us and more than that our love reveals that God lives in us.

The final phrase in these 2 verses is translated: 'his love is perfected in us' ESV; '*his love is made complete in us*' NIV; '*his love is brought to full expression in us*' NLT. What on earth does that mean? Perhaps it gives each of us Christians the enormous responsibility of being the instruments God uses to reveal his love to those who don't yet know him. The love we show each other should be so striking to those around us that they want to know more about its source.

In my early twenties I encountered a group of Christian young adults and I was struck by their love and care for each other and that was what drew me to them and then to the Lord. Love in action is a very powerful attraction force in a world where so many people feel rejected and unloved. May God empower us to love one another in such a way that others find themselves drawn to us and our Saviour.

RESPOND:

Are you an example of the full expression of God's love? Think and pray about this today.

DAY 3

GOD'S LOVE ABIDES IN US

READ: 1 JOHN 4:13-16

REFLECT:

It is the Holy Spirit in us who gives us the assurance of our salvation and enables us to know that we abide in God. We didn't physically see the Father send his Son to be our savior, but we can testify to that fact because we have come to know Jesus as our savior. (By the way John only uses the word '*saviour*' twice in his writings – here and in John 4:42.)

If we confess that Jesus is the Son of God then God abides in us and we in him and we come to know the love God has for us and believe in it. God is love and when we abide in love with him he abides in us and assures us of our salvation.

Some of this section seems repetitive but John is concerned to reassure those who are feeling insecure in their faith and to emphasise to them how much God loves them. When we are confident in God's love for us we are enabled to serve him and others in ways that bring glory to him. Often we are obsessed with our own guilt and shame to such an extent that we are useless to God. We need to have a healthy balance between being proud and being overly conscious of our sinfulness.

RESPOND:

Do you know that God loves you and that nothing you do can change that love? Are you conscious of him abiding in you? OR do you still feel unworthy and focus on your guilt? Jesus died to take away your sin don't belittle his incredible sacrifice – accept his love and live for his glory.

DAY 4

NO FEAR IN LOVE

READ: 1 JOHN 4:17-18

REFLECT:

God's abiding in us and us in him perfects our love or makes it complete and this gives us confidence for the future. As we get to know more and more about God's love for us we become more and more certain that we have a sure hope for the future. We live in this world as Jesus did to reveal God's love to those around us.

"There is no fear in love" has nothing to do with the awe and reverence we should show to God. It means that we have no need to fear punishment for our sins because Jesus took that punishment upon himself. His perfect love for us casts out any need to fear the wrath of God and eternal punishment.

Living life on earth with the indwelling presence of God and with the certainty that we have eternal life and will not face judgement should have an enormous impact on the way we live our lives. But too often we seem to take our privileged position for granted and to forget that we owe it all to our beloved Saviour. Or we have no assurance of our salvation and we live in fear. We must guard our hearts and minds against the wiles of the devil so that we are not tempted away from the faith, but our God is faithful and he will keep us from falling.

RESPOND:

Thank you precious Lord for your love for me, for your sacrifice for me and for the promise of eternal life in your presence. Help me to live my life in the light of these things.

DAY 5

LOVE OTHERS

READ: 1 JOHN 4:19-21

REFLECT:

Our love for God and for other people is rooted in his love for us. God loved us when we were still sinners and died for us so that we could be forgiven and we are to demonstrate that kind of love to those around us. Just as God's love resulted in an amazing sacrifice so our love should result in practical actions that show the world what Christian love is.

If we say we love God but we live self-absorbed, selfish lives then we are 'liars'. If we don't love our brothers and sisters who we have seen, how can we say that we love God who we haven't seen? This is a sobering thought. The Gospel is not just to be preached, it is to be lived out so that those who don't yet know the Lord will be drawn to him through his people.

Loving our brothers is directed initially to those in our Christian community, but it must spread wider so that others can be drawn into that community. Jesus taught us to 'love your neighbor as yourself'. You can only do that with the help of the Holy Spirit, but you must do it. This is one of the most obvious aspects of Gospel Culture. Our love for each other should be a beacon of light to those on the outside looking in.

RESPOND:

Do you love your brother/neighbor? If not, spend some time with God and ask him to fill you with his love for those around you. If you do, how do you show this love? Pray about new ways to demonstrate your love to others.

DAY 1

WEEK 5

Be Kind

EPHESIANS 4:32

BE KIND

READ: EPHESIANS 4:32

REFLECT:

This is the final verse in a list of instructions about Christian living. Many of the instructions are framed in a negative rather than a positive way and then we come to '*be kind*'. What is Paul instructing us to do? What comes to mind when you think of someone being kind? I have a picture of an older woman offering to babysit so a new mom can go out to coffee with a friend. This kindness has no ulterior motive and is purely for the benefit of the person to whom kindness is being shown.

There are many synonyms for being kind – caring, loving, warm, amiable, tolerant – the list goes on, but none of these words describe '*being kind*' fully. '*Kind*' is active – we are commanded here to be kind. It is more than an attitude, it involves a commitment on our part to make a difference in another person's life.

So how can we be kind in a world where kindness seems to be sadly lacking? In some ways it's easier to say what we shouldn't do. Ephesians 4:31 '*Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.*' Kindness involves love and acceptance of others in spite of the differences between us. Putting the other person first, being considerate. It is very difficult to be kind if you are selfishly looking after your own comfort.

Is RUC perceived as a church where kindness is generally the norm?

RESPOND:

Would you describe yourself as a kind person? Kindness is one of the fruits of the Spirit and this is an area where we can pray for the Holy Spirit's help in growing more like Jesus.

DAY 2

BE COMPASSIONATE

READ: EPHESIANS 4:32

REFLECT:

The Oxford Dictionary defines 'compassionate' as feeling or showing sympathy and concern for others. The etymology of 'compassion' is Latin, meaning 'co-suffering.' When we show compassion to others we try to put ourselves in their shoes and feel what they are feeling. Compassion comes from being willing to feel along with others what they might be feeling. It is to understand the state and the pain someone is in and to show that we understand.

Our compassion for each other involves our emotions. We are trying to feel what the other person is feeling so that we can empathise with them in a meaningful way. If we do this too often and too intensely we may end up being burnt out. This is why pastors and counsellors need to have regular debriefing sessions.

In a country like South Africa where there is so much need it is easy to develop compassion fatigue and we need to guard against this. Compassion is one of the characteristics of God and he will guide us and give us the strength we need to show compassion to each other.

When we are kind we accept someone without judgement and bring them into our circle and build them up. When we show compassion we try to get into their circle and stand with them in what they are going through so that we can help them to get into a better situation (this is sometimes called active compassion).

RESPOND:

Are you compassionate? Do feel other people's pain or do you remain aloof and uninvolved? Ask God to help you to be compassionate and to show compassion to others.

DAY 3

GENTLENESS

READ: PHILIPPIANS 4:5

REFLECT:

Let your gentleness be evident to all.

If only all people would follow these commands, it would be a heavenly world. Paul's imperative in Eph 4:32 encompasses the whole of the Christian life towards one another. Though he does not say here to love one another, he does show key component parts of Christian love by this statement. And when we add gentleness another dimension comes in.

One commentator defines gentleness like this: Sensitivity of disposition and kindness of behaviour, founded on strength and prompted by love. Jesus epitomised this kind of gentleness. Too often we see gentleness as weakness, but that is not how God sees it.

As Yahweh's representative, the messianic king comes in humility and gentleness (Zec 9:9). That king, now come in the flesh, is "*gentle and humble in heart*" (Matt 11:29). In accord with the prophecy, he enters Jerusalem in gentleness and lowliness (Matt 21:5). Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology

If the Almighty God, Creator of the Universe exhibited gentleness in his life on earth, how much more should we, his children, do so. We must be gentle with each other and build each other up not rip one another apart.

Gentleness is another fruit of the Spirit and it is only with his help that we will be able to treat one another with the gentleness that God desires us to show.

RESPOND:

Gracious Lord, thank you that you are all powerful yet kind, compassionate and gentle. Help me to reveal these characteristics of yours to the people I come into contact with and to show forth Gospel Culture in all I do and say. Amen.

DAY 4

FORGIVE

READ: EPHESIANS 4:32

REFLECT:

The previous verse (4:31) dealt with anger and malice, showing that there is no place for them in the heart of a Christian. Kindness, compassion, and forgiveness are what will take the place of those things in the heart of a believer. Our compassion is modelled on Jesus' compassion in his earthly ministry, and on the cross. And most importantly, our forgiveness is made possible by his forgiveness of us which is a model for us to imitate toward others. Thanks to Christ's sacrifice, we should be unable to see a person's sin against us as unpardonable. If we are unable to forgive, then we have not yet been forgiven (Mt 6:15). Do you really grasp the truth of that? If you are holding a grudge against someone because they have wronged you, then you are out of fellowship with God and you need to come to him in repentance.

Forgiveness is a superpower for the Christian who wants to live in perfect peace. We forgive others because God remembers the wrongs done to us on our behalf. He wants to be the one to exact vengeance when it is necessary (Ro 12:19). Forgiveness removes anger and wrath from our shoulders and leaves us in peace. Unforgiveness only hurts you because it leads to bitterness and resentment and distance from God.

RESPOND:

Examine your heart and if you are holding a grudge or feelings of resentment against someone confess that to God, and to the person if possible, and ask the Holy Spirit to help you to forgive them. Then leave that burden in God's hands and move on.

DAY 5

AS GOD HAS FORGIVEN

READ: EPHESIANS 4:32

REFLECT:

The grounds for our forgiveness of others is that this is the way our Master, our teacher, Jesus Christ behaved towards us. His death on the cross atoned for our sin, bringing us peace with God, redemption, justification, and adoption as his sons and daughters in Christ. But the other thing Christ accomplished on the cross was a perfect example of how we should be toward others.

When we were still sinful and unlovable, God loved us so much that he made a plan to enable us, at a huge cost to himself, to be forgiven and cleansed of our sin so that we could have fellowship with him. The Creator of all things left the glory of heaven and took on the human frailty of his creatures and lived among them. He allowed himself to suffer and die in pain and indignity so that the necessary penalty for our sin was paid. Then he rose in victory over death to give us the gift of eternal life in his presence if we believe in him.

What right do we, the recipients of God's amazing grace, have to refuse to forgive anyone, no matter what they have done to us? None! As we have been forgiven so must we forgive those who trespass against us.

RESPOND:

Spend some time meditating on God's forgiveness and what it cost the Father and the Son to enable you to be saved from condemnation. Then praise and glorify your wonderful Saviour and thank him for his forgiveness. Acknowledge your need for daily, moment by moment forgiveness and ask the Holy Spirit to enable you to forgive as you have been forgiven.

DAY 1

WEEK 6

RECONCILIATION

EPHESIANS 2:11-22

WITHOUT HOPE

READ: EPHESIANS 2:11-12

REFLECT:

In this section of his letter to the church at Ephesus Paul was teaching about reconciliation to God, but also between people of different nationalities. He addressed the non-Jews who had come to know Christ and reminded them of their situation before they were Christians. Circumcision was the outward sign of membership of the Jewish nation – obviously only for men – and calling a man ‘uncircumcised’ was an insult and meant that he was not as highly regarded as the circumcised men.

In Israel’s history, those who were uncircumcised were not allowed to be citizens and they were excluded from the various covenants God made with his people through Abraham, Moses and David. In verse 12 Paul went even further and stated that before they came to know Christ, the Gentiles were without hope and without God in the world. They worshipped gods of their own making, not Yahweh the one true God and therefore had no hope.

Most of the Jewish Christians were reluctant to accept that Gentiles could be saved. Jesus was their Messiah and it was only after revelation from God that they agreed that the gospel should be preached to non-Jews.

This may seem like ancient history that has no relevance to our situation in the church today, but think about the different people who make up RUC or your local church. Are some groups treated with more respect than others because of their background? Is it assumed, perhaps without actual rules etc, that the leadership of the church should be in the hands of certain kinds of people?

RESPOND:

Give thanks to God that his salvation plan was not limited to his chosen people but revealed to the whole of mankind. Pray for those who have not yet come to know Jesus as their Saviour.

DAY 2

IN CHRIST

READ: EPHESIANS 2:13-15A

REFLECT:

The bad old situation where there was division between Jews and Gentiles (sometimes referred to as Greeks) has changed: 'But now in Christ Jesus...' The blood Christ shed on the cross to take away our sin has brought both Jew and Gentile near to him. We now have free access to the all-powerful God and are no longer far away from him.

Christ has made peace between man and God as well as peace between Jew and Gentile through his sacrifice. He has '*broken down the dividing wall of hostility*' (Eph 2:14 ESV) and destroyed the barrier between men of different nationalities and cultures. It is interesting to note that there was an inscription on the wall of the outer courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem warning Gentiles that they would only have themselves to blame for their death if they went beyond it into the inner courts. Now there is no longer a wall between us and God.

Through his sacrificial death Jesus brought an end to the old covenant system of sacrifices and offerings. God can be worshipped anywhere and he does not have a special relationship with any one national group. All of us have access to our Living God. What a privilege!

RESPOND:

What does it mean to you to be 'in Christ'? Gospel Culture is all about allowing God's Spirit in you to impact the way you behave and how you relate to other Christians and non-Christians. Are you growing closer to God daily? Pray for a real sense of the presence of God in your life today.

DAY 3

ONE BODY

READ: EPHESIANS 2:15B-18

REFLECT:

When Jesus paid the price of our sin he did away with the division between 'his people' – the Jews and the Gentiles and created one body out of the two. By his sacrifice he not only made peace between mankind and God but he also made peace between the two opposing groups and re-created us as Christians indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Christ put the hostility between men to death on the cross and preached peace to all mankind, whether far or near. We all now have access to God through his Spirit.

"To draw near to God and to enjoy him forever in a new creation is both mankind's greatest good and the ultimate accomplishment of Christ's earthly work of redemption." ESV Study Bible.

Paul uses the image of the human body to describe the church in a slightly different way in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 where he emphasises our dependence on one another as individuals in the body of Christ who work together for the good of the whole body. In the passage we are studying his emphasis is on the oneness of those who know the Lord. Sadly, we too often emphasise the differences between different groups of Christians and forget that we are all members of one body.

As a non-denominational church RUC is committed to majoring on the majors and not allowing differences of opinion on less foundational issues to cause dissension. But, as individual members, we must be careful not to judge others because their opinions differ from ours.

RESPOND:

Contemplate the privilege of being part of this body of believers saved by grace. Thank Jesus for his sacrifice for you. Give thanks too for the body of believers in which you are placed and pray for them.

DAY 4

ONE HOUSEHOLD

READ: EPHESIANS 2:19-20

REFLECT:

The consequences of Christ's death on our behalf are that we are no longer foreigners and strangers who have no rights or privileges. Instead we are fellow citizens with all the rights and privileges that that implies and even more than that we are members of God's household. Have you really grasped the implications of this?

Citizenship in Ancient Rome was valued because it granted the person the right to be tried by his peers if a legal dispute arose and it gave him other rights and privileges, e.g. lower taxation. Our citizenship in God's kingdom gives us the immense privilege of access to God and the right to call him Father.

We are not only citizens, but also members of the household of God – part of his family. Isn't that an amazing thought? This household is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

'Apostles were those associated personally with Jesus; the name literally means 'sent ones,' who were the first to share the message of Christ. Prophets included those Old Testament figures and early church leaders who proclaimed God's truth. Though people may serve in similar roles today, these roles of apostles and prophets as foundations of the church were unique to the New Testament time period.' BibleRef.com

However, Christ himself is the cornerstone of this building – his church. The cornerstone is the critical stone in the corner of the foundation that ensures that the building is square and stable. Without this stone the building will not stand, just as without the Lord Jesus there would be no Christianity.

RESPOND:

Thank the Lord that you have the privilege of being a citizen in his kingdom and a member of his household.

DAY 5

JOINED TOGETHER

READ: EPHESIANS 2:21-22

REFLECT:

In some ways this building metaphor is unhelpful because it focuses our attention on the physical church building, but in Paul's day there were no church buildings. A structure underpinned by the cornerstone, Jesus Christ, is built piece by piece and all the pieces are joined together through their faith in him until this body of believers becomes a holy temple.

A church building has no power or holiness in itself – although some of the beautiful cathedrals help to inspire worship – but the people of God indwelt by the Holy Spirit joined together to worship and serve him become a holy temple. This temple is not limited to a particular place. The people of the old covenant could only worship at the temple in Jerusalem, but under the new covenant God's people are the temple in which his Spirit lives.

Each of us is indwelt by the Spirit, but we are encouraged to join together with other believers so that we can be built up in our faith and use our gifts to serve others and help them grow. Being part of a local church is so much more than just attending services on a Sunday. It means regarding, and treating, the people in the church as your brothers and sisters. Loving them, praying for them and inviting them into your life.

RESPOND:

If you are part of a local church, are you being built together and becoming a holy temple in the Lord? That's what this series is hoping to achieve. Gospel culture is about treating each other the way Jesus treats us and growing closer to one another. Pray for transformation in yourself and your church.



DAY 1

WEEK 7

Humility

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

BE LIKE-MINDED

READ: PHILIPPIANS 2:1-2

REFLECT:

This week we will be looking at the area of humility and how important this is in our relationships with each other and, hopefully, we will learn from the greatest exponent of humility – the Lord Jesus Christ. The new NIV heads this section: ‘Imitating Christ’s Humility’ and that is what we are told to do.

Paul uses a conditional sentence (if) to provoke the Philippians and make them examine their lives to see if these qualities are evident in their lives. Let us personalise this: are you encouraged by being united with Christ, are you comforted by his love, do you share in his Spirit, does your life exhibit tenderness and compassion?

If these qualities are evident then we should bring joy to our Lord by being like-minded and loving one another. This does not mean that we have a drab intellectual uniformity. We can and will disagree and think differently about some things, but our love for God and for one another is so deep that it covers any differences.

The Spirit indwells every believer and, if we are walking in step with the Spirit, we will humbly put others before ourselves and be of one mind. I have seen this happen when a contentious topic is being discussed and those on both sides allow the Spirit to work and consensus is reached.

RESPOND:

Are you hard-headed and stubborn when you believe you are right and insist that your way is the only way? Or are you open to being led by the Spirit to see the other side? This does not mean that you should give in when others are leading the flock astray, but rather that you have the humility to admit when you are wrong.

DAY 2

VALUE OTHERS

READ: PHILIPPIANS 2:3-4

REFLECT:

These two verses express the antithesis of what the 'world' teaches us about how to conduct ourselves. Selfish ambition and vain conceit are encouraged in our modern secular society where the focus is on the 'happiness' of the individual rather than the good of the group.

As individual Christians and as a church we should always think of others as more important than ourselves. Not in some obsequious, hero-worshipping way, but because we know that God loves and values them. This valuing of others above ourselves must stem from our own humility – there is no place for pride in our relationships with others.

As well as valuing others we must also put their interests above our own. This is not something that comes naturally to us humans and we can only do it honestly with the help of the Holy Spirit. All of us are selfish at heart and we need ongoing transformation and sanctification with God's help. This entails keeping short accounts with God – confessing and repenting when we let him down not just morning and evening, but as it happens.

Are there practical ways in which you can show others that you value them? Here are a few – spend time with them, thank them, praise them, encourage them, guide them, lovingly point out areas in their lives that they need to work on, check in on them regularly, etc.

RESPOND:

Is there someone in your life that you have treated as if they are of no value? Make this right with God and with that person.

Ask God to lead you to someone who is feeling as if they have no value and enable you to encourage them. Pray for ongoing help and guidance in valuing others.

DAY 3

BE LIKE CHRIST

READ: EPHESIANS 2:5-7

REFLECT:

Paul begins this next section by telling us that in our relationships with one another we should have the same mindset as Christ. He goes on to explain what he means by this in a beautiful poetic description that is sometimes referred to as 'the hymn of Christ'.

Christ was and is God – part of the triune nature of God – and therefore he was equal to the Father, but he didn't try to assert his authority over the Godhead or hold onto (grasp ESV) his authority to gain some sort of an advantage over the Father and the Spirit. Too often that would be our human response – we like to increase our feeling of importance by lording it over those 'below' us. The Creator of the universe is not like that.

The Son of God, who holds everything together and can create and destroy with a word, 'made himself nothing'. This does not mean that he gave up being God – he was fully God and fully man while he was on earth – but he gave up the privileges that were his as the king of the universe. He took on the form (very nature NIV) of a servant and came into the world as a Jewish baby bound for the cross. He had every right to stay comfortably in his position of power, but his love drove him to a position of weakness for the sake of sinful mankind (2 Corinthians 8:9).

RESPOND:

Are you in a position of power and authority? Do you use that position to your own advantage or do you use it to benefit others who are less powerful? Do you think your mindset is like Christ's – do you put others first rather than yourself?

DAY 4

HUMBLE OBEDIENCE

READ: PHILIPPIANS 2:8

REFLECT:

Not only did Jesus take on human form, as we saw yesterday, but he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death and not just any death – death by crucifixion!

“Crucifixion was not simply a convenient way of executing prisoners, it was the ultimate indignity, a public statement by Rome that the crucified one was beyond contempt. The excruciating physical pain was magnified by the degradation and humiliation. No other form of death, no matter how prolonged or physically agonising, could match crucifixion as an absolute destruction of the person.” (ESV Study Bible).

So Jesus Christ the Living God became a man and lived among men and then allowed himself to be subjected to this humiliating form of execution in order that the penalty required by a just and sinless God for our sin and rebellion could be paid. He humbled himself!

We have this supreme example of humble obedience, but most of us still battle with being humbly obedient to God. Too often we are filled with a sense of our own importance or our pride makes it difficult for us to show humility in some situations. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that we haven't fully grasped how enormous Christ's sacrifice for us was and, dare I say it, we almost take his death on our behalf for granted.

RESPOND:

Spend some time reflecting on the enormity of Christ's sacrifice for you. Read Isaiah 53 and ask God to open your eyes to really see his love for you shining through his obedient death. Praise and glorify your wonderful Saviour.

DAY 5

CHRIST'S EXALTATION

READ: PHILIPPIANS 2:9-11

REFLECT:

As a result of his humble obedience to the Father, Christ was raised from the dead and highly exalted and given a name that is above every name.

JESUS, THE EXALTED LORD.

Philippians 2:9–11 explains one major outcome of Christ's righteous suffering and death: The Father exalted Jesus. In the resurrection—and later in the ascension—Christ's deity, obedience, and sacrificial death were vindicated by God. The themes of vindication and exaltation are likewise part of those servant passages in Isaiah. God will *“prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul, he shall see and be satisfied”* (Isa. 53:10–11). God's servant *“shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted”* (Isa. 52:13). Paul also insists that this exaltation resulted in Christ bearing “the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9). He is “*Lord*”—a term that reflects not only authority but also God's personal name, Yahweh (Isa. 42:8). Before this name, *“every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess”* (Phil. 2:10–11). Paul takes these phrases from Isaiah 45:23, thereby equating the servant Christ with Yahweh himself. (Ryan Kelly, Knowing the Bible: Philippians)

Sometime in the future when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth at the Second Coming every person will acknowledge his sovereignty by bowing the knee to him and everyone will call him Lord. But even in his exaltation Jesus remains the model of loving service to God and all this is ‘to the glory of God the Father’.

RESPOND:

Rejoice that your Saviour has been exalted for his obedient sacrifice and is acknowledged in heaven and earth as Lord. Pray for the nations to come to the place where they can call him Lord.



DAY 1

WEEK 8

Perseverance

2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-18

JARS OF CLAY

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-9

REFLECT:

What is this treasure that we have in our clay jars? It is the Gospel – the glorious news that Christ died and rose again to save us from certain condemnation and death. And we sinful humans saved by grace have been entrusted with spreading the news and revealing its power by our sanctified lives.

Clay jars were the cheapest vessels in the kitchen and those that broke easily and yet God chose to store his treasure in those rather than in the fine china. He wanted to show the world that any power his followers had came from him and that the work was being done by him through them.

The contrasts used in these next two verses highlight their meaning. Paul was a wanted man, pursued and hunted by many – hard pressed, but he was not crushed by this. He was still able to serve the Lord and spread the gospel to God's glory. He was perplexed, puzzled and confused about what God was doing and why he had to suffer, but in spite of this he was not in despair. He didn't understand but he trusted God for the future. He was persecuted, but he knew that God was with him at all times. At times he was struck down – physically through violence or illness – but never to the point of death.

Paul knew the power and victory of Jesus in his life because he was often in situations where only that power could save him. Many of us live such comfortable lives that we don't experience God's power in dramatic ways and in some ways we lose out.

RESPOND:

Open yourself to God's leading and trust him to go with you and be there for you.

DAY 2

SUFFERING WITH JESUS

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 4:10-12

REFLECT:

Paul, like most Christians, wanted the life of Jesus to be evident in his life, but unlike many of us he realised that in order to reflect Christ's life he also had to be acquainted with Christ's sufferings (death).

In Philippians 3:10, Paul speaks about the glory of knowing Jesus: that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Many long to know the power of His resurrection but want nothing to do with the fellowship of His sufferings or being conformed to His death. However, there are certain fragrances God can only release through a broken vessel, so Paul rejoiced in knowing both the suffering and the glory. He knew the two were connected. (Enduring Word Commentary).

Paul's suffering gave him greater insight and enabled him to explain the mysteries of the gospel in deeper ways. It made his ministry more effective and gave life to the people who were taught by him. There are many followers of Jesus who think that those who are 'godly' should be blessed with peace and prosperity and not experience suffering, but the message Paul is giving here is the opposite. Most people need to experience suffering of some kind in order to empathise with others who are going through difficulties.

Understanding what Paul wrote here not only tells us that God's servants may experience death-like suffering but that God has a good and glorious purpose in allowing it. (Enduring Word Commentary).

RESPOND:

Think back over your life and consider the ways in which you have suffered. Have these times drawn you closer to Jesus? How has God used these times to touch the lives of others?

DAY 3

RAISED WITH CHRIST

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 4:13-14

REFLECT:

Paul quotes from Psalm 116 v10 "*I trusted in the Lord when I said, 'I am greatly afflicted...'*" (NIV); "*I believed even when I spoke, 'I am greatly afflicted'...*" (ESV). Reminding us that even David suffered and was persecuted but he did not lose faith and we have that same faith and should also believe and trust no matter how bad our circumstances seem.

Some commentators think that the 'speaking' here may also refer to our verbal witness to the gospel and is a reminder that we should tell others about our belief even, or perhaps especially, when we are suffering for our faith.

We have the same spirit of faith that David had – this may or may not refer to the Holy Spirit – we believe and we speak about our belief because we know that we have eternal life. Our Lord Jesus was raised from the dead by the Father – that is fundamental to the Christian faith and we can trust the Father to raise us because we believe in Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf.

Not only will we be raised, but we will also be presented to God as those who are acceptable in his sight because of what Jesus did – not because of anything we have done. Does this excite you or terrify you? Do you long to be with Jesus for eternity or are you holding onto your family and possessions here on earth?

RESPOND:

Thank the Lord for the promise that you will be raised from death and be alive in his presence forever.

DAY 4

OUTWARD DECAY & INWARD RENEWAL

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 4:15-16

REFLECT:

All Christians benefit from the spreading of God's grace. As the number of those who have received his grace increases so evidence of his grace in the world increases and the thanksgiving to God overflows and brings glory to him. The result of this is that those who know the Lord do not lose heart – they persevere.

Our physical bodies are aging and getting weaker and '*wasting away*' – this is the natural way of life. But, at the same time, we are being renewed spiritually day by day. The Holy Spirit is at work in us transforming us and making us more like Christ each day. This transformation and spiritual growth enable us to keep going even when times are tough and to remain faithful to our faithful God.

Our peers encourage us to keep fit, to exercise, to eat healthily – these are all positive steps to keep our bodies healthy and as our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit we should look after them as well as we can, but our spiritual wellness is far more important. We need to make sure that we are reading God's word, meditating on it, spending time in prayer and being fed through sermons, etc so that we are constantly experiencing spiritual renewal.

Don't fear the inevitable aging process, but rather embrace the different stages of life and seek what God has for you in each stage. Keep growing spiritually even as you are getting weaker physically. Persevere in your faith.

RESPOND:

Pray for guidance in all stages of life and ask the Lord to bless you with perseverance as you rely solely on him.

DAY 5

ETERNAL GLORY

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 4:17-18

REFLECT:

Our troubles don't seem light and momentary when we are going through them and we can't see the wood for the trees, but Paul tells us that they are. In the light of eternity what we suffer here on earth is of no real significance except if it draws us closer to God.

We should stop focussing on our troubles and on the physical world around us and rather fix our eyes on the unseen. This does not mean that we become so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use, but rather that our focus is on what is to come and that colours our lives now.

The Greek word used for eternal here is *aionios* which means belonging to or characterised by the age to come and refers not to timelessness but to that which lasts forever. The material (seen) world around us is temporary/transient, but we have hope for a future in the presence of God that lasts forever. Hallelujah!

What an amazing prospect we have! So why are we so wrapped up in the here and now? Perhaps that is one of the downfalls of our human nature. Try to visualise the joy of living in God's presence for always. This wonderful vision will give you '*strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow*'. Knowing that your future is secure will help you to persevere and remain faithful to the Lord.

RESPOND:

Praise and thank the Lord for securing your future and for the joyful prospect of living in his presence for eternity. Ask him to help you to persevere in your faith and to spread the gospel to those who don't yet believe.

DAY 1

WEEK 9

Generosity

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-9

AN EXAMPLE OF GENEROUS GIVING

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-2

REFLECT:

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul had given instructions for them to set aside an amount each week for the collection for the saints (1 Corinthians 16:1-4) so that there would be no need for a collection when he arrived. Paul's visit to the Corinthian church was a painful one because the church was in turmoil and Paul left without dealing with most of the issues. Titus was sent ahead of Paul's second visit with this letter.

Paul starts this section by stating that the opportunity and willingness to give are a gift from the grace of God. He uses the churches of Macedonia as an example to show the Corinthian church what giving should look like. The churches in Macedonia, northern Greece, included those in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. None of these were wealthy churches and they were undergoing persecution and other trials, but they had given generously to support the believers in Jerusalem.

When the Romans conquered Macedonia they stripped it of much of the wealth it had accumulated as the homeland of Alexander the Great and it had not yet recovered. The believers in that area were often among the poorest people, but God had given them the gift of generosity. There is a huge contrast in *"their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part"*. They were joyful in spite of their poverty and they gave generously from joyful hearts.

RESPOND:

Have you ever considered giving to the work of God as a grace that he has given you? Do you give out of an abundance of joy? Ask God to reveal this aspect of giving to you and to guide you in giving.

DAY 2

GIVING THAT HURTS

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 8:3-4

REFLECT:

Paul testifies to the fact that the Macedonian believers gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability.

"The account of the widow's giving in Luke 21:1-4 illustrates the same point. She only gave two mites, which was a very small amount of money. In that sense, she gave according to [her] ability. Nevertheless, since she gave all she had – after all, she might have kept one mite to herself – she gave beyond [her] ability. The same principle of giving was evident in the Macedonian Christians." (Enduring Word Commentary).

Paul didn't have to beg the Macedonians for money, in fact they begged him to allow them to participate in this collection. So, though the Macedonian Christians didn't have much to give, they really wanted to give. They saw it as a privilege to give. True Christian generosity can't be measured by how much one has to give. Often those who have less are more generous with what they have.

"The example of the Macedonians is practical proof that true generosity is not the prerogative of those who enjoy an adequacy of means. The most genuine liberality is frequently displayed by those who have least to give. Christian giving is estimated in terms not of quantity but of sacrifice." (Hughes)

Giving out of abundance is 'easy' but we are required to give until it 'hurts'.

RESPOND:

Do you really want to give to God's work or do you find it difficult? Remember that everything you have comes from God and ask him to help you to see giving as a privilege.

DAY 3

GIVE YOURSELF TO THE LORD FIRST

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 8:5-6

REFLECT:

The Macedonian Christians gave far beyond what Paul hoped for. What made their giving so spectacular? It wasn't the amount. It was that they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God. Why were the Macedonians such good examples of giving? Because they first gave themselves to the Lord; then they gave their trust to Paul and the other apostles. In giving, the real issue isn't giving money. It is giving ourselves to the Lord. If we really give ourselves to the Lord, then the right kind of material giving will follow naturally.

We might think that the Corinthian Christians would be willing to take up a collection for the saints in Jerusalem and give that money to Paul to take with him to Jerusalem. But when things became difficult between Paul and the Corinthian Christians, they may have been less willing to do this. One reason Titus was sent with this letter was to complete this grace in the Corinthian Christians and make certain they followed through on their original intent.

The Corinthian Christians may have intended to give. They may have thought about giving. They may have been favourable to the idea of giving. Yet all of this was useless unless they did in fact complete this grace. Our intentions, vows, and resolutions are useless without action.

RESPOND:

Have you made decisions about giving that you have not put into practice? If so ask the Lord for forgiveness and take steps to do something about this. Spend time recommitting yourself to God and then seek his guidance with regard to giving to his work.

DAY 4

GIVE OUT OF LOVE FOR GOD

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 8:7-8

REFLECT:

It's interesting that Paul compliments the church at Corinth for their faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness and love even at this time when there were difficulties in his relationship with them. They have all these positive attributes, but he urges them to also excel in the grace of giving. This is the fourth time in this passage that he refers to giving as a 'grace' – Greek *charis* – the word used for spiritual gifts.

Giving is a work of God's grace in us. When you see a believer who is truly generous, a great work of God has been done in their heart. When God gives to us out of grace, the motive for His giving is in Him, not based in the one who receives. That is how we should give – because the motive of the love and generosity of God is so big in our heart that we simply must give. Our giving, like God's grace to us, should be offered without expectation of payment in return. We can never repay God. We can just serve Him and love Him in return.

Paul doesn't command them to give, but he wants to test their sincerity by a comparison, firstly, with the Macedonians who had given so generously. We give because we love, we can't love without giving (1 John 3:17-18). Since the Corinthians had more than the Macedonians did, they should give more. Calvin puts it plainly: *"Rich men owe God a large tribute and poor men have no reason to be ashamed if what they give is small."*

RESPOND:

Is your love for God reflected in your giving? Do you give generously from the blessings you have received?

DAY 5

JESUS BECAME POOR

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 8:9

REFLECT:

The second comparison for giving that Paul uses here is that of Jesus Christ. Christ was rich beyond what we can imagine, but he was prepared to set aside his wealth for a while and come and live as a poor man on the earth that he had created.

"For He assumed poverty, yet did not lose His riches. Inwardly He was rich, outwardly poor. His deity was hidden in His riches, His manhood apparent in His poverty." (Hughes)

Jesus was not a destitute beggar, but he could say of himself, *"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."* (Matthew 8:20) He left heaven's glory so that we could become rich – not materially, but spiritually. This has nothing to do with having lots of money, but rather having the amazing blessing of entry into God's presence with our sins covered by the blood of Jesus.

This amazing gift should motivate us to give all our time, talents and money to the Lord who gave them to us in the first place. How can we not give generously when we owe everything to the one who gave himself for us?

Those of us who have been blessed with wealth should give according to that blessing and those of us who have little should still give generously proportionately. Don't give reluctantly – search your heart to discern the reason for your reluctance. *"God loves a cheerful giver"* 2 Corinthians 9:7.

RESPOND:

Give thanks to the Lord for his amazing love and for all he has given you and pray for the grace of generosity.

DAY 1

WEEK 10

STRIVE TO DO GOOD TOGETHER

PHILIPPIANS 1:27-30

WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

READ: PHILIPPIANS 1: 27A

REFLECT:

"...let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ" ESV.

This statement summarises what this series on Gospel Culture is all about. The people of God are to live their lives in such a way that everyone can see that they are believers and to draw others to the Lord by their example of the redemptive power of the Holy Spirit.

Most Christians feel inadequate in this area. We know that we let God down constantly and that we are often bad examples rather than good ones, but God understands our frailty and so he sent the Spirit to empower and enable us. We can't live up to God's standards – that's why Jesus had to come to earth to die for our sins – and we should not try to do so in our own strength. We must surrender to the Spirit and allow him to work in us to lead and guide and change us. Sanctification is a process during our earthly lives – we will only be perfect in the next life.

However, this does not mean that we can live our lives on earth as we please and ignore God's instructions. It is our responsibility to reveal God to those who don't know him and we should do this by our witness in words and deeds. We are to do this 'whatever happens'. The way we respond to joy and sadness, hardship and blessing will impact people around us and draw them to our God or turn them away from him.

RESPOND:

Think about your attitudes and behaviour. Do you think that people watching you would say: *'If that's Christianity you can keep it'* or *'wow I'm amazed by her/his peace in the midst of suffering and I wish I could have that'?*

DAY 2

STAND FIRM

READ: PHILIPPIANS 1:27B

REFLECT:

Paul was hoping to go back to Philippi to visit the church he had planted there, but he knew that this might not be possible. It is interesting that he instructed them to live in a manner worthy of the gospel and linked that to their standing firm and striving together for the gospel. Living out gospel culture will not only deepen our relationship with the Lord but it will also impact our relationships with other Christians positively.

Even if he was not able to go to see them Paul wanted to hear that the Philippian church was doing well and that the believers there were standing firm in the Spirit and striving together for the gospel. His goal for them was unity and effective working together that would extend God's kingdom. This should be our goal in our church too.

We want to see people coming to know the Lord and being discipled so that they grow in their faith and are able to stand firm no matter what hardships they have to face and then the whole body of believers unified in the desire to serve the Lord and spread the gospel!

You can play a part in this by living out the gospel, promoting unity of purpose and working together with the believers in your church to spread God's word. Be the person who encourages others and builds unity rather than one who complains and sows disunity.

RESPOND:

Pray and ask God to help you to stand firm in all circumstances and to be a unifying influence in your family and church.

DAY 3

FEAR NOT

READ: PHILIPPIANS 1:28A

REFLECT:

Fear is sometimes linked to a lack of trust in God. Perhaps our concept of God is too small and we don't really believe that he is in control so we become afraid. The early church members faced great opposition and persecution and Paul is encouraging them here. If they stand firm and are unified in their devotion to the gospel then they have no reason to fear those who oppose them.

Most of us reading these devotions are not being directly persecuted for our faith in Christ, but we live in a world that is largely secular and finds our faith inexplicable and challenging. We too can be encouraged by Paul's words and know that God is with us always and he will help us to stand firm in the face of opposition. Sometimes you will experience opposition in your family or in the workplace or in your friendship groups, but take heart and believe that the Holy Spirit will guide you in your response.

There is no need for us to be frightened of those who oppose us or of the future because we know that God is in control and knows everything about our lives and he is with us all the time. Stand firm in your faith and rely on the unity of your church community to help you through.

RESPOND:

Are you a fearful person? If so commit your fears to the Lord and ask him to give you confidence that he knows all and is with you always.

Thank God that you can rely on him and be confident in his strength and in his love for you.

DAY 4

YOU WILL BE SAVED

READ: PHILIPPIANS 1:28B

REFLECT:

According to this portion of verse 28, our lack of fear in the face of our opponents is a sign to them that they will be destroyed but we will be saved by God. This is quite intriguing, but there are some accounts of those being persecuted for their faith in Christ confounding their persecutors with their lack of fear even in the face of death. Stephen is one example (Acts 7).

Over the last two thousand years many people have been martyred for believing in Jesus and some of us wonder how we would act if we were faced with the choice between death and renouncing our Lord. Does God give special strength in those circumstances? Maybe.

Here the emphasis is on the fact that our courage/lack of fear in the face of opposition shows those who don't believe that we will be saved by God and they will be destroyed. Somehow their eyes/hearts are opened and they know that there is no hope for them (unless they turn to the Lord). What a shattering revelation that must be!

RESPOND:

Give thanks to the Lord for the privilege of being saved by grace.

Pray for the millions of people in the world who don't know the Lord. Perhaps they have never heard about him or maybe they have heard but have rejected him.

Pray that all of us who know Jesus will be faithful witnesses and that we may have the joy of seeing revival in our world.

DAY 5

SUFFERING FOR CHRIST

READ: PHILIPPIANS 1:29-30

REFLECT:

Not only do we have the privilege of belief in Christ, but we also have the privilege of suffering for his sake. That may sound rather strange to some of us. How can suffering be a privilege? But those of us who have been given the gift of salvation must also expect to suffer for our faith in some way. For Paul and many others over the years that suffering took the form of persecution by non-Christians, but for us it may be more subtle.

The suffering Paul is referring to here is not suffering as a result of the fallen nature of the world – illness, war, crime, etc. All mankind, including Christians, experiences that kind of suffering, but here Paul is specifically referring to suffering for our faith. He notes that the Philippians are going through the same struggle he was and is still going through – being beaten and imprisoned for his faith in Jesus.

In some parts of the world today a person can be put to death for admitting that they are Christians. In other countries they won't be allowed to hold high office or maybe even to do certain jobs. In the Western world the persecution may take the form of ridicule or not being promoted. These are very different scenarios, but if you are suffering because you have openly declared your faith in Christ then you should count it a privilege.

Both faith and suffering for your faith are gifts from God!

RESPOND:

Thank God for your gift of faith and ask him for grace to bear the gift of suffering for his sake.

