



# BECOMING

DEVOTIONAL

become like jesus and live for others  
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## DEVOTIONAL



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# WELCOME

*Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’*

Matthew 22:37-40

## WHO ARE YOU BECOMING?

Every January, the world invites us to set goals about productivity, health, or self-improvement. Those things can be good, but they often distract from a deeper, more spiritual set of questions Jesus continually raises: Who are you becoming? What kind of person is your life shaping you into? And is it Jesus who is doing the shaping...or something else? All of us are being formed by our habits, routines, relationships, screens, and desires.

For many of us, this isn't a new conversation. Many voices, from financial experts to thought leaders, are asking and offering solutions. Even pastors and theologians, myself included, are asking and giving our opinions. So, why do we keep returning to it? Because in many ways, this is the question that forms our life and is the question we never truly grow beyond.

We're always learning, growing and becoming someone. Our choices, decisions, motivations all stem from the answer to this question: Who are you becoming?

However, there's another more helpful question: *Who do you want to become?* Many of us are inherently falling into a set of patterns, lifestyles and choices that are impacting who we are becoming, but does that match with our vision?

This question—*Who do you want to become?*—carries weight. It takes intentionality, purpose, and reflection.

## JESUS' VISION FOR WHO WE ARE BECOMING

When Jesus was asked about what matters most and the purpose of life, his answer was profoundly simple: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind... and love your neighbor as

yourself” (Matthew 22:37–39).

Love. Everything in life has the opportunity to move us toward becoming a person of love. Love for God. Love for people. Love expressed in daily, practical ways.

This kind of love doesn’t happen by accident; it happens through apprenticeship. Jesus invites us, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matthew 11:29). Implying, “attach your life to mine, walk with me, imitate me, let my way become your way.” The apostle John makes it even clearer: “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6). Becoming like Jesus means learning his way of life, his rhythms, his posture, his compassion, his courage, and his love.

**OUR MISSION: BECOME LIKE JESUS AND LIVE FOR OTHERS**  
This is why our mission at Waterstone doesn’t focus on belief alone, but on formation and action: *Become like Jesus and live for others*. Mission statements aren’t accomplished through inspiration; they’re accomplished through formation. They require direction and clarity. Our core values provide that clarity, inviting us into a shared way of life that forms us into the compassionate and courageous people Jesus intends us to become.

## WHO ARE WE BECOMING?

This past year, our staff engaged in a multi-month process to explore who we want to be as a church. For several years we’ve had deep clarity about our mission, to *become like Jesus and live for others*, but we recognized a gap in articulating how we live that mission day-to-day.

A few years ago, I was in a pastors cohort and one of the leaders shared this statement that has stuck with me: “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” I don’t know much about organizational leadership, but I know that resonated with me at my core.

The statement is simple, but it means that an organization could have the best mission statement, the best strategy for how to reach the world; it means we could create plans to make an impact in our community, fix our schools, clean up the government, build houses for the poor, send missionaries all over the world, but without the right culture, those strategies will never work.

So the question becomes, how does an organization shape culture? How do we create the sort of culture that will sustain our vision and strategy? How do we help people not just do the things we want to accomplish, but be the type of people who carry

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the vision as if it was their own? As if they've been formed in it?

His answer was values.

Values shape identity. Values shape direction. Values shape formation. And they help us answer the question: What kind of church are we becoming? How do we want to live together? How will we embody the way of Jesus in Littleton, in Denver, and beyond?

So as a staff, we set out to dream, discuss, and define the values that guide us as a church. We discussed who we have been as a church, what still resonates, what we might need to let go of, and who we feel the Spirit is leading us to be in this new season as a church.

## OUR VALUES

### **Jesus Changes Everything:**

The good news of Jesus is not just a belief—it's a way of life. We follow Jesus with expectancy because he transforms people, places, and purpose.

### **Presence over Program:**

We prioritize being with God and one another over executing polished plans or programs. We value margin. We slow down to listen, are willing to be interrupted, and respond to the Spirit. We believe spiritual power is born in prayerful

presence, not just strategic excellence.

### **Together is Better:**

We choose relationships over results. We serve, suffer, celebrate, and dream together. We resist the pressure to perform and instead build a culture of belonging, where people are seen, known, and valued—not just for what they do, but for who they are.

### **Process over Product:**

We don't expect anyone to have it all together. We bring our whole selves to church—honest, messy, hopeful. Everyone is welcome, everyone is safe, but no one stays the same.

### **Soft Hearts, Steel Spines:**

We hold convictions with grace, engaging culture with courage, and compassion. We are not swayed by fear or outrage. We stay rooted in Scripture and the way of Jesus, even when it's costly. Our hearts remain tender to people and our spines remain strong in truth.

### **Open Hands:**

We give because God first gave to us. Whether it's time, money, attention, or presence, we live with open hands, trusting that generosity creates space for the kingdom to break through.

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These values reflect who we are becoming as a church, rooted in our mission to help people become like Jesus and live for others. So, as we begin this year, we are intentionally centering ourselves around these six core values—the values we believe reflect the way of Jesus and shape the kind of people we want to become together.

My hope is that by the end of this year, every person at Waterstone can say, “I know who we are. I know who Jesus is calling us to become, and I know the practices and values that help me become more like him.”

As we begin this devotional journey together, let this be your prayer:

*Jesus, form your life in me. Grow your love in me. Shape me into your likeness. Help me become a person of love toward God and toward others.*

Because the truth is, you are becoming someone. This year, let's become more like Jesus. And let's do it together.

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# **DEVOTIONAL 1.1**

## **JESUS CHANGES EVERYTHING**

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*

2 Corinthians 5:17

## **JESUS CHANGES EVERYTHING:**

The good news of Jesus is not just a belief—it's a way of life. We follow Jesus with expectancy because he transforms people, places, and purpose.

## **DO WE REALLY BELIEVE JESUS CHANGES EVERYTHING?**

Our first Waterstone value begins with a bold claim: Jesus Changes Everything. It's hopeful, sweeping, and beautiful. But if we're honest, I'm not sure we're always fully convinced it's true.

The longer I pastor, I've become more and more convinced, we (mostly me!) believe Jesus forgives us, saves us, and loves us, but I'm not sure we actually believe Jesus changes us, our situations, families, our future, or the people around us.

Does Jesus actually make a difference in our lives? Or do we quietly assume that people stay the same, that patterns repeat, and that most of life is just managing what is, rather than being transformed into something new?

Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:17 challenge that worldview. In summary, he says that anyone who is in Christ becomes a new creation—not a mildly improved version of their old self, but something genuinely *new*. And yet, many of us struggle to believe this in the places where we need it most.

## **A PERSONAL REMINDER OF HOW DIFFERENT JESUS MAKES LIFE**

Recently, I was in a conversation with a new group of people, and while we were playing basketball, they were talking casually about their weekend plans and most of it centered around drinking heavily, avoiding responsibilities, and numbing out from the week.

There was no excitement about time with their kids. No vision or purpose. No sense of meaning—just survival.

Get through the week.

Escape for a while.

Repeat.

As I listened, I felt a wave of gratitude, not because I'm better than anyone, but because my life is different. And the difference isn't discipline, or personality, or maturity (definitely not maturity).

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The difference is Jesus.

Jesus has reoriented my purpose. Jesus has given me joy in the everyday. Jesus has filled my life with meaning, community, hope, and direction. Following him has reshaped my desires, my identity, my relationships, and the very way I show up in the world, and sometimes I forget just how profoundly different that is from the story so many people are living.

That's not to say that I am perfect. My closest friends and family can attest to the fact that I am not; however, my prayer is that I would live in the reality of the belief that Jesus changes everything. My hope is that I would see that take place, both in my life, and in the lives of those around me.

### **STORIES OF CHANGE: THEN AND NOW**

Sometimes, we read the stories in Scripture of how Jesus healed, transformed a life, or met someone in desperation, and think, “That’s great for them, but Jesus doesn’t do that stuff now.”

However, we believe Jesus changes everything and we have seen transformation. These stories are not just history, because they are happening right now in our church and around the world.

I’ve seen Jesus pull people out of suffocating depression and breathe hope into them again.

I’ve witnessed healing in bodies that doctors didn’t know how to fix.

I’ve stood with couples whose marriages looked all but dead, only to watch Christ rebuild them with forgiveness that made no sense, except grace.

I’ve seen prodigals come home after years of wandering.

I’ve sat with people whose addictions felt unbreakable until Jesus loosened chains they couldn’t loosen on their own.

Story after story, life after life, moment after moment, Jesus steps in and everything shifts. But it’s important to note, that when we say we believe that Jesus changes everything, it doesn’t always mean our circumstances work out perfectly. It doesn’t mean Jesus makes all of our dreams come true.

I’ve also witnessed that “*Jesus Changes Everything*” often means seeing transformation and new life emerge right in the middle of circumstances that remain unchanged.

I’ve watched people walk through

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cancer without fear because Christ met them in the valley.

I've sat with grieving parents who discovered a peace they could not explain, but somehow could not deny.

I've seen followers of Jesus cling to hope when the circumstances never changed, yet *they* changed.

I've watched people forgive someone who never apologized.

I've witnessed joy grow in hearts where sorrow didn't leave.

I've watched believers remain tender and faithful in seasons where every prayer seemed to echo back in silence.

I've seen people carry chronic pain or unanswered questions with a strength that could only have come from God.

Sometimes, *Jesus Changes Everything* means he changes the *situation*, and sometimes it means he changes *us* in the middle of the situation.

Either way, we hold fast onto this value, not because everything works out, but because he works in everything. He meets us in the broken places, the unresolved circum-

stances, the unanswered questions, and he brings new creation there, too.

That's the kind of change we're talking about when we say we believe that Jesus changes everything. It's the kind of transformation no program, no self-help plan, and no New Year's resolution can accomplish.

It's the kind of transformation only Jesus can do.

### **A COMMUNITY THAT BELIEVES FOR TRANSFORMATION**

Here is the tension we must acknowledge: we can know 2 Corinthians 5:17 in our heads and still not expect it in our lives. We can quote the verse but lose faith in the places where we're waiting for change. However, what if, as a church, we decided to believe this value with fresh conviction?

What if we lived with *real expectancy* that Jesus truly can make all things new...our lives, our families, our sin patterns, our relationships, our city?

What if we prayed like it? Parented like it? Led like it? Hoped like it? Showed up like it?

What if we become a community

that refuses to settle for cynicism or resignation, but instead believes that Jesus is still in the business of resurrection?

## THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

Where do you need Jesus to bring new creation in your life?

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Where have you stopped believing real change is possible, for you or someone you love?

## Where has hope quietly dimmed?

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Bring those places honestly before God. Ask him to breathe fresh life

into them. Ask him to help you see your story (and others' stories) through his transforming power, because Jesus doesn't just change some things. He doesn't only change the "spiritual" parts of our lives. He changes identities, relationships, desires, and direction. He changes families, marriages, friendships, and futures. He changes how we love, how we hope, how we work, and how we show up in the world.

Jesus changes everything.

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# **DEVOTIONAL 1.2**

## **A WAY OF LIFE**

*Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"*

Mark 9:24

## **JESUS CHANGES EVERYTHING:**

**The good news of Jesus is not just a belief—it's a way of life.** We follow Jesus with expectancy because he transforms people, places, and purpose.

### **NOT JUST A BELIEF—A WAY OF LIFE**

One of the quiet dangers of following Jesus for a long time is that the gospel can shrink down into a set of beliefs we mentally agree with rather than a way of life that reshapes who we are. We assume that if we can affirm the right doctrines, pray the right prayers, attend the right services, then we're "doing the Jesus thing."

However, the good news of Jesus was never meant to sit on a shelf like an old dusty Bible. It's not something we admire from a distance or mentally store in our theological filing cabinet. The gospel is not just true; it is transformative. It is something we live into, step by step, day by day. And yet, if we're honest, many of us have moments where faith feels thin and cynicism feels strong. We hear that "Jesus changes everything" but our lived

reality feels more like "Jesus changes some things... maybe... on a good day."

Modern life teaches us to be skeptical, cautious, and self-protective. We expect disappointment. We assume people don't change. We believe the worst before we trust the best. And sometimes that cynicism seeps into our faith until we're holding the gospel at arm's length—not rejecting it, but not living it either.

### **THE TENSION OF BELIEF AND UNBELIEF**

This tension shows up vividly in Mark 9, where a desperate father brings his suffering son to Jesus. The disciples can't solve the situation, it looks hopeless, and the father sounds exhausted. The root of cynicism, we believe, is often not unbelief but exhaustion; it's the stack of one disappointment after another. It's a way we instinctively protect ourselves from being let down again.

The father hasn't been able to find anyone who can heal his son. He goes to the disciples, and they fail. So he comes to Jesus and says, "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." What a fragile prayer. "If you can..."

Have you ever been there? Not quite sure if God *can*? Or maybe he

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can, but he *probably* won't?

I love Jesus' response: "*IF I can? IF?*" So much confidence and self-assurance. Which makes sense. He's the Son of God. Healing people happens as easily for him as someone reaching out and touching his shirt. He doesn't have to do much to shift the balance in the cosmos.

The man's response though is so poignant. Mark tells us that he *immediately exclaimed*. He had an answer. It burst out of him. But what came from his lips is one of the most honest, fragile prayers ever uttered: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

He's saying, "Jesus, I'm trying... but I'm not sure. I'm reaching... but I'm afraid. I want to trust you... but you feel far away."

What amazes me is that Jesus doesn't shame him. He doesn't demand stronger faith. He meets him right there, right in the mixture of faith and doubt, belief and unbelief, hope and fear, and he moves toward him with healing, despite the apparent cynicism.

Many of us live in that exact tension. We believe... and we question. We trust... and we worry. We follow... and we hesitate. But Jesus doesn't ask for flawless belief, he

asks for honest trust.

## THE GOSPEL AS A WAY OF BEING IN THE WORLD

When we say, "The good news of Jesus is not just a belief—it's a way of life," we are talking about something far deeper than cognitive agreement. We are talking about the daily, practical, embodied life of apprenticeship with Jesus. We are talking about:

- Loving people who are hard to love.
- Forgiving when everything in us wants to hold onto the grudge.
- Choosing presence in a world of distraction.
- Practicing gratitude in a culture of scarcity.
- Living with hope in a world of despair.
- Being shaped by truth instead of trends.
- Living for others instead of living for ourselves.

This is why Jesus's first call to his disciples wasn't "believe these doctrines about me," but "*follow me*." Walk where I walk. Live how I live. Practice what I practice. Be shaped by my rhythms, my heart, my compassion, my way of being in the world.

And yet, Jesus is incredibly gentle with us in the process. He knows we carry doubts. He knows cynicism nips at our heels. He knows we sometimes pray, “Jesus, I believe... mostly... sort of... maybe?” And he meets us there, not with condemnation, but with invitation.

### **BREAKING THE GRIP OF CYNICISM**

I mentioned that cynicism is a form of self-protection. It's a way of guarding ourselves against disappointment, which means (and this is so important) that cynicism is not a sin. But while it can serve a purpose, I think many of us fall into a trap of remaining stuck in cynicism, and at some point, cynicism shifts from something that was meant to protect us and morphs into something that misguides us.

Cynicism tells us life never really changes.

Cynicism tells us people are too broken to grow.

Cynicism tells us faith is naïve.

Cynicism tells us to stop expecting anything from God, that God showed up *then*, but not *now*, and that God will work in *their* lives, but not mine.

But the gospel insists on the exact opposite: Jesus changes everything. Jesus restores what's broken. Jesus renews what feels dead. Jesus meets us in our unbelief and grows faith within us. Living the gospel as a way of life means choosing trust over fear, hope over despair, openness over self-protection, expectation over resignation. It means letting the life of Jesus seep into our habits, our posture, our relationships, our priorities, and our vision for the future.

It means letting Jesus shape not just what we believe, but who we are becoming.

### **THE INVITATION FOR TODAY**

Take an honest moment before God.

Where does cynicism have a grip on your heart?

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Where has unbelief crept into your expectations about God, about yourself, or about others?

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Where do you pray, “Jesus, I believe, but I need help believing this in my everyday life”?

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Bring those places to him. Jesus is not threatened by your questions or disappointed by your struggle. He meets you in the tension and invites you into a way of life marked by trust, hope, and transformation.

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Handwriting practice lines consisting of five horizontal lines for each row, with the middle line being dashed for guided writing.



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## **DEVOTIONAL 1.3**

### **EXPECTANT FAITH**

*For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

Ephesians 3:14-21

## **JESUS CHANGES EVERYTHING:**

The good news of Jesus is not just a belief—it's a way of life. **We follow Jesus with expectancy because he transforms people, places, and purpose.**

## **EXPECTANCY: BELIEVING JESUS STILL MOVES**

One of the most important postures of the Christian life is expectancy.

For those unfamiliar, expectancy is the quiet, steady confidence that Jesus is alive, present, and at work—right now, right here, in ordinary moments and ordinary people. It's living with a heart that anticipates his movement.

Paul captures this posture powerfully in Ephesians 3:14–21. He begins with a prayer—one of the most beautiful prayers in all of Scripture. He prays that we would be strengthened in our inner being, rooted and established in love, able to grasp the vast dimensions of Christ's love—its height, depth, width, and length—and that we would be “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” This prayer alone is staggering. Paul is asking that the very life and fullness of Jesus would take up residence in us.

But then he ends with a verse that should awaken expectancy in every follower of Jesus: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine...”

Immeasurably more. More than we ask. More than we imagine.

And not according to our effort, our enthusiasm, our spiritual maturity, or our good intentions—but “according to *his* power at work within us.”

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Paul is effectively saying:

- Expect Jesus to move.
- Expect God to work.
- Expect transformation.
- Expect renewal.
- Expect his power to be at work in your actual life.

## MY GROWTH IN EXPECTANCY

Before we get much further, I need to confess my hesitation around the word “expectancy.” For me, this word comes with a lot of baggage. Whether you’ve heard the word before or not, you may resonate with my experience.

For me, the hesitation of using a word like *expectancy* is I feel like I have seen it weaponized in Christian spaces to hype crowds, manipulate emotions, or subtly promise that if you just believe hard enough, pray long enough, or show up faithfully enough, God will give you everything you ever dreamed of.

Expectancy becomes a spiritualized pep rally (never liked pep rallies, personally!). Churches talk about it like a magic wand—raise your hands, raise your voice, raise your expectations... and God will deliver the breakthrough, if you just try hard enough and believe big enough.

When expectancy is used like that,

two things often happen to me: First, I try to protect myself from disappointment. Personally, when someone has promised that sort of thing, and it doesn’t happen, after a while I stop expecting God to move because I’m tired of being let down. It feels safer to keep hopes low so my heart doesn’t get bruised again. I lower my expectations not because God is small, but because I’m trying to shield myself.

Second, I start to fear sounding like prosperity-gospel people. Pastorally, I don’t want to be associated with the idea that following Jesus means that we get everything we want—success, healing, prosperity, perfect marriages, dream jobs, or a pain-free existence. I know that’s not the gospel. I know that’s not the way of Jesus, and so I tend to swing the pendulum in the opposite direction.

Instead of unhealthy expectancy that demands God perform for me, I settle for no expectancy at all. But neither extreme is the way of Jesus. Biblical expectancy is not hype. It is not manipulation. It is not a guarantee that everything will work out the way we prefer, and it is certainly not a prosperity formula where God exists to deliver our desires.

Biblical expectancy is a posture of trust:

- A belief that Jesus is alive and active.
- A belief that he loves me (it's a challenge for me to believe this is true many days).
- A belief that his power is at work even when we cannot see it (really difficult to believe at times).
- A belief that he will always be faithful to his character, even if he is not predictable in his outcomes.

Expectancy says: “Jesus, I trust that you are at work—whether you change the situation or whether you change me in the situation.”

That's why Ephesians 3:14-21 is so important for grounding this. Paul is not hyping a crowd, and he isn't trying to stir emotion. He is on his knees praying for a church facing hardship and suffering under Roman power, and what he prays for is not comfort or escape—it's strength, inner renewal, deeper love, fullness in Christ, and an imagination for what Jesus can do.

Expectancy is not demanding outcomes, it's opening ourselves to God's overflowing love and power. It's not assuming Jesus will give us what we want, it's trusting Jesus is

what we need. It's not expecting an easy story, it's expecting a faithful Savior.

Ephesians 3 is an invitation to expand our imagination for what Jesus can do in us, in our relationships, in our homes, and in our city. It destroys the small, cautious versions of Christianity we often settle for. The gospel is not a survival strategy; it is a resurrection story, and following Jesus with expectancy means we live as though resurrection is still happening.

### **JESUS TRANSFORMS PEOPLE**

Expectancy begins personally. It means believing Jesus is not done forming you and shaping you into his likeness. “Jesus Changes Everything” means that Jesus transforms people—real people with stories, histories, fears, addictions, hopes, and wounds—and that includes you.

When we follow Jesus with expectancy, we assume transformation is possible, not because of anything we do or don't do, but because of who he is.

Jesus transforms people when he reshapes desires, breaks unhealthy patterns, confronts lies, heals memories, lifts shame, and restores identity. He transforms people when he gives peace we can't manufacture,

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forgiveness we can't muster, and courage we don't naturally have.

Expectancy means believing that no one in your life is too far gone—your loved one who's drifting, your friend buried in cynicism, your co-worker running from God, or your own child who feels unreachable.

Jesus transforms people because Jesus never stops moving toward people. When we follow him with expectancy, we start seeing people not as they are, but as Jesus is making them.

### **JESUS TRANSFORMS PLACES**

Jesus' transformation doesn't stop with individuals, so we don't have to think myopically. Expectancy means believing that the places we inhabit, our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and cities, are not static—they are places where God wants to bring renewal.

When the Early Church followed Jesus into the world, cities changed. Joy spread in Samaria. Households transformed in Philippi. Revival broke out in Ephesus. These weren't isolated spiritual events, they were the ripple effects of ordinary believers expecting that Jesus was already at work where they lived.

Expectancy means you see your workplace differently. You walk

into your office or your classroom believing Jesus is present. You see your neighborhood with spiritual eyes. It means you look at your city not with resignation, but with hope: Jesus wants to transform this place.

And the incredible truth is—he often starts by transforming it through you. Through your listening, your presence, your hospitality, your prayers, your small acts of kindness, your courage, your integrity, and your faithfulness.

The beauty of expectancy turns everyday environments into sacred spaces.

### **JESUS TRANSFORMS PURPOSE**

Finally, Jesus transforms our purpose. When Jesus called his disciples, he didn't offer them a hobby or a belief system; he offered them a mission. He rewrote their purpose. He took their gifts, their weaknesses, their limitations, their passions, and their stories and wove them into something meaningful.

Expectancy means believing your life is not random: your gifts, your personality, experiences, and even your wounds are not random. Jesus is forming them into a purpose aligned with his kingdom.

When Jesus transforms our purpose, we stop living for ourselves. We stop living just for comfort or achievement. We live for others. We live open-handedly. We see opportunities everywhere—conversations to encourage, people to bless, communities to support, and ways to embody the love of Jesus in the everyday work of our lives. Purpose becomes less about what we accomplish and more about who we become.

When we follow Jesus with expectancy, we begin to see his transforming work in people, in places, and in our purpose. We become alert to the kingdom breaking in all around us, because all around us, Jesus is changing everything.

## THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

Today, ask yourself:

Where do you need expectancy again?

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Where has your imagination for what Jesus can do grown small?

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Are there any places you have settled for resignation instead of hope?

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Where have you stopped believing Jesus transforms people... places... purpose... and even you?

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Bring those places to him honestly. Pray Paul's prayer of Ephesians 3:14–21 over your life. Ask Jesus to enlarge your imagination for his work, because following Jesus with expectancy is not wishful thinking, it is trusting that the risen Christ is alive, present, and at work in every corner of your life. When we follow him with expectancy, we begin to see transformation everywhere.

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## **DEVOTIONAL 2.1**

### **PRESENCE OVER PROGRAM**

*“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”*  
Luke 10:41-42

**PRESENCE OVER PROGRAM:** We prioritize being with God and each other over executing polished plans or programs. We value margin. We slow down to listen, are willing to be interrupted, and respond to the Spirit. We believe spiritual power is born in prayerful presence, not just strategic excellence.

### THE SIN OF OVER-PROGRAMMING

If there is a modern church epidemic, it is the belief that *activity* is *spirituality*. We assume that bigger is better, busier is holier, and excellence equals anointing. We pack calendars, plan programs, organize teams, build events, and structure every moment until church-life resembles a frenetic, corporate workflow more than the quiet, unhurried kingdom of Jesus.

It's a sin I am guilty of.

While programs have their place and Small Groups build community, and excellence is a gift, somewhere along the way the pursuit of

excellence became perfectionism, and the pursuit of good planning became over-programming. We began designing ministries where everything is polished, seamless, predictable, controlled, and efficient—but not necessarily holy, Spirit-led, or attentive.

Over-programming is not just a practical problem. It is a *spiritual* one. It is a way of saying, often without realizing it, “God, we’ve got this covered. We don’t need interruption. We don’t need any surprises. We don’t need your presence. We just need excellent execution.” And I’m so worn out by that version of church.

What ends up happening is we slowly exchange the *presence of Jesus* for the *production of ministry*.

### MARTHA, MARTHA... ONLY ONE THING IS NEEDED

This is what makes Luke 10 so painfully relevant. Martha is doing everything right—hosting, preparing, serving, cooking, and organizing. She's the kind of person pastors dream of having ten more just like. She is incredibly productive and strives for excellence.

But she is missing the “one thing.” When Jesus tells Martha, “Only one thing is necessary” (Luke 10:42), he is drawing a sharp contrast be-

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tween her *many things* and Mary's *one thing*.

The Greek phrase literally means "there is need of one thing," and Luke makes it unmistakably clear what that *one thing* is by describing

Mary's posture: "*Mary sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.*" Luke 10:39

In the ancient world, sitting at someone's feet was the posture of a disciple. Mary is not being passive; she is positioning herself in humility and attentiveness. She is receiving, listening, resting, and orienting her life around Jesus.

The *one thing* is not a task—it's a relationship. The one necessary thing is being with Jesus.

Mary embodies that true discipleship begins not with effort, output, or excellence, but with simple, uncluttered attentiveness to Jesus. Early Christian interpreters unanimously recognized this. From Augustine to Gregory the Great, the Church Fathers taught that Mary represents the soul centered on communion with Christ, while Martha represents the tendency, even among sincere believers, to be consumed by service, productivity, and performance.

Jesus is not rebuking Martha for serving; he is correcting the disordered priority that places *doing for God* above *being with God*. The "one thing" is the one thing our souls were made for: intimate, relational presence with Jesus—sitting at his feet, listening to his voice, and letting his life shape ours.

Without that, everything else becomes anxious striving.

With that, everything else finds its proper place.

## **PRESENCE OVER PROGRAM—THEN AND NOW**

The truth is, many of us would rather serve than sit. We'd rather lead than listen. We'd rather stay busy and keep ourselves occupied than pause and reflect.

This value of *Presence over Program* at Waterstone is not simply a strategy; it is a theology rooted in Scripture that teaches this pattern again and again:

*"My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."* Exodus 33:14

- Israel is ready to charge into mission, into the Promised Land, into activity. God says, "Stop. My presence first."

*"Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain."* Psalm 127:1

- The psalmist reminds us: if you do not begin from presence, everything you build—no matter how excellent—is empty.

*“He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach.”* Mark 3:14

- Before preaching, healing, casting out demons, building the church—Jesus’ first call is, “be with me.”

The goal of the Christian life is not to live *for* God, but *with* God.

His presence precedes, shapes, and empowers our mission, because without his presence, the mission of our lives becomes mechanical and begins to resemble the efforts and strategy of the world instead of the kingdom of heaven.

### PROGRAM-DRIVEN FAITH

When churches over-program, it’s often because they’re tempted to try and create experiences that run perfectly, events that impress, successful ministries, and Sundays that sparkle (I’m not a fan of sparkly things).

Worse, we begin *performing* instead of praying. We begin *executing* instead of listening. We begin *managing* outcomes instead of responding to the Spirit. And we wonder why we’re tired and anxious, why wor-

ship feels hollow, and why it no longer feels holy. We’re reaping the fruit we’ve sown.

However, Jesus is inviting us, again, to choose the better way—to stop obsessing over doing, producing, and planning, and instead learn how to be with him. Don’t be mistaken: being with Jesus is not passive, it is formative. It transforms our pace and it calms our fears. It reorders our priorities and restores our souls. Being with Jesus provides us with what we are actually looking for and the deepest longings of our souls. We just have to listen to him when he tells us—and focus on the *one* thing.

### THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

So today, take a deep breath and ask yourself:

In what ways am I doing for Jesus instead of being with Jesus?

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Where does my life reflect the worry of Martha more than the presence of Mary?

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What would it look like to slow down, open up my schedule, and choose the better thing—the “one thing necessary”?

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Invite Jesus into this moment, your day, your tasks, your calendar. Ask him to help you resist the urge to over-schedule and instead renew your heart in his simple, quiet presence. Because spiritual power is not born from polish or planning—it is born from presence.

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## **DEVOTIONAL 2.2**

### **THE GIFT OF BEING IRREPUTIBLE**

*Now when Jesus returned, a crowd welcomed him, for they were all expecting him. Then a man named Jairus, a synagogue leader, came and fell at Jesus' feet, pleading with him to come to his house because his only daughter, a girl of about twelve, was dying.*

*As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.* Luke 8:40-44

**PRESENCE OVER PROGRAM:** We prioritize being with God and each other over executing polished plans or programs. **We value margin. We slow down to listen, are willing to be interrupted, and respond to the Spirit.** We believe spiritual power is born in prayerful presence, not just strategic excellence.

### INTERRUPTIONS THAT BECOME MIRACLES

If you trace Jesus' ministry throughout the Gospels, you'll notice a pattern: many of the most beautiful moments—the healings, the revelations, the stories we cherish—happened as interruptions.

In Luke 8, Jesus is on his way to heal Jairus' dying daughter when a woman, desperate and exhausted from twelve years of bleeding, reaches out to touch his cloak. This moment wasn't scheduled. It wasn't on the program. It wasn't part of the day's ministry plan.

Yet, Jesus stops, and an interruption becomes a miracle.

This is not an isolated event. So much of Jesus' ministry flows not from the efficiency of his schedule but from his attentiveness to the people around him. He moves at a pace that allows him to be interruptible. He's not ruled by hurry, pressure, or production—even when crowds press in, the needs are overwhelming, and people demand more of him. Jesus shows us a clear example of our value: “We slow down to listen, are willing to be interrupted, and respond to the Spirit.”

For Jesus, interruptions aren't obstacles to ministry—they're often the very places ministry happens.

### LISTENING IN A NOISY WORLD

How do we slow down to listen in a world that is endlessly loud? Our lives are saturated with noise: buzzing phones, constant notifications, 24-hour news cycles, relentless de-

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mands, and the subtle pressure to always be available.

I don't know about you, but there are times I get anxious when I misplace my phone or haven't looked at it for a while. "What if they need me!?" Who's *they*, you might ask? I don't know but they MIGHT NEED ME!!!

Silence feels foreign. Stillness feels wasteful. Listening feels unproductive.

And yet, listening is at the very center of discipleship. You cannot be interruptible if you are not listening. You cannot respond to the Spirit if you cannot hear him.

All throughout Scripture, God interrupts people and speaks in ways that redirect their lives. Abraham is called to leave his home; Hagar is met in the wilderness; Jacob encounters God in a dream; Moses turns aside to see a burning bush; Samuel hears God call him by name; Elijah hears God in a gentle whisper; Isaiah is overwhelmed by God's presence in worship; Jonah's rebellion is interrupted by God's Word; and Joseph receives dreams that reroute his future.

Then, Jesus continues the pattern—Mary is visited by an angel; Joseph hears from God in his dreams;

shepherds are interrupted by glory (ok, this one is not so quiet); Simon is moved by the Spirit into the temple; Zacchaeus is called out of a tree; and Saul is stopped on the Damascus road.

After Jesus' ascension, the interruptions continue: Philip is led by the Spirit onto a desert road; Peter receives a rooftop vision; Cornelius is visited by an angel; the church in Antioch hears the Spirit speak during worship; Paul is redirected by the Spirit from Asia to Macedonia; and John receives the Revelation on Patmos.

Scripture is one long story of a God who interrupts, speaks, and leads—again and again—whenever people are attentive enough to notice.

Here's the trick though, the voice of God rarely competes with the noise. If you look at those stories, there are far more whispers than moments where someone is knocked off their horse. God tends to speak in gentle nudges, quiet conviction, and subtle invitations. The Spirit rarely shouts, but if we are moving too fast, or if our lives are too noisy, we might miss him entirely.

So we must learn—slowly, intentionally—to create space for the voice of Jesus. Space to breathe. Space to notice. Space to be atten-

tive. The hard truth is: listening requires margin.

It may sound odd, but listening even requires courage. I say courage because once we slow down, we might finally hear the things we've been outrunning or attempting to ignore.

## THE STRUGGLE WITH BUSYNESS

I feel this tension deeply. I struggle with busyness. Working in ministry and at a church can easily become a nonstop sequence of meetings, problems to solve, people to support, emails to answer, services to prepare, and crises to address. Add to that the responsibilities of being a husband, a father, a friend, a neighbor, a person, and suddenly life feels like one long run-on sentence with no punctuation.

I am not complaining at all. I love my life. It is such a gift to get to do what I do, but the toll of the pace I'm tempted to keep up with is real. I often get swept up in the busyness, and before I realize it, I'm moving too fast. I stop listening. I stop noticing. I stop being present. I lose my capacity to hear the quiet whisper of the Spirit. I miss moments with my kids. I flatten conversations. I rush past opportunities. I start living a frantic, hurried, over-programmed, anxious,

frazzled life doing things for Jesus but not with Jesus.

Here's the truth I'm learning (and find myself relearning again and again): busyness is not the same as fruitfulness. Busyness crowds out attentiveness. It dulls the soul and makes me uninterruptible. In this place, I become unavailable to the Spirit, which also makes me less available to my kids, my wife, and those around me.

## THE BEAUTY OF BEING INTERRUPTIBLE

But when we (I) slow down—and choose unhurried presence over frenzied production—something beautiful happens, and we see the Spirit's movements more clearly. We begin noticing people: the tired cashier, the stressed coworker, the lonely neighbor, the frustrated child. We recognize opportunities for compassion, and hear the quiet invitation to pray. We even become aware of the kingdom breaking in around us.

Interruptibility is the willingness to let go of our perfect plans and embrace God's better ones. It is the practice of being so connected to Jesus that our schedules become flexible in his hands. When we are interruptible, we begin to experience the joy of Spirit-led living—those sacred moments where we

know, deep down, “This wasn’t me. This was God.” Moments where we comfort someone at just the right time, and listen instead of rushing. Moments where we encourage a heart that would have gone unnoticed, and where we show up for someone without knowing how much they needed it.

Jesus’ life teaches us that the kingdom comes through interruptions—not the ones we plan, but the ones we welcome.

### THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

So today, pause and ask yourself:

Where is your life too loud to hear Jesus?

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Where is your pace too fast to notice his invitations?

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Where do you need to slow down so you can be interruptible again?

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Bring your busyness honestly to God, and ask him to help you listen and pay attention. Ask him to interrupt your plans with his presence.

The joy of following Jesus is not found in getting everything done—it’s found in being attentive to the moments where he slips quietly into our day and invites us to join him in his work.

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## **DEVOTIONAL 2.3**

### **POWER COMES FROM PRESENCE**

*I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.* Ephesians 1:17–21

**PRESENCE OVER PROGRAM:** We prioritize being with God and one another over executing polished plans or programs. We value margin. We slow down to listen, are willing to be interrupted, and respond to the Spirit. **We believe spiritual power is born in prayerful presence, not just strategic excellence.**

#### **ATTENTIVENESS: THE SOIL OF SPIRITUAL POWER**

One of the quiet truths woven throughout Scripture is that spiritual power does not come from our activity, strategy, competence,

charisma, or perfection. It doesn't come from bigger programs, better leadership structures, or more polished execution. Real spiritual power comes from presence—from being deeply connected to Jesus and deeply attentive to the Spirit.

When Paul prays in Ephesians 1:17–21, he is praying for something far deeper than ministry effectiveness. He asks God to give believers “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation,” so that they might know him better. Everything begins there. Paul isn’t praying for ability; he is praying for awareness. Not for strength in themselves, but for the eyes of their hearts to be opened to the strength that already resides in them through the Holy Spirit.

This is a radical reframing of where power actually comes from in the Christian life. According to Paul, power is not produced—it is revealed. It does not come from being busy, brilliant, or impressive—it comes from being with Jesus long enough that our inner lives become attuned to the presence of God.

This is why Paul prays for enlightenment—not intellectual enlightenment, but a spiritual awakening that allows believers to perceive the hope, inheritance, and power that are already theirs. In other words, Paul is saying: We don’t need more

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programs or performance. We need more awareness and presence. We need more of Jesus.

## THE POWER ALREADY WITHIN US

Paul goes on to highlight the power that is available to every believer: “his incomparably great power for us who believe.”

Incomparably great power.

Read that sentence a few times. Do you believe that? Do you believe that sort of power is available to you? One that is incomparable to all other forms of power? And that it is a greater power than anything this world has ever known?

If that’s not mind-crippling enough, he defines it: “the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at the right hand of God.”

Paul is talking about resurrection power. Ascension power. Cosmic authority. Power that dethrones death, dismantles darkness, and exalts Christ above “all rule and authority, power and dominion.”

Let me be so, so clear. Paul is not giving sentimental encouragement or using hyperbole. What he is talking about is the theological center of Christian identity.

The power of God is in you be-

cause the presence of Jesus is with you. Paul’s prayer makes something clear: even though this power is already ours, we can go through life unaware of it, disconnected from it, unresponsive to it. You can have power without access if you lack attentiveness. You can have spiritual inheritance without spiritual sensitivity if you live too fast, distracted, or too self-dependent to notice.

The Spirit’s power is not a switch you flip; it is a connection you cultivate.

## PRESENCE BEFORE POWER

This is why the value of *presence over program* at Waterstone says: “We believe spiritual power is born in prayerful presence, not just strategic excellence.”

We are surrounded by a ministry culture that measures success by output. However, in Scripture we see that Paul measures success by intimacy. He knows power doesn’t come from the many things we do for God, but from being with him. Without presence, strategies are empty, and excellence becomes performance. Without presence, church becomes noise. To the contrary, though, with presence—even ordinary moments become holy.

Attentiveness is the posture that opens our hearts to the power of

God. Attentiveness slows us down enough to listen. It clears space for the Spirit to speak. It keeps us responsive, interruptible, and available. When we are attentive, we begin to sense God's leading in ways we would have missed otherwise. We begin to see people as God sees them, recognize opportunities for faithfulness, and pray with expectation. We begin to trust more fully because we are rooted more deeply. Attentiveness makes us conduits of the Spirit's power rather than architects of our own.

## WHERE POWER ACTUALLY FLOWS

Spiritual power rarely shows up in spectacular displays. More often, it flows through the quiet places where we are paying attention to Jesus:

- In the still moment of prayer before the day begins.
- In the whisper of conviction that redirects your choices.
- In the gentle nudge to encourage someone.
- In the unexpected courage to speak truth in love.
- In the resilience to endure suffering with hope.
- In the compassion that rises in you for someone you once dismissed.

- In the clarity to make a wise decision you couldn't have made alone.

This is the power of resurrection. It flows through attentive hearts that are rooted in presence rather than driven by performance.

When Paul prays for the “eyes of your heart” to be enlightened, this is what he’s talking about: a way of seeing that is only possible when you live in communion with Jesus. Attentiveness is the soil where spiritual power grows, and presence is the posture that makes us available to the Spirit’s work.

## THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

Pause today and ask:

Where am I living in my own strength instead of leaning into the Spirit's power?

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Where is my life too loud or too hurried for attentiveness?

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What would it look like to create margin—not to do more, but to be more aware?

Ask God for the Spirit of wisdom and revelation. Ask him to open the eyes of your heart. Ask him to help you know the hope, the inheritance, and the power that are already yours in Christ. Power doesn't come from pushing harder—power comes from presence, and when we live from presence, we become people through whom God's power quietly, beautifully flows.



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## **DEVOTIONAL 3.1**

### **TOGETHER IS BETTER**

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Acts 2:42-27

### **TOGETHER IS BETTER:**

We choose relationships over results. We serve, suffer, celebrate, and dream together. We resist the pressure to perform and instead build a culture of belonging, where people are seen, known, and valued—not just for what they do, but for who they are.

### **THE CHURCH THAT CHOSE EACH OTHER**

Here we go again: Acts 2. You probably felt this coming. Anytime someone teaches about community, Acts 2:42–47 gets pulled out like the trusty friend it is. It's the Golden Retriever of community passages—loyal, eager, tail-wagging, and always happy to be included.

And yes, we joke about it, but for good reason: this is the Spirit's first snapshot of what happens when ordinary people gather around Jesus and choose one another with intention and devotion.

Luke describes a people who “devoted themselves”—a phrase that carries the weight of commitment, persistence, and a refusal to drift. They were devoted to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. These practices were the rhythms that shaped a new kind of family.

Their community wasn't built on shared hobbies, similar life stages, or natural compatibility.

Their community was built on the shared grace of God. And from that shared grace came a shared life: eating meals in their homes, generously meeting one another's needs, praying earnestly, praising freely, and showing up for one another day after day.

This was not a performance-based group. They weren't trying to run the best program or keep attendance numbers climbing. They weren't evaluating ROI or tweaking group strategy. They were simply learning to belong to one another, because they belonged to Christ.

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It's always fascinating to me that in the beginning the Spirit didn't build an institution—he built a new community. While Acts 2 makes it look like this community was picturesque, the rest of Acts shows us the early church was messy. Like family-drama-at-Christmas messy. Like sons-sleeping-with-their-step-moms messy. Like people-fighting-about-traditions-politics-and-race messy.

So, as idealized as this picture in Acts can look, the messiness was real, and despite the people, God made something beautiful. The beauty of what came out of the Early Church was the simple fruit of ordinary faithfulness, ordinary presence, and ordinary people choosing one another again and again. Even in the midst of the mess.

### **MOST COMMUNITY DOESN'T FEEL LIKE THIS AT FIRST**

Here's an honest truth most pastors won't tell you: most church Small Groups are... fine.

They aren't terrible—just fine. Most of the time, community begins in awkwardness. You show up, settle into a familiar seat, circle around a coffee table covered with Bibles, seltzers, and a suspiciously large bowl of Chex Mix. Someone asks how everyone's week was; someone

else shares a prayer request involving their neighbor's cousin's dog. There's those awkward moments of silence. Then, someone overshares while someone else never says a word. The snacks are hit-or-miss. The conversation feels choppy. Some people arrive late or leave early.

And you leave wondering, "Was that good?"

The truth is, community and belonging do not arrive fully-formed. They grow slowly, often invisibly, through repeated gestures of presence and care. Rarely does it feel like the fireworks of the Early Church community (except maybe the part about a dude falling asleep during the teaching and tumbling out of a window...)

And that's actually okay, because we don't build community for the good weeks. We build it for the hard ones.

Most of us don't need deep community on ordinary Tuesdays—but when life collapses, when grief storms in, when the phone rings with the news you never wanted to hear—that's when you discover whether you're truly alone or genuinely held.

## WHEN COMMUNITY BECOMES HOLY GROUND

A few weeks ago, one of our faithful Small Group leaders received a phone call. A woman in her group—someone they had prayed with, laughed with, eaten meals with—was dying. There was no discussion about schedules or convenience. Our leader dropped what she was doing and drove straight to the hospital. When she got there, she put word out to the rest of the Small Group and five other members dropped what they were doing and met at the hospital.

They stood around her bed, holding hands. They prayed. They cried. They whispered Scripture. They stayed as she passed from this life into the presence of Jesus. When the breath left her lungs, the love of God did not. His love was embodied in the people who refused to let her be alone.

They weren't there because it was "their night to meet." They weren't there because it was planned or convenient. They were there because the Holy Spirit had woven them into a community.

Community becomes sacred when we stop trying to impress one another and simply show-up for one another. When we carry burdens, share joys, offer prayers, and re-

main present in suffering, we get a glimpse of the kingdom—right there in a quiet hospital room, hands held, tears shared, hearts united in hope.

This is the miracle of Christian community: not that it removes suffering, but that it refuses to let anyone suffer alone.

## TOGETHER IS BETTER

Most of us long for Acts 2-level community, but we forget that Acts 2-level community was built through countless unseen moments. People don't feel "seen, known, and valued" on week one.

Trust is not microwaved; it is marinated. This slow process is not evidence of failure—it is evidence of formation. Community is cultivated long before it is felt. You may not realize what God is building through the cumulative, seemingly ordinary gatherings: the meals, the prayers, the shared laughter, the mundane conversations. Yet over time, these moments braid together into something profound—a net strong enough to catch the weight of real life.

Every ordinary week is actually laying the groundwork for extraordinary moments. You just might not recognize them until you need them. Acts 2 shows us that the

Kingdom of God grows wherever people choose one another in love. So, may we be a church that does the ordinary things—meals, prayers, conversations, simple acts of care—with extraordinary devotion, and may God weave those ordinary threads into a community strong enough to hold us in the hardest moments of life.

Because together is better. Always.

### THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

Today, the invitation is simple but profound: Choose someone.

Choose a person to show-up for, to text, to pray for, to sit with, to listen to, to bless. Don't wait for perfect chemistry or instant belonging. Don't chase an idealized picture of community. Just begin with presence. One person. One moment. One act of love.

Ask the Spirit:

Who needs me today?

Who can I bless?

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Who can I stand beside, in celebration or in sorrow?

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Pray that God would shape you into the kind-of person who doesn't need perfect community to be present, who doesn't wait for the "right moment" to belong, and who is ready—when the crisis comes—to hold a hand, whisper a prayer, or simply stand with someone who should never face life alone.

Because the strength of Christian community isn't found in polish or performance—it's found in people who choose one another.

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## **DEVOTIONAL 3.2**

### **RELATIONSHIP OVER RESULTS**

*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*

Romans 12:9–16

### TOGETHER IS BETTER:

**We choose relationships over results. We serve, suffer, celebrate, and dream together.** We resist the pressure to perform and instead build a culture of belonging, where people are seen, known, and valued—not just for what they do, but for who they are.

### THE MOST INEFFICIENT INVESTMENT

Most of us live in a world trained to measure everything—productivity, efficiency, output, ROI, progress, success. It's the air we breathe. From workplaces, to-do lists, to even our spiritual lives, we often

default to asking, “How am I performing?” rather than, “Who am I becoming?” So when we say, “We choose relationships over results,” it can feel counter-cultural, even a little uncomfortable.

Because relationships aren't efficient. They take time. They require emotional investment. They slow us down. They ask things of us that spreadsheets never will. Honestly, relationships are probably the most inefficient investment you can make. But Scripture is clear: the Christian life is not built on metrics—it's built on love.

### THE SHAPE OF GOSPEL-FORMED COMMUNITY

Paul begins with a single sentence that cuts through all our excuses: “Love must be sincere.” In Greek, the word *sincere* means “without a mask.”

Genuine.

Not performative. Not polite affection with spiritual veneers. Real love—the kind Jesus modeled—requires authenticity, presence, commitment and perseverance. It requires commitment to one another that doesn't evaporate when things get inconvenient.

Then Paul gives a series of com-

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mands that sound less like an organizational plan and more like the rhythms of a deeply connected community:

- “Be devoted to one another in love.”
- “Honor one another above yourselves.”
- “Share with the Lord’s people who are in need.”
- “Practice hospitality.”
- “Rejoice with those who rejoice.”
- “Mourn with those who mourn.”

That’s a varied list, but it has one thing in common: it is all slow work. Ever devoted yourself to another person in love? That’s going to cost you some time. Ever tried to share with people who are in need? It’s certainly not efficient. Ever practiced radical hospitality? Get ready for someone to stay well past the time you are ready to go to bed.

Community isn’t efficient and it certainly isn’t easy.

Does anyone remember the Easy-Bake Oven? I sometimes wish that community worked like an Easy-Bake Oven. My sister would mix some neon powder with water, shove it into that tiny plastic oven, and—thanks to the raw power of a lightbulb—a “cake” would come out in three minutes flat. (And

by “cake,” I mean a vaguely edible sponge with frosting.)

Wouldn’t it be great if relationships worked like that? Add a little small talk, sprinkle in a prayer request, hit the switch, and *ding!*—instant deep community, perfectly risen, no mess, no patience required.

But that’s not how real belonging works. Genuine community is slow-baked, not lightbulb-baked. It takes time, presence, repetition, and a whole lot more than a 40-watt bulb.

It’s slow work, but it’s also holy work. It’s the work of the Spirit forming a people who don’t just show up when it’s easy, but who stay when it’s costly. Because relationships are not the means to a better result. Relationships *are* the result. It’s what Jesus came to create in his followers.

### **WHY WE DRIFT TOWARD RESULTS INSTEAD OF RELATIONSHIPS**

Let’s be honest, though: choosing relationships over results is not natural for most of us. We live in a culture that rewards performance, productivity, and accomplishments. It feels easier to check boxes than to enter into someone’s pain. It feels safer to keep things surface-level than to risk being known.

It feels more efficient to offer quick advice than to sit in someone's sorrow.

And because of this, even in the Church, we sometimes drift toward managing people rather than loving them. We evaluate whether a Small Group is "working." We measure ministry impact by attendance and programs. We unintentionally turn relationships into strategies.

But Paul reminds us that the family of God is not a machine—it's a body. You measure a machine by its efficiency but not a body. You measure a body by its health, its unity, and its ability to move, breathe, and function.

The true mark of Christian maturity is not how much we accomplish, but how well we love. Not how polished our programs are, but how present our people are. Not how impressive our achievements look, but how deeply our lives are intertwined.

### **THE COST AND BEAUTY OF SERVING, SUFFERING, AND CELEBRATING TOGETHER**

One of the most beautiful lines in Romans 12 is also one of the simplest: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." That's what it means to be a community shaped by Jesus. We

don't outsource our celebrations or our sorrows. We enter into them. We show up with cupcakes (not Easy-Baked!) and cheers when someone experiences joy. We sit on living room floors with tissues and silence when someone is grieving.

But Paul doesn't stop there. The gospel community he describes is one where we serve, suffer, celebrate, and dream together.

That last word—dream—is important. It reminds us that our relationships are not only forged in pain but also in hope. We envision a better future together. We carry one another's longings. We cheer one another forward. We hold onto hope when someone's arms are too tired to carry it themselves.

This kind of community takes courage. It also takes humility. Because results keep us safe—relationships make us vulnerable. But vulnerability is the doorway to transformation. And choosing relationships over results means choosing the slow, steady, sacred work of letting your life be knit to someone else's.

It's choosing presence when you don't have answers.

It's choosing celebration even when your own life feels heavy.

It's choosing to dream with someone whose hope has been bruised.

It's choosing to lose your life in love  
because Jesus did the same for you.

## THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

So today, pause and ask yourself:

Where am I choosing efficiency over empathy?

Where am I valuing results more than relationships?

Who in my life needs me not to fix something, but simply to show up?

Ask the Spirit to slow you down and open your eyes to the people around you. Ask him to help you

rejoice with someone who is celebrating, or stand with someone who is suffering. Because love is not measured by productivity—it's measured by presence. And when we choose relationships over results, we become a community shaped by the very heart of Jesus.

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## **DEVOTIONAL 3.3**

### **BELONGING OVER PERFORMANCE**

*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.* Galatians 6:2

### **TOGETHER IS BETTER:**

We choose relationships over results. We serve, suffer, celebrate, and dream together. **We resist the pressure to perform and instead build a culture of belonging, where people are seen, known, and valued—not just for what they do, but for who they are.**

### **THE PRESSURE TO PERFORM**

We live in a world that rewards performance. From an early age, we learn that approval is tied to achievement—grades, productivity, success, image, efficiency. Even as adults, we often feel like our worth is measured by what we produce, how much we accomplish, or how well we hold everything together. Unfortunately, that pressure doesn't magically disappear when we walk into a church building. If anything, sometimes it gets worse. We want to seem spiritual, put-together, faith-filled, and in-control. We worry that if people really saw us—our fears, our failures, our wounds—they might step back instead of leaning in.

However, the gospel paints a radically different picture of community. At Waterstone, we express that vision this way: “We resist the pres-

sure to perform and instead build a culture of belonging, where people are seen, known, and valued—not just for what they do, but for who they are.”

### **THE EPIDEMIC OF LONELINESS AND THE ACHE TO BE SEEN**

We are living through what many experts call the Epidemic of Loneliness. Nearly half of Americans report feeling isolated, unseen, or unknown. Social media keeps us connected but not cared for. Work keeps us busy but not bonded. Even in families and friendships, many people walk through their days wondering, “Does anyone actually know me? Does anyone see the burden I’m holding?”

A few years ago, I spent some time in downtown Denver with the homeless. In one of my conversations with a man who had been living on the streets for years said the hardest part of being homeless wasn't the lack of food or shelter—it was invisibility. People would walk by without looking at him, eyes averted, as if he didn't exist. He told me he started writing his name on his sign because he realized no one had spoken his name in weeks, which broke my heart. However, I think this is true for far more people than we realize—not just for those on street corners.

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Most of us are holding invisible signs every day. Signs that say:

I'm overwhelmed.  
I'm anxious.  
I'm grieving.  
I'm lonely.  
I'm not okay.

But instead of holding them in front, we tuck them behind our backs. We perform instead of reveal. Most of us try to shield ourselves from vulnerability, and offer our résumés instead of our wounds.

Tragically, in church communities, sometimes we reinforce this instinct. We celebrate the gifted, the productive, the impressive, the strong, the extroverted (especially the extroverted). But the Kingdom of God does not run on performance—it runs on *presence*. It runs on belonging. It runs on a love that sees people as image-bearers, not resources.

## **BELONGING BEGINS WITH SEEING**

Paul writes, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Notice the assumption: everyone has a burden. Everyone is carrying something heavy, and holding something they cannot lift alone. This includes the people who look

the strongest. The pressure to perform tells us to hide our burdens, but belonging encourages us to bring them into the light.

Performance demands curated selves; belonging welcomes real selves.

The law of Christ—the law of love—is fulfilled not when we impress one another, but when we carry one another. When Paul calls the Church to carry one another’s burdens, he is calling us to see each other, and to notice the emotional sign someone is holding.

Belonging starts with being seen. Not your public self, competent self, or even your Sunday-best self.

You.  
Seen.  
Known.  
Valued.  
Loved—not for what you do, but for who you are.

This is the culture Jesus created everywhere he went. He noticed Zacchaeus in a tree. He noticed the woman reaching for his cloak. He noticed the grieving mother in a funeral procession. He noticed people who blended into the background, who were overlooked, and felt invisible. With every moment of seeing, Jesus restored dignity

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and declared worth.

When we resist the pressure to perform, we become a community capable of that same Christlike attention. We make space for authenticity. We allow one another to be weak. We create an environment where no one has to hide their sign, because they know that they will be met with compassion instead of judgment, presence instead of avoidance, and belonging instead of evaluation.

## CARRYING BURDENS IS THE ANTIDOTE TO PERFORMANCE

Here's something that I don't think many of us recognize: performance isolates. It can only isolate because performance is concerned with, "How do I look?" "How am I being perceived?" "What do I need to protect here?" and "Do I look like I have it all together?"

All of these postures are antithetical to authenticity and belonging.

I think of someone I know who lives under the constant pressure of, "I have to hold it all together. I have to be strong." It exists beneath everything they do—every conversation, every decision, every moment of weakness that's quickly hidden. But on the outside, it looks admirable: dependable, composed, unshakeable. That's the image they are trying to project.

However, the truth is that beneath the surface there is a deep, aching loneliness. The moment we decide we must always be the strong one, we eliminate the possibility of being held by anyone else. We lock ourselves inside the role of supporter, and without meaning to, we begin to push people away—because people can only love the parts of us they can see, and we've hidden the parts that actually need love. Eventually the weight becomes unbearable, not because the burden is too heavy, but because we're carrying it alone.

This is why it is so important that we learn to bear one another's burdens. We often hear this as something we are called to do *for others*—but I'd argue it is just as important that we learn to let others carry burdens *for us*. When we do, we find that burden-bearing ensures that no one suffers alone, no one celebrates alone, and people are truly seen.

## HOLY COMMUNITY

This kind of community is not efficient. It is not tidy. It is not quick, but it is holy. It is healing, and it's the only way to fulfill the law of Christ. When we carry one another's burdens, we tell each other the truth: "You are not invisible." "You don't have to impress me." "You

don't have to earn your place here." And, "You belong—even at your weakest." That's what we saw Jesus do with his disciples. It was the culture that was created in the Early Church, and it's the culture our society is desperate for. And this is the culture Waterstone is committed to becoming, because together is better.

## THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

So today, pause and ask yourself:

Where am I performing instead of being honest?

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Who around me might be carrying  
a burden I've been too distracted to  
notice?

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Ask the Spirit to open your eyes to one person today. Ask him to help you see them—really see them—and to give you the courage to offer presence instead of evaluation, because belonging begins wherever



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## **DEVOTIONAL 4.1**

### **PROCESS OVER PRODUCT**

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*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.* Romans 12:1-2

### PROCESS OVER PRODUCT:

We don't expect anyone to have it all together. We bring our whole selves to church—honest, messy, hopeful. Everyone is welcome, everyone is safe, but no one stays the same.

### THE INVITATION TO A DIFFERENT WAY OF GROWING

We live in an age obsessed with *Project Self*. Everywhere we turn, there's pressure to optimize: upgrade your mindset, maximize your productivity, curate your habits, enhance your performance, unlock your potential. Become the "next best version" of you.

It's exhausting—because the underlying message is always the same: who you are right now is not enough. Modern life turns growth into a self-managed improvement plan, a constant striving to produce

a better, cleaner, more impressive you.

It's subtle, but this mindset often sneaks into our spiritual lives.

We start treating discipleship like another self-improvement program—read the right books, master the right habits, try harder, do better. Level up.

But Paul, in Romans 12:1-2, calls us back to something very different. The way of Jesus isn't *Project Self*—it's an ongoing surrender to mercy. The way of Jesus is not about manufacturing a polished final version of ourselves; it's about being gradually formed by the Spirit. It is slower, deeper, and holier than anything we can produce because it's all about the process and not the product.

### THE MERCY THAT MAKES THIS POSSIBLE

Paul's opening phrase—"in view of God's mercy"—feels like a throw away line but it's actually the foundation of everything he is about to say.

The beauty of the Christian view is that transformation does not begin with our effort; it begins with mercy. Before we ever try to change, we remember what God has already done. And before we offer any-

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thing, we first receive everything. This means spiritual growth cannot be driven by shame or pressure (to the chagrin of many old-school preachers). You cannot shame yourself into Christlikeness, pressure yourself into holiness, or force yourself into joy, gratitude, or love. Those things grow only in the soil of mercy—the mercy that has already met, held, forgiven, and claimed you.

Many of us who grew up in the church during the 90's and early 2000's love the way this sounds, but it feels very foreign to the religion many of us were raised in. Shame is a powerful motivator—to a point—and it was wielded mightily around things like purity culture, political Christianity and the like.

In this vein of belief, transformation didn't begin with God's mercy, but your wickedness (and sometimes, God's wrath). Now, those things are not unbiblical (hold on to them for a moment), but they are poor motivators and not the heart of the gospel.

If you look at the life of Jesus, transformation begins with mercy, and then leads to life change. If transformation begins with mercy then the expectation to have it "all together" collapses. You don't come to God as a finished product; you

come as a work in progress. You bring your real self, not your ideal self, and God meets you there with mercy—every single time.

### A LIVING SACRIFICE

Paul's phrase "living sacrifice" is striking. A sacrifice in the ancient world was offered once. It was placed on an altar, killed, and consumed—a single act. But Paul flips that idea.

A living sacrifice is ongoing. It is something offered not once, but daily. Every. Single. Day.

To be a living sacrifice means you bring your ordinary, unedited life—your habits, your wounds, your desires, your failures, your insecurities, your hopes—and place them before God. You offer your anger, fear, and exhaustion. You offer your longing for healing, your frustration that it hasn't come yet, and bring your whole unfinished, unpolished, still-in-process self before God. Amazingly, he receives you with mercy again and again.

This is so different from the view of transformation I mentioned earlier—when transformation begins with wickedness and wrath—it actually produces Christians who inherently identify a need to *hide* themselves from God. We see people who only present the best parts

of themselves, and pretend the sin plaguing their life needs to be swept under a rug.

This is actually the exact opposite of what Jesus wants. When you look at the Gospels, there is not a single person who comes to Jesus and is told to clean themselves up before following him. To a sinful, traitorous tax collector, Jesus says, “Follow me.” To a woman caught in adultery, Jesus first says, “I do not condemn you,” and then, “Go and *sin no more.*”

It always follows a pattern: mercy and then transformation and change.

In fact, the only people you might be able to argue Jesus asks to get their life in order *before* they can come to follow him are the religious leaders like Nicodemus or the Rich Young Ruler. The people who seemed to indicate they had it all together and didn’t need Jesus. To them he says, you might need to go figure your life out before you come and follow me.

### **SAME PROBLEM, DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS**

Here is a truth that is both comforting and unsettling: Jesus and our culture actually agree on one basic premise—*something is wrong with you.* Something is misaligned,

broken, wounded, bent away from flourishing. The difference is in the solution.

Culture says, “Something is wrong with you, so get to work and fix it.” Upgrade yourself. Improve yourself. Reinvent yourself. Hustle until your weaknesses disappear. The problem is real, but the burden is on you. Culture diagnoses the wound and then tells you to be your own surgeon.

Jesus says, “Something is wrong with you, but I can heal it.” He invites us into his presence, without pressure. Not with more striving, but with ultimate surrender. Not with self-optimization, but with true transformation.

What’s fascinating to me about Jesus is that he never denies the broken places. He is actually quite honest about them (for an example, see in John chapter 4, the woman at the well who had five husbands). While Jesus refuses to be shy about naming the things that are broken within us or the sin that entangles us, he also never refuses to meet us in them. He doesn’t hand us a toolkit for fixing ourselves; he offers himself as a sacrifice for us.

The world gives you a project. Jesus gives you himself, and then invites you into a process of becoming

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more like him.

This is why Romans 12 is so liberating. Paul doesn't say, "Transform yourselves." He says, "Be transformed." Transformation is not something you manufacture; it's something God does in you when you offer your authentic self to him.

### PASSIVE TRANSFORMATION

Paul's verb is passive on purpose, "Be transformed." He does not tell us to transform ourselves. He tells us to submit to a work that God is doing. The original Greek word *metamorphoō* describes a deep internal change that happens gradually as something becomes what it was always intended to be.

"Something it was always intended to be..." I like that—it means that whatever problems we may find in ourselves, they are foreign. They are like a disease, a cancer, that has infected us, and Jesus' work of transformation is about removing the cancer (sin) and restoring us to what he always intended us to be.

It's not easy, it doesn't happen instantaneously, and it is still incredibly painful. Our natural tendency is to try to fix ourselves with shame or fear of wrath, but true transformation doesn't start there. It begins with honesty about our struggles and hope in God's mercy.

Most importantly, it is not self-powered; it is Spirit-powered. Your job is not to speed up transformation, your job is to stay open to it. It's not to produce a finished version of yourself, but to remain surrendered to what God is doing beneath the surface. Have the courage to remain on the altar as a living sacrifice.

### THE RENEWING AS DAILY WORK

Paul takes this *daily* metaphor even further when he says "by the renewing of your mind."

Renewal is not a one-time event, it's ongoing, repetitive, and habitual. Your mind—your interpretations, assumptions, emotional reflexes, patterns of thought—are constantly being shaped. Every day, something is forming you: fear, media, wounds, desires, relationships.

Each of the twists and turns shape and form us into who we are becoming. Paul invites us to let God do the forming; to make space for Scripture to reshape us. It's the process of allowing worship to soften us. Surrendering to the Spirit to awaken and convict us. It's devoting ourselves to others in the community, so that we can be challenged and encouraged.

None of this happens quickly, but it does happen faithfully—over time.

## THE FREEDOM OF LIVING IN THE PROCESS

When we embrace *process over product*, our spiritual life stops feeling like a performance and starts feeling like a journey. We stop pretending that we should be further along, because God is not in a hurry with us. The pressure begins to lift not because we stop growing, but because we stop pretending that growth happens instantaneously.

There is deep freedom in accepting that transformation is God's work, not ours. We can relax into grace, and we can be patient with ourselves. We can also trust that God meets us not in the version of ourselves we wish existed, but in the one that actually does.

## THE DAILY WORK OF TRANSFORMATION

We may be tempted, then, to do *nothing*. However, Jesus doesn't say transformation won't cost us—in fact, he is very clear that it will require *everything* of us.

This is why Paul's language matters so much: you are a living sacrifice. Meaning the real work of transformation is about surrender. It is not about trying harder to become better—it is the daily discipline of climbing back onto the altar with your desires, habits, fears, and hopes, and saying to Jesus, “All of

this belongs to you.”

Practically, this looks like beginning your day with openness rather than urgency, naming your worries instead of hiding them, confessing your sin instead of managing it, inviting the Spirit into the places you want to control, and letting Scripture reshape your assumptions rather than letting your assumptions interpret Scripture.

It's responding to conviction quickly, releasing resentment when it rises, receiving grace when you fail, and returning—again and again—to Jesus who is doing the forming. A living sacrifice doesn't stay put because it is perfect; it stays put because it trusts the hands of the one on the other side of the altar.

## THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

Name one place in your life where you wish you were already finished. A habit you want changed, a fear you could overcome, a healing you wish had already come, a sin you long to be victorious over. Bring that unfinished place before God with honesty. Don't fix it. Don't hide it. Don't polish it.

Simply say:

*God, this is where I am today.*

Then ask:

*Will you keep renewing me here?*

Let today be a day where you choose process over product—and mercy over pressure.



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## **DEVOTIONAL 4.2**

### WELCOME, SAFETY, AND TRANSFORMATION

## PROCESS OVER PRODUCT:

We don't expect anyone to have it all together. We bring our whole selves to church—honest, messy, hopeful. Everyone is welcome, everyone is safe, but no one stays the same.

## THE TENSION AT THE HEART OF JESUS' COMMUNITY

If you follow Jesus through the Gospels, you discover a tension that is both beautiful and unsettling: Jesus welcomes people with extraordinary grace, yet he also calls them into a radically new way of life. His presence is both a refuge and a turning point.

Everyone is safe with him—but no one is ever unchanged by him.

The Church often struggles to hold these two truths together. Some lean so heavily into welcome that transformation becomes optional, while others emphasize truth so intensely that people no longer feel safe enough to be honest.

However, Jesus doesn't choose between grace and truth. He embodies both. His welcome disarms, his holiness restores, his kindness protects, and his presence transforms. A Jesus-shaped community must do the same.

## THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY

*Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.*

*But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.*

*At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."* John 8:1–11

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The religious leaders drag a woman into the temple courts, half-dressed and shaking. She is caught in the act of adultery—exposed, shamed, and treated like a prop in a theological argument. The Pharisees are not interested in her future or her dignity, they simply want to trap Jesus. They demand judgment, and expect Jesus to condemn her.

Instead, Jesus kneels down and writes in the dust. Then he stands and says words that collapse the entire system of condemnation: “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.” One by one, the accusers leave. Suddenly it’s just Jesus and this trembling woman—two people, one guilty, one sinless. Jesus looks at her and says, “If no one else will condemn you, neither will I. Now go and leave your life of sin.”

In that moment, Jesus makes her safe. He protects her dignity, and shields her from shame, but he also calls her forward: Leave your life of sin. Jesus refuses to condemn her, but he also refuses to pretend her sin is inconsequential. Grace brings safety, and truth brings transformation. She is welcomed, but she is not unchanged.

## ZACCHAEUS

*Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the*

*name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.*

*When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.*

*All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”*

*But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”*

*Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Luke 19:1–10*

Zacchaeus is a very different story, but we see the same pattern. As a tax collector, he was a collaborator with Rome, enriching himself through extortion. He was wealthy, powerful, and utterly despised. He

climbed a tree to see Jesus and his life was changed forever by Jesus' response to him.

Jesus stopped under the branches, looked up, and said something shocking: "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I'm going to stay with you today." Jesus welcomes him (technically he welcomes himself!) before Zacchaeus repents or even thinks of repenting.

Now, we might think Jesus simply doesn't know who Zacchaeus is, and that's why Jesus feels comfortable inviting himself to his home, but that seems unlikely, given the context of the story. Jesus seems very intent on meeting Zacchaeus knowing full well who he is.

Regardless of whether or not Jesus knew who Zacchaeus was, the crowd does, and they lose it. They can't handle the fact that Jesus is going to eat with *that guy*—he's a sinner!

We see, though, that it is precisely his welcome—unexpected, undeserved, unembarrassed—that cracks Zacchaeus open. After dinner at his home, Zacchaeus stands and declares, "Half of my possessions I give to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus responds: "Today salvation has come to this house."

Did you notice the trajectory of transformation? Welcome, then salvation. Along the way Zacchaeus is changed forever, but he is not transformed in order to be welcomed; he is transformed because he *was welcomed*.

When Jesus invited himself into Zacchaeus's life, he was not affirming Zacchaeus's lifestyle. Jesus shows it's possible to move towards someone without condoning their choices. So, we see that Jesus' presence does not affirm Zacchaeus's sinful life, but it absolutely reshapes it.

#### PETER'S RESTORATION

*When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"*

*"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."*

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*Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”*

*Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”* John 21:15–19

We could look at just about any interaction Jesus has with different people and see the same pattern: welcome, safety, then transformation.

This is the disciple who swore he would die for Jesus—and then denied him three times. The disciple Jesus looked at in the very moment of his final betrayal, as if to say, “I saw it all.” It broke Peter.

After Jesus rises from the dead, Peter runs to the tomb and discovers the resurrection is real. And yet, not long after, he retreats. He goes back to fishing. He withdraws from Jesus.

Many of us know that feeling. Even after following Jesus—even after real transformation—there are still places in our lives marked by shame and brokenness. Even after the moment when, “salvation has come to this house,” there are moments

when we feel we’ve fallen short of Jesus’ calling on our lives.

And so we retreat. We hide. We withdraw in shame and keep our sin concealed.

But after Peter withdraws in shame and sin, Jesus doesn’t avoid Peter. He doesn’t demand repayment or try to get revenge. He doesn’t even lecture him (something us parents should maybe take note of). Instead, Jesus cooks him breakfast on the beach. It’s one of the most tangible stories of Jesus being human—feeling hurt and disappointed—he still found a way to be present and intentional with his guys on a beach.

After they eat, Jesus asks him three times, “Do you love me?” Each question is painful but healing—a mirror-image of Peter’s three denials. But again, Jesus does not condemn him, he’s doing this to *restore* him.

The beautiful thing about Jesus is that restoration is not the end—there is also a calling. Jesus entrusts Peter with responsibility: “Feed my sheep.” Peter’s failure does not define his future. Jesus’ mercy does. However, mercy does not excuse Peter from discipleship—it recommissions him for it. Peter is welcomed back, made safe, forgiven,

and then sent out changed and given the task of leading Jesus' movement.

## JESUS AND OUR CULTURE

Our culture talks a lot about acceptance, belonging, and creating safe spaces—and these are genuinely good desires. However, we often misunderstand what real safety means. Safety becomes defined as affirmation without question, agreement without discernment, and support without challenge. In this, the highest form of love is to leave people exactly as we found them, never risking discomfort or disagreement.

But a community that never challenges one another can never help each other grow. A love that never asks anything of us is not love—it's indifference dressed as compassion. Our culture knows how to welcome, but it rarely knows what to do next. And what saddens me is that in an effort to welcome people, it actually leaves people where they are, even when where they are is hurting them, and that is not love.

On the other hand, others—and sometimes the Church—valorize transformation, but neglect welcome entirely. They rush to correction without compassion, assuming that change can be demanded, rather than nurtured.

In these environments, people don't feel safe enough to be honest, let alone transformed. The result is fear, defensiveness, and secrecy rather than growth.

I don't know how many times I've heard the line, "I could never step foot in a church, I'm afraid God would strike me down."

Isn't it sad that this is the message so many have received about who God is? The Church should be the most welcoming place—where everyone is welcome—because Jesus welcomed everyone (and I truly mean everyone!).

What Jesus offers is what our culture cannot hold together: a place where people are profoundly safe and deeply loved, and also a place where real transformation is not only possible, but expected. He welcomes without condition and transforms without hesitation. Only in the presence of that kind of love—grace-filled, truth-shaped, and patient—can people truly change.

## THE SOIL OF TRANSFORMATION

Every one of these stories shares the same arc: Jesus protects, Jesus dignifies, Jesus welcomes, Jesus calls, then he transforms.

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Our culture defines safety as the goal, but in Jesus' kingdom safety is the soil; transformation is the goal.

In unsafe environments, no one confesses, no one tells the truth, and no one grows, but when people encounter the non-condemning presence of Jesus, they become honest about what is real, and honesty is where transformation begins.

### **NO ONE STAYS THE SAME**

Jesus' welcome is not permissive; it is restorative. He does not say to the woman, "It doesn't matter what happened." He doesn't say to Zacchaeus, "Keep living as you were." He doesn't say to Peter, "Let's just pretend the denial never happened."

He tells the woman, "Go and leave your life of sin."

He draws generosity out of Zacchaeus.

He entrusts leadership to Peter.

Jesus accepts us fully—but he refuses to leave us unchanged. His love is too deep for cheap grace.

### **WHAT IS MEANS FOR THE CHURCH TO EMBODY THIS VALUE**

So we ask: What kind of church

forms around this Jesus? A Jesus-shaped church becomes a place where people can exhale. Where anyone can walk in—broken, ashamed, questioning, overwhelmed—and discover that they are safe in the presence of Christ.

It is also a place where lives change, where sin is confronted with compassion, where repentance is welcomed (not shamed), where healing is possible, where no one's past is final, and no one's story is finished.

This is the kind of community Jesus builds: radically welcoming, deeply safe, fiercely transforming. A church where you can come as you are, but by the grace of God, you will not stay as you are.

### **THE INVITATION FOR TODAY**

Where do you need the safety of Jesus today?

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Where is he whispering, "Neither do I condemn you"? And where is he gently calling you to rise, repent, or walk a new path?

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Who in your life needs this same welcome—someone you are called to invite in, protect, and encourage toward transformation?

Bring your life to the One who welcomes, restores, and remakes. His grace is wide, his safety is deep, and his transformation is real.

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**DEVOTIONAL 5.1**  
**SOFT HEARTS, STEEL SPINES**

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* Matthew 11:28–30

### **SOFT HEARTS, STEEL SPINES:**

We hold convictions with grace, engaging culture with courage and compassion. We are not swayed by fear or outrage. We stay rooted in Scripture and the way of Jesus, even when it's costly. Our hearts remain tender to people; our spines remain strong in truth.

### **THE BEAUTIFUL PARADOX OF JESUS' PEOPLE**

The phrase “Soft hearts, steel spines” captures something essential about following Jesus. Discipleship is not merely about what we believe; it's about the kind of people we become.

Jesus forms a particular kind of person:

- Someone who is tender toward people and unshakably rooted in truth.
- Someone who embodies grace and conviction, humility, and courage.
- Someone who refuses to trade compassion for clarity or clarity for compassion.

This tension is woven into the very heart of Jesus himself. When he calls us to follow him, he is calling us to become people who carry his posture into the world—hearts softened by love with spines strengthened by truth.

### **THE GENTLENESS OF JESUS: SOFT HEARTS**

In Matthew 11, Jesus gives us one of the clearest descriptions of the gentleness of his heart: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest... for I am gentle and humble in heart.”

Jesus is not distant, or hard to approach, despite what some of us might think. His heart bends toward the weary, the confused, the disappointed, and the hurting. He moves toward sinners, outcasts, and toward those who feel like they have nothing to offer. Jesus holds children on his lap, weeps at tombs, touches lepers, and he restores dignity to people who have lived too long under shame.

When Jesus meets the widow in Nain grieving her only son, Luke says, “His heart went out to her.” When he sees the crowds in their confusion, we're told he was filled with compassion. When a sinful woman anoints his feet with tears, he defends her before the religious elite and says her love is beautiful.

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These are stories where we see the soft heart of Jesus—open, gentle, tender, safe. Don’t be mistaken, though—Jesus’ compassion is not weakness; it is the strength of love moved into action. I think some people might confuse the idea of a soft heart with sentimentalism or acquiescing to culture; but it’s neither of those things. It is Christlike. It is the Spirit reshaping us into people who receive others with warmth instead of suspicion, kindness instead of hardness, and mercy instead of contempt. Soft hearts listen. They empathize, forgive and remain open. They see the image of God where others see inconvenience.

### **THE COURAGE OF JESUS: STEEL SPINES**

The same Jesus who offers gentle rest in Matthew 11, speaks with blazing moral clarity in Matthew 23. This is Jesus confronting the Pharisees—religious leaders who used spiritual authority to manipulate, burden, and elevate themselves. They contradicted God’s Word and created rules that went far beyond his intent. To them, Jesus speaks with unmistakable strength: “Woe to you, teachers of the law... you clean the outside of the cup but inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence.” He calls out hypocrisy, exposes injustice, and opposes systems that crush the

vulnerable. This is a side of Jesus that some of us are less comfortable with, but it’s so important we don’t miss it. Jesus is someone that refuses to bend under pressure or fear. He never dilutes truth to maintain peace, he clears the temple, he rebukes his disciples, and he warns his followers that following him requires them to take up their cross. His moral clarity is unwavering, and his allegiance to the Father is absolute.

Jesus’ unwavering strength shows that compassion doesn’t require compromise. Kindness doesn’t mean staying silent, and love doesn’t mean agreeing with everything just to make others feel comfortable.

Soft hearts and steel spines belong together. A steel spine keeps us grounded when culture shifts, and a soft heart keeps us humble when we’re tempted to judge. Together, they make us look like Jesus.

### **JESUS AND THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS: COURAGE WITH COMPASSION**

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus embodies this tension perfectly.

When the Pharisees bring a woman caught in adultery, Jesus shields her from condemnation (soft heart) and then calls her into a new life

(steel spine).

When Nicodemus comes at night with questions, Jesus receives him gently—soft heart—but tells him the truth without flinching: “You must be born again.” Steel spine.

When Peter rebukes Jesus, he loves him deeply—soft heart—but also declares, “Get behind me, Satan.” Steel spine.

Jesus never sacrifices one for the other. His courage is always compassionate and his compassion is always courageous.

As followers of Jesus seeking to become more like him, we need both as well. If we only have soft hearts, we become easily swayed, afraid of confrontation, unwilling to speak truth when it’s necessary. When this happens our compassion becomes sentimentality.

If we only have steel spines, we become rigid, harsh, defensive, unapproachable. And, when this happens, truth becomes a weapon that inflicts harm, rather than healing.

However, when the Spirit forms soft hearts and steel spines together, the Church becomes a prophetic community that is both a refuge and a lighthouse—safe to come to, and strong enough to stand on.

## CONTRASTING THIS WITH OUR CULTURE

Our culture is deeply confused about this combination. It tends to swing between two extremes, both of which distort the way of Jesus.

On one side, culture prizes soft hearts without calling anyone to change. It values affirmation over transformation, and empathy without accountability. In this, love means that we can never challenge someone, or ask them to grow, or call them into something truer or deeper. This leaves people stuck and in a world that refuses truth, which cannot offer liberation.

In the Church, this often looks like acquiescing to culture—allowing the trends of the day to inform our worldview rather than Scripture and the tradition of the Church. It looks like realigning Scripture to fit our desired outcomes, rather than allowing Scripture and tradition to form our faith. We allow our experiences with Christians or the Church to dictate what we believe.

On the other hand, culture also celebrates steel spines without compassion. Outrage feels like courage and judgment feels like clarity. Boldness becomes synonymous with immaturity. This world knows how to shout, but not how to love. It knows how to expose sin,

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but not how to heal it.

In the Church, this looks like people that are so committed to “truth,” that they are willing to say it however they feel like, even if it causes harm, rather than healing. It’s this twisted form of Christianity where truth becomes more about what we want, rather than what is actually true. So often, it becomes a “truth” that is really based more on our preferences, instead of the person of Jesus. And even when we get this form of truth “right,” the tone, words, and actions close people off to hearing it.

The truth is always meant to heal, and sometimes that healing is painful—like cutting out cancer from the body. However, the harm is supposed to be inflicted by the doctor, not the person who diagnoses the cancer.

Jesus shows us a better way—a truth strong enough to confront, and a heart soft enough to restore. Only the Church rooted in him can hold this tension faithfully, and only disciples shaped by his Spirit can engage the world with both courage and compassion.

**THE FORMATIONAL JOURNEY**  
Growing into this value does not happen quickly, it takes a lifetime. The Spirit softens our hearts as

he teaches us mercy, humility, listening, and kindness. Often, our hearts are softened by the journey of the Spirit confronting our sin in our own lives. This is the point of Jesus’ stories about forgiveness—when you recognize what Christ has done for you, you shudder at the thought of judging others for things you have been forgiven for.

At the same time, he strengthens our spines as he teaches us conviction, courage, clarity, and resilience. In a world battered and swayed by all sorts of teachings, ideologies and personalities, Jesus can be the foundation we build our lives on that gives us courage in troubled times.

Formation is the daily work of becoming people who reflect the posture of our King—a heart that breaks for the hurting and a spine that stands unbent in the face of compromise.

### **THE INVITATION FOR TODAY**

Where is Jesus softening your heart today—inviting tenderness, patience, empathy?

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Where is he strengthening your spine—calling you to stand firm, speak truth, or refuse fear?

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Ask him to form you into someone who reflects his heart and his courage, his gentleness and his strength. Soft hearts. Steel spines. The way of Jesus.

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## **DEVOTIONAL 5.2**

### **CONVICTION WITH GRACE, COURAGE, AND COMPASSION**

*Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”*

Acts 4:18–20

### **SOFT HEARTS, STEEL SPINES:**

We hold convictions with grace, engaging culture with courage and compassion. We are not swayed by fear or outrage. We stay rooted in Scripture and the way of Jesus, even when it’s costly. Our hearts remain tender to people; our spines remain strong in truth.

### **THE CULTURAL MOMENT OF FEAR AND OUTRAGE**

We live in an age where fear and outrage have become the dominant currencies of public life. Our world disciplines us into reaction—into quick conclusions, hot takes, and tribal loyalties. We learn, almost unconsciously, to divide people into “for us” or “against us,” to assume motives, to escalate rather than listen, and to interpret disagreement as personal threat. You’re never supposed to agree with someone across enemy lines, and you have to tow the party line. Fear tells us that the stakes are always catastrophic: “If this person is elected, it will be the end of the world!” “If this per-

son’s ideas are adhered to, it will take us back 100 years...”

Outrage insists that anger is virtue, and in this sort of culture, the loudest voices often feel like the truest ones.

On the contrary, the way of Jesus is not reactionary. Jesus’ people hold convictions with grace, not aggression. They engage culture with courage and compassion, not with panic or hostility. The Spirit forms people who can stand with clarity, and yet respond with gentleness. People who can speak boldly without losing tenderness, and who can resist the pressure to match the world’s outrage with outrage of their own.

Disciples of Jesus are not driven by fear, nor do they weaponize truth. They carry convictions the way Jesus did—firmly, graciously, courageously.

### **THE APOSTLES’ COURAGE AND CLARITY**

Acts 4 gives us one of the clearest pictures of courageous conviction in the Early Church, as the disciples learned to follow the way of Jesus. After healing a man at the temple gate and preaching the resurrection of Jesus, apostles Peter and John are arrested by the religious authorities. These same authorities had or-

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chestrated Jesus' crucifixion—they held real power, because they could imprison, beat, ruin reputations, and destroy livelihoods.

At this moment, the religious authorities issued a simple command: "Speak no more to anyone in this name." After this, the apostles could have been fearful, softened their message, compromised their calling, or negotiated safer circumstances for themselves. Instead, they responded with clarity and humility: "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

Notice what they don't do: they don't lash out, they don't insult, they don't escalate. They simply state the truth with unyielding conviction. Their courage is not abrasive or even argumentative, it's anchored in conviction and truth. Their boldness is clear, and they speak truth without venom. They hold conviction without contempt, and resist pressure without resorting to outrage.

Their example pairs beautifully with James 1:19–20: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."

The problem with anger is that it feels powerful—it feels like clarity—but it does not produce the life God desires (and more often than not, the clarity is severely misplaced). Peter and John show us a better way—the way of Jesus—with courage that is calm, and conviction that is gracious.

### **CONVICTIONS WITH GRACE**

True Christian conviction is marked as much by its posture as by its content.

Take a moment to reread that sentence.

Holding the *right beliefs* in the *wrong way* distorts the very truth we are trying to represent. Conviction without grace becomes superiority, and a performance of being "right" rather than an embodiment of the One who is truth.

One of the problems with outrage is that it masquerades as passion, but it cannot bear the weight of the gospel. Anger cannot produce righteousness, because hostility cannot produce holiness. The beauty of grace, on the other hand, is that it disarms. It softens the soil of human hearts and it opens doors that aggression slams shut. Grace allows us to speak with clarity without losing compassion—it keeps us rooted in humility, remembering that

we are not defending our pride; instead, we are bearing witness to the person of Jesus. When followers of Jesus hold convictions with grace, their lives reflect the gentle strength of the way of Jesus.

## COURAGE AND COMPASSION TOGETHER

Courage without compassion becomes cruelty, and it justifies harm in the name of truth. It speaks boldly, but almost always refuses to listen. It steps on people, while claiming to defend righteousness.

Jesus never modeled this posture.

On the other hand, compassion without courage becomes compromise. It avoids hard conversations, and allows truth to erode in the name of kindness. It says “peace, peace” where there is none.

And Jesus never modeled this posture either.

Jesus embodies a third way: courage and compassion, strength and gentleness, clarity and kindness. He speaks truth to power, yet welcomes sinners with tenderness. He confronts injustice, yet restores the broken. He absolutely refuses to dilute the truth, yet at the same time, refuses to discard people. A disciple shaped by Jesus learns to carry both—steel in their spine and soft-

ness in their heart—because that is what love requires.

This is something both the Church and the culture need desperately.

## REFUSING TO BE SWAYED BY FEAR OR OUTRAGE

In our culture, fear permeates everything from politics to personal relationships. It's a schtick designed to divide us and drum up clicks online. Sadly, it seems to be working. The problem with this is fear distorts reality. It shrinks our world, clouds our discernment, and tempts us to protect ourselves at all costs. Tragically, fear convinces us that people are enemies, not image-bearers. It whispers that God is losing, and that we must fight to win.

On the contrary, Scripture reminds us that perfect love casts out fear—not perfect certainty, not perfect control, but perfect love. Think about that. Love is what conquers fear. Do you notice that when we are afraid, we tend to reach for other things, like certainty or control? Jesus says that when we're afraid what we actually need is love.

This is why Jesus makes such a point to his followers that they are to be shaped by love, not shaped by fear, or driven by outrage. We are anchored by truth and animated by

love. We engage the world not as those who must win a cultural battle, but as those who bear witness to a kingdom. Love stabilizes us when fear rises: it guides our words, determines our actions, and shapes our tone, but only when we have been formed in the way of Jesus and follow his example. I believe it is the reason Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all that we are. The second commandment is similar—love others as we love ourselves. If we get this right, everything else begins to fall into place.

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Ask Jesus to give you a heart strong enough to speak with courage and soft enough to speak with compassion. Ask him to form in you the quiet, rooted confidence of Peter and John—the kind that can stand firm without becoming harsh, and that can love deeply without losing clarity.

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## THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

Where do you feel fear shaping your responses today?

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**DEVOTIONAL 5.3**  
**ROOTED, TENDER, AND UNSHAKEABLE**

*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

2 Timothy 3:14-17

**SOFT HEARTS, STEEL SPINES:** We hold convictions with grace, engaging culture with courage and compassion. We are not swayed by fear or outrage. We stay rooted in Scripture and the way of Jesus, even when it's costly. Our hearts remain tender to people; our spines remain strong in truth.

### **THE COST OF FOLLOWING JESUS IN A CHANGING WORLD**

Following Jesus has always required courage, but perhaps in this current cultural moment it requires clarity and resilience like never before in our lifetime. The cultural landscape shifts constantly. Convictions that once seemed obvious, now appear contested. Faithfulness to Scripture is sometimes dismissed as outdated, intolerant, or naïve. Different people prop up a “hidden” reading

of Scripture—if you just studied enough, knew what I knew, and read what I read, you'd understand why you are wrong, and my way is right.

The temptation is real—to soften hard teachings, to sidestep uncomfortable passages, to reshape Jesus into a version more agreeable to our cultural moment:

- Jesus' teaching on sexuality makes me feel uncomfortable—so let's change it.
- Jesus' confrontation of how we treat the poor—no thank you.
- Scripture's teachings on hell, money, politics, gender, immigration...

The list could go on and on—if any of those things make us feel a little queasy, we make them more palatable. But, discipleship has never been about cultural approval; it has always been about rootedness. As our value clearly states: We stay rooted in Scripture and the way of Jesus, even when it's costly. The cost today may look like misunderstanding, criticism, rejection, or the quiet ache of being out of step with the world around us. Yet, this is precisely where Jesus meets us, forms us, and strengthens us—not by hardening our hearts, but by anchoring our lives in something deeper, older, and truer than shift-

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ing cultural opinion.

## ROOTED IN JESUS AND SCRIPTURE

In John 15, Jesus describes discipleship using the image of a vine and branches: “Remain in me, and I will remain in you... apart from me you can do nothing.” Remaining—or abiding—is not a passive posture. Rather, it means holding onto his words, his truth, his presence, his commands, and his voice—even when every competing voice calls us elsewhere.

Paul echoes this in 2 Timothy 3, writing to a young pastor leading a church in a culture filled with confusion, false teaching, and pressure. Paul doesn’t tell Timothy to adapt to the moment or blend with the world; he tells him to remain rooted: “Continue in what you have learned... All Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.” Timothy’s stability is not found in cultural approval but in Scripture’s authority.

To stay rooted in the way of Jesus is to let his Word shape our minds. Too many of us flip the script on this. We come with a worldview, a theology, and ideology and try to figure out how Scripture can affirm those positions. But, notice Paul’s words: teaching, rebuking, correct-

ing and training. All of those come from a place of authority. Scripture teaches and rebukes us, not the other way around. It also stands above us, and has the power to correct our assumptions, reorder our desires, and define our convictions. We are to let Scripture guide us even when it confronts us, and recognize that Jesus gets the final word in our lives.

## WHEN FAITHFULNESS BECOME COSTLY

Costly faithfulness is woven throughout the New Testament. When Jesus teaches about discipleship in Luke 9, he does not hide the difficulty: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me.” This is not the language of convenience or cultural compatibility. It is the language of surrender and allegiance.

Cost may look different for each of us. For some, it is the cost of obedience in private—choosing holiness over comfort. For others, it is the cost of conviction in public—standing for truth when it is unpopular. For many, it is the cost of compassion—loving people who may not love us back, serving people who misunderstand us, offering grace to those who oppose us.

Faithfulness always costs some-

thing, but unfaithfulness costs far more.

Unfaithfulness always promises relief but delivers ruin. It may seem easier in the moment to compromise, to go along with the crowd, to soften our convictions or silence our allegiance to Jesus, but that kind of ease is deceptive.

Unfaithfulness slowly erodes our integrity, weakens our witness, and distances us from the voice of Jesus. Rather than anchoring ourselves to Jesus, in unfaithfulness, we anchor ourselves to unsteady foundations. The immediate cost of faithfulness may feel heavy, but the long-term cost of unfaithfulness is far heavier—because it asks us to trade our soul's rootedness for temporary comfort.

### **TENDER HEARTS, STRONG SPINES**

This value is unique because it refuses two temptations: becoming brittle in our convictions or becoming mushy in our compassion.

A tender heart stays open—open to people, pain, compassion, and open to the Spirit. Tender hearts cry with those who cry, and they refuse cynicism. They don't weaponize Scripture against those who struggle, and they hold firm to truth with gentle hands.

Meanwhile, a strong spine stays firm in its rootedness. It means truth is not up for negotiation. It means Scripture is not reinterpreted to suit our preferences, and that we follow Jesus even when others walk away. Strong spines stand firm in the storms of culture, not with arrogance but with clarity.

Together, tenderness and strength create a posture that looks like Jesus: a Savior who welcomed sinners and confronted sin, who embraced lepers and rebuked Pharisees, who wept at gravesides and overturned temple tables.

### **CONTRASTING THIS WITH OUR CULTURE**

In our culture, tenderness without truth becomes nothing more than sentimentality. We value affirmation more than transformation, and see love as agreement, rather than seeking flourishing for one another.

On the other hand, truth in our culture has lost any resemblance of tenderness, and truth without tenderness becomes cruelty. When truth loses grace, it begins to use conviction as a weapon—like something you can stab people with and if you stab them with the truth enough times, they'll probably get it. However, it only produces more wounds—not healing. It shames instead of restores. When Christians

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fall to this temptation, truth looks like caring more about being right, than being Christlike.

Both distortions are cheaper and easier than the way of Jesus. Tenderness without truth *costs* nothing, and truth without tenderness *risks* nothing. The way of Jesus costs *everything*.

If we want to live out this value, and stay rooted in Scripture when culture shifts, it will take courage. However, to remain tender when people differ from us, will require great humility. If we wish to do both at once, it's only possible by the power of the Spirit.

### REMAINING ROOTED IN SCRIPTURE

To stay rooted in Scripture and the way of Jesus means:

- We measure our lives by Jesus' teachings, not public opinion.
- We let Scripture confront us, before we use it to confront others.
- We refuse to let fear shape our responses.
- We choose compassion even when we're misunderstood.
- We hold truth with tenderness, not triumph.
- We love people enough to be honest, and love them enough to be gentle.

Rooted believers stabilize a shaky world and humanize a world characterized by division and demonizing. The question is, will you have the courage to pursue this type of posture in the world, as you become more like Jesus?

### THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

Where is Jesus inviting you to stay rooted today—perhaps in a conviction that feels costly, or a truth you'd rather avoid, or a relationship that requires courage and compassion?

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Where is he softening your heart toward people?

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Where is he strengthening your spine in truth?

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Ask him for both—tenderness that reflects his heart, and rootedness that reflects his way. For this is the shape of a disciple: soft hearts, steel spines.

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**DEVOTIONAL 6.1**  
**OPEN HANDS**

*“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”*

*“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Matthew 6:25-33*

### **OPEN HANDS:**

We give because God first gave to us. Whether it's time, money, attention, or presence—we live with open hands, trusting that generosity creates space for the kingdom to

break through.

### **A WORLD OF SCARCITY**

We live in a world that disciplines us into scarcity.

Which means that we don't need anyone to teach us how to worry about the future—it's being impressed upon us all of the time. When we look around, our economy is driven by scarcity, the news cycles are built on scarcity, and social media constantly reminds us of what we don't have, don't look like, don't earn, or don't experience.

Everything whispers the same message: Protect what you have. Hold onto it tightly, and don't let anyone take it from you. There's not enough to go around—so make sure you get yours. It's subtle, but it shapes us deeply. Over time, we start living with closed fists—guarded, anxious, self-protective, and afraid to loosen our grip on anything we believe secures our lives.

The kingdom Jesus announces in Matthew 6 is nothing like that.

Jesus speaks into the very heart of our scarcity-mindset when he says, “Do not worry about your life... Look at the birds of the air... See how the lilies of the field grow... Your heavenly Father knows what you need.” In this teaching, from

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the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not encouraging naïvety or blind optimism, and he isn't telling us to ignore our responsibilities. The point of the passage is Jesus attempting to reveal the character of God—a God who is not limited, not stingy, and not scrambling to meet demand.

Jesus invites us to see the world not through the lens of scarcity, but through the lens of *abundance*. And that shift changes everything.

When you believe you live in a world of scarcity, you naturally cling, hoard, measure, compare, and stress. But when you believe you live in a kingdom of abundance—where God provides, cares, and sustains—something changes. Where your fists were once clenched tightly around what you own, you begin to loosen your grip. Where you feel fearful and wary of others (or God), you begin to trust.

You begin to open your hands.

Open-handed living becomes a quiet, but powerful act of rebellion against the lie that you are on your own, and that resources are limited. It becomes a prophetic declaration: “I will not live from fear. I will live from faith.” My life, my resources, my existence, my well-being, is not dependent on my efforts alone, but

the God who sustains everything.

## LIVING WITH DEPENDENCE

In our day and age, it's so easy for us to forget our dependence. When Jesus was speaking these words, he was speaking to a predominantly agrarian society dependent on rain, sunshine, and fair winds for the growth of their food and sustenance. Despite all of our advancements in science and technology, we still can't produce rain or sunshine on our own—for that we depend on God.

So, it makes sense for Jesus to point to flowers of the fields and the birds of the air—they are just as dependent on rain, drought, or shade to survive. For that audience it didn't matter how hard they tilled the soil or worked the cattle—if rain didn't come, they weren't going to survive. But we're pretty far removed from that way of living (most of us anyway). When our livelihood is not tied to the soil beneath our feet, but to our efforts in the stock market, our ability to punch in numbers on a computer, or lead a team of people toward an objective, it's really easy to have the impression that what we have comes from our efforts and ability.

Dependence on God feels like an illusion because when we believe we are the source of everything we

have, then we must also become the protector of everything we have. The weight rests on our shoulders, and if we carry it all—our effort, skill, hustle, and ability to strategize or perform—then of course our hands stay clenched. Of course we worry. Of course we live with the low-grade fear that at any moment the bottom could drop out. When we place ourselves at the center of our own provision, we end up carrying a weight we were never designed to hold. It produces exhaustion, anxiety, frantic striving, and the constant feeling that we're falling behind. Scarcity becomes the dominant story of our inner life—not because God is scarce, but because we've forgotten we're not the ones holding the world together.

This is why Jesus calls his disciples—calls us—back to the birds and the wildflowers. He's reminding us that dependence is not a burden but a blessing. The birds are not anxious. The flowers are not panicked. They flourish because they are rooted in the truth that someone else is sustaining them.

The same is true for us. When we recover our dependence on God, our hands finally begin to relax. The pressure lifts. The illusion of self-sufficiency shatters, and in its place we rediscover the freedom of trust. Freedom comes not from

gripping tighter, but from releasing our grip. Not from thinking we control the outcomes, but from believing God is present in every outcome.

Opening our hands begins with open trust, and open trust begins when we remember that everything we are, everything we have, and everything we need comes not from our scarcity, but from God's abundance.

Jesus' words actually echo those of Job in Job chapter 12:

*“But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.*

Do you see what Job says? Ask the birds and the flowers what they know and they will tell you the deepest truth—God holds in his hands all things—the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind. This isn't meant to be some morbid declaration that God could take life whenever he wishes, it's actually meant to be the opposite—God is the author and sustainer of all life—and if his character is

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good, then we can trust him with all things.

We can relinquish our grip on the things of this world that we think we have to hang on to because we trust that they are already in God's hands and he is good. That's the freedom Jesus offers in Matthew 6. He is not simply teaching a story about our worries—he's saying we can live with trust in such a way where we don't have to worry anymore.

### THE CULTURAL NEED

The culture around us runs on a scarcity engine. Everything—from advertising to politics to financial planning—assumes that there is not enough. Not enough money, not enough resources, not enough time, not enough opportunity, etc. And if there isn't enough, then we have to protect ourselves. We have to hold tightly and keep what we have because no one else will do it for us.

This mindset doesn't just shape our spending and our savings—it shapes our souls. It forms us into people who worry constantly, who assume God is withholding, and who believe blessing is fragile and fleeting. It drives us toward self-protection, rather than self-giving. It keeps us small, fearful, and reactive.

The Kingdom of Heaven, however, runs on an entirely different logic. Jesus doesn't deny our needs—he acknowledges them, but he also insists that our needs are held by a Father who is good, watchful, generous, and deeply attentive. He invites us to step out of the exhausting cycle of grasping and into the restful confidence of trust.

When we trust that our Father is generous and live from a place of abundance rather than scarcity, our posture toward what we have begins to change. Generosity is no longer something we strive to perform; it becomes something that naturally flows from us. An open-handed life is a quiet refusal to let fear tell our story.

Jesus is teaching and modeling the posture that enables generosity. He knows a closed-fisted life can never be a generous one, and that we cannot cling to fear and offer generosity at the same time. He wants to free his people from the anxious grip of "What if?" so they can embrace the open-handed confidence of "God will."

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Scripture is filled with stories that reveal the abundant heart of God. When the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, anxious about sur-

vival, God sent manna—not storehouses of food, not a surplus for months, but enough each day to teach them the rhythm of trust.

When the widow in 1 Kings feared starvation, God allowed her oil to keep flowing far beyond what the jar should have held. When a hungry crowd gathered around Jesus with only a boy's lunch, Jesus multiplied loaves and fish until baskets of leftovers testified that God does not do *barely enough*—he *overflows*. And when humanity was dead in sin and brokenness, God poured out grace—not sparingly or reluctantly, but lavishly, as Paul says, “according to the riches of His glory.”

This is the pattern of our God:

- Where we see lack, he creates provision.
- Where we see limitations, he creates overflow.
- Where we see impossibility, he creates abundance.

The kingdom Jesus brings is defined by this kind of generosity. It is not built on fear, but on trust, not on scarcity, but on the endless resources of God's goodness. When we begin to see God this way, generosity becomes a natural response.

We give because we believe God will continue to give. We open our

hands because we trust the one who fills them.

## **WATERSTONE VALUES CONNECTION—OPEN HANDS**

This value doesn't begin with our generosity. It begins with God's goodness. The whole point of Jesus' teaching is that our sense of security should not be based on our own efforts, but rooted in the character of the Father that he describes in Matthew 6. Living with open hands means we refuse to let a culture of scarcity determine our posture. We refuse to let fear shrink our lives, and instead, we root our identity in a generous God.

We trust that living open-handed isn't reckless—it's faithful. It's how the kingdom becomes visible in ordinary life.

## **WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE...?**

What would happen if an entire church truly lived this way—not from scarcity, but from abundance?

Imagine:

- Families freed from the anxiety that there will never be enough.
- People sharing resources rather than protecting them.

- A community where generosity is so normal, so joyful, and so constant that it becomes a signpost of God's Kingdom in our city.
- If our neighbors said, "Those people at Waterstone—they don't cling to anything. They trust God, and give freely. They live differently."

This is what living with open hands makes possible. This is the kind of church we are becoming.

## THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

Open one hand. Just one.

Open a hand to a neighbor—or a hand to someone in need. Open a hand with your time, attention, presence, or money. Open a hand to God and pray, *“Show me where I’m still living from scarcity.”* Today, choose one place where fear has closed your fist—and practice opening it. And as you do, watch what God does. Watch how fear loosens. Watch how trust grows. Watch how the kingdom breaks through in small, unexpected ways.

Your Father knows what you need.

You can trust him.

You can live free.

You can live open-handed.



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## **DEVOTIONAL 6.2**

### **GIVING**

*What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? Romans 8:31-35*

### **OPEN HANDS:**

**We give because God first gave to us.** Whether it's time, money, attention, or presence—we live with open hands, trusting that generosity creates space for the Kingdom to break through.

### **GOD'S UNBELIEVABLE GENEROSITY**

Romans 8 is a bit like Paul's literary Mount Everest—every step climbing higher and higher until we reach this breathtaking ridgeline where he just unleashes one rhetorical question after another. It's as if he's saying, "Let me stack up every possible reason you could ever doubt God's goodness... and then let me knock them all down in rapid fire."

At the heart of this avalanche of assurance is a single conviction: *God is unbelievably generous.* Not moderately generous. Not occasionally generous. Not generous when he's had his morning coffee...

God is consistently, relentlessly, and mind-blowingly generous.

Do you believe that? I think many of us struggle to believe this. Whether we have experiences that would beg to differ, or our mind can't help but think of starving kids in a third-world country, or we've seen the generosity of God weaponized into a manipulative tool to separate people from their hard-earned cash—we're not quite sure what to believe about God's generosity.

Or maybe, if I'm honest, *I'm* not always sure what to believe about God's generosity. I think the Apostle Paul had a much better grip on God's generosity than I do (shocker I know...)

Paul begins this section with a question that sounds almost too bold: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Now, Paul *isn't* denying that we will face opposition. He's not handing out Christian bubble wrap—that's what all the prosperity preachers get wrong—they say "if God is for us, then nothing

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*will ever stand against us.*" What Paul *is* saying is that nothing has the power to overturn God's purposes in your life, not that you'll never experience difficult things. God himself—Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer—is for you, that's Paul's point. The one who spoke galaxies into existence knows your name, your circumstances, the number of hairs on your head, and he is in your corner.

Then comes the knockout punch in verse 32: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all..." Paul is essentially saying, "Let's go straight to the top of the mountain. Let's not talk about the small stuff yet. Let's talk about the biggest thing God has ever done."

God gave his son.

Not because we deserved him. Not because humanity was having a great year. Not because we were trending in the right direction. God gave his son freely, sacrificially, joyfully, because that's what we needed. And as we learned in Matthew 6—God knows our deepest needs.

We didn't earn the gift of Jesus; we received him. Jesus is the ultimate evidence that God is not holding out on us. This is fascinating to me, because the belief that God is holding out on us goes all the way back

to the garden—that was what the snake tempted Eve with—"God's holding out on you, and if you do what I say, you can have what God is holding back from you..."

What a devious lie.

Paul's trying to destroy the lie that has tripped us up from the very beginning. Then comes the beautiful logic that flows from this gift: "... how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

It's the argument from greater to lesser: If God has already given the greatest gift imaginable, why in the world would he withhold anything lesser that you or I truly need? Paul isn't saying God will give you everything on your Amazon wishlist. Not even close. But what he is saying is that God will give you everything necessary for you to experience life in Christ—mercy, forgiveness, strength, hope, endurance, presence, provision, and, eventually, resurrection.

"All things" means God's generosity doesn't stop at salvation; it spills into every corner of your life.

Finally, Paul takes it even further: "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? ... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Paul lists out hard-

ship, famine, danger, death—all the things we fear—and declares they are powerless to separate us from the love of Christ. God's generosity is not fragile. His love is not temporary. His commitment to you is not conditional. You stand under the waterfall of God's giving, and that waterfall never runs dry, even when it feels like your world is falling apart.

Romans 8 teaches one thing with crystal clarity: The Christian life is lived in response to a generous God.

### THE CULTURAL COUNTER-FORMATION

Paul's vision of a generous God stands in sharp contrast to the world around us. One of the great theological dangers in secular progressivism—not political progressivism, but theological progressivism—is the attempt to remove God from the story altogether.

When you remove God as the source of life, then by necessity, you become the source. You have to produce your worth. You have to create your identity. You have to secure your future. You have to carry your own life.

In other words: You are all you have. And let's be honest—that's exhausting. When there's no giv-

er behind the scenes, everything becomes scarce. Worth becomes something you earn, and love becomes something you maintain. Provision becomes something you control, time becomes something you guard fiercely, and money becomes something you cling to because no one else is looking out for you.

Que up the closed, clinched, white-knuckled fists.

If your worldview says there is no God giving good gifts, then gratitude dries up almost instantly. How do you practice gratitude when you believe everything in your life is simply the result of your own hustle? And if gratitude dries up, generosity becomes nearly impossible. Because generosity—true generosity—flows from the belief that what you've been given is grace. A gift you've been given that's not yours to hoard, but yours to share.

The irony, of course, is that removing God in the name of "freedom" actually makes us less free. If God isn't the provider, then you must be. And if you must be the provider, then anxiety becomes the quiet soundtrack of your life. Scarcity takes over. Fear grows. And the hands that were meant to be open slowly curl inward until they have carpal tunnel.

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Romans 8 offers a fresh alternative: You are not on your own. Your life is not self-made. Everything you are and everything you have sits under the canopy of God's extravagant giving. And when you see that, gratitude begins to rise again.

## **WE GIVE BECAUSE GOD FIRST GAVE TO US**

Our value to live with open hands is deeply tied to this idea that, "We give because God first gave to us."

Now, my fear is that phrase has become a slogan in the church-world and has lost all meaning. But this is not a slogan. This is Romans 8 in value form. We don't give to impress God or earn anything from him (what could we possibly give that God doesn't already have?) We don't give out of guilt or obligation or because the church needs to pay the electric bill.

We give because we are swimming in the generosity of God.

The Father didn't spare his own son. Jesus didn't spare his own life. The Spirit doesn't spare his presence. We live every day held by this triune generosity.

When you realize that, generosity stops feeling like a burden and starts feeling like joy. You stop

asking, "How much do I have to give?" and start asking, "How could I not give?" You stop clinging and start blessing. You stop living from scarcity and start living from abundance.

"We give because God first gave to us" isn't a fundraising tactic—it's the formation of our souls away from scarcity and into kingdom abundance. It shapes us into people who look like Jesus, the ultimate giver.

## **THE INVITATION FOR TODAY**

So here's the invitation for today: Sit for a moment with Paul's question—"If God did not spare his own son... how will he not also graciously give us all things?" Let it settle into your soul. Let it soften the anxious places. Let it remind you that your life is carried by generosity, not scarcity.

Then choose one act of generosity today. It doesn't have to be dramatic. It just has to be open-handed. Maybe it's giving to someone in need. Maybe it's offering time or attention to someone who feels unseen. Maybe it's writing a note of gratitude. Maybe it's loosening your grip in one small area where fear has held you tight.

Let generosity flow from gratitude. Let gratitude flow from God's gift.

And let that gift—Jesus himself—reshape how you hold everything in your life.

You can give today because you have already been given *everything*.

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## **DEVOTIONAL 6.3**

### **GENEROSITY CREATES SPACE FOR THE KINGDOM TO BREAK THROUGH**

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Acts 2:42–47

### **OPEN HANDS:**

We give because God first gave to us. **Whether it's time, money, attention, or presence—we live with open hands, trusting that generosity creates space for the kingdom to break through.**

### **HOW TIRED ARE YOU?**

If modern life could be summarized in three words, it might be these: We are exhausted.

We are living in what sociologists call “The Age of Too Much”—too much to do, too much to manage, too much to carry, too much noise, too many expectations. Over-scheduling, overcommitment, overextension, over-stimula-

tion—they're no longer the exception; they're the air we breathe.

And when people feel overwhelmed, our natural instinct is to close our hands, to hold tighter, and to protect what we have, because we fear we don't have enough of it—time, money, energy, emotional bandwidth, compassion, whatever it might be.

When our hands close, our world shrinks. Not just our personal world—but the world around us. It becomes far easier to ignore need, to walk past pain, to look away from suffering, because we've quietly convinced ourselves that generosity is for people who aren't tired, who have margin, who have “extra.”

Meanwhile, the very kind of world Jesus came to heal—the world marked by scarcity, injustice, inequality, hunger, exploitation—continues to grow in the soil of closed fists.

So. How exhausted are you? Because my guess is, if you examine your energy levels, you will see a direct correlation to your levels of generosity.

### **WHO'S TO BLAME?**

Here's the hard truth we often don't want to admit: the scarcity we see

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in our world is not God's fault—it's ours.

God has provided more than enough for the flourishing of every person on this planet. There is enough food, water, wealth, compassion, and enough presence.

The problem is not supply; the problem is selfishness.

We hoard. We fear. It's the quiet and not-so-quiet ways we clutch what we have in the name of security. When we refuse generosity—when we cling to our resources, ignore the stranger, or close our hands—we actually create the very environment where poverty, hunger, and even trafficking thrive.

This is why Scripture says “the love of money is the root of all evil.” Not money itself—the love of it. The idolatry of it. The centering of it. Because when money becomes god to us, people become tools for consumption. And when our god becomes scarcity, people become competitors.

### **THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION**

Throughout Scripture, God's kingdom consistently moves through people who offer what they have—not what they wish they had, not what they will have someday, not what they think is “enough,” but

whatever they already have.

Mary offered her womb—a young, vulnerable woman in a forgotten town—and through her open “Yes,” God launched his rescue mission. The disciples offered their boats—ordinary, unimpressive fishing vessels—and Jesus used them as platforms to preach hope to the crowds. A little boy offered his lunch—five loaves and two fish, nowhere near enough—and Jesus multiplied it to feed thousands. The Early Church offered their homes, tables, possessions, finances, time, presence—and the Spirit used that generosity to form a community so compelling that Luke tells us, “The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

Every time someone opened their hands, God's kingdom expanded. Every time someone held loosely what God had placed in their lives, God did more with it than they ever could have imagined.

Generosity is not losing something—it is joining God's movement. It is partnering with the Spirit's work in the world, it's resisting the scarcity that destroys, and participating in the abundance that heals.

This is why Acts 2:42–47 is so crucial. Luke describes a church

marked by radical sharing—not because they were forced to, but because they had seen the generosity of Jesus. They held their possessions loosely. They made sure there were “no needy persons among them.” Joy marked them and hospitality shaped them. Their open-handedness became the environment where God’s kingdom could break through in real, tangible ways.

Acts doesn’t say they had perfect systems, perfect theology, or perfect strategy. It says they had open hands, and through those hands, God changed lives daily.

## CREATING SPACE FOR THE KINGDOM

At Waterstone, our value of *Open Hands* concludes with this line: “We live with open hands, trusting that generosity creates space for the kingdom to break through.”

That phrase, “creates space,” isn’t accidental. It means generosity is not merely something we do; it is something we make possible. An open-handed church becomes a landing pad for the kingdom. When we give our time, space is created for healing. When we give our attention, space is created for dignity. When we give our money, space is created for justice. When we give our presence, space is created for belonging.

And this value is not about doing more. In fact, doing more is the problem for most of us. This value is about becoming interruptible. Becoming attentive, responsive, and available to the ways God wants to move in the world.

Generosity is not measured by the amount we give, but by the openness of our posture. The kingdom often moves through small, unnoticed acts—moments when someone simply says, “Lord, everything I have is yours. Use it however you want.”

Imagine if our whole church lived this way? What if this wasn’t something we named as a value, but was part of our culture? It would be our witness. It would be the aroma of Christ in a world starving for generosity and goodness.

## THE INVITATION FOR TODAY

So here’s the invitation: try an open-handed experiment this week. Not something overwhelming or heroic—just intentional:

### TIME:

Give someone an unhurried hour of your day. Put down your phone. Listen deeply. Offer presence.

### MONEY:

Open your wallet, not in fear but in faith. Ask God, “Where can my

giving create space for your kingdom?"

## ATTENTION:

Slow down enough to see the person everyone else walks past. Notice the emotional “signs” people are holding up. Offer compassion.

## PRESENCE:

Show up where you normally avoid inconvenience. Offer your actual self.

Pray this simple prayer each morning: *“Lord, where can my open hands create space for your kingdom today?”*

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If Waterstone became a community that truly lived this way (and we already do in so many ways) we would be such a beautiful, radiant, counter-cultural witness in a world drowning in scarcity.

Open your hands today.

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And watch the kingdom break through.

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## **CONCLUSION**

### **A PEOPLE FORMED LIKE JESUS**

At the end of the day, my hope for these values is not that they become brand statements for our church that are turned into wall art, a strategic plan, or simply clever language for a website.

If I'm honest, they are a prayer. This is the type of church I want Waterstone to become. Not because it will cause us to grow (although I hope we do) or because it will make an impact (I hope we are able to!) but because I believe it's what following Jesus requires in this moment.

These values are a prayer of our staff and name the kind of people we believe Jesus is forming us into—and the kind of church we believe the Spirit is shaping us to become. Because Christianity, at its core, is not about information but formation. We don't simply want to believe the right things about Jesus. We want to actually become like him.

We believe **Jesus changes everything**—not just our eternal destination, but our Monday mornings, our relationships, our money, our power, our fears, our loves. If Jesus really is Lord, then nothing in our lives is untouched. Following him isn't an accessory we add to an already busy life; it is the center that reorders everything else. And that's good news. Because Jesus is the one who reigns but is also the one who

heals, forgives, restores, and makes all things new.

That's why we choose **presence over program**. Not because programs are bad—some of us love a good spreadsheet—but because Jesus didn't save the world through efficiency. He saved it through incarnation. Through showing up. Through lingering at wells, touching lepers, eating long meals, and being interruptible. We believe spiritual power is born not from hustle, but from attentiveness and prayer. From staying long enough in God's presence to be changed by it. We want to be the kind of church that knows when to slow down, listen, and trust that God is already at work before we try to manage the outcomes.

We believe **together is better** because the gospel is inherently communal. Jesus didn't call disciples one by one to live isolated spiritual lives; he formed a people that became a family that became a church. In a culture obsessed with performance, productivity, and self-sufficiency, we are choosing a different story. A story where belonging comes before believing, where people are known before they are useful, and where no one has to pretend they're okay when they're not. We serve, suffer, celebrate, and dream together—because none of us can become

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like Jesus alone.

And that leads us to **process over product**. We are not a church for people who have it all figured out. We are a church for people who are honest enough to admit they don't. We believe sanctification is not instant, but that it is patient. Becoming like Jesus is slow and it's often messy. We want to be a place where people can bring their whole selves: their doubts, their wounds, their questions, their hope. Everyone is welcome. Everyone is safe. And by God's grace, no one stays the same.

We also believe in **soft hearts and steel spines**. We refuse the false choice between conviction and compassion. Jesus was full of grace and truth—not half of one and half of the other, but fully both. In an age of outrage, fear, and polarization, we want to be a people who are deeply rooted, but not easily rattled. Our desire is to be courageous in an age that requires it, without being cruel. When we are faithful there is never a need to be fearful. And that posture leads us to be tender toward people and unyielding in our commitment to the way of Jesus. This kind of maturity doesn't come naturally; it is forged over time through prayer, Scripture, repentance, and love.

Finally, we choose to live with

**open hands.** Generosity is not just something we do—it's who we are becoming. While the world lives with a mindset of scarcity we believe scarcity is not God's design. Scarcity is what happens when fear takes the wheel. We believe that when we live with clenched fists—hoarding our time, our money, our attention—we actually contribute to the brokenness of the world. But when we live with open hands, we create space for the kingdom to break through. We give because God first gave to us. We trust that the few small loaves and fishes are enough when they are placed in Jesus' hands.

So this is our invitation. Not to be perfect. Not to have it all together. Not even to agree on everything.

But to commit—*together*—to the slow, beautiful work of becoming like Jesus for the sake of the world. This is the kind of church we want to be.

May the Spirit give us the courage to live it.

