

WEEK 8: EXERCISE #1

One of the most read books of all times begins with this line: “It is not about you.”⁸

Absorbing that truth is the first step to encountering Jesus. Until we get it—really get it—that this life is about Jesus, we will miss out on the greatest treasures life has to offer.

Read Acts 9:1–19; Genesis 32.

In these passages, where do you see signs of self-centeredness? What about signs of surrender? Make notes in the margins. Underline words and phrases that stand out. What do you learn from the main players in these two stories about going with God?

Read Matthew 10:38–39.

We often hear someone say, when they are talking about a difficult part of their life, “I guess that’s my cross to bear.” Usually, we are talking about something we dislike dealing with. What do you think Jesus means when He says, “If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine”(NLT)? Why would Jesus say we’re not worthy of Him unless we identify with His cross?

What does Jesus mean when He talks about “clinging to your life”? What does that look like in practical terms?

What are you clinging to that might cause you to lose your physical life? Your spiritual life?

How would you describe a life totally committed to Christ? Is that a life you're interested in living?

Encounter

Read James 4:7–10.

As you read this testimony, reflect on your own understanding of repentance and grace.

I spent my church life being told to repent, but I was an adult before I knew that repent meant (or at least involved) change. I was taught that “the middle of SIN is ‘I!’” but not necessarily to forgive. I was taught about the new life in Christ, but I always saw it as a goal to reach, not a gift of salvation. I have never enjoyed repentance but endured conviction which led not to freedom but self-hatred. Now I know that confession without change really isn't repentance; it's just guilt. I am very grateful that God is now showing me the softer side of salvation—the freedom of the gift. Conviction is not the end but the beginning. And repentance is the completion of a beautiful process of cleansing.

I've spent my whole life asking myself, “Why would anyone ever want to be a Christian?” For the first time ever, I know. It's not because it feels good, but because it is good.

Journal a response to this testimony from your own experience. Then write in your own words what repentance means to you. Spend some time in conversation with God, asking Him to show you where in your life you have yet to complete that process of repentance.

WEEK 8: EXERCISE #2

Read Numbers 13–14; Jeremiah 29:11–14.

Ten men became afraid and doubted the promises of God. Because of their fear they persuaded a whole community into disobedience. Their influence caused great distress for the people of God. However, two men dared to believe in the Mountain Mover, the One who held the future. They chose to follow totally after God, in whom they placed complete trust.

On what truths did Joshua and Caleb base their commitment? Make a list of those truths.

Do you have a vision for going someplace spiritually? Do you sense God leading you into the future? How are you drawing near and abiding in Jesus as you continue to trust Him with your future?

Encounter

God wants to bless us. This is written into the Scriptures from beginning to end. God is a blessing God and we are a blessing people. When our lives line up with His purposes, we come under the blessing and experience the abundant life.

The Bible is full of blessings. Take some time to read through these: Numbers 6:24–26; Psalm 121:7–8; Romans 15:13.

Choose one that speaks into your life and write it on an index card that you can tape to your computer or car dash.

Who in your life could use your blessing today? How could you use one of these Scriptures to pour a blessing over someone, either in prayer or by some practical act of kindness?

WEEK 8: EXERCISE #3

Read Ephesians 3:14–21.

As you read, underline all the phrases describing God. Circle the phrases and words that indicate Paul’s heart for people.

In one of the most powerful and heartfelt prayers of the New Testament, Paul prays for all believers to be strengthened through the power of the Holy Spirit in our relationship with Jesus. Paul longs to see followers of Jesus wildly abandoned to the ideals of the Kingdom of God. He yearns for us to be rooted and established in love and to grasp the remarkable, lavish love of Christ.

Such a prayer deserves our attention. Take a moment to rest in the knowledge that this prayer of Paul was prayed over *you* . . . nearly 2,000 years ago. This is the prayer of a righteous man who deeply cared about your life in Christ.

Let’s look at some of the key terms in this prayer. Paul prayed that we might be rooted and established in love. To be rooted is to have a firm footing, to be entrenched. Being rooted in Christ is not the same thing as assenting to a set of beliefs. It is about planting our lives in the soil of Jesus, drawing our spiritual food from Him.

There is a beautiful benediction in this prayer. Paul says, “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly all that we ask or think . . .” (NASB). The NIV Bible uses the phrase, “immeasurably more.”

God’s idea of “big” is a lot bigger than ours. And God intends at the end of His work to receive all glory for it.

Paul's prayer gives us a powerful tool for praying over those we love. Write this prayer on an index card and put it in your Bible. Personalize it and use it to pray over the lives of your children, your spouse, and your church.

Encounter

Plant the good seeds of righteousness and you will harvest a crop of love.

—Hosea 10:12 (NLT)

Read Galatians 6:7–10.

Paul sowed into countless lives, and not just those he personally encountered. Through his writings and prayers, he continues to sow into lives today.

The principle of sowing and reaping says that what we plant will bear fruit. Paul says, “You will always reap what you sow.”

How can you share the love of Jesus this week with someone, planting seeds of righteousness through practical acts of kindness? Who in your life needs a note or some other expression of care? What prayers are you sowing into the lives of the people you love?

Make a list in your journal of those you'd like to sow into spiritually, and begin now to pray for them.

WEEK 8: EXERCISE #4

John 13–17 describes Jesus’ last hours with His disciples. He washes their feet, shares a final Passover meal, and reveals that He is about to be betrayed. Sensing their troubled spirits, Jesus promises He will give them the Holy Spirit to be a comfort and help to them. They will not be left alone. God will be with them. He then tells His disciples as John 14 closes, “Come now; let us leave” (John 14:31).

When the meal is over, Jesus takes the disciples on a two-mile walk out of the city to the Garden of Gethsemane. Can you imagine the spiritual and emotional heaviness these followers felt as they made that walk together? Passing through vineyards as they traveled, Jesus offered one more picture of who He really was.

Read John 15:1–11.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.” The image of the vine was a familiar image in Jewish culture and history. A vine was engraved on Jewish coins. It decorated the front of the Holy Place in the Temple. Their Scriptures (our Old Testament) described Israel as God’s vine or vineyard (Isa. 5:1–7; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 15; and Ps. 80:8–9). The grapevine was a symbol of hope for the Jewish people.

Now Jesus gives the grapevine a whole new meaning. “I am the vine.” It is Jesus who will produce the fruit of hope. It is Jesus who is over the temple and over Israel itself.

The Greek word *airo* means to lift up or take away. In the dry season, root systems easily become disconnected from the main vine, the source of their nutrition. To keep the system healthy, some roots have to be lifted up or pruned. The gardener's job is to carefully tend these systems, lifting (or pruning) root systems that have become disconnected.

Hearing Jesus' teaching in *this* light makes it all the more powerful when we apply it to our own spiritual lives. This is a word about the hard work of letting go of those things that draw energy away from our growth in Jesus.

What in your life is sapping you spiritually? What dead roots need to be lifted up, examined honestly, and pruned?

In a Jewish vineyard, stones mattered. Branches resting on a stone didn't develop separate root systems, but remained fully connected to the main vine, allowing the vine to do its work in producing the fruit. Our focus should be on staying connected to Jesus. Abiding in Him. Obeying Him. Keeping His commands.

So where is your focus these days? Are you abiding? Are you able to simply "be" with Jesus? Is this a point that needs repentance and prayer?

Read John 15:12–17.

Jesus is clearly pouring everything He has into these dear followers as they make their way to the place where He would be betrayed.

He tells them about the power of praying in His name. He gives them a new command, to love one another. He calls them to a life of abiding, to an intimate connection with the Vine.

Jesus wants His followers to become like Him: to love as He loves, to give as He gives, to forgive as He forgives, to pray as He prays. And then, He calls these followers His friends *not* because of what they do but because of *who they are*. They have been faithful to Him, and He will now be faithful to them, even to the end.

What kind of relationship did these disciples have with Jesus? What kind of relationship do you have with Jesus? Have you accepted the reality that Jesus loves you and accepts you as His friend?

Jesus wants to meet with you face to face. He chooses you. Will you choose Him?

Encounter

Reaching out to love one another is not always an easy thing to do. In order to love as Jesus intends, we must remain connected to Him.

Make a list in your journal of at least three people in your life:

1. One who is easy to love.
2. One who is difficult to love.
3. One who is unlovable in your eyes.

Next to the each person's name begin to write the following questions and statements:

- To whom can I show favor for the Father's sake?
- How can I show kindness?

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- What one good quality do I see in this person?
- How can I pray God's best over this person?
- How is Jesus asking me to bear fruit in this person's life?

As you pray through your list, listen for promptings of the Holy Spirit. Remember the mark of the Holy Spirit is a supernatural ability to love. When we are obedient to the commands of Jesus, even when we don't feel like it, we surrender our own ways and open the door for an authentic encounter.

WEEK 8: EXERCISE #5

Read John 13.

In John 13, the story is told of Judas, the most notorious rebel in the Bible. Just before Jesus is arrested, all the disciples are there at the table with Jesus. John tells us that “the one whom Jesus loved” was sitting right next to Jesus on one side. Most folks assume that person was John himself. If so, notice that John does not see himself primarily as a follower or an apostle or as a certain kind of disciple, but as “the one Jesus loved.”

Most folks assume Judas was sitting on the other side of Jesus. So on one side sat John, the one Jesus loved. On the other side, Judas, the one who thought he needed to make it all happen on his own strength. On one side, John, who was leaning on grace; and on the other side, Judas, who lost confidence in grace.

Steve Harper, former president of Asbury Seminary’s Orlando campus, says that spiritual dryness often begins right there, with a loss of confidence in God’s grace. Spiritual dryness often grows in a theology “rooted in performance, whose voice keeps trying to convince us, ‘You are worth only as much as you do; valuable only as long as you produce; in My will only as you succeed.’” And out of that mindset comes great workers and even great churchgoers. But not great faith.

So there at the Last Supper, on the two sides of Jesus, are the two kinds of *us*: grace and performance; the one Jesus loves and the one who wants control.

The question is: In this scene, which one are you? That's where it begins, really. With taking honest stock of how we see ourselves as spiritual beings. What if, from this day forward, you were to see yourself as the one Jesus loves?

Set your book down now, and speak this great truth into the spiritual realm: "I am God's Beloved."

What if you began to follow Jesus out of that motivation? Not because He was a great teacher or prophet or leader of people (though He was), but because He is the very love of God poured out you and over the whole world.

Jesus loves *you*. That's the great news of the red letters in the Bible.

The Jesus loves you.

That's a promise.

Encounter

Read John 17.

Before He left earth Jesus looked up to heaven, the Scripture says, and He prayed for you. He prayed a real prayer that you might be just as close to God as He was. He prayed that you would *know* He came from God and was sent here for your benefit. He prayed you would know God loves you every bit as much as He loved Jesus Himself. He prayed for the deeper knowing that comes through transformation. He prayed that when you and I encounter Jesus, we'd change.

And since Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, then the prayer He prayed for us in the first century is the same prayer He is praying for us now as He continues to intercede for us at the right hand of the Father.

We are people for whom Jesus prays! Jesus Christ, Son of God, who lives and reigns with God forever, is praying for you. Jesus is praying for your faith, for your salvation, for transformation in your life. Jesus' great desire for you and me is that we have eternal life. And eternal life is ours when we know the one, true God and Jesus Christ, whom He sent.

The prayer Jesus prays for His followers in John 17 is one we can pray too. Praying Scripture is a great way to pray in agreement with God's will.

As we close this study, read John 17:20–23 and, in the spirit of the words of Jesus, pray this into your life:

Lord Jesus, I pray as one who believes in Your message. Make me one with the Father, just as You are in Him and He is in You. May I also be in Christ so that the world may believe in the One the Father has sent. Be glorified through my life and make me one with those You've called into the Body of Christ. Then the world will know that You are God's Son. I make this prayer in the name of Jesus, the One who changes everything. Amen.