



The Basics of Life in Christ



Week Seven:

Incarnating the Love of
Christ—Practices that lead
us to self-donating love



Introduction: Not a Slave but a Brother

Paul met the slave Onesimus while he was imprisoned, probably in Rome. Onesimus, whose name means “useful,” had come to Paul on the run from his master. This encounter with Paul transformed him. Paul later wrote that he became Onesimus’s “father,” that is, that he’d led Onesimus to faith in Christ (Philemon 10), and reported that Onesimus was very “useful” to him in his chains.

The funny thing is, Paul knew Onesimus’ master, a wealthy man named Philemon from the town of Colossae. Philemon was what was known in the ancient world as a *paterfamilias*, that is, the head of a large household and essentially overseer and ruler of an estate. *Paterfamilias* in essence owned all those under their authority, each of which lived in a strict hierarchy in relationship to one another. At the top of this hierarchy, under Philemon, would be his adult sons, followed after by his wife, and so on, down to the servants (like Onesimus).

Paterfamilias played an important role in the formation of the early church, as often their conversion would spark the conversion of their entire households, and they would use their villas as the first “churches” where the Christians would gather weekly to worship. Philemon

himself was a well-known leader in the Colossian church, which met on his estate. Onesimus, it seems, hadn't got the message, however. He'd escaped from Philemon's estate, taking some expensive goods along with him.

In the ancient world, Onesimus' crimes were punishable by severe beating, if not death. But notice what Paul tells Philemon to do:

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus — ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ *no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother*—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh

and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. (Philemon 8-17, emphasis added).

What Paul shows in this little letter is this: the gospel can (and must) transform the relationship between slave and master, *paterfamilias* and his charges, kings and subjects. The gospel message doesn't stop at personal salvation; it rather demands that we take the self-giving love of Christ on ourselves and transform the way we interact with the world.

Sent into a Loveless World

Q: what adjectives characterize the way people commonly talk to and interact with each other?

Whether it is the ancient world or our own, people are often quick to devalue, attack, and subdue one another. Ethnic, cultural, and social rivalries become dominate factors of human existence, and we define ourselves by a list of attributes that differentiate us from other people. Outcasts and the marginalized become a constant reality because, after Eden, the propensity of every human heart is toward the evil abuse of others (see Genesis 6:5).

This is why Jesus' words are so important:

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” (John 20:21)

Just as Jesus took on flesh and dwelt among us, out of the Father’s love to bring us rebels back to him, so too we go into the world armed with God’s self-giving love, having in us the mind that was in Christ Jesus.

Incarnating the Love of Christ: Thinking, Speaking, and Living with the self-giving love of Christ always before our eyes (Philippians 2:1-11).

Q: How is the self-giving love of Jesus “ours” in Christ Jesus? What is unique about the Christian’s approach to selfless love?

Question for Reflection: Where in your life do you struggle to “in humility count others more significant than yourself”? What makes it a challenge in these spaces?

Desires that Lead us to Incarnate Christ's Love

As we've said before, the beginning of pursuing the spiritual life is simply taking the time to recognize what we desire, and following that desire to God's throne.

I want...

...to instill courage, confidence and hope through expressing the delight God has in others (the discipline of Blessing Others/Encouragement)

...to honor the Creator by loving, nurturing and stewarding his creation (the discipline of Care for the Earth)

...to become the healing presence of Christ to others (the discipline of Compassion)

...to turn the destructive way I use words into authentic, loving and healing speech (the discipline of Control of the Tongue)

...to lean into Jesus' forgiving heart and stop the cycle of vengeance (the discipline of Forgiveness)

...to become like Jesus in his willingness to choose the hidden way of love rather than the way of power (the discipline of Humility)

...to love others by seeking their good, protection, gain and fair treatment (the discipline of Justice)

...to live as a steward of God's resources in all areas of life; to live out of the awareness that nothing I have is my own (the discipline of Stewardship)

Q: Do you resonate with these desires? Do they spark any memories, thoughts, or reminders for you?

Spiritual Disciplines For Incarnating the Love of Christ

Blessing Others/ Encouragement	To speak well of them—inspiring them with God's own hope, confidence and delight in their belovedness.
Care for the Earth	A way of expressing God's delight in his very good creation. By engaging in loving care of the earth, the environment, the plants and the animals, we honor the gifts and treasures of our Creator.
Compassion	Feeling with and for others as well as extending mercy and help to them in extravagantly practical ways. Compassion is part and parcel of sharing in God's heart for an aching and wounded world.

Control of the Tongue	Involves an intentional awareness and governance of words as well as tone of voice in all communication.
Forgiveness	To condemn a wrong, spare the wrongdoer hatred, revenge and self-righteous indignation by joining them to Jesus' own forgiving heart.
Humility	Not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less. Humble people let go of image management and self-promotion. They honor others by making the other's needs as real and important as their own.
Justice	Seeks to help others through correcting and redressing wrongs. It treats others fairly and shows no favoritism.
Solidarity in Jesus' Sufferings	When we hold our pain and bear our burdens together with Jesus and his own sufferings for the world.
Stewardship	The voluntary and generous offering of God's gift of resources, time, talents and treasure for the benefit and love of God and others.
Truth Telling	Involves speaking in a way that does not exaggerate, minimize, deny, rationalize or manage the truth.

Question for reflection: *Which of these practices inspires you as you think of the desires above? Which could you try this week?*

An Example: Forgiveness

Desire: to lean into Jesus' forgiving heart and stop the cycle of vengeance.

Definition: To condemn a wrong, spare the wrongdoer hatred, revenge and self-righteous indignation by joining them to Jesus' own forgiving heart.

Forgiveness in biblical terms is **not seeking vengeance on others but their redemption** (Luke 23:32-34; Acts 7:59-60)

Q: Why is forgiveness such a counter-cultural act?

The spiritual discipline of forgiveness is one where we actively take on the disposition of Jesus and see that God's work in Christ *actually changes* how we interact with hurts and wrongs.

“The teaching of these words is this: Bless those who curse you, and pray for your enemies, and fast for those who persecute you. For what credit is it if you love those who love you? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? But you must love those who hate you, and [then] you will not have an enemy.” (The Didache [1st Century Christian writing], 1:3)

Questions for Reflection: *Take some time and think through your life and your hurts. Where is the desire for vengeance popping up? Who could you talk to about this?*

Q: How could you work to actively forgive those who upset you in your daily routine? How could you seek to bring the gospel to those you consider your enemies?

Schedule (From Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*):

Next Week: FIRST, PRAYER

Week Eight (3/14): **“Praying”** my life—practices that lead me to pray without ceasing.

Starting 3/21: The basics of Sharing Christ: How to Think, Speak, and Act Like Christ in the World.