



St. Paul Lutheran Church

“Your Refuge from the Storm”

St. Paul Weekly Toolkit

LifeGroup Study

Daily devotionals for the week following November 10, 2024
Micah 6:8; 1 John 4:7-21

Community

THEME:

The relational commands of God are captured in the command to love one another, to love kindness. John is calling Christ-followers to love each other. How does this happen in our lives? John knows that this kind of love must begin with God loving us (4:10-11). He also knows that this kind of love is only perfected and developed through practice (4:12). God’s relational command points us toward other people and their needs. How might this affect how we spend money and how we prepare for the Christmas season?

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO KNOW?

We cannot do justice without being people who love “hesed,” who love kindness.

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO DO?

Wrestle with our own charity, and consider how we need to change in order to be people who truly love kindness.

INTRODUCTION: GOD’S WILL

As Christians, we are called to love kindness. When asked, we would probably say that Christians are a group of kind and loving people. It might be news to us that not everyone feels the same way.

In their book *Unchristian*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons surveyed thousands of people outside the Christian community and asked them about their perception of Christians. Here’s what they discovered:

Perception of Christians	Outsiders, ages 16-29
Judgmental	87%
Hypocritical	85%
Sheltered (old-fashioned, out of touch with reality)	78%
Too political	75%
Proselytizers (insensitive to others, not genuine)	70%

ICEBREAKER

What is your perception of Christians? How is this different than your view of what Christ is calling us to?

PRAY TOGETHER

Father God, we know that there is a disconnect between how people perceive you and us. You loved the outcast, ate with sinners, healed the broken, and reached across boundaries of culture and religion. As we have a conversation about loving kindness, move us into a new awareness of your will and your hope for the world. Amen.

Content

CONTEXT FOR 1 JOHN 4:7-21

Tradition claims that John wrote this letter to churches around Ephesus. Toward the end of the first century, it appears that a faction developed within the early community as false teaching swayed some believers. Some scholars identify this false teaching as “Docetism.” Docetists denied that Jesus had actually become flesh and blood, because God could not possibly come in a human body. If this is true, then the purpose of John’s first letter is to reassure the early Christians and encourage them to stay faithful to the apostles’ teaching about the nature of Jesus.

In this particular section, John seems to be concerned with *the* identifying mark of true believers: love. In this passage, John makes the following affirmations:

- Love comes from God. God is the source of real love.
- Everyone who loves is “born of God and knows God.”
- If you don’t love others in the Christian community, you obviously don’t know God because God *is* love.
- The kind of love that John is referring to – the kind of love that we are called to live out – is the same love that God demonstrated through the cross of Christ.
- We are empowered to love because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and, through love, we abide in God.
- Maturing love expressed in community gives us confidence of God’s love for us, and therefore casts out all fear of God’s condemnation on the day of judgment.

- Our confession of faith is proven true by our love for others, and our failure to love others shows our lack of real relationship with God.

- Those who abandoned the Christian community because of their false beliefs demonstrated a lack of love, and were obviously not true believers – not “born of God,” but “of the world.”

Read the Text: 1 John 4:7-21

DISCUSSION Do you believe that love is *the* identifying mark of true believers? Why? Are there other signs present in the life of true believers? Name some. What does maturing love look like? Give an example. How is the love we are called to the same as the love that God demonstrated through Christ on the cross?

GOING DEEPER: HESED, OUR BRAND IDENTITY

There’s a brilliant biblical scholar at Princeton Theological Seminary by the name of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld who says that, if we will pay careful attention to how the word *hesed* is used in context, we’ll discover that there are some consistent characteristics in its usage:

First, the word *hesed* is used when the help of another is essential; the person in need cannot help themselves.

DISCUSSION Describe a possible situation in which someone cannot help themselves. Is there anyone in your sphere of relationships in this situation?

Second, the word is used when help is desperately needed; without help the person’s situation will go from bad to worse.

DISCUSSION Have you ever experienced this? If you can, describe what happened.

Third, it is used when the circumstances dictate that one person is uniquely able to provide the help that is needed; there is no alternative if this person doesn’t provide help.

DISCUSSION Describe a situation in which this might be true.

Fourth, the person in need has no control over the decision of the person whose help he or she needs. There are no negative implications for the helper if he or she chooses not to help. The potential helper must make a free choice of whether to help or not. There is nothing particularly in it for them.

DISCUSSION Describe a situation in which this might be true.

(– from “Love (OT),” The Anchor Bible Dictionary, by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, Doubleday.)

According to Dr. Sakenfeld, no matter what English word we use to try to describe *hesed*, nothing quite captures the fullness of its meaning. *Hesed* is they guy who gives a kidney to a friend who was dying of kidney failure. *Hesed* is the firefighter who rushes into a burning building to save a trapped child. *Hesed* is the 9-year-old who gives all of her birthday money to buy meals for Feed My Starving Children. *Hesed* is the teen who gives up a few hours each week to visit a few desperately lonely shut-ins at a local senior center. *Hesed* is the Son of God taking on human flesh and dying on a cross for the redemption of the world.

And I would suggest that *hesed* is our corporate logo in the world. When the world sees God’s people living out *hesed*, they see God and God’s love for the world.

DISCUSSION What are some instances of *hesed* in your life? What are some instances of *hesed* in our church? What are some instances of *hesed* in our world?

Application

NOW WHAT?

What are some charitable things you give to? Why? What step could you take to turn your charity into justice? How might we need to change in order to be people who love kindness?

PRAY TOGETHER

Father God, we are a people so deeply loved by you that we are compelled to share that love with the world in tangible ways. Teach us how to love kindness that makes your heart glad and comes from our own willing hearts. Help us to build relational bridges that connect us with our brothers and sisters all over the world. Amen.

1 John 4:7-21 NLT Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. (8) But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. (9) God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. (10) This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. (11) Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. (12) No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us. (13) And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us. (14) Furthermore, we have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. (15) All who declare that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God. (16) We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. (17) And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world. (18) Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. (19) We love each other because he loved us first. (20) If someone says, “I love God,” but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? (21) And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their fellow believers.



Daily Walk on the Rock

Daily devotionals for the week following November 10, 2024

Monday: Branding

Daily reading: Leviticus 19:18; John 15:12-17

Branding is a big deal in the business world. You can probably recall the logo of Target, Best Buy, or Honda. Most people would be able to identify the company represented by that logo. So, what's the brand identity of Christianity? What's our logo? Some might say that it's the cross, but at least in our culture every gangster with bling and every rock star wears a cross. Wearing a cross no longer accurately identifies us to the world. Others might say it's a fish, but have you seen the way some people with fish symbols on their cars drive? John would say that our logo, our brand identity as individuals and as a "corporate culture," is love. In your life, would people be able to identify your "brand" as love? In your prayers, ask God to reveal new ways for you to walk in the way of love.

Tuesday: Motivation

Daily reading: Micah 6:8; Isaiah 29:13-14

Isn't it interesting that we're told to "do justice," but we're not just told to "be kind"? We're commanded to love kindness. Why is that? Why is God so interested in our loving kindness? God seems to care more about our hearts than our hands. God doesn't seem terribly interested in obedience for obedience's sake. God doesn't want us to worship each week to just check it off our list and think we're good to go. That kind of worship doesn't honor God. That kind of worship is motivated by guilt or fear. Instead, God desires worship that comes from love and gratitude for who God is and what God has done for us. What motivates your worship? Ask God to empower you to worship with deeper gratitude and love.

Wednesday: Love

Daily reading: Psalm 31:23-24; 1 John 4:7-12

John seems to be saying that *the* identifying mark of true believers is love. In this passage, John makes the following affirmations. First, love comes from God; God is the source of real love. Second, everyone who loves is "born of God and knows God." If you don't love others in the Christian community, you don't know God because God *is* love. Third, the kind of love that John is referring to – the kind of love that we are called to live out – is the same love that God demonstrates through the cross of Christ. In your life, are there people who bear *the* identifying mark of a true believer? Do you bear this mark, as well? In your prayers, ask God help you live in greater love for God and for others.

Thursday: Hesed

Daily reading: Hosea 12:6; 1 John 4:12-21

According to scholar Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, the word "hesed" describes the loving kindness that we are called to live into. Hesed has four characteristics. First, the word is used when the help of another is essential; the person in need cannot help themselves. Second, it is used when help is desperately needed; without help, the person's situation will go from bad to worse. Third, it is used

when the circumstances dictate that one person is uniquely able to provide the help that is needed; there is no alternative if this person doesn't help. Fourth, the person in need has no control over the decision of the person whose help he or she needs. In your life, have you ever experienced hesed? How did it come to you? From whom? In your prayers, ask God to move you from simply loving to hesed. (*– from "Love (OT)," The Anchor Bible Dictionary, by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, Doubleday.*)

Friday: Stewardship

Daily reading: Proverbs 22:6-9; Matthew 19:21-24

This call to love kindness also has implications for the stewardship of our lives. It calls us to consider the daily investment of all that God has given us ("ourselves, our time and our possessions, signs of your gracious love"). If we invest only in ourselves, we perpetuate the "negative branding" that our culture perceives. We add to the negative narrative that undermines people's willing participation in Christian community and all that we seek to do in Jesus' name. What would happen if we radically turned our lives inside out, started to believe in God's abundance, and so allowed God's love to fill us that our lives couldn't help but spill over with love for others? What might that kind of kindness do to the world? To our neighbors? To our church? To our own soul? In your prayers, ask God to direct you toward greater generosity and better stewardship of your resources.

Saturday: Perception

Daily reading: Micah 6:8; Matthew 7:1-5

A recent survey of non-Christians reported their perception of Christians to be judgmental, hypocritical, sheltered, and too political. Similar surveys show no correlation of these perceptions to Jesus Christ. This is a huge disconnect. Micah says that God requires that we "love kindness." Kindness has been described as "love in action," so God requires that we love "loving on people." According to 1 John, this is to be our brand identity, our hallmark, our reputation. And the good news here is that this love isn't something we need to conjure up. God is at work in our lives. God's transformational love is daily forming us into a loving community. How can we change the perceptions of others toward us? Ask God to show you where you appear to be judgmental or hypocritical.

Sunday: Logo

Daily reading: Jeremiah 29:11; 1 Timothy 6:17-19

What is God's will? What do we mean when we pray "thy will be done"? It means that we, as the body of Christ, do justice and love kindness in such a way that no one is "those people." It means that we are a people so deeply loved by God in Christ that we are both empowered and compelled the share that love with the world in tangible ways. The day will come when hesed is the living corporate logo for the body of Christ in the world. The day will come when hesed is the church's corporate logo. But that journey cannot begin until hesed is the logo of our lives. Pray today that "thy will be done."