



LENT

Devotional

Invitation to Transformation:
*Drawing near to God with all our
heart, soul, mind and strength*

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By Lisa Baptiste

Lent is a season where we are given the opportunity to prepare our hearts and minds to receive Christ's sacrifice, usually through the discipline of self-denial. The goal is to come out more holy, more godly, but if you're anything like me, the change doesn't last, and I return to the very thing I was so committed to giving up for 40 days. If I'm really honest with myself, at some point, it stops being about putting my focus on Jesus and starts being about completing a commitment, forcing myself to keep fasting, telling myself I'll be a better person for it.

Ed reminded us mid-January that God is pro-self improvement, but He's going for something much deeper, transformation. That through a close connection with Jesus, and our cooperation, participation and effort, we would experience this inevitable work without conforming to a pattern or striving. His words opened a yearning in me, and Lent presented itself as an invitation to draw near.

We will be drawing near to God with our heart, mind, soul and strength (which we will call effort,) by noticing areas commonly resistant to His presence and position ourselves open and exposed to His light using various exercises and cascading habits. For the purpose of this devotional, matters of the heart will deal with desire, the mind will be common attitudes, the soul will relate to our identity and our effort will focus on specific ways we can love God but have resistance. Many of these topics will overlap and the points made be revisited from a different angle, as the Jesus Creed was simply meant to convey loving God with your whole person. This will be 40 days where we will not be trying to force or create change, or impress or please God with our sacrifice. We will simply be trusting Him and creating space for his life-changing grace.

Heart: Control

“For where your treasure is, there your heart is also.” Matthew 6:21

We all have a vision of what life is supposed to look like. Whether you've always wanted a powerful career or a big family, to travel the world or amass a library of excellent books, we maneuver every part of life in hopes it will get us closer to achieving that vision. Then, real life happens, and things don't go according to plan. As panic sets in, we find the reigns of control gripped tightly in our fists, and we are ready to do everything in our power to set our life back on track.

The desire to control our lives is human. We live as though we are the star of the show, to come and go as we please, have no one to answer to except our own conscience, free to explore our passions. We all begin like the man who builds his house sand*, the unpredictable landscape shifting and moving under us, threatening all we value and desire. In those moments, we can either turn to God and admit our plan isn't working out and ask for Him to intervene or turn and curse Him for not honoring our plans. If I'm honest, I curse more often than I cry out for help.

Today, we open those clenched fists, even just a little, and show Jesus what we're afraid to lose. Exposing our fear positions us to see His trustworthiness, and transform our hearts bent on their own way to those open to change, direction and that which is exceedingly, abundantly more than we could ask or imagine.

*Matthew 7:24-27

Reflection:

What part of your life feels out of control right now? Are you trying to reign it in or have you brought it to Jesus?

What fears is God pointing out that He wants to shed His light on? Are there any lies associated with these fears? What is God's truth?

Prayer

Father, I may have a very clear view of what I want my life to be, but I open it up to You. I say to my heart that I trust Jesus, and His wisdom concerning my gifts, passions and desires. Thank you for exposing my fears and shedding the light of Your truth on the lies I hear about not being in control. I receive your invitation to participate and cooperate with you, building a life together that will satisfy the depths of my soul. Amen.

Soul: What's Your Name?

“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” Isaiah 43:1

The first thing we typically learn when we meet someone new is their name. When we think about the construction of a name, the first part of identity is the individual mantle, sometimes given with the intention that the holder will grow to embody the meaning of their name, and is meant to reveal something personal about us. The second point signifies our place in society, focusing not just on who we are, but whose we are. Our last name identifies our family, and where they are from. Some women after they get married change their last name to that of their husbands, to break the identity of belonging to their family and create a new identity of oneness with their spouse.

Many times, as God called people, the first thing He did was change their name, none so dramatic as Jacob to Israel in Genesis 32. In doing this, God shaped Jacob's identity from beyond one who undermines/deceives (his brother) to include Himself, as according to the scripture, Israel means one who struggles with men and God, and overcomes.

Once God was able to meet Jacob in the primary way he identified, he was positioned to be changed into more than what he, his family or society expected from him. He was even able to reconcile with his brother, and have great healing and affection between them, whereas had he continued to identify the way he had his entire life before his encounter with God, would not have been possible. Today, we open that very first place we know ourselves and hold our primary identity open to God, allowing Him to reveal misconceptions about ourselves, any lies we've agreed with, and ask if there's anything He wants to say about who we are first and foremost. Some will get new names, some will get new revelation of their current ones, but all will be re-identified as His.

Reflection

What does your name mean? Have you found that meaning true in your life?

What is God disassociating you from in order to re-identify you as His? Are you willing to accept the exchange?

Prayer

Father God, I know my name is written in Your book of life and is just as precious to You as it is to me. Reveal to me the way You see me, and highlight anything that I may primarily identify as that You are separating me from. Give me a mantle to grow into that I may be an expression of your goodness in my family and in society. Thank you for claiming me as Your own, and binding my life to Yours. Help me to walk in faith that I am first and foremost who You say I am. Amen.

Mind: Entitlement

“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.” Eph 2:8-9

I’ll never forget the first time I prayed for something and didn’t get it. I was so angry. I felt like God had lied to me somehow, not living up to this bargain we’d cut: I do as You ask, You bless me as I ask. I treated God like an employer, and I was now being withheld the wages I was due. I felt justified in my mindset, as that’s how I see pop culture approach God as well, characters with their fists raised, exasperated, listing all their “good deeds,” and asking what more God wants from them.

How quickly we forget that prayer is meant to be a dialogue, not a list of demands; an avenue through which we get to know God, and build our assurance that He knows us. Unfortunately, most prayer sounds a lot like, “Do __, give me __, help me __.” This is not the language of grateful children accessing love and grace, but entitled ones, ready with their lists to show God why they deserve what they’ve asked for. Today, we open up this bad habit and sense of entitlement and raise our hands in worship.

The practice of worship puts the focus back on God instead of on me. When we focus on His goodness, lovingkindness and mercy, we can’t help but fall on our knees. We treat the blessings in our lives as the free outpouring of love and grace that they are and view our petitions as expressions of trust, where we reveal our deepest desires to the Father. Through worship, we position ourselves to have our entitlement mindset transformed into one of gratitude.

Reflection

Take some time to worship, praising God not only for what He’s done for you, but for who He is. Write it in the space below as your own personal expression of gratitude.

Prayer

Father God, You are good, and in that goodness, You consider me. I recognize that there is nothing I can do to earn more of your love or deserve more blessing. Forgive me for trying to leverage my own good works to gain what I feel owed from You. Hold me in your grace, that as I expose my deepest desires to you, I am filled with assurance of Your love and reminders of Your kindness. Thank you for dealing so tenderly with me and my sense of entitlement. Amen

Effort: Giving

“Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” 2 Corinthians 9:7

Nothing kicks up my fight or flight response like being asked to give. Whether it's time, energy or money, someone is always asking for something, and after dividing our resources between family, community, this cause and that activity, our tanks are drained, but the need is still great. The call to give can be so constant, it's easy to become offended and shut it off. For those who can't shut it off, and are consumed by obligation, we extend ourselves beyond reason, and become resentful. We think, “All I want is a few minutes, a few dollars, to myself. Why should I give it away?”

We try to guilt ourselves into becoming cheerful givers, and settle for the bit of happiness we feel when we can pat ourselves on the back and say we did a good thing or we tell a friend so that they can acknowledge us, not realizing our effort doesn't glorify God, as we claim the glory for ourselves. Today, we turn away from the call to give and turn toward the One who gives above and beyond what we can ask or imagine and give thanks for all He has given us, the same way Jesus gave thanks to the Father before He gave of Himself.

Reflection

What good things has God given you today?

How does recognizing how abundantly blessed you are change the way you see giving or will give?

Prayer:.

Holy Spirit, thank you for all the gifts you have blessed me with. Thank you for the love of community, for the resources I can draw from which meet my needs, for everyday pleasures I take for granted. I am humbled by your constant, faithful expressions of love, and am so grateful. I ask that You would take my gratitude and turn it to joy, as it was with Jesus, who gave thanks to the Father before giving of himself, and for the joy set before him, endured the cross. Forgive me for trying to make myself better at giving through guilt, obligation and self praise. I believe Your word is true, that You have enriched me in every way so that I can be generous on every occasion, and that generosity would result in more thanks to You. I receive Your overflow of resources in my life. Thank you for choosing me to be a blessing. Amen.

Heart: Safety

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

John 8:12

I love the irony of the phrase “safe bet.” It implies that while there is a measure of uncertainty, it’s a comfortable measure, one that likely costs little to nothing if I lose. As people, the need for safety is innate and one of the most basic human values, driving us to fight or to flee in order to protect our life, property and relationships. That being the case, most of our day to day decisions are safe and in an attempt to avoid vulnerability, whether physical or emotional, we build walls, systems, whole complex workings, eliminating all potential threats.

Just as soon as our lives are ironclad, the Father begins to awaken potential and possibility in our hearts. He calls us to Risk, inviting us to not live by our own measure of safety but to radically love, generously give, and believe without reservation.

Jesus, over and over, called people to take a risk and follow Him. He gave little explanation if any, but promised abundant life beginning now and extending into eternity. Today, we open up some of those walls and invite the Holy Spirit to reveal what we’re protecting from God and commit to answering “yes” in one area we’re being called to take a risk and follow Him.

Reflection:

What areas in your life or heart have you blocked off from God’s call to risk?

Which of these are you willing to open? Can you commit to a yes where you previously had said no?

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, show me which areas of my life I have resisted Your calls to risk. Forgive me for being willing to deny You access or blatantly disobey Your call and for placing my stake in fear of losing what I value instead of placing it in Your goodness. Increase my faith, that I may follow You in the call to _____, bravely living out the abundant, radical life Jesus said He came for me to have. Amen.

Soul: Who do you think you are?

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” 1 Peter 2:9

If I were to ask who you are, how would you answer? I’m sure some of you would tell me your occupations (I’m a Sailor,) and some would tell me your hobby (I’m a reader,) and the list of attachments you have would go on. This was an exercise in a class I took, where the professor waited the room to quiet, and then looked at all of us and said, “I didn’t ask you what you did. I asked you who you are.”

In a culture where our accomplishments determine our value, it’s easy to conflate the two and move from human beings to human do-ers. It’s why I’ve always loved the visual of God carving man out of a big block of marble, removing everything that wasn’t so that man could be revealed.

Often, as we lose our talents and abilities, lose jobs and opportunities, if we are not centered in the identity God gives us, we lose ourselves; pieces of who we think we are falling off every day. But God has given us an identity that is incorruptible and speaks it over us throughout scripture. Today, we’re going to open our cultural mindset of human do-er and ask God to reveal who He says we are at the core of our being.

Reflection:

Below is a non-exhaustive list of some things we get to identify as in Christ. Reflect on what you resonate most with, and what your heart rejects.

- God’s Special possession, 1 Peter 2:9
- A Child of God, 1 John 3:1
- His Workmanship, Ephesians 2:10
- Jesus’ Friend, John 15:15
- A Temple, 1 Cor 3:16
- A Vessel, 2 Timothy 2:20-21
- A Co-laborer with Christ, 1 Cor 3:9
- A Witness, Acts 1:8
- An Ambassador, 2 Cor 5:20
- A Minister/instrument 1 Timothy 4:6
- Beloved, Colossians 3:12
- Complete in him, Colossians 2:10
- Salt of the earth, Matthew 5:13
- Accepted, Romans 15:7
- Chosen, 1 Peter 2:9
- Justified and Redeemed, Romans 3:24
- A new creation, 2 Cor 5:17
- Righteous, 2 Cor 5:21
- An Heir, Galatians 4:7
- Holy and Blameless, Ephesians 1:4
- The apple of my Father’s eye, Psalm 17
- Citizen of Heaven, Phil 3:20
- Gifted, 1 Peter 4:10/1 Cor 12:7
- Blessed, Eph 1:3
- Light of the world, Matthew 5:14
- Saint, 1 Cor 1:2
- A display of His splendor, Isaiah 61:3

Prayer

Lord, it’s easy for me to identify with what I do as my whole culture’s vocabulary is geared toward reinforcing the idea. I know you have a lasting identity for me, one that goes so far beyond what I could build, and so I let go of doing, and open my hands to being. I believe that I am who You say I am, no more and no less. Help me see myself the way you do, and highlight for me a verse that I can claim in the core of my being. Amen.

Mind: Willful Ignorance

“They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts” Ephesians 4:18

Living in a society with flashing lights, scrolling banners and all types of signs screaming, “look at me,” it’s easy to get overwhelmed by issues, physical and spiritual. Sometimes, it’s so much, that we just shut down our hearts and refuse to engage. Occasionally, we feel a little nudge or a tug, but we quickly harden our hearts, throw up our hands and ignore it.

The “with God life” is a dynamic one, where we are not only called to engage in our interconnected design with one another but also with spiritual realities, going so far as to manifest the values of the Kingdom of God on Earth. When we choose to be willfully ignorant, not only do we disconnect from the world, we disconnect from God. We render ourselves and subsequent faith impotent, and our understanding of the mind, heart and motivation of God is darkened. Our hearts become like hardened clay, unworkable, unusable, and we forfeit the abundant life Christ said He came for us to have.

Whether He desires to create compassion in you for your local homeless or instill justice in you for social issues, His main goal is always the same: that you would be part of what He’s doing and that the influence you have on the world around you would have a lasting impact. Today, we take off the blinders and intentionally ask God what is is He wants us to partner with Him on.

Reflection

What has God given you concerning gifts and talents? Do you find them being pulled in a particular direction or toward a specific topic?

Is there something He’s asked you to pay attention to that you feel overwhelmed by? Write your feelings on the subject and your reluctance to engage below.

Prayer

Confess to the Lord where you have willingly turned your eyes away from what He asked you to consider. Thank Him for his gentleness in bringing this to your mind, and ask Him intentionally to show you where He is asking you to partner with Him. Commit to doing as He is asking.

Effort: Praying

“This, then, is how you should pray...” Matthew 6:9

I don't know if you've looked recently, but there are a lot of books on prayer. They range from how to pray to effectively, to praying particular models, using them as a battle plan and 20,000 titles in between. It's no wonder so many people tell me they “can't” pray or don't pray “well.” It sounds nice to say that prayer is just a dialogue between us and God, but if that's all there is to it, why does it seem so complicated and why do other people seem better at it?

It seems even the disciples were confused about it, one of them requesting Jesus teach them how to pray.* While teaching, Jesus addressed some pitfalls people fell into during prayer that I think we still see today. There are those for whom prayer is a challenge, and they tend to be vague and unexpectant. Then there are those steeped in a particular fashion, and their prayers are boxy and formulaic, or impressive and eloquent, almost as if the person praying is reciting a magical incantation. Jesus taught the first when they ask something from God should present their requests blatantly and with faith and the second that God is not manipulated with flowery language or showy display.

I'm going through this with my oldest son right now, who is just starting to realize he can talk to God. “Ask him to protect me from the shadows,” his small voice requests. We pray together, and he exuberantly punctuates with a big “AMEN!” It's not eloquent, it isn't formulaic, I'm not trying to impress God, I am simply addressing a Father with the concerns of a son. Today, we open ourselves up and ask God to reveal if there's any dysfunction in our prayer life, and echo the call of the disciple's heart, “Teach us to pray.”

*Luke 1

Reflection

Examine how and when you typically pray. Do you have difficulty getting your requests specific? Have you fallen into the trap of eloquence?

Prayer:

Ask Jesus to teach you how to pray. Listen for what the Holy Spirit brings up in your heart and talk to God about it. Write it below.

Heart: Acquisition

“You open Your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” Psalm 145:16

Everyone I know is somewhere in the process of decluttering. Every season, bags of clothes, knick knacks, appliances and whatnot make their way to thrift stores, and yet the process of purging our hoards is never finished. This is because of an odd phenomenon that as soon as we have an empty space, we feel the need to fill it. Whether we fill them with tokens of class and stature, of enthusiasm or entertainment, we all have a desire for more, even when we realize we have too much.

We acquire to satisfy some desire in us: the promise of happiness, security, convenience, etc. It's much like the child who begs for a specific toy during Christmas, acting as though they need it or they will die, and 1 day after they open it, if we're lucky, the novelty of it wears off, and they're back to searching for the new thing that will make them happy. Solomon, in Ecclesiastes, details how he denied himself nothing, and amassed wealth of silver and gold and in the end, it did not satisfy.* We know this, we have seen this play out in our own lives, and yet, we are defenseless against the call to consume. In keeping up with the Joneses, we enslave ourselves to heavy debts and make money a taboo subject so our shame, our insatiability, will never be exposed or judged.

While our culture has set itself up appealing to ravenous consumers, the Father has called us to rest in satisfaction, as He desires to provide exactly what is sufficient for the moment you are in. Today, we acknowledge the panic and worry in our hearts about never having enough and open ourselves to being satisfied by a Father who loves to give good gifts to His children, and provide not only their daily bread, but even the desires of their hearts.

*Ecclesiastes 2

Reflection:

What is God highlighting concerning your acquisition habits?

How could the spiritual practice of abstaining from acquiring more bring you closer to the satisfaction God is calling you?

Prayer

Father God, I long to rest in the satisfaction You've designed me for. I turn over my worry and panic that says if I do not acquire more, I will not be _____ and exchange it for Your truth, that the lilies do not labor or spin and yet they are the most beautiful dressed in all of creation, and as you satisfy the earth and all its creatures, you are able to satisfy me. Forgive me for chasing after that which rusts and breaks and never satisfies. Fill me with your contentment. Amen.

Soul: Where do you belong?

“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” 1 Corinthians 12:27

Doctors believe as soon as a baby's born, they can differentiate between their mother and everyone else. They know her smell and the sound of her voice and that they belong to her, and will choose her over any other available person. It's a survival necessity, to know where they belong, so they will get food, safety and comfort. As we get older, we start separating our identity from our parents, flourishing into individuals. This is a good thing, except when those individuals forget that they belong somewhere, and stay out by themselves. Those who forget where they belong go without necessary encouragement, validation of who they are, accountability, and forget what it is like to experience grace through another person. This is the very reason the writers of Hebrews warns against falling away with fellowship from other believers.*

With church the size it is now, it is easy to come in, sit down, and not be noticed. That is exactly what some of you want, as being in community left you with too much hurt. You would rather not play the game so you find other ways, maybe in the world, to satisfy that instinctual desire to belong somewhere. Even those of us who are part of one or more small groups can grow tired and resentful of those groups, as having to be in community with imperfect people can be less than desirable. Today we open up the place in us that is meant to belong somewhere, and ask God to reveal what our hang ups are and where we fit within our community.

*Hebrews 10:25

Reflection

What are your feelings on your current community? Are you getting the validation, encouragement and correction community is meant to give?

Are you harboring any resentments toward your community? Confess them here.

Prayer

Lord, I know you made me to belong somewhere. Give me a sense of where that is and where who I am would best encourage others. Show me where I have harbored bitterness and resentment against community and heal me of the wounds that have been inflicted, leaving me reluctant to participate. Thank you for choosing to manifest Your grace through messy, imperfect people, and calling us to one another. Amen.

Mind: Laziness

“With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith.” 2nd Thess 1:11

“I’ll get to that later.” We’ve all had that thought, whether it’s about our chores, or an assignment or even making an appointment, we always have something more pressing to do, even if that something is binge watching an entire series on Netflix. Later often doesn’t come until our laundry basket is overflowing, something is due the very next day, and that ache is so bad you can’t help but pick up the phone and call the doctor. While we’re being squeezed by sudden pressure, we look back at the days, weeks, sometimes months we had and ask why we didn’t just do something sooner. We can almost hear an audible yawn in our minds answer back, “I didn’t feel like it.”

There’s a saying we all remember from childhood, “Idle hands, Devil’s playground.” It was meant to say if we weren’t busy doing something, our hands would find themselves trouble. However, the truth of that statement is even more insidious. If we’re not busy doing something, we get in the habit of doing nothing, and we lead undisciplined, unproductive, unimpactful lives, which is exactly what our enemy wants. Even more, the enemy wants to use our own habit of disinclination to be the source of our own destruction as Proverbs says, “Sluggards do not plow in season; so at harvest time they look but find nothing.” (Proverbs 20:4) .

Some combat laziness with to-do lists, productivity charts, or even sheer will to “do,” but the Father has an even better method: activation. He calls us forward, re-inclining us toward something worthy of our life, saying, “Follow Me.” We get in the habit of spending time with Jesus and before we know it, are energized and passionate, walking boldly with purpose and sense of destiny. Today, we open our habit of laziness and position ourselves to hear our calling, and have our daily routine reoriented toward Jesus.

Reflection

Do you have an idea of what God is calling you to in this season?

What passions currently are dormant that you would like re-oriented toward Jesus?

Prayer

Lord, I’ve grown comfortable in my habit of laziness, preferring to do nothing as opposed to even things that would bring me joy and fulfillment. Forgive me for cultivating it in my routine and rendering myself fruitless. Speak to my heart a sense of destiny and purpose, and reignite passion toward the good works you have prepared for me to complete. Thank you for being my example, simply calling me to follow Your lead. Amen.

Effort: Serving

“For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Galatians 5:14

As a mom of young kids, I'm in a consumer stage of life. I need a lot of help with just day to day tasks, like someone holding a door while I have a stroller or making faces at the kids to distract them while we're waiting in line. If I want anything beyond day to day, I need even more, someone to sit with and love on my kids so I can attend a service, a class or even catch a quiet moment with my husband. If you're also in a stage where you need a lot of help just to get by, it's easy to get in the habit of taking, and excluding yourself from the call to serve.

1 Peter 4:10 says, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.” When we're stuck in a consumer stage of life, we forget that the service of others is a grace, unearned favor toward us and our circumstances. We do not receive it as an act of love because we are looking for it as an entitlement. Therefore, we do not return the love to our neighbor.

We also forget we have been given gifts, as it can feel in our current stage, we have nothing of worth to offer, but we do! As a member of the body of Christ, we have the opportunity to serve a function that will bless the whole body. It may not be the function we once served, but we are still a member, whose presence is meant to bless others.

Today, we open our consumer mindset and ask God to show us what gifts we can use in our current season to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Reflection:

What God given talents and abilities do you have? What opportunities are available to you to be able to use them to serve your community and church?

How much of a time commitment are you willing to give to Jesus starting today toward serving?

Prayer

Lord, as I am in a stage of life right now where I am consumed by need, help me to see where I can give. Reveal the talents and abilities you've given me in this season, and show me where I can put them to good use. Forgive my entitlement to your grace as it's been expressed through people, and fill me with gratitude as my needs are met, receiving them as an act of love. Thank you for calling me to be a blessing no matter what season I'm in. Amen

Heart: Acknowledgement

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”
Romans 5:8

It's easy to walk through your day and feel unseen by the world around you. Most of our everyday activities are praise-less ones, chalked up to “adulting” and when we do manage to do something out of our ordinary, it's still not extraordinary enough to garner verbal acknowledgement by those around us. When we point out our accomplishments, we're hit with a shame stick, accused of fishing for compliments. In order to avoid that shame, we need to be really impressive before we command attention. It's so exhausting to be praiseworthy, that some of us don't even bother, shirking all attention and putting on false humility so people think we are ego-less. It's no wonder so many of us are addicted to social media, and the little lift we feel when we see someone “liked” the meal we prepared, the picture we drew, or the blog post we wrote. It's a poor substitute for the approval we are desperate for, but it's better than nothing at all.

The real question our heart is asking in our quest for praise is, “Am I valuable? Am I good? Am I desirable?” The world responds with a demand to show them what we offer before we are approved. The Father, however, separates our efforts from our value. He says because you are His child, you are valuable. Because you are made in His image, you are good. And He so desires relationship with you that while you were yet bent on your own agenda, Christ laid down His life to heal the broken connection between you and God. Today, we open our hearts to His approval and let His love disconnect all the works we have attached to our value.

Reflection:

What is the Father highlighting concerning your need and response to praise and acknowledgement?

Where have you allowed how much praise you receive to determine how valuable you are?

Prayer

Father God, it's so easy to get tangled up in the approval of others, and the sense of value that comes with being acknowledged. Today, I rest in Your love, and ask that You would expose where I have equated my value with my accomplishments and begin to untangle them. Thank you for loving me before I ever did anything and declaring me valuable as I am. Amen.

Soul: What are you made of?

“For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;”

Romans 12:4-6

It's always funny to me when someone asks me what my astrological sign is or sends me a personality test. As an ENTJ and an Enneagram 8, I've pretty much had it confirmed that I'm loud and hard to ignore, something that anyone who is spoken to me for longer than 5 minutes can confirm.

Our personalities are one of the biggest parts of our identity is, as through it we express who we are. It is also an area most resistant to confrontation and change, as it can be perceived that we are being told we are not good the way we are. Being loud and outgoing, the fact my spiritual gift involves speaking to strangers is not a surprise. What was a surprise was when God told me he could not trust me with his words because my personality made me slam into them like a truck and He needed me to be a scalpel. I was shocked, but by receiving his correction I've been able to use who I am for the greater reach of the Kingdom. Today, we open up our personalities and ask God to show us the areas he would like to fine-tune.

Reflection

Do you have any personality traits you would say you have had to make excuses for?

Where do you feel like God wants to take one of your personality traits and fine-tune it for his use?

Prayer

Father, your word says that I am fearfully and wonderfully made and that you knit me together in my mother's womb. I believe that extends to my personality and thank you for giving me the exact personality I would need to be able to fully express who I am. Help me to yield my personality to you, believing that you love me completely as I am and that if you desire to fine-tune me it is for a matter of effectiveness and so that I might even more be able to express who I am to the world around me.
Amen

Mind: Anxiety

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Phil 4:6-7

Living in this day and age, if you turn on the television, you will be given something to worry about. The world seems on constant high alert concerning potential destruction and wants to make sure you are devoting your time to think about what if. What if our country goes to war? What if your child gets sick? What if the stock market crashes? It's easy to say “don't worry,” but when faced with the fear of dealing with potentially terrible situations, the stress of our day to day life can leave us paralyzed with anxiety.

Anxiety doesn't feel like something we can choose out of or just turn off. It's something that builds up in our chest, only alleviated by assurance, like when our loved one walks through the door after not being able to reach them long into the night. Assurance moves the focus from what if to what is.

The Bible gives us both assurance in God's presence and power. Deuteronomy 31:8 says, “The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” Then Paul in the above verse says the very peace of God, surpassing all human understanding, will be the gatekeeper to our heart and mind. Today, we open our anxious mind to His presence and His peace, which we can rest assured in.

Reflection

What are you anxious about? Have you brought these concerns to Jesus?

Picture God/Jesus/Holy Spirit engaging with what you're worried about. What is their response to your concerns?

Prayer

Lord, oftentimes my worries seem overwhelming and absolutely paralyzing. It seems the more I try to not worry, the more I have to worry about. I feel stuck. Reveal yourself to me, that I may know your presence, and feel you around me as I encounter the stress of my day to day life. Give me assurance that no matter what I face, You are with me and there is nothing too great for You. I receive Your peace, even though I may not understand it, as the guard to my heart and mind. I place my trust in it, certain that you have overcome the world. Amen

Effort: Fasting

“The Lord will guide you always, he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.” Isaiah 58:11

Having grown up culturally Jewish, I know a number of people who observe Yom Kippur. They go to synagogue, corporately fasting, and as they pray, lightly hit themselves on the chest with a closed fist, to show God how sorry they really are for their sin. Some of them actually end up coming home with bruises, as they felt especially convicted and really wanted God to know how sorry they are for their sin. They used fasting as a way to punish themselves and hoped God would receive their penance.

Then, I have Christian friends who any time they're seeking God for something, they fast. That sounds good, but when you talk to them, they make sure everyone knows they're fasting, and they talk about it like it's a bargaining chip during a hunger strike situation, "I'm going to fast until God _____."

With so many bad examples of fasting, it's no wonder why so many of us don't bother. We don't want to fast and experience that level of discomfort, nor do we want God to think we're trying to manipulate Him. The only issue is Jesus didn't say if you fast, He said "When you fast..." The purpose of fasting to demonstrate our need for God, and when that need is realized, Isaiah tells us, "Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I." (Isaiah 58:8-9) Today we open our resistance to fasting and ask God to create a hunger with which to love Him.

Reflection:

There are many things you can fast from in order to develop a hunger for God's righteousness. What can you fast from that will create greater dependence from you on God?

Prayer:

Lord, the thought of fasting makes me very uncomfortable, but I know that You do things outside of the box so that my physical body and spirit get on the same page. I open myself to fasting and ask that You give me Your mindset, that I might understand on a greater level it's impact. Amen.

Heart: Power and Authority

“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Matthew 20:26-28

If you could have any superpower, what would it be? Mine would be mind control, so I could force all the bad drivers on the highway off the road or make my kids comply with my request that they finish dinner. I think superhero lore exists because deep down inside, we all wish we had a little more power to exert over our environment and circumstances. Whether we get smarter, stronger or have a cool advantage, what it reveals is a human desire to possess an authority that makes things happen.

Oftentimes, the way we are tempted to establish authority is through insecurity. It is a fear of powerlessness and loss of control that demands we become bigger than our circumstances, causing us to manipulate people, overpower the environment and force our will unto those around us.

Jesus, being submitted to the Father, was not insecure about His authority, and because of his confidence, was able to give his disciples increased authority to change their environment by healing the sick, casting out demons and overcoming all the power of the enemy but told them not to take joy in the fact that demons submit to them, but that their names are written in the book of Life.* His is an authority that empowers instead of manipulates, and is proven enough that it can serve instead of micromanage. Today, we open our desire to be over one another and submit our authority to God, who interacts with the environment out of love instead of fear and a desire to build up instead of crush into submission.

*Luke 10

Reflection:

What areas in your life do you possess authority? This could be at home, work, ministry, relationally, etc.

What attribute of Jesus' leadership are you willing to practice walking in?

Prayer:

Father God, I acknowledge You gave man authority over our environment when You gave us dominion over the earth, and that it was always part of Your plan that I would have an influence in the world around me. I submit my authority to You, opening my insecurity and exposing my fear of powerlessness. Cultivate in me the assurance that You know my name, and show me how to establish authority like Jesus, who was so secure in Your relationship that He gave others freedom to influence the world, which beat back darkness and manifested Your will on Earth as it is in Heaven. Thank you for calling me to partner with you in impacting this world with Your love. Amen.

Soul:What do you value?

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” Phil 4:8

We would all agree that we should value healthy eating habits. We have all seen the research for the benefits of eating fruits and vegetables, getting enough sleep, and getting exercise and we would all agree that they are good things. At the same time many of us spend our evenings in front of the television with milk and cookies, having let our gym membership lapse. These are the difference between stated values and real values, real values being what we actually live out.

We all recognize that reading the Bible is valuable, as is worship, as is going to church, as is just spending time with a friend over coffee asking where God has shown up in their lives this week. But many of us do not take the opportunity to turn our stated values into real ones, lacking the discipline necessary to put them into action. Today we open up our stated values and ask God to show where we are simply performing lip service, as well as reinforce the values He desires us to have.

Reflection:

What spiritual practices do you say that you value but aren't in the habit of practicing?

What 1 practice are you willing to move from a stated value to a real value?

Prayer:

Father, I want to value that which is praiseworthy, noble, lovely, and admirable. I open up my stated values to you and I ask that you would begin to reveal where I am simply paying lip-service and I do not have a real value that I am practicing. Give me the grace to begin to move my stated values into real ones, that I would have time to practice an even make mistakes until I truly value that which you value. Amen

Mind: Stubbornness

“The Israelites are stubborn, like a stubborn heifer. How then can the Lord pasture them like lambs in a meadow?” Hosea 4:16

Sometimes, I feel like I can't get out of the way of my own stubbornness. It feels natural that as positions rise against my own, my heels dig in and my legs become like pillars: unmovable. It gets to the point I begin to respond to undesirable requests like a petulant child, “You can't make me.” I see how damaging this can be, from watching relationships fall apart to governments shutting down, all due to inflexibility, but I remain rigid. It's as if life is a competition of will, and if I move first, I lose.

This mindset affects my relationship with God and I find myself in these power struggles with Him, which lead to rebellion, as I can't bring myself to do as He's asked of me. Still, even then, there is grace. The verse in Hosea gives God's very clear desire for us: to put us in good places so that we can be satisfied. He's asking us to partner with Him, and believe we have the same goal in mind. Today we open our stubborn will to flexibility and partnership with God.

Reflection

What areas of life do you experience power struggles with God in?

How do you feel He's wanting to partner with you in getting what you want?

Prayer

Lord, I have long used stubbornness as an excuse to be disagreeable, unreasonably willful and insubordinate. I admit my fear of what will be taken from me or how I will be taken advantage of if I am flexible. I give you that fear, trusting we both have abundant life for me in mind. Forgive me for holding my position as better to what you can offer. I say yes to your invitation to partnership and thank you for honoring me with such a request. Amen

Effort: Behavior

“What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!”

Romans 6:15

Most of us grew up in a faith tradition where good behavior is what we were told pleased God most. We were very clearly given parameters for what was sinful and was told that when we acted outside of them that God turned away from us and we should expect wrath and hellfire. That line of thinking led to most of us falling away, and when we came back we didn't know how to interact with law. We kept acknowledging that God gives grace but behaving as though we were attempting to avoid judgment, only to fall back into sin because we could not maintain a perfect posture.

Ed mentioned a couple of weeks ago that grace is opposed to earning not effort. It's okay to want to be good! We love God through our behavior by availing ourselves to all he has offered, including the mind of Christ, trusting that as we follow Jesus, anything that is not with us will naturally break off and fall away. Today we open our love-hate relationship with the law and ask for God's grace to keep us open to following Jesus.

Reflection

Where have you fallen into using your behavior to try to earn love/approval/blessing from God?

How can you trust Jesus for where you fall short and love Him through what you get right?

Prayer

Lord, you know that I do my best to be good but that is often not enough. Forgive my desire to earn your love and my salvation as though there is anything I could do to earn either. I ask that you would give me grace as I continue to trust Jesus, knowing that as I follow Him, anything that won't go where he leads will naturally break off and fall away. Thank you for continuously making me look more like your Son. Amen

Heart: Understanding

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

If you've ever spent any time with a preschooler, you have experienced the inherent need to understand the world around us. My three year old's favorite topics of conversation are why, how, and what. Curiously interacting with the world around, he is on a great quest to find wisdom. By the many periodicals detailing what we can know about space, the depths of the ocean and the inner workings of the body, we know that curiosity doesn't go away as we age, but intensifies. We must understand the world around us in order to experience fulfillment in life.

So what typically happens when that understanding is challenged, and something you thought you knew all about you suddenly don't? There's a panic, frustration, maybe even a grasping to retain and hold down what you "know" to be true. I imagine this is how people felt listening to Jesus' sermon on the mount in Matthew 5-7. He would say with, "You have heard _____, but I tell you _____" taking the crowd's understanding on murder, lust, love and so many other topics that they had a baseline for, were "wise" in, and turning them on their head. I imagine the religious leaders hot with anger, digging their heels into what they "knew" to be "true." I know when God messes with my understanding of how something is supposed to work, that's the first thing I do. The second is I tell Him He's wrong; That He doesn't understand how life works. I exalt my worldly understanding, my formulas for how to live over his wisdom, because more often than not, I would rather trust what I can prove by testing, and control than trust Him. Today, we open our finite human understanding and ask God to help us trust in His wisdom.

Reflection

What is something in your life that you thought you understood and Jesus turned it upside down?

What is something you're hanging onto your understanding of instead of God's understanding?

Prayer

Father, you have given us this wonderful gift of curiosity and a desire for wisdom and I thank you for that. Forgive me for exalting my understanding of life instead of being willing to accept what You reveal, as the very Designer of life. I open my thirst for understanding to You and place my trust in Your wisdom, which is pure, impartial and sincere. Amen

Soul: Where are you going?

“My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.” Psalm 17:5

It's nice to just get in the car and drive sometimes. Without any particular direction I can feel free to explore but more often than not after about an hour, I grow restless, experiencing a desire within myself for a direction.

I don't think we as people were designed to wander aimlessly, considering our habit of making paths and roads, very clearly marking destinations. We all have this desire to know where we're going. The call to follow Jesus gives that to us, and we love being lead to the place of abundant, eternal life, and the place of fulfilled purpose, but not so much the place of loving our enemies or the place of losing our life. When the destination we had in mind for our lives takes a turn toward somewhere we'd rather not go, we turn into Jonah, actively looking for one way tickets elsewhere. This off-road inclination leads us getting lost, our compass spinning without a destination, and wandering like the Israelites did. We then raise our fists against God, frustrated that He would call us to a place we don't want to go, and leave us hanging when we walked away. Today, we open our stubborn, fearful nature that wants to define the value of a destination based on what it offers me, and firmly place our trust that God knows the goodness of the places He leads.

Reflection

What hard places do you feel like God is leading you to?

What value judgement have you made against that place that you need to confess and repent of?

Prayer

Lord, as I feel like Jonah being lead to Nineveh, I have to confess that this is not the direction I thought my life would be going. I can tell you every reason You don't want me to go to this hard place, and why this place/these people are not worth my time or effort, or Yours, but know that Your compassion is unyielding and Jesus' desire is always to go to dark places and bring light. Forgive me for running, and give me the compassion and grace you have for the destination you have set before me. Amen

Mind: Pride

“But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.”
Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” James 4:6-7

I met a girl in Starbucks once, and it was clear that she was having a rough day. Since I was on my way to church, I asked her if there was anything she needed prayer for. She thought for a second and said, “No, I’m ok.” Most of us don’t think about pride in that sense, but I’ve been a part of many conversations where, like this girl, people absolved themselves of the grace of God, reserving it only in case of disaster. When I’m not being intentionally conscious of it, I fall into the same attitude often. Pride is like a little bit of yeast that works its way through the whole batch, convincing me in one area of my life and then another that I’m perfectly capable of handling things on my own, and I don’t need God.

Proverbs tells us to trust in God with all our heart and lean not on our own understanding, but in all our ways, acknowledge Him and He will direct us. (Proverbs 3:5-6) God wants to be honored in every aspect of our life. He wants us to recognize even if we are strong and skillful and our own understanding says we can trust in our abilities, that we can’t even take a breath outside of His sovereignty.

His resistance to pride springs from a deep love that refuses to be excluded from the inner workings of His own creation, and He is willing to fight for His rightful place. He does this by reserving grace for the humble, those willing to acknowledge their weakness and dependence on Him, and allows those who refuse humility to expend themselves, ending in burn-out. Today, we open wide our prideful mindset to His presence, acknowledging just how dependent we are on Him.

Reflection

Which areas of life rely on your own abilities and rarely acknowledge God’s presence?

How can you begin to honor and acknowledge God in those areas?

Prayer

Lord, even now, I feel resistance to your grace. I don’t want to need it, and like being seen as strong and capable, without weakness, free from criticism. Forgive my foolishness. I submit to you, laying down the trust I have in myself and acknowledge your desire to have your presence known in every aspect of my life. Give me little reminders through the day of how reliant I am on you and as I experience trial, let your grace be my guide and shield. Amen

Effort: Work/Parenting

“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.” Col 3:23

Most of my days as a mom feel thankless. No one is thanking me for cleaning up the mess left over from breakfast, no one is thanking me for getting them dressed or putting their shoes on, no one is thanking me for changing their diaper or getting them their third glass of water. Often I want to throw my hands up in the air and stop serving my family until they can be grateful.

My husband often feels the same way at work. He tells me that he picks up extra tasks, unwilling to let things go left undone because someone else shirked their responsibility. He also has a heart for new people and is willing to take extra time to show them the ropes, remembering what it was like to feel thrown to the wolves. Often that too goes left unacknowledged by his boss and sometimes unthanked by those he's helping.

We work so hard for our families and our paychecks and are often left feeling defeated, with the question why bother looming in the air. Paul encourages our spirit here to not lose hope but continue working heartily, that our Father in Heaven may be glorified through our effort. Today, we expose the resentment we have toward our daily grind and lift it up to God in an act of worship, receiving His approval and reward for our work.

Reflection

How can you turn what you do in your current vocation into worship?

How can you encourage others, reflecting God's approval and glory over others?

Prayer

Lord, I thank you that when I am sure no one cares about what I am doing with most of my day, that you do. I lift up my vocation to you as an act of worship, and ask you would receive my efforts as an expression of love to you. Reveal the resentment I have harbored against my family and/or my coworkers and forgive me for becoming bitter against the very thing You have given me as a blessing. Amen

Heart: Peace

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” John 14:27

Most of us would agree that we want to live in harmony and order with each other, the world around us and within ourselves. We tend to manage well enough with the golden rule that seems to govern society, but that peace is such a fragile thing. It is so quickly destroyed by the slightest offense, to the point of becoming a distant memory in some areas of the world. We also want harmony within ourselves, but is so easily disrupted even hidden in my own heart, by the noise of my own thoughts and inner critic that I only seem to experience it when I finally lock myself behind a door and make strife stay away from me. Instead of true peace, I settle for something else: Distraction and Numbness. There are a number of mediums available, from binge watching television to drinking or using drugs but my need for peace is such that I will do whatever I need to to get as close as I can.

Jesus seemed to understand our need for peace, and even our fear that we wouldn't be able to get it. He offered a peace unlike that of the world. The peace I experience from the world is based on my circumstances and on the agreement of others. His peace doesn't seem to be affected by circumstance, displayed in his not understanding why the disciples were so upset when their boat was caught in a storm and Jesus was sleeping through it.* It is called a peace that transcends understanding, and today, we open our numb and distracted hearts to the true peace of God.

*Mark 4:35-41

Reflection

Where are you using distraction and numbness in place of real peace in your life?

Are you willing to trade distraction and numbness for true peace, which endures circumstances, as a guard for your heart and mind?

Prayer

Jesus, my peace is so fragile, so easily disrupted that I am weary of both trying to hang onto it and trying to manufacture it. I confess that I have settled for distraction and numbness because true peace has seemed too difficult to attain. I receive Your offer for a different kind of peace, one unphased by circumstance, and able to bear offense. Help me to trust it as true, even when I don't understand it and let me be a conduit of true peace for others. Amen.

Soul: What's your purpose?

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Ephesians 2:10

Whether or not we admit it, we all long to be significant. We want to know that we offer unique, indispensable, inherent value that only our presence can give. The question which resonates from this deep desire is age old, “Why am I here?” Whether or not you believe in a big P "Purpose" for your life or are more like me, who thinks life is a succession of little purposes, the need for an assignment, as displayed through our art, music, movies, is pervasive through the human experience.

At this stage in my life though, where I'm consumed with the needs of others, I've backburnered that question, and squelched that longing. I've told God I don't have the time, energy or capacity for it right now and that He'll just have to find someone else. I know I'm not alone, being buried in day to day, as I meet with two groups of people who you would believe the outline of their day was wake up, work/parent and sleep. To even begin to consider what more we could be living for is too much, so we deaden our heart, and silence that whisper that we were made for more. We even stop looking for eternal impact in our day to day, making our goals something like going to the bathroom alone, or just hitting that deadline. Today, we open our lost sense of purpose and ask God to breathe new life into it.

Reflection

Have you ever felt called to something? Were you able to fulfill that purpose?

Is there a calling that you haven't risen to? Why?

Prayer:

Lord, I hear the desire you've put in my heart for more, and I'm terrified of missing it but I don't feel like I have space to fulfill it. Remind me that I was made for glory, resplendent beauty not found in tight measures or dutied practice, but in the journey and the pondering of doing life with You. Give me grace to simply follow You through my week and put my hands to what you ask. Thank you for giving me a job to accomplish, (if you're a parent, you may also add: children to raise) Help me find purpose and meaning in every day, as You have created each one with inherent value. Amen.

Mind: Bitterness

“Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.” Hebrews 12:15

When we're hurt, offended or disappointed, it's normal, healthy even, to be upset. However, when that offense isn't resolved or that anger goes undealt with, it buries itself in our heart, giving the devil a foothold,* taking root as bitterness. It's flower, resentment, which is defined as a combination of anger, annoyance and hatred, grows from its center. It is watered with the idea that we have been dealt with unfairly, and can grow against man or God. Considered poison, bitterness chokes out the cultivation of healthy relationships and stains our worldview with cynicism before it begins to manifest physically, as modern psychology links bitterness to insomnia and high blood pressure and says it can go so far as to threaten our immune systems by raising our stress baseline.

Calling bitterness a root implies a number of things. Roots not only anchor the whole plant and hold it steady, but if a flowering plant is threatened, even to the point of being cut, a root will keep the plant alive, and it can even grow back. This is why Paul tells us to get rid of all bitterness.* He knows that if we just try to get over the resentment, or fake it till we make it, we will never be free from it. We need to do the work to dig it up, bringing the unresolved feelings to light. Today, we take hold of the root of bitterness and ask God to reveal the source. We open ourselves to forgiveness, whether we need to give or receive it.

*Eph 4:26-27, 31

Reflection

Where are you harboring feelings of resentment? What unresolved event do they lead to?

What do you need to bring to light through confession? This could be the initial hurt or offense that was left unresolved, feelings of being disappointed or being treated unfairly by God, or actions you've taken propelled by resentment.

Prayer

Take this time to personalize your confession, and open yourself to give forgiveness for those who've hurt us or receive it for holding a grudge against God.

Effort:Body

“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” 1 Cor 6:19-20

I have a friend who is always trying to get me to go to the gym. She tells me that when she takes care of herself she is loving God. This has been the key motivator for her to diet, exercise and refrain from many indulges she used to partake in before she met Christ. I'm often convicted just by the presence of her water bottle, knowing my doctor has told me I should lay off coffee and just drink more water. I often wish I didn't feel beholden to the carnal desires of my body, who tells me it wants cookies all day, every day, but don't have the discipline to break my bad habits.

I imagine my story is a lot like most of yours, whether it's an addiction to food, to sleep, to substance, it just feels like you have no control over your desires, and must bend to their will or your very body will rebel against you. The verse above is usually used as a shaming mechanic to try to motivate us out of bad behavior, but only love can transform the way we see and relate to ourselves. Today, we open our bodies, and see where we have honored our undisciplined desires and invite the Holy Spirit to indwell us.

Reflection

What bodily desire do you have that you feel has control over you?

What does it look like to love God with that desire?

Prayer

Lord, Your word says you have cultivated in me self control, but I have not kept up the work. Forgive me for using the space meant to reflect Your glory as a dumping ground for worldly pleasures. Holy Spirit, I give you space in my body, and in it's desires and ask You to teach me how to best honor You. Amen.

Heart: Justice

“The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.” Psalm 103:6

There is nothing worse than when we see evil being carried out in the world and feel powerless to stop it. We ourselves feel cheated, our spirit recoiling at every underhanded storyline we read, exclaiming “that’s not fair.” We yearn to see justice exercised, where the oppressed are lifted up and the hand of evil disabled, until something happens to us personally. Then it’s less about me being lifted up and restored and more about the offender being punished. Our desire for justice quickly devolves into a thirst for vengeance.

Even in the church, there’s a prevalent idea that God will get someone back on my behalf and I don’t need to worry about it when according the scriptures, it is far more likely that He desires a personal encounter with them, exposing their dysfunctional places to His love and transforming them into the likeness of Christ, effectively bringing an end to the work of evil and birthing an agent of goodness and grace; Just look at Saul’s conversion to Paul in the book of Acts.

This is not to say that God does not hold people accountable for their actions, as there are many natural and lawful consequences found in society we are all subject to. It is to expose our rigid view, and while God is exacting true justice all over the earth, we miss it because we are looking for wickedness to be crushed instead of transformed. We let our incorrect view cultivate unforgiveness in us, believing God will not hold the offender responsible for their actions and punish them accordingly, and so we must. Today, we open up our desire for vengeance, and practice forgiveness, rejoicing in the true forms of justice, righteousness and kindness our Father delights in.

Reflection

What does Justice look like to you?

Is there someone who’s offended you that you’ve been waiting for God to punish? Would you be willing to pray instead that God would transform them into the likeness of Jesus?

Prayer

Father, I have always pictured justice as the wicked being snuffed out, and have rejoiced at the thought. I open my rigid views to You and ask that You would give me Your understanding of justice. Forgive me for holding back Your transformative power in favor of judgement and retribution. Give me peace as I forgive _____, and release what they have done to You. I declare that You will not only lift and restore me, but will transform them into the likeness of Your Son, creating a representative of Your love and mercy through which Your Kingdom will advance and darkness will recede. Amen.

Soul: What do you offer?

“So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.”

1 Cor 14:12

I grew up in the age of the participation trophy, where the whole of our education was focused on our self esteem, making sure we knew we were special and proficient at everything. This cheapened so many experiences, because I knew those who were supposed to be revealing my gifts and directing them toward proper channels felt like they couldn't in fear of making someone else feel badly.

It seems since coming into adulthood, my generation is still searching for true validation of their ability and someone to show them how to use their gifts. It's the reason so many of us look for “spiritual parents” deep into our twenties, desperate for a validation we believe is genuine because of it's spiritual nature, and not because these are people who felt obligated to encourage us. We need to actually be extraordinary; we need to be gifted.

These gifts though, in everyone, are something that as soon as they are encouraged by others are shut down by us. A fear that our ego will somehow get away from us if we receive true praise for what God has planted in us to naturally do. Instead of developing these gifts for the sake of the Kingdom, and really to the direction toward fulfillment, we turn them into hobbies or things we do when no one else is around. The greatest example I've seen of this is a friend of mine who was born to sing. We were waitressing together on the 4th of July, and with an empty restaurant facing the empty mall, she grabbed the host microphone and began to sing the national anthem as the TV's showed the fireworks display. Her voice ripped through my spirit as it resounded off the walls, and I immediately recognized this was more than just the hobby she reserved for when she was home. Those of us present stopped, filled with awe and moved to tears, drinking in every note. She finished, quietly put the microphone down and walked back into the kitchen. How my heart ached knowing how gifted she is, knowing the world may never experience what I did. Today, we take our gifts and talents and give them back to God, giving Him permission to do with and display however He chooses.

Reflection

In what ways are you extraordinary? What gifts do you possess?

Are you willing to allow God to use those gifts for His glory?

Prayer

Lord, you have made me with marvelous gifts to contribute to the world, and I have buried them like the man in the parable who was afraid to lose his talent. Forgive my false humility and fear of my own ego, which serves no one and give me the grace necessary to use my gifts for Your glory. Thank you for making me truly special. Amen

Mind:Impatience

“A person’s wisdom yields patience; it is to one’s glory to overlook an offense.” Proverbs 19:11

There’s a joke in the church that you never pray for patience because God will make you wait. Most of us agree that while patience is something we should all practice, we don’t want to go through the process of cultivating it. We call it a virtue, and make it a high and lofty attitude only the best of us have.

The rest of us would rather be impatient. The anger and frustration we experience when we are impatient makes us feel powerful, as though it can force things to happen when we want them to. When that doesn’t happen and we realize we don’t have power over most circumstances, we start to grumble against God, “When God? When are you going to make ___ happen?” We start trying to convince Him how much we need something right this second, and are prone to huffy tantrums when we end up still waiting. We then position ourselves against God, disregarding both his timing and wisdom, and put our faith in our own ability to get what we want when we want it. Most of the time, we end up with a mess because we didn’t see the whole picture, and in our impatience ran head first into a situation we were not prepared for. Today, we humble ourselves to God’s wisdom and open ourselves to cultivating the fruit of patience.

Reflection

What areas of life do you need to be more patient in?

What 2 things you are waiting for can you commit to trusting God’s timing with?

Prayer

Father, I feel like I spend so much of my life waiting, and I am afraid that if I don’t try to force things to happen, that they never will. Forgive me for disregarding your wisdom concerning timing and for willingly trusting in my own understanding and ability and running ahead of you, acting as though I understand my needs more than You do. I submit to Your wisdom and ask that you would cultivate the fruit of Patience in me, both for myself and the world around me. Give me joy in the waiting, letting me notice things I would have normally missed that are encouragements to my soul. Amen

Effort: Language

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.”

Proverbs 18:21

I used to joke that I was going to teach my son the phrase, “my mom is a waitress,” to explain the fact why at 3 years old he knows certain cuss words. In the culture that I work in, it is natural to express frustration, negativity, gossip, self-interest and swear. It is so prevalent that when positivity does show up, it begins to change the atmosphere almost immediately.

We get so in the habit in our microcosm cultures of letting our tongue express every thought we have that when we encounter restraint, pleasantness, and hope, we are left silent and humbled. I never thought that just threw my everyday speech I could love God but then he showed me the lasting effects of something I had said.

It was during a faith exercise, which at the time I did not have much of, and I was very vocal about the fact I would not be participating. Later on the instructor came to me and told me three other women had heard me say I was not going to participate in the exercise, and then if I did not have enough faith neither did they. The ripple of negativity was laid out before me and the verse above boomed in my heart.

It has been difficult removing negativity from my speech habits, but the reward of watching life spring up as opposed to watching things wither away has been worth the discipline. Today we open up our speech patterns to the Holy Spirit and ask that he would show us where we could partner with him in sowing life.

Reflection:

Examine where your speech habits sow death and destruction.

What does it look like to intentionally develop new habits?

Prayer

Lord, for too long I have been comfortable in my undisciplined speech habits. Forgive me for sowing death and negativity among your people and in the world when you have called me to partner with you as an agent that sows life. Give me great faith that I might speak hope and life and expect to see Your kingdom to earth through my speech. Amen.

Heart: Happiness

“The fear of the Lord leads to life; then one rests content, untouched by trouble” Proverbs 19:23

I remember sitting in my therapist’s office during our initial meeting, and her asking me if my life had a tagline, what would it be? After a long pause, I told her plainly, “Happiness is not for me.” I broke down afterward, as I had thought that for such a long time, but never said it to anyone else. With it out, it was so clear why I had been depressed to the point of not valuing my own life anymore.

The potential for happiness is one of those things that defines whether or not life is worth living. It is also something we have made dependent on people or things, touting the belief once I get married, have children, have an awesome career, have a house/car, I’ll be happy. The lie is exposed later, after we get what we thought was IT, and at best, it was nice for awhile, but the happiness didn’t last; at worst, it turned out to be hollow. Out of that emptiness, we begin to use people and God as a means to happiness, and the simple pleasures of life no longer have any effect on us. When called out on our behavior, we lash out against our community and God, as though it is their fault we are not happy.

God, in His wisdom, understands both our need for and fleeting nature of happiness. It is why He offers something we can actually get: contentment. Paul, in Philippians 4 says, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” Today, we open up our hunger for happiness, and ask Jesus to teach us the secret of being content in all situations..

Reflection

Do you believe God is interested in you enjoying life? Why/why not?

Once you are rested in contentment, how are you able to experience happiness?

Prayer

Lord, I have tried to be happy for such a long time, and it seems no matter what I do, I can’t hold onto it. Forgive me for growing resentful against you, as though you were keeping from me the very thing that defines life as worth living. Teach me the secret to being content in all circumstances, and reignite the appreciation I once had for the simple pleasures in life, that I might give thanks for them. Thank you for understanding my desire for happiness, and not only meeting that need through it’s proper channels, but also leading me to something so much greater. Amen.

Soul: Are you cut out for this?

“Moses said to the Lord, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” Exodus 4:10

At this point in our journey, we have identity, community, healthy values, direction, purpose, gifts, and it looks like we're ready to embark on living the abundant life Jesus wants us to have. But there's still this smarmy, oily voice that asks, “Are you sure you're cut out for this?” I imagine it was the same voice that spoke to Moses, when after he met God through the burning bush, after God gave His mandate and many signs and answers for Moses to give the people, that reminded him of his stutter. “YOU are going to speak to Pharaoh?” it asked, reminding him how he couldn't even ask for a cup of water without having to concentrate. The sadness Moses must have felt, and crushing fear of ridicule from past experiences, which caused him to reject his calling, saying, “If this is important, you don't want to send me. I'm not good at this. Please send someone else.”

Scripture goes on to say the Lord first told Moses He was going to be with him, and that he would give him the words to say, and when Moses rejected Him outright, gave him a helper, but still called Moses to go. I love this, because I am someone who disqualifies myself constantly. “I'm not ready for this,” is usually my excuse. This account tells me that for all of our maneuvering and attempting to get away, showing God all the reasons why we can't do what He's imprinted into our very souls to accomplish, we cannot convince Him that we are unworthy of or incapable of carrying out our calling. Today, we open our insecurity, and places we get most attacked by the enemy and ask the Father for strength.

Reflection

Is there something God has called you to accomplish that you feel you just can't?

Are you willing to put your trust in His reasoning, His calling of YOU and His wisdom concerning the task?

Prayer

Father, I thank you that it is not by my might, nor by power, but by Your Spirit that I am able to accomplish everything you give me to do. I place my trust in Your word that says You are faithful to complete the good work You have begun in me, and that anything I perceive as that which would exclude me from your good work is a lie. Give me the strength to stand against the enemy when he attacks in this tender place that makes me so afraid that I just want to run away. Thank you for equipping the called, as we are called, and for Your relentless love that doesn't let us disqualify ourselves from your goodness. Amen

Mind: Hopeless

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13

If hope is defined as a desire and expectation for good to happen, I would have to confess I have a hopeless mindset. I am normally prepared for the worst case scenario which means I don't have much expectation that things will turn out great, even if it's what I want in the depths of my heart. Sadly, most people I know, who aren't necessarily worst case scenario types, live with an almost unconscious hopelessness. They express desire, but no expectation, that our families, our marriages, or circumstances will change. When they think of the future, they tell me it's best to expect little and just take what comes.

I think the reason so many of us hedge against Hope is because we have an unrealistic view of what it is or the function it serves. Hope is meant to be an anchor for our soul, a steady assurance that God is writing a good story, and regardless of present circumstances, we should expect the end will be greater than we can imagine. It calls us to wait, trust, fight, rest, savor, and partner with God in writing the story. It is a sword and shield in the darkness when we don't think we can go on, and a breath of fresh air when we feel the waves of life overwhelming us. Today, we open our hopelessness to God, and put our trust in His hope.

Reflection

What areas of life/desires of your heart does God want to create desire and expectation in?

Where do you see signs of Hope, the assurance of God's good narrative, in everyday life?

Prayer

Lord, for too long I have lived with unmet desires and hollow expectations, afraid to fully put my trust in Your goodness. I renounce hopelessness and ask You to help me remember where I have seen Your hand move toward bringing all things around for good. Forgive me for trying to suppress hope as You have tried to raise it up in me. I put my trust in the knowledge that You are good, and accept your invitation to partner with you in writing this good story. Thank you for this anchor that will keep me close to You. Amen

Effort:Gifts

“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Col 3:17

I know some exceptionally talented people. The way they express art, music, and ideas is so far above usual capabilities it's almost holy. It's easy to marvel at their work and praise both their discipline and expression. How tempting that praise must be.

As people are prone to worship what we perceive as excellent, those of us with gifts and talents are faced with the choice of receiving and internalizing glory or reflecting it back to the One who gave us our gifts in the first place. It is easy to feel entitled to glory, as many gifts are disciplined and honed to become better, and we want the effort we put into developing our talents to be acknowledged.

How important Paul's encouragement is here. As we work, create, express the revelation we have been given, we do so in stewardship, in the name of the Lord. We accept that He sees the good we've done with what He's given us, and that we do not need to take glory away from Him, instead, we can thank Him that we can be a conduit of His beauty on earth. Today, we open our talents and abilities and avail them to God, asking how we can bring Him glory and receive the delight of a Father who sees their child enjoying what was given to them.

Reflection

What has God gifted you with that can be used for His glory?

How can you enjoy your gifts and talents without seeking the approval of the world?

Prayer

Lord, I thank you for natural and developed talents and abilities that I have, and hold them as tokens of love from You. I open them up to You, that they might be used for Your glory. Forgive me for the times I am caught in the praise and do not reflect it back to You. Help me to steward your gift well, and let it be an expression of love back to You. Amen

Heart: Love

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

John 13:34-35

When I first met my husband, I asked him what his key value for life was. "Love," he said. "All I've ever wanted out of life was to love and be loved in return." Something in my heart swelled in resonance when he said that, and I recognized it as a universal desire to be fully seen and fully received. It's so integrated in the human experience, people have laid down their lives, given everything they had and even unleashed destruction all in the name of love.

For as beautiful as an idea that Love is an outward focused power that affects everything it touches, I have seen and experienced it more as an inward focused whirlpool, sucking in anything that looks like affection, or admiration. We may have in our minds that it's supposed to be a passionate consideration for another, but it usually displays as an affinity for. Why is what's in our heart so different than what gets played out in our relationships? It's because our relationships aren't fulfilling in the way we thought they would be. They didn't possess enough gravity for us to revolve our lives around, but they are set up to be the source by which we are fully seen and fully received, so we try to extract that from our relationship. The only way to get Love manifesting as the ideal we know it should be is to put Jesus at the center of our desire for it. Our lives were always supposed to revolve around Him, and He knows more about the desires of our heart than we are conscious of. Today, we open our dysfunctional love which does not act as it knows it should and turn it back toward Jesus.

Reflection

What is currently holding itself as wanting to be your source of love?

We love God because He first loved us. How can that be an aid to you putting Jesus as the center of your affection and devotion?

Prayer

Jesus, I thank you for Your perfect love, which is patient and kind and casts out all fear I have of rejection. I open my dysfunctional, selfish love and ask that you would draw me closer to your heart, and teach me what you mean when you talk of love. Thank you that while I was still opposed to you, you died because you loved me first, so that I might trust that you know me fully, and embrace me wholly. Amen

Soul: Accounting for change, Who was I?

“The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.”

Psalm 92:12-15

You may be in a season where you remember being a spiritual giant, full of new revelation and vigor where you really were able to pour out your soul to God and for God and are now in a season of rest. Often, we perceive that rest as the equivalent of earthly retirement, where we're cut a severance package and left by the wayside while others move forward. We long for that sense of direction and excitement and are fearful that God has no more use for us.

Or you might not be in a season of rest. You might be in the season lovingly called, “the tyranny of toddlers,” or one where the work is laborious and hard, or one where you're just older and not able to do as much. In all of these seasons, life as you once knew it, and the person you were before, seem gone.

Before I had kids, I spent a lot of time developing a thick skin, because I grew up so sensitive that the news hurt my heart. By the time I was an adult, I was hard and I liked it that way. I felt strong and powerful. Then I had kids, and now I cry at Dove commercials. There are days I really miss that strong young woman who felt like she could take on the world, but I've learned to thank God for connecting me to my soul in a different way.

It's ok to grieve. It's ok to admit you didn't think the present would look the way it does and long for what was before. Thankfully there is truth we can cling to that unlike the seasons, the Father says, "I, the LORD, do not change. Therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." (Malachi 3:6) I want to encourage you, for your reflection and prayer time, take some time to think about who you were, and thank God for that season, whether or not it was hard, ask Him to help you embrace who you are today.

Mind: Judgement

“For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” Matthew 7:2

A few years after I met Jesus, I forgot all about the pit I had been rescued from. Walking with Him was the equivalent to walking on mountaintops compared to where He had found me, and in a short while I began to act like I had always been there. I became suspicious of people’s intentions, annoyed by their presence and disgusted by their behavior. I had become high minded and justified in my criticism.

And then I fell, more like tumbled, over and over down the mountain. Each accusation which I knew to be completely true, felt like bouncing off jagged edges until I was kneeling in dust, covered in bruises, cowering in fear.

It was then I was spoken to through the Bible, John 8, where Jesus is brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, her sin now on display for all to see. I imagined she and I shared a very similar sense of shame, as both our communities looked on and called down condemnation. The passage says Jesus told the crowd they without sin may cast the first stone, and then turned toward the ground. One by one, they dropped their rocks and walked away. “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? Then neither do I. Go and leave your life of sin.” I broke down as the display of mercy barreled into my heart, knocking my judgemental attitude to the ground. I had been simultaneously convicted and uplifted. I still carry some scars from that fall, and they remind me that radical mercy changed more in me than judgement ever could. Today, we yield judgement and open ourselves to the mercy Jesus demonstrated.

Reflection

Of what have you become overly critical and unyielding in judgement?

What areas of your life do you need to experience mercy?

Prayer

Lord your word says that any who practice judgement without mercy will be shown the same, and that You judge by a law that gives freedom. Forgive me for standing in condemnation of Your creation, holding them bondage to their circumstances and behavior after You died so that they might be free. Remind me often that one display of mercy accomplishes more than 100 displays of judgement. Thank you for your abundant compassion, and never tiring of pouring out grace on your people. Amen

Effort: Study

But he answered, "It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Matthew 4:4

I remember when I first joined moms group and was told we would be reading books based on God's word and there would be homework. I was aghast. Didn't these women understand I had a six-month-old? That I wasn't sleeping or eating or even showering on a regular basis, what makes them think I suddenly will have time to pleasure read? As I grew in relationship with the then leader, she would specifically ask me to engage in the material. I grumbled at her but because she had asked as a personal favor, I complied. Through complying, I learned the Power of a Praying Wife, how to integrate Jesus into my real mom life, how to put down the phone and stare into the eyes of my children when I had to been stuck in the house all day and so desperately just wanted to escape.

Many of us are overwhelmed, our schedules taxed, and we don't have time for ourselves or our development. However, none of us would put off as less than important that which would provide our very sustenance. We fool ourselves when we don't make time for the word of God in our lives, whether it be by audiobook, tape, movie, book, there are so many mediums that we are blessed to be exposed to and it is arrogant of us believe we need it less than bread. Today, we open our stretched schedules and overwhelmed attention spans and give God space to cultivate a love for His word in our hearts.

Reflection

How much time do you spend studying God's word currently? Would you consider it a sufficient amount to feed your soul?

How much time are you willing to commit to studying the word of God as an act of loving the Lord with all of your effort?

Prayer

Father God, I thank you for your word and that you gave it to me so that I may know and understand you better. Forgive my arrogance for not making time to sit at your feet, giving importance to everything else. Teach me what it means to abide in you and give me grace to maintain my commitment. Amen.