

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY: GROWING TOGETHER IN FAITH



In an earlier lesson, we discussed the fact that the Godhead is a community of three Persons in one being: The Father (God), the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Each is a distinct person with a distinct purpose, especially when it comes to the redemption of mankind. The relationship within the Godhead is one of life-giving love, self-sacrifice, concern for the others, unity of purpose, unity of thought, and unity of action. This communal God did not create individual human beings: He created a community known as mankind.

Christians are meant to live in a manner that reflects the God who is our Creator. The believers as a group are often referred to as the Body of Christ. When God speaks to us through the Bible, He directs His Word to believers as a community. Believers are meant to share life together, living and working with unity of purpose and action, and having love for one another that is compassionate, merciful, self-giving, and builds one another up, especially in helping us mature spiritually. This is the concept of *koinonia* (which means “fellowship” in Greek). The Church of Christ is meant to be a community of support, encouragement, and accountability. We are the image of God in Christ in this world (the *imago dei*). We see this in the Book of Acts as it recounts life in the early Christian church. Believers were a tightly knit community who shared their lives, resources, and faith for the good of one another. They had no church building but met in each others’ homes to break bread, worship, pray, and support one another. They were persecuted and sometimes martyred, but the persecution strengthened their bonds and unity and mutual dependence. Love, mutual respect, common purpose, and shared commitment to their faith was the transformative heart of their community lives. The Bible has instructions for life as a church: *Love one another, bear one another’s burdens, encourage and forgive each other, and pray for one another*. This does not mean





passive church membership. It means actively engaging with other believers, contributing our time and talents to the mission of the church in this world. Why is the human body used as a metaphor for the church? One part of the human body cannot function properly apart from the functioning of the other parts of the body. Neither can an individual fully experience relationship with God without experiencing and sharing life with the body of believers in some degree nor can a congregation of believers truly function as a community without the presence of each member. Every believer is uniquely gifted in some way by the Holy Spirit to serve a specific purpose the God's work in this world. He or she contributes to the "health" and functionality of the church, just as the other members of the church contribute to the spiritual health and functionality of that individual and helps the individual discover, develop, and utilize his or her spiritual gifting.

A "healthy" church body is a community of people with a variety of roles and responsibilities. As a reminder, the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the church includes gifting some to be teachers of scripture, some to be church leaders, some to help and serve those in the community (in the church and outside the church), and still others to venture into the mission fields to plant new churches and evangelize unbelievers to receive Jesus Christ. Believers in the church hold one another accountable to live according to their faith, correcting one another not in judgement and condemnation but in grace, love, and compassion.

An "unhealthy" church community might be characterized by judgmentalism, cliques, or lack of love. The church may impose requirements of members that go beyond biblical teachings (stringent dress, attendance, tithing or other membership guidelines), excluding Bible passages which go against current cultural sensitivities, showing any kind of favoritism to some members or excluding others (which interferes with their receiving the Gospel message), not teaching the Bible or other essentials of the Christian faith, or a leadership that does not rightly divine God's Word or places too much authority on the pastor without the oversight of church elders.

A truly healthy Christian community will be a reflection of Christ's love, compassion, forgiveness, and genuine concern for the well-being of its members and its surrounding community. It will be a place where believers are supported and encouraged to grow spiritually. It is a place where the unbelievers and the unchurched, those in distress, and those who are marginalized can come to find this acceptance and true reflection of God's love. This makes the church a powerful force for change in the world.

The process of finding a Christian community that will nurture one's faith so that we can thrive spiritually is not an easy process, especially with the multitude of modern church denominations and diversity of worship styles within those churches. Always remember to begin any spiritual change with prayer and familiarity with biblical principles, our connection to the Holy Spirit who in turn connects us with God. One of the most important qualities to look for in a church is *adherence to sound biblical doctrine*. This means that the church faithfully teaches and preaches the Bible, the centrality of Jesus Christ, the authority of scripture, and the importance of living a life which reflects God's love. Churches usually post statements of what they believe and teach on their websites and how they apply their faith in the community and the world.

Authentic worship is another crucial element in church life. Styles of worship vary, but worship should always reflect reverence of God and sincere desire to connect with God. The style of worship should appeal to you and inspire you to draw closer to God. The sincerity (or lack of sincerity) of a church's worship may be an indication of its underlying spiritual health.

Also consider how the church engages with the surrounding community. A church that embodies Christ's love by serving others is likely to have a healthier spiritual foundation. This goes beyond outreach projects; consider how the church members relate to people in their daily interactions in the community. Are they still reflecting Christ when they aren't in church?



² Therefore, an elder must be blameless, the husband of one wife,^[b] stable, sensible, respectable, hospitable to strangers, and teachable.^[c] ³ He must not drink excessively or be a violent person, but instead be gentle. He must not be argumentative or love money. ⁴ He must manage his own family well and have children who are submissive and respectful in every way. ⁵ For if a man does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, so that he won't become arrogant and fall into the Devil's condemnation. ⁷ He must be well thought of by outsiders, so he doesn't^[d] fall into disgrace and the trap set for him by^[e] the Devil. ⁸ Deacons,^[f] too, must be serious. They must not be two-faced,^[g] addicted to wine, or greedy for money. ⁹ They must hold firmly to the secret of the faith with clear consciences. ¹⁰ But they must first be tested. Then, if they prove to be blameless, let them serve in ministry.^[h] ¹¹ Their wives^[i] must also be serious. They must not be gossips, but instead be stable and trustworthy in everything. ¹² Deacons^[j] must be husbands of one wife^[k] and must manage their children and their families well. ¹³ Those who serve well in ministry^[l] gain an excellent reputation for themselves and will have great assurance by their faith in the Messiah^[m] Jesus. (1 Timothy 2-13)

Don't be afraid to ask questions before committing to a church. Speak to the pastor and get to know the church leadership team. Are these leaders teaching and acting in ways that are biblically and morally upright and genuinely invested in the spiritual growth of the church members? Paul gives lists of qualifications for church leaders (elders, overseers, deacons) in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:6-9. Are the leaders accessible to members? Is the vision of the church unified, clear, and biblically sound?

Consider whether the church will be a place that inspires you to actively participate and engage. Do you feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. Are their opportunities to build relationships with other believers? Remember that you can't expect the church to do the work for you—believers should actively participate in the church's life. Volunteer your time for church projects or ministries. Joining small groups is beneficial not just in expanding our understanding of Scripture but in building relationships in which we are supported and support others in turn. The size of the church will affect your level of comfort. Some people thrive in a larger church community with diverse ministry opportunities. Other people prefer smaller and more intimate congregations.

To fulfill one's God-given purpose of serving others and reflecting God's love to the world, we must discover the spiritual talents given to us by the Holy Spirit. Paul teaches about these gifts to the church body of believers in 1 Corinthians 12. Some context is important for this biblical passage. Paul founded the church in Corinth (in Greece) during his second missionary journey as documented in the Book of Acts 18. The church soon experienced problems with internal division, immorality, and confusions over Christian doctrine.

The doctrinal confusion occurred when false teachers came to the church. They attempted to discredit Paul in various ways and questioned his apostolic authority. They attempted to impose the ritual of circumcision on the Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians. Paul had to contend with these church to preserve the church community. The members also divided themselves according to which leader performed their baptism, seeking status by association with Paul or Apollos or Cephas (Peter) or Christ. The church was tolerating the presence of a sexually immoral member rather than disciplining that member to bring him back into right relationship with Christ. The church was seeking to resolve their differences in courts outside of the church rather than within the church. They were also valuing the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues above all other spiritual gifts. This showed lack of understanding of how the Holy Spirit gifted every believer uniquely for God's purposes.

Unfortunately, there are churches even today that venerate certain spiritual gifts, particularly the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. Beware of such congregations and evaluate whether they are rightly discerning God's Word. You can find discussion on the real gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. Gifts of the Holy Spirit are meant for the common good of the church and its members, to strengthen and edify the church, and to enable the church to spread the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. The gifts for individual believers according to 1 Corinthians are:

Wisdom: The ability to make decisions and give guidance that is in accordance with God's will.

Knowledge: Understanding deep spiritual truths and mysteries.

Faith: A strong, unwavering trust in God and His promises.

Healing: The ability to restore health and wholeness to others.

Miracles: Performing acts that demonstrate God's power beyond natural laws.

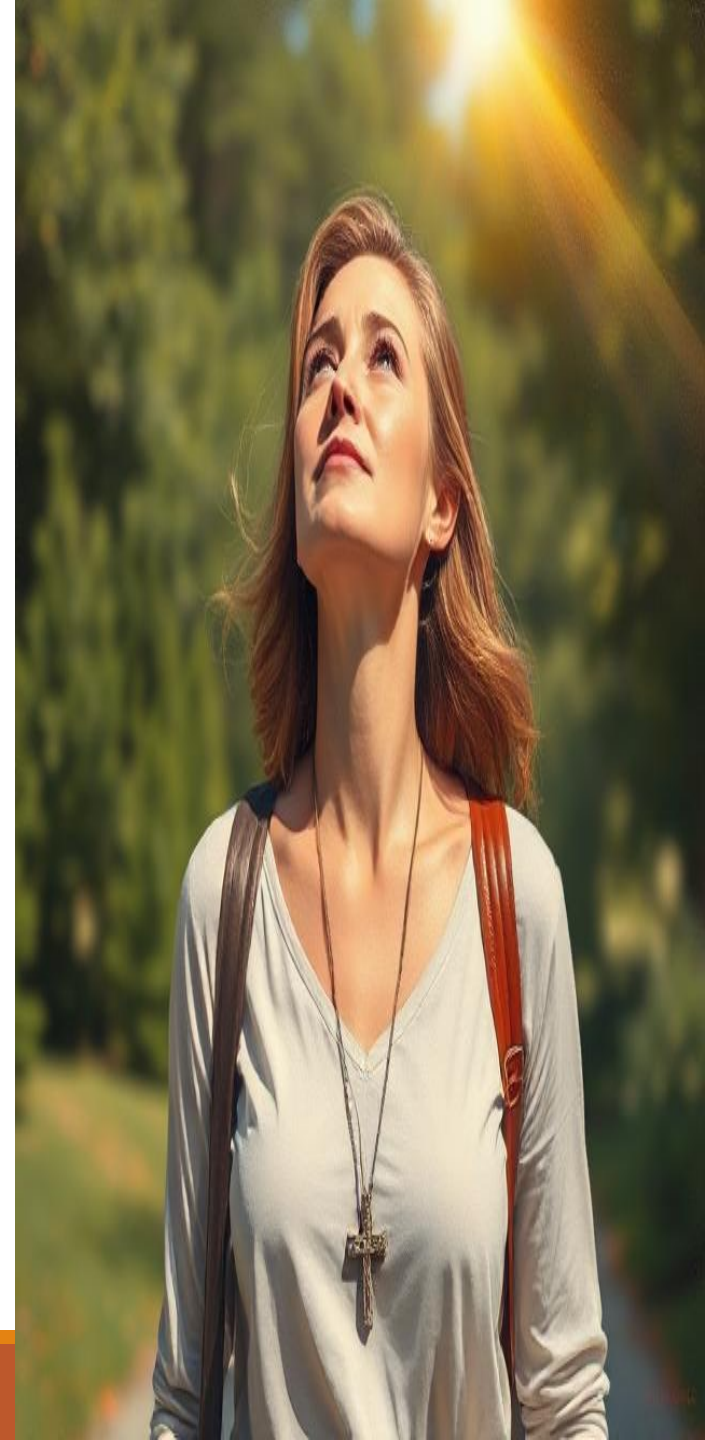
Prophecy: Speaking God's message to others, often involving future events.

Discernment: The ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil.

Tongues: Speaking in languages not previously learned, often for prayer or worship.

Interpretation of Tongues: Understanding and explaining the messages spoken in tongues.

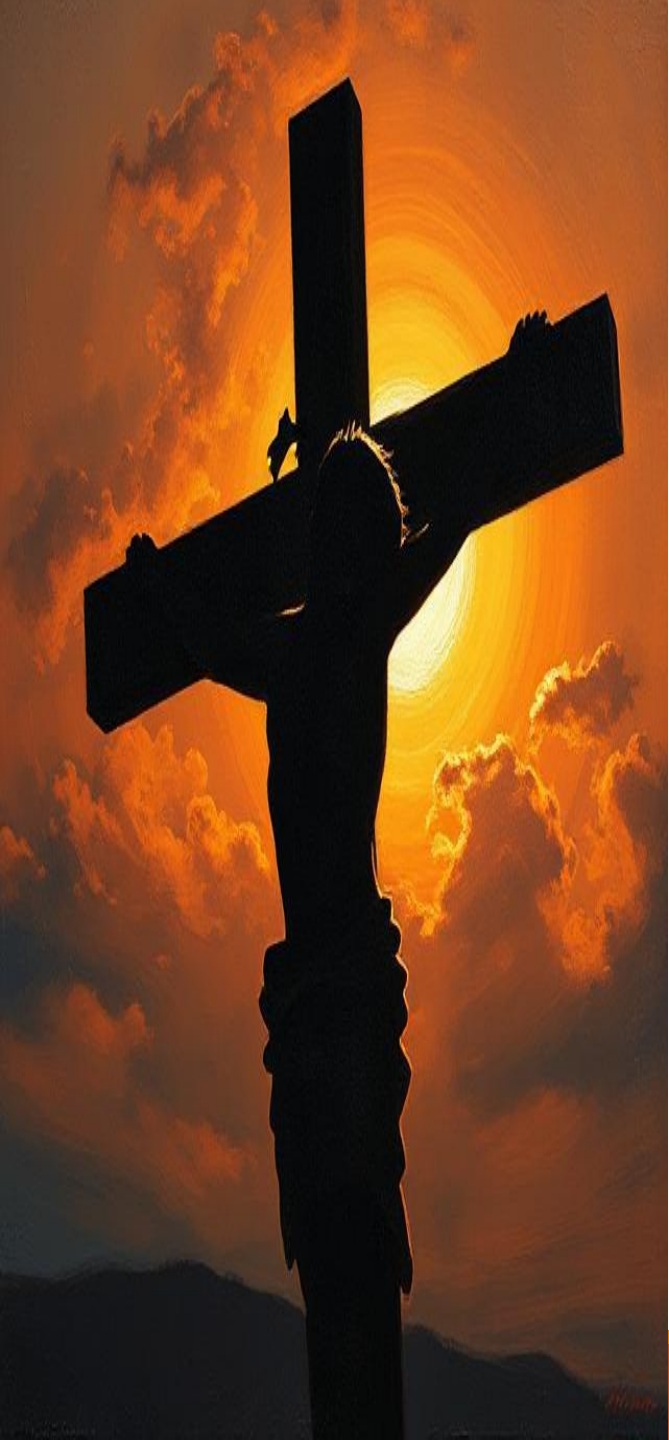
Ephesians 4 lists five offices that are gifted by the Holy Spirit to the church are Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors, and Teachers. At this point, you might be wondering if there are still apostles and prophets in the modern Christian church. This is a subject of debate among church denominations. If we define apostles according to the biblical requirements listed in Acts 1:21-22 that an apostle be a witness to Jesus' resurrection, then we are not likely to find apostles in the modern church. Paul qualified by virtue of his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. The modern continuationist view in some groups, particularly within Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, assert that apostles and prophets continue to be active today. They believe these roles are essential for guidance and revelation in the church. Some modern churches have leaders who identify as apostles or prophets and focus on church planting, prophetic ministry, and leadership.



The modern cessationist view, such as many Reformed and Baptist churches share, argues that the roles of apostles and prophets were specific to the early church and are no longer present. They emphasize that the canon of Scripture is complete. They may use the terms metaphorically to describe influential leaders or teachers without claiming the same authority as the original apostles. This is why the Bible tells us to test everything that we are told according to what is written in scripture. Don't take for granted that what you are being told is the truth just because it comes from someone who claims authority. The Bible has the final word. If you do not feel that your church is rightly interpreting and teaching the Bible, it is better to seek a new church. At the same time, remember that just because a leader doesn't affirm your specific wishes or desire does not mean he or she is misinterpreting the Bible. Make sure that you aren't misinterpreting the Bible yourself by studying, praying, and consulting with other spiritually mature believers.

There are tests available online that can perhaps help one discover his or her spiritual gifts. As always, it's best to start with prayer and meditation to see how the Holy Spirit guides us. Is there a ministry within your church which piques your interest? The Spirit might be leading you in that direction. Consider your personal skill set. Are you good with tools? You might consider community projects such as repairing schools. Can you clean? You might clean for local shelters, thrift stores, or food banks. Can you sing? You might sing for the church choir. Can you drive? You might help others by offering rides to church services or doctor's appointments. Serving the church is not just about witnessing Christ's love in the community and congregation, it's about developing connections. The Bible tells us first to love God with all our hearts, souls, mind, and strength and second to love our neighbor as ourselves. Every person in the world is our neighbor in God's sight. We cannot help everyone, but we can help in the community where God places us. When we serve, we gain a deeper understanding of God's love and grace and experience the transformative power of humility, selflessness, and compassion. This is the feeling of the relationship that exists within the Godhead. Besides that, God is our Father, and we are His children. It is a natural thing for a child to be joyfully mentored and spend time working alongside his or her Father.





Serving in ministry helps us develop patience as we depend on God's strength and guidance in overcoming obstacles. It teaches believers the importance of teamwork, respecting every person's contribution to the ministry work. Effective teamwork builds up the entire church body. Service is a way to live out our faith in a tangible way. It grows our relationship with others, changes our perspective to align more with the Lord, and is an essential step in our spiritual growth. Working together as a church body mirrors the interconnectedness, love, and unity within the Holy Trinity.

However strong our relationships within the church, there will inevitably be disagreements, misunderstandings, hurt feelings or conflict within the congregation (we are still human after all). At these times, believers must cultivate a spirit of forgiveness, actively pursue reconciliation, and develop conflict resolution skills. Forgiveness is not just an important aspect of resolving conflict, it is a biblical command of Christ's followers. Think of it this way: Jesus prayed for the people who hung Him on the cross even as He was dying. Certainly, as His disciples, we should find the humility, self-reflection, and willingness to overcome our own pride and defensiveness so that we can extend forgiveness to others for their offenses. Matthew 6:14-15 is blunt when it says if we do not forgive others, neither will God forgive us our trespasses. Mark 11:25 tells us any time we are praying, we should be forgiving the trespasses of others so we can receive forgiveness. Luke 6:37 says plainly to forgive and we will be forgiven. It may take time, it may take the guidance of other believers, but forgiveness is ultimately a lighter burden than a grudge and it frees us to move forward with our lives and relationships.

Reconciliation is the next crucial step after extending forgiveness. This is the process of re-establishing trust and healing emotional wounds. It requires honest communication, humility, and willingness to take responsibility for our actions. We must have direct communication with the person who wronged us or whom we have wronged, a conversation which should be approached with open and loving communication, respect, grace, empathy, and a desire to establish mutual understanding rather than placing blame and honestly attempting to see the other person's perspective.. A pastor or other church leader may be called to reconcile.



Accountability is also an element of church relationships. This should not be perceived as something negative or restrictive. When we make the choice to follow Christ, we will encounter challenges, obstacles, and persecution. Some of the obstacles come from our own “growing pain” as we move past worldly temptations or fleshly responses like anger or lust. Some obstacles come from external pressures of culture (for the fallen world will seek to conform us to images of sin even as we strive to be images of Christ). We may find ourselves openly persecuted and derided for our faith. Accountability means that other believers have agreed to come alongside us as we all commit to maturing in our spirituality, to help one another carry these kinds of burdens while staying true to our faith. As accountability partners, we are not judges or critics of other believers (or unbelievers for that matter). We provide a safe place for honest communication, self-reflection, and self-assessment. Maturing in the faith is a lifelong process. It is good to have partners to help us focus, to help us forgive ourselves when we fail (and we will stumble at times in our spiritual journey), and refocus on Christ. Finding a mature believer to act as a spiritual mentor helps support us as we seek spiritual direction. Mentors can provide insights based on their own spiritual journeys, encourage us, and help us cultivate disciplined practices such as prayer and ministry work.

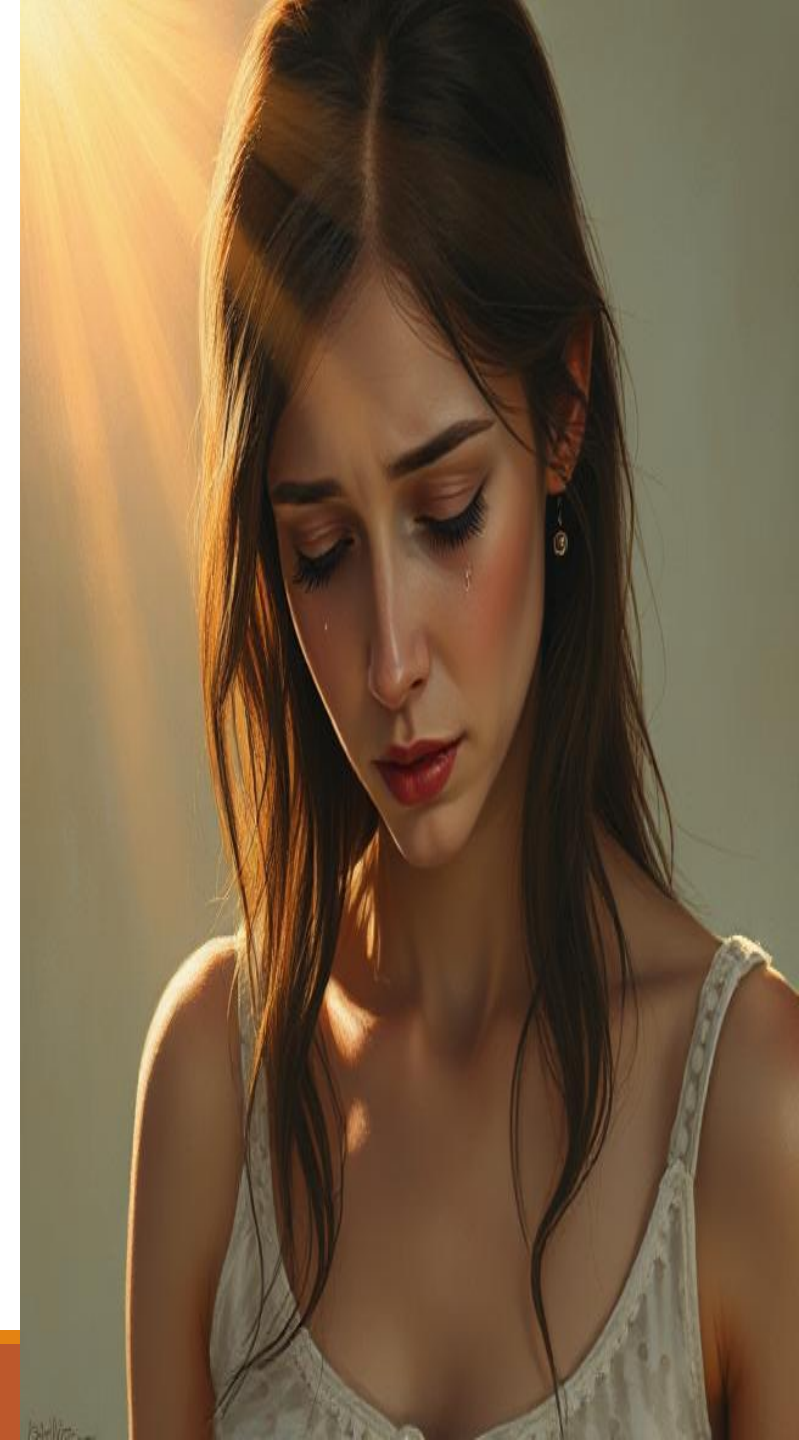
Open, honest, respectful, loving communication is always the foundation of good church relationships. Honest self-reflection and prayer is foundational to opening our hearts and minds to these relationships and allowing ourselves to grow spiritually. The commitment to mutual accountability and understanding strengthens the entire church community and fosters transformative faith for every believer. It helps the church as a community to be more effective in its witness for Christ in the world.

Navigating difficult relationships is one aspect of life in Christian community. The Bible is full of examples of relationships that are, at minimum, difficult. There are multiple examples of conflict between siblings (Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau), conflict between prophets and pagans, conflicts between kings (Saul’s relentless attacks against David), men rebelling against God, between husbands and wives, and the ultimate example of relational betrayal when Judas betrays

Jesus. As long as sin exists and holds any kind of influence over men and women's hearts, there will be relational strife. It's no surprise to find again that forgiveness and prayer are the first steps in navigating difficult relationships. Our capacity to forgive others is tied to our acceptance of God's forgiveness in our own lives. Remember that when you forgive someone, you are not condoning their behavior nor denying that the behavior has harmed you. You are not inviting the other person to harm you again. You are releasing your bitterness and resentment towards that person so that those emotions no longer cause you pain or interfere in your relationship with God. Forgiveness is a choice made despite the pain. Yes, it's acceptable to make boundaries between yourself and the person who has harmed you in order to process your emotions and seek healing. Proverbs 11:14 also tells us to seek wise counsel in such situations. Friends, mentors, and pastors can offer prayer, encouragement, and objective advice. Prayer connects us to the Holy Spirit's presence, so pray to the Spirit for patience, wisdom, strength, grace, and understanding to handle the situation. How many times are we required to forgive others? The Bible tells us "seventy times seven times" (Matthew 18:22).

Approach conflicts with humility, trying to identify the underlying issues that fuel the conflict. Strive to find a mutually acceptable solution. Keep forgiveness and reconciliation as your priority. Alas, even with our best efforts, reconciliation in a relationship may not always be possible. In such cases, we can only offer the matter up to God's hands and trust that He is still working even when we are feeling pain and brokenness. We are called to choose grace and compassion and love instead of resentment. The great reward is the chance to experience God's peace which comes from such humility.

Another crucial aspect of daily Christian living is ethical decision-making. This begins with a foundation of knowing biblical scripture and an unwavering commitment to living by its truth. We have seen before that Christianity is not about legalism (this was the trapping of the Pharisees and Sadducees which Jesus denounced).



We have also seen that good works and good behavior is not the means of obtaining salvation. Jesus accomplished our salvation by His sacrifice on the cross. Our efforts to cultivate relationship with God and emulate Jesus in our daily living is our response of gratitude for God's grace in making a path to our forgiveness through Christ. Rather, the Bible is a moral compass that guides us according to God's expectations of believers. When we know the scriptures, we can begin to learn how to apply it to our daily lives.

Ethical living, as with all aspects of Christian life, begins with maintaining our regular habits of prayer and Bible study. Particular attention should be paid to the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20) and to the teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These are foundational principles for Christian ethics. There is one biblical passage that every Christian should commit to memory: ³⁶ *“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”* ³⁷ *Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”^[a]* ³⁸ *This is the first and greatest commandment.* ³⁹ *And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’^[b]* ⁴⁰ *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”* (Matthew 22:36-40).

In this passage, Jesus mentions the Law. We know that we are not under the Law anymore but rather under grace. Still, we should keep these instructions in the forefront of our minds because Jesus has said that these are the two guidelines for believers that are most important to God. In every decision that we make, we should seek the path which glorifies God and reflects His attributes (righteousness, justice, honesty, integrity, mercy, compassion, love). We should have the same regard for others that we have for ourselves (in other words “do unto others...”).

The book of Proverbs is a compilation of the wisdom of King Solomon (whose supernatural wisdom was a blessing from God). Believers can gain much insight on Christian ethics from the profound observations and advice within this book.





When we have a decision to make, we should bring it before God for His guidance (particularly when we are uncertain or conflicted over a course of action or hesitant because of pride or other personal ambitions). We must open our hearts to His guidance and seek discernment from the Spirit to recognize the path that aligns with God's will.

Dr. David Jeremiah recommends these steps to making ethical Christian decisions:

- 1) Remember that your best decisions will always reflect your values as a Christian. Your biblical values should always be the underpinning for your decisions.
- 2) Your best decisions are birthed in an atmosphere of prayer
- 3) Your best decisions heed the wisdom of others. Don't hesitate to consult with those who are mature in the faith and learn from their experience.
- 4) Don't make snap decisions on the spur of the moment. Your best decisions take time, understanding of the variables, and reflection.
- 5) Your best decisions are committed to God. Remember that when it comes to a question of "my will" or "thy will", God has your best interest at heart. We may not always understand the path that God sets before us, but He knows where we're going and the plans that He has for us. Living the life of a Christian is about seeking to glorify God, not to glorify ourselves.

Outside of our families, one aspect of our lives will challenge our Christian ethics almost every day: The workplace.

First of all, move away from the false sense that your spiritual life and your work life are two separate entities. They aren't. Our work is an integral part of our life's calling from God, even if we don't immediately recognize how our career serves His purposes. We can infuse our workplace tasks with our Christian integrity, honesty, and righteousness and demonstrate



Social justice is a topic that is in the forefront of modern culture. How does social justice align with justice in the biblical sense of the word? The scriptures do advocate for justice, mercy, and equality, though most biblical figures are usually on the receiving end of the worst kinds of social injustices (especially when their faith in God is at stake). Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, and later he was thrown in jail for a crime that he did not commit (but God used his situation to save countless lives in a time of severe famine). The prophets and apostles were beaten, abused, threatened, jailed, and quite often martyred for speaking God's truth. Conquering nations took Hebrews as captives and slaves. Esther was forced to become part of a harem (though God used her situation to facilitate saving the Jewish people from slaughter). Jesus ministered to many people who were sick, poor, or otherwise marginalized.

God's attributes, however, include righteousness and justice. His Law of Moses was founded on these principles. For example, some Hebrew people often had to sell themselves into slavery to settle debts. God established the Year of Jubilee as part of the Law, a year in which debts had to be forgiven, and Hebrew slaves had to be set free. This was to prevent families from remaining in a perpetual state of poverty and exploitations. God's Law also required us to be openhanded in giving to the poor and needy among us and Psalm 82 commands us to defend the weak, the poor, and the helpless among us. Leviticus tells us to be kind and welcoming to foreigners among us and to love them as ourselves. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan underscores that we are to love our neighbors...and as Christians the whole of mankind is to be regarded as our neighbors. Furthermore, He tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves. There's no ambiguity in that command. In Galatians 3:28, Paul makes it clear that God no longer makes a distinction between Jew or Gentile, between men or women, between those who are free and those who are slaves (and human trafficking is still very much a part of the modern world). Our worthiness in God's eyes is not determined by social status or gender or ethnicity. No tribe of man is considered unclean in God's eyes. Every person has the privilege to receive Jesus Christ as their Savior and be adopted into God's family.

the spiritual fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control during our workplace interactions. Conversely, we can slip into the sinful manifestations of anger, pride, greed, sloth, envy, gluttony, or lust when the workplace tempts and pushes us to our limits. Colossians 3:23 tells us to work diligently as though God Himself is our employer (because if you think about it, He really is our boss and we are His representatives in the world). Proverbs 11:1 tells us to practice fairness in all business activities. Ephesians 4:28 tells those who steal to instead seek honest work. Matthew 20:26-28 reminds us that true leadership means serving others, not holding authority over them.

The Apostle Paul made a point during his missionary journeys to always have some kind of employment. It was not his wish that he become a burden to the local congregations by having them financially support him (though it would have been his right as their spiritual leader to ask for their financial support). In 2 Thessalonians 3:10 he states that everyone should work if they are able to. In 1 Corinthians 10:31 Paul says our work motivations should not be money, power, or fame but only the glory of God. The Bible also reminds us that the Sabbath was established because God understands the importance of rest in our lives. This doesn't mean that you are doing wrong if you must work on the Sabbath day but be sure that you are taking your days off work for time to rest. A work-life balance is important. We must not neglect our families or friends or our spiritual disciplines. A holistic approach to spiritual life means finding time for rejuvenation and relationship with people and with God.

Integrity in the workplace means being honest in our dealings, ethical in our practices, and transparent in our actions. Maybe our boss doesn't see everything that we do or know what kind of feelings about work are in our hearts, but God knows and sees us. Integrity means that we don't compromise what we know is right for gain or personal advancement. This is the transformative power of faith on our hearts. Let us be people who are worthy of trust and respect in all that we do—at home or at work.



BIBLICAL PASSAGES ON THE SUBJECT OF SUFFERING:

Romans 8:7-21

Colossians 1:21

Ephesians 2:12

2 Corinthians 1:3-7

James 1:2-4

1 Peter 1:6-7

It helps also if we see our work as a chance to serve others (colleagues, customers, community) in a manner that reflects Christ. Contribute to the success of your workplace selflessly so that you might reflect God's compassion.

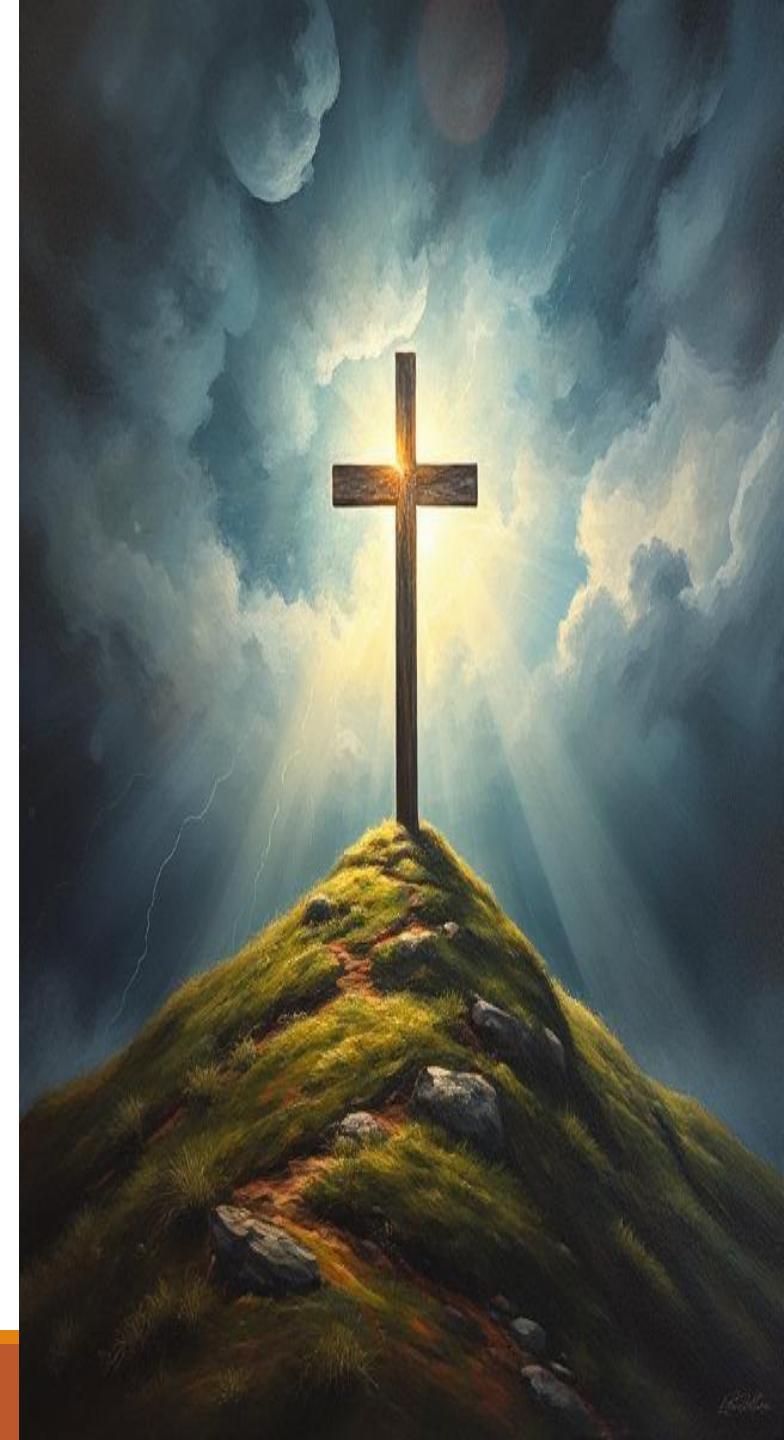
There is sometimes a misconception that giving our lives to God means an end to our problems and suffering. We need only look at the lives of the Apostles or the Book of Job to know that suffering is still very much a part of Christian life. Jesus explicitly warns us that we will have tribulations (meaning problems and suffering) in this world. He also promises that those who suffer, those who grieve and mourn, those who are persecuted will all one day be blessed by God in the Kingdom to come. There are people who turn from their faith over the subject of suffering, especially when it comes to areas like childhood diseases and mortality, grief for loved ones, homelessness, famine, murder, terrorism, and other forms of suffering in the world. Always it circles back to the question of "Why?" More specifically, it circles back to the question of "Why does God allow suffering?" This is a question that is beyond human limits to fully discern, even with the help of scripture. If a person's mind is closed and their heart is hardened, there is no answer that can bring them peace. If a person is open-minded to God's Word, it can provide some guidance for accepting the suffering that we encounter in the world.

Sin is sometimes the result of the actions of others; other times it is a result of choices that we make (especially the choices to sin). Other times suffering is a result of the broken condition of creation (suffering due to natural disasters, for example). Remember that the world still exists in a fallen condition where wickedness is pervasive. The fall of mankind with Adam and Eve brought sin, suffering, and death into the world. Sin has made the world innately hostile towards God and towards those who believe in Him. People have the freedom to choose to do evil as much as they have the freedom to choose good. As Christians, we need to look to the perspective of God and the cross of Christ when we consider the topic of suffering. It is not God's desire nor intention to leave us at the mercy of a broken, sinful world. He has established redemption history to give us hope for a time when suffering will end.

God did not intend for us to live in a world of sin, nor does He wish to leave us in this broken condition. Jesus came to earth in the flesh and suffered the punishment due to us for sin. Jesus took all suffering upon Himself in His excruciating death on the cross. By His sacrifice, we have the assurance that there will come a day when there will be an end to sin, suffering, and death. God has appointed a time for the return of Christ and the end to suffering. In the meanwhile, believers hold to the hope for this time. We know that the wait is only because God desires that everyone hear the message of the Gospel and have the chance to receive Christ (for those who do not will experience the worst kind of suffering: Eternal separation from God).

God sometimes allows suffering as a tool to build our faith in His ability to provide for us and deliver us, to sharpen us and strengthen us so that we can serve His specific purpose in this world (a person who knows hunger will have compassion for those who are still hungry; a person who knows persecution will advocate for justice and mercy for others; a person who has succumbed to the temptations of the flesh and knows the trappings of sins can mentor another person through the process of escaping and healing from such trappings). God also gives us the Holy Spirit to indwell us, offering us comfort and enlightenment in the middle of our suffering, transforming our hearts so that we can trust God and lean on the hope given to us through Jesus Christ in such times. God has given us the body of believers to come alongside us, to comfort and support and guide us during such times. God is near to us to hear our prayers as we pour out our hearts to Him during such times. He wants us to draw near to Him out of trust and love during such times.

Believers have to hold to the truth that suffering is not in vain. We can use suffering as an opportunity to draw near to God as much as others use it as an excuse to turn away from faith. We can trust God in faith and recognition that He is sovereign and that He loves us even when our circumstances seem hopeless.





What should we do during those seasons of “spiritual aridity” or “spiritual dryness” (the times where we feel distance from God and emptiness where there is normally vibrant faith and joy)? First of all, do not become discouraged or perceive this as a sign that you are failing God or that you lack devotion to God. Every believer has such moments, whether they admit to it or not. It manifests in different ways, whether it’s lack of enthusiasm for prayer, feeling disconnected from our spiritual family, lack of interest in spiritual activities or service, or an overall sense of apathy and feeling lost. Perhaps you have become burned out under the weight of demands from family, work, ministry, and social obligations and are now just depleted, too exhausted to invest in our relationship with God or engage in the practices which nourish our souls. Perhaps we are feeling discouraged by recent life challenges, hardships, or illnesses. Perhaps we are experiencing doubt.

Spiritual apathy is natural, but it can also erode our passion and zeal for our relationship with God. It can even cause us to fall away from God altogether. Overcoming this kind of spiritual dryness requires a proactive approach to reconnect with God and reignite our spiritual passion.

Get back to basics: Prayer and Bible study. Do so with intentionality. Do not rush through these activities, but spend time with God (yes, it’s okay to merely sit quietly and reflect on God’s Word, on our experiences with God, and to surrender our anxieties to Him. Spend some time in nature, considering the miracle of God’s creation. Engage in prayer during such outings. Confide your struggles with a trusted spiritual mentor. Chances are that mentor has also experienced such times and has insights to share. Avoid self-criticism or judgment during this time---you are a human being. God understands this, and His love for you is unwavering. During such times of spiritual lows, it is important that we lean more heavily on God rather than allowing ourselves to drift further from Him. These times are not failures but opportunities to rebuild a faith that is even stronger and richer than before.



Intentionality on our part is a necessary part of enduring and healing from sufferings. With intention, we go to God in prayer, and with intention we open our minds and hearts to God instead of shutting Him out. With intention, we turn to the Bible, God's Word, to guide us during our sufferings. With intention, we open ourselves to other believers as we suffer, allowing them to help, encourage, and advise us in our sufferings. We cannot choose whether we will suffer in this world, but we have the capacity to choose faith in response to such trials. We must trust in God's ultimate goodness in the bad times just as thoroughly as we trust Him during the good times.

Cultivating a heart of gratitude and focusing on God's faithfulness can also help us through times of spiritual aridity and suffering. Gratitude is simply acknowledging God's active presence and provision in our lives. It's a pillar upon which to build a more enduring faith and deeper relationship with God. It's navigating periods of blessings and periods of intense struggle with hope and confidence in our Father's goodness, faithfulness, and love for us.

There are simple and practical ways to practice gratitude. Take a moment each day to reflect on how God has blessed your life (it can be a big blessing or a small blessing, so long as it is recognition of His hand working in your life). Journaling about such blessings and answered prayers is a valuable tool in this process. It is also good to verbally express gratitude to God. This does not have to be something saved for designated prayer time, it can happen at spontaneous moments and in unexpected things. Extend this gratitude beyond your relationship with God by sharing it with people around you as well. It fosters deeper connection with people in our lives and creates ripples of positivity that uplifts our spirits as well as the mood of others. It might even give them a boost if they are privately struggling with their own period of spiritual aridity.

Another aspect of living in the body of Christ is the Great Commission—our call to witness for Christ in this world. We have examined how we serve as witnesses for Jesus just through the way in which we conduct our daily lives. However, we must always be prepared to speak about Jesus to others and give a reason for our faith in Him. *“But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect”* (1 Peter 3:15).

Jesus’ final words in the Book of Matthew are the Great Commission. Though they are addressed to the Apostles, they were commands to all who believe in Him for all generations that followed: Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. *17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”* (Matthew 28:16-20)



People sometimes assign a negative connotation to witnessing for Christ, imaging an aggressive evangelical campaign. Witnessing is not about aggressive proselytizing and imposing our convictions on others. Witnessing is about showing the world how the transformative power of Christ has changed your life. It means telling the story of how you came to the faith and how it impacted your life. It's about extended Christ's love and compassion in everything we do so that people do not just *hear* how we are changed but they see the love and joy of our relationship for themselves. When we are truly in a love relationship, it is natural to want to tell the world about our significant other. When we are happy, it is natural to want to share the source of our happiness so that others can experience it for themselves. Conversely, when we have been rescued from actions and lifestyles that could have caused us harm (eternal, unchangeable harm), it is also natural to want to warn others of the danger so that they might be saved. That is a natural response of love and concern for our neighbors. Personal testimony is a powerful component of sharing the Gospel.

Apart from the way that we conduct our lives every day, there possible ways we might witness are as diverse as the church body. Every person will approach it differently. Yes, some people will want to stand on the street corner proclaiming their faith, and that's fine. Some people might take to social media and share their stories of faith. Others might want to teach children's classes at the church or perform community services in the name of the church (and by extension in the name of the Lord). I will tell you this: If even one person receives Jesus because of your influence on their lives, then you have fulfilled your role in the Great Commission. Every single believer has a way that he or she can share Jesus effectively with the world.

Consider first the natural audience for your witness. Think of the people you see most frequently, the ones with whom you have perhaps earned some trust and respect. How might you engage with this person in a conversation about Christ? Will your approach foster trust and open dialogue, or will they react with negativity or hostility? Find common ground and give honest responses to any questions they might ask. It's okay if you don't have all the answers.





Bear in mind the principles we have discussed for conflict resolution. Witnessing for Christ means that sometimes we will encourage people who will challenge us or even be hostile towards us. It is important to remain respectful, patient, and empathetic in these situations. Before you ever set out to witness, go back to the Holy Spirit in prayer for guidance. Respect the beliefs of other people (it doesn't mean that you are agreeing with them or condoning their behaviors, it simply means we are not appointed to judge others). Avoid accusatory language or condemnation of other people. Listen attentively and actively to what they are telling you. Think before you respond and always reply with gentleness and compassion. You are, after all, representing the Lord as His *imago dei*.

Preparation is important. We should always be thinking about our personal relationship with God and why we believe as strongly as we do. It's okay to make and memorize some key points, especially since we can never predict when an opportunity to witness might come our way.

Sharing the faith is not a one-time event. We will be witnesses for Jesus Christ for the rest of our lives. Our relationship with God is a lifelong journey of learning and growing. It is a process of highs and lows, moments of deep and abiding joy and times of doubt and soul-searching. Never forget that God is there alongside you in the highs and lows, ready to listen to our prayers and our questions. He loves us in our times of deep faith and in our times of suffering. If a relationship is real and worthwhile, it touches the deepest part of our soul where our emotions can be raw. God has given us a family of other believers to come alongside us, building us up when we need a hand. God has also given us to other believers so that we can carry them in their times of suffering and doubt. Together, the church body should always be a place of humility, love, compassion, support, teaching, correction, and spiritual growth. The world is watching us, particularly those who are unbelievers or unchurched. Whether it's right or not, they are evaluating Jesus by the lives of His believers. It's an amazing privilege and a sobering responsibility. Let us rise to the calling for which Jesus has chosen us. "*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*" (Micah 6:8)

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