

THE ABIDING CHALLENGE

WEEK NINE - DAY ONE

NEW COMMUNITY

KEY SCRIPTURE: John 15:12-13

READING: John 13:34; Mark 12:28-31; John 13:35; Ephesians 4:1-6

INTRODUCTION

“This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.” John 15:12-13 ESV

This commandment is so important that Jesus states it twice in His instructions to His disciples. In John 13:34 ESV, He said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” In Mark 12:28-31 NIV, Jesus spoke of what has come to be called the Greatest Commandment: “One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked Him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord Your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength’. ‘The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” NIV. Jesus went further to attest to the fact that He will only be seen and known by our love for one another. He says in John 13:35 NIV, “By this everyone will know that you are My disciples if you love one another.” The Lord is calling His bride into a community of love. He wants us to speak the language of love and be drawn and motivated by love. Hence, a community of Love!

What is a community? It is a feeling of fellowship as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals. As believers, no matter our backgrounds, ethnicities, or less frivolous – we can come alongside one another and seamlessly bond. No matter how great our differences may be, we share one commonality that is greater than all of them combined. The community we are talking about today isn’t the hub or town or county, or state where you live. I’m referring to that sense of community for which our souls long. Paul admonished the church in Ephesus with these words: *“As a prisoner for the Lord, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”* Ephesians 4:1-6 NIV

The new community is one body – Christ’s body. It is His sacrifice, not our strivings, that define us. It is His blood that relates to us, not the social construct of race, culture, or country. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an influential German Lutheran pastor and theologian, put it this way: “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this.” In other words, we are connected through Christ or not at all.

The Holy Spirit provides the atmosphere for a community to flourish because God is over all and through all, and in all. A new community where we each recognize Jesus as the Head and Lord A new community where the Holy Spirit unites our hearts

A new community where Abba Father is the Father of all

A new community where our language is Love”

A new community where “self” is replaced by “Us”, “We”

A new community where the love of God is flowing in and through each one and reaching our hurting and dying world. A new community where the world will be drawn into by God’s love. In conclusion, there are three reasons why the Christian Community is essential for new believers in Christ.

- Christian community driven by love helps each other walk with Christ
- Christian community driven by love welcomes accountability
- Christian community driven by love, encourages each other.

RESPOND

PRAYER

Lord, circumcise my heart

Lord, thank You for Your infallible word, which is so relevant to our lives today. Your Word is “alive and active.” Dear Holy Spirit, please open my eyes so I may see anything that is hindering my relationship with You and the community in which You have planted me. Reveal things, people, or attitudes of the heart that no longer nurture or nourish my walk with You or help my community. Please forgive me for the idols I place above You. Forgive me for not honoring You with my whole heart. Forgive my half-hearted devotion and misplaced affections. Please continue to guide me and teach me the truth of Your Word. May I not harden my heart when I hear Your voice, but rather circumcise those things in my heart that You’re asking me to let go of.

May my life be pleasing to You. Thank You for Your power and strength extended towards me to transform my heart. Lord Jesus, You are standing at the door of my heart, knocking, waiting for me to open. Lord, I open my heart to You today. Come in, Lord, and open the eyes of my heart so my devotion can be solely on You. I love You and praise You and worship Your Majesty.

In Jesus’ Name,

Amen.

THE ABIDING CHALLENGE

WEEK NINE - DAY TWO

SACRIFICIAL LOVE

KEY SCRIPTURE: John 15:13 Amp

READING: John 3:16; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 5:2, 25, 28; 1 John 3:16

INTRODUCTION

“No one has greater love [nor stronger commitment] than to lay down his own life for his friends.”
John 15:13 Amp

This greater love that Jesus was talking about is what I call sacrificial or divine love. It is an unselfish display of affection that will strengthen and improve any relationship. What is sacrificial love, and from where does it come? Before I answer the definition of sacrificial love, let's brush up on our knowledge of love according to ancient Greece. Ancient Greece spans the years 700 to 480 B.C. During this time, it was believed that there were four types of love:

Phileo, a brotherly love and compassion for others.

Storgē, a familial love, such as the bond between a parent and child.

Eros, which is linked to sexual, romantic love.

Agapē is a sacrificial love based on principle. This love is synonymous with unselfish behavior and intense affection.

The most prominent act of sacrificial or divine love spoken of in the scriptures is John 3:16 (ESV). *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* This, I believe, is the basis for divine love. Not only did God sacrifice His son as a ransom for humankind's sins, but Jesus Himself endured a painful death on a torture stake to save all. Other noteworthy verses about sacrificial love include: *“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* Romans 5:8 ESV

“Go on walking in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave Himself for us as an offering and a sacrifice, a sweet fragrance to God. Husbands, continue loving your wives, just as Christ also loved His Church (bride) and gave Himself up for her. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. A man who loves his wife loves himself.” Ephesians 5:2; 25, 28.

“I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Romans 12:1 ESV

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” 1 John 3:16 NIV

Examples of sacrificial love: As Christ demonstrated, sacrificial love is exemplified through selfless actions and putting the needs of others before one's own. Examples include supporting a

partner through a difficult time, making compromises for the well-being of the relationship, and making personal sacrifices to ensure the happiness of a loved one.

Why is sacrificial love so important? Sacrificial love is important because it fosters deep connections, trust, and emotional intimacy in relationships. It demonstrates a genuine commitment to the well-being and happiness of the other person, creating a foundation of love, understanding, and mutual support.

Sacrificial love is characterized by selflessness and putting the needs of others first, and it encompasses several essential qualities that strengthen relationships. Here are the five characteristics of sacrificial love:

1. Selflessness: Is prioritizing the well-being and happiness of others above your own desires and needs.

2. Empathy: Involves actively listening, seeking to understand the perspective of others, and offering support and compassion during challenging times.

3. Compromise: Is learning to adjust, and a willingness to find common ground for the benefit of the common good.

4. Patience and forgiveness: Are key elements of sacrificial love, recognizing that we all make mistakes and have shortcomings. You have patience because God is patient with you. You forgive because you have been forgiven.

5. Commitment: Means being steadfast through ups and downs, weathering challenges together, and actively investing in the growth and happiness of others.

RESPOND

Pray to be filled with sacrificial love, based on 1 John 3:16: *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”*

PRAYER

Dear Lord Jesus,

You’re the definition of love. Your sacrifice on the cross is the gold standard for sacrificially loving others. Lord, living a life of service and speaking the truth is where the rubber meets the road. So, start with me. Give me Your heart and activate Your love in me. May I see people saved and unsaved through Your eyes. Forgive my prejudices and fill me with a love that will step up and meet that need. In every relationship, may the example of Jesus on the cross compel me to love sacrificially. Help me to be a standard bearer in my home, church, work, and community. I long to exemplify Your love today. I ask this in Your name, because You are the source and giver of love.

In Jesus’ name,

Amen.

THE ABIDING CHALLENGE

WEEK NINE - DAY THREE

LOVE FOR THE LOST

KEY SCRIPTURE: Galatians 1:3-5

READING: John 10:17-18; Matthew 28:19-20a; Luke 15:7; 1 Timothy 2:3-4

INTRODUCTION

“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” Galatians 1:3-5 NIV

Jesus said in John 10:17-18 ESV, *“For this reason, the Father loves Me because I lay down My life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have the authority to lay it down, and I have the authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from My Father.”* Jesus laid down His life because He loved. At Calvary, the cross of Christ became an eternal emblem of love. Jesus never lost sight of God’s purpose for His life. Everything He learned from the Father was in preparation for this moment. As Scripture tells us in John 15:13 NIV *“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”* Jesus not only laid down His life for those who loved Him, He laid it down for all men — even those who rejected Him. The Lord has commissioned us to make disciples of all nations.

“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Matthew 28:19-20a CSB

The book of Luke has a similar message: *“I tell you, in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous people who don’t need repentance.” Luke 15:7 CSB*

There is rejoicing in heaven when the people we share Christ with receive Him as their Lord and Savior. Just imagine: We get to participate in one of the most exciting celebrations happening in heaven when a soul is saved.

ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT THE GREAT COMMISSION?

Prayer is one way to cultivate a heart for the lost. Our prayer should be ... *“Lord, give me a heart for the lost.”* We need to pray for the heart of love for the lost and the heart of boldness to reach out to the lost. One thing we must remember is that we were once lost. God extended His grace and mercy towards us, and now we are saved and heaven-bound. This should give you a heart for the lost, who are hell bound. 1 Timothy 2:4 NKJV tells us that God *“desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”* As a believer, you can share His heart for the lost and have a part in the salvation of those around you! Salvation is a gift that God freely offers, but each individual must make the choice to receive it. While no one can make decisions for their unsaved friends, neighbors, and family members, there are definitely some things you can do.

Develop God's heart for them: That means you should recognize their value the way God does and have a sense of urgency that keeps you from giving up on them.

Pray: You can pray that God will send people to you to share the gospel and show them His love. You can also pray that their eyes will be opened so they can see and know God and receive all He has for them (Ephesians 1:16-19).

Check your attitude: It is easy to be judgmental when the people we care about are slow to change. A condemning attitude can also hinder our witnessing.

Live a life that reflects who God is to you: Our actions generally speak louder than our words. Even though our friends and, especially, our families have seen our faults, how we live our lives is still often the best form of evangelism.

Put faith into words: Our friends and relatives often do not respond well to our preaching or constantly telling them what God says. But 1 Peter 3:15 TLB tells us, "...if anybody asks why you believe as you do, be ready to tell him, and do it gently and respectfully."

RESPOND

Love For The Lost

Lord, it is hard to imagine the depth of Your love for me. Thank You for dying for me. Lord, many are still in darkness, and Father, You desire all to be saved and to know the truth, which is on my heart also. Give me a heart for the lost and the desire to pray for souls. Lord, You said to Your disciples and us today, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore, beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest." (Matthew 9:37-38 NASB1995). Lord of the harvest, awaken my heart more fully and move upon the hearts of those who have yet to discover their usefulness in the amazing harvest that is ripe and ready to be gathered. Give us compassion for those who are lost! Lord God Almighty, touch my heart so that it longs for the salvation of every person in every nation on earth. May Your Spirit deepen my anguish over those lost in darkness. I cry out to You to give Jesus His inheritance – the ends of the earth!

I pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

THE ABIDING CHALLENGE

WEEK NINE - DAY FOUR

THE SPIRIT OF UNITY IN A COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS

KEY SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 4:3-6

READING: Ephesians 4:1–3; Philippians 2:3; 1 Peter 3:8; 1 Peter 5:5

INTRODUCTION

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Ephesians 4:3-6 NIV

The Spirit of Unity is the role of the Holy Spirit in creating unity among Christians. The Spirit of Unity is supernatural and is maintained by the power of the Spirit alone. Divisions and splits have threatened the church from its inception to the present day. Different factions in the church are common all around the world. The Apostle Paul tackles this problem of disunity here in Ephesians 4, even though there is no reference to divisions in the church in Ephesus. However, when Paul spoke to the elders of the church for the last time, the apostle pleaded with them to stay alert to the oncoming attacks against the church. In Ephesians 4, Paul pivots from his focus on doctrine to right living, emphasizing the believer’s responsibility to live in a manner worthy of God’s call in Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 4:1–3 NKJV, he urges church members always to be humble, gentle, and patient, “bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The word Paul uses here for “unity” (**henotēs** in Greek) refers to a condition of harmony or oneness that can only be experienced among members of Christ’s body — the church. This unity already exists as a spiritual reality through the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life. Unity of the Spirit comes from God, but its expression can be destroyed by humans and, therefore, must be guarded and maintained. In Ephesians 4:2, Paul offers four qualities that, when cultivated in the believer’s life, will help keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in the church. They are **humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance**, or “**bearing with one another in love.**”

Walking in **humility** means remembering to keep Jesus first, other people second, and ourselves last. We “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” but instead consider the wants and needs of others above our own (Philippians 2:3). The apostle Peter stresses the value of humility for maintaining relational unity and peace, encouraging all believers to “be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble” (1 Peter 3:8). “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble’.” (1 Peter 5:5). Gentleness causes one to act in a manner that is meek, mild, and even-

tempered. It is closely associated with self-control (Galatians 5:23) Jesus described Himself as “gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29). In a similar holding back of power, patience requires the discipline to endure suffering or discomfort without striking back (Colossians 1:11). Forbearance or “bearing with one another in love” is a character trait inextricably linked with love. All the qualities that contribute to keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace are associated with love: *“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its way; it is not irritable or resentful. ... Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”* 1 Corinthians 13:4–8 ESV. Indeed, cultivating love is the core component to keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace:

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you have a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.” Colossians 3:12–15 NIV

RESPOND PRAYER

Praying for Unity of the Spirit

“I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.” 1 Corinthians 1:10 NLT

Heavenly Father,

Your Word says “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity (Psalm 133:1)!” Oh God, help me endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Let me not be carnal and walk in envy, strife, and divisions. Lord, fill me with Your Spirit of love and unity for all. For if we love life and want to see good days, we must keep our tongues from speaking evil, and our lips from telling lies (1 Peter 3:10). Help me, Lord, always turn away from evil, doing good instead, seeking peace, and working to maintain it (1 Peter 3:11). For I know that Your eyes, Mighty God, are over the righteous and Your ears are open unto their prayers: but Your face is against those who do evil (1 Peter 3:12).

Holy Spirit, I ask You to fill me with the knowledge of Your will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. Help me to walk worthy and fully pleasing before You. Teach me how to live together in unity. Lord, I ask for Your peace, for the unity of Your Spirit in the bond of peace. I ask this in Jesus’ Mighty Name. Amen.

THE ABIDING CHALLENGE

WEEK NINE - DAY FIVE

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH EACH OTHER

KEY SCRIPTURE: Philippians 2:3

READING: Matthew 5:16; Matthew 7:12; Deuteronomy 7:6; Ephesians 4:32

INTRODUCTION

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.” Philippians 2:3 NIV

The Bible has much to say about human behavior and the way we should treat each other. There are thousands of specific directions for doing so, but they can all be summarized in what we know as the “Golden Rule.” Jesus said, *“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”* Matthew 7:12 NIV. When we treat others as we want to be treated, we will be honest, kind, trustworthy, and loving. We all need honesty and kindness from other people, so we should be equally concerned with giving those things to others. When God first gave the law to Moses, He included hundreds of instructions about the way the Israelites were to treat each other (Leviticus 18:3; 20:23; Deuteronomy 18:9). They were immersed in a world that was violent, godless, and wicked. When God chose them to be His holy people, set apart for Himself, He was very specific about what was allowed and what was forbidden (Isaiah 41:8–10; Deuteronomy 7:6; Exodus 19:6). When asked about the greatest commandment, 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.

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Ephesians 4:32 NIV. These words from the Apostle Paul are easy to read yet difficult to live out. As forgiven people, it should take little effort to show kindness, compassion, and forgiveness to one another. So why do we struggle so much in this area? In a world that seems to be increasingly polarized and angry, the Church should shine out as an example of how to live differently; how to live in kindness and compassion.

As we seek Christ, our attitudes toward one another should become like His. We should love and care for the people He has redeemed as His own. As we grow in our walk with Him, may we find ways to complement others. Show compassion instead of judgment. Give as has been given unto us. Offer help when we know there is a need.

Treating others as we would be treated means we must be willing to set aside our own preferences, rights, and desires in order to serve those in our lives. As a mother loses sleep, sacrifices financially, and cares for the children she loves, so are we to give up our own comforts for the good of others. Jesus did exactly that. When our focus is on treating others as Jesus would, we don’t need a hundred specific laws telling us what not to do. A heart filled with the love of God would never treat others that way. When the heart is right, the right actions will follow (1 Peter 1:22).

RESPOND

PRAYER

Dear Lord,

I thank You for Your grace toward me. Forgive me for the ways I have treated others. I accept that there are times when I am selfish and self-seeking, putting my own desires before others. God, I ask that You help me to be considerate and aware of the time when my choices affect other people. Lord, help my life to be a testimony to Your goodness. Teach me how to interact with others in a way that would draw them back to You. Lord, I want my light to shine before men, that they may see my good works, and glorify You, Abba Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

Bring your conviction when I am off course and need to change how I treat others. Help me to be a worthy ambassador. Use me to share the Gospel with others through my words and actions. I am believing for many to come to know You through my actions. Show me how my life can be a part of sharing your Word.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.