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Atlanta’s been my home for a long time, but I’ve served as pastor at various churches in different parts of the country. From Ohio to Florida, I’ve had to forge a lot of new relationships, both in churches and in communities. Getting to know people can be difficult, but it brings great blessings.

Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matt. 5:14). This is a good basis to understand the role of relationships for the church. To be a bright beacon, a city should not be a place where isolated residents go about life, barely having contact with one other. Nor should it seem closed off to outsiders. Such a city should be built on cooperation, welcoming visitors, and being known and loved in the region. I believe this is what our Lord meant for His church when He compared His disciples to a well-lit city.

This year, as we continue to explore different aspects of being the whole church, I hope you come to understand how special you are to your heavenly Father and embrace His plans for you. My prayer is that over next few months you will begin to experience deepening friendships in God’s house and become a growing witness in your neighborhood.
Gathering around an elaborate table to enjoy a delicious meal. Laughing and playing games with the children you love. Worshipping on a Sunday morning, surrounded by other believers. For many of us, these images may seem familiar, conjuring feelings of fellowship and hospitality. But for others, they may evoke a sense of longing.

We all want to have consistent, positive relationships. And when that becomes a reality for us, we may not see a need to create room for new faces—whether in our local congregation or beyond the walls of the church. But there are people all around us who feel isolated and lonely. People who are hoping to find a place where they belong. People who are looking to us for a sign that they’re welcome.

What would happen if you were to focus on building intimate connections with the people in your congregation—regardless of whether you share hobbies and interests, have the same background, or are currently in the same season of life? What would it look like for you to extend to your neighbors the same gracious welcome Jesus has offered you?

In this volume of the Whole Church Guide, we’ll explore what it means to be connected to the body of Christ in three essential ways—fostering relationships, welcoming outsiders, and strengthening the kingdom of God.

Each of us is called to this work of building community and receiving others. If we don’t take up this calling, we’ll miss out on an important part of the Christian life and all the blessings that come with it. This work isn’t just an act of service we offer others; it isn’t merely some good deed or holy obligation. It’s for us, too—essential to our wholeness, joy, and sense of belonging.
Picture a group of friends in an animated exchange. Their relationship is vibrant, and the enthusiasm they share for being together makes us want to be a part of it—or have something like it in our life. It's easy to think of an exclusive group like the “popular kids” in school, but instead, imagine a group that loves and understands each other well. Do you have relationships like this in your life?

Throughout the world, friendships and connections grow out of shared interests. But when we are in community with other Christians, whether at church or outside of it, we have something more magnificent in common than any shared passion or hobby. Scripture tells us that the church is the body and bride of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; 5:25-27) and we were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). But to understand what it means to be in grace-filled, life-giving community with other believers, we should look to the Trinity.

God has presented a perfect model of fellowship in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, existing eternally as three distinct persons who relate to each other in love. And we are made in Their likeness—sons and daughters built for relationship that reflects this divine community.

Think about the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Is there something that keeps us from echoing this in our relationship with God and cultivating the connections we have with fellow believers? What does it look like to reflect and project the love that radiates from the Trinity?

Heavenly Father,

I thank You for all that You have given me in your Son Jesus Christ, my Redeemer and truest friend. You have modeled what true Christian community looks like. Help me cultivate that in my life. Guide me, Lord, as I pursue deeper connections with fellow believers. Holy Spirit, show me where I can confide in and draw closer to others, and show me, too, how to share Your love with those who are opening their life or heart to me. I humbly ask for Your guidance in relationships where You would have me seek reconciliation and forgiveness. Help me orient my life around loving others as You have commanded. Amen.

Use this prayer, or let it inspire one in your own words, as you move through the weekly reflections in the following section.
WHAT DO YOU LEAVE OUT OF YOUR PRAYERS?

Many Christians hold back from telling God everything. Sometimes it’s because we feel our burdens are too insignificant or because we aren’t yet ready to invite the Lord into a specific area of our life. But in order to move toward intimate connection with other believers, we have to learn to be completely open with God. He already knows and sees everything, and He continues to love us. It’s up to us to approach Him with trust and transparency.

Jesus modeled what this looks like. Although He was equal to God and worthy of all honor, He willingly chose to make Himself weak—even to the point of dishonor—for those He loved. As we imitate Christ and open ourselves to deeper connection with the infinite and personal God who loves us, we have the opportunity to commune together with this same kind of radical vulnerability. He makes all things possible.
TRY THIS

Think of one or two areas of your life where you would like a deeper connection with the Lord. Consider things like identity, conversations at work, or past experiences. When you pray this week, imagine opening the door to every part of your life and inviting Him in.

KEY VERSES

“DRAW NEAR TO GOD AND HE WILL DRAW NEAR TO YOU.”
—JAMES 4:8

“LET US LOVE ONE ANOTHER, FOR LOVE IS FROM GOD; AND EVERYONE WHO LOVES IS BORN OF GOD AND KNOWS GOD. THE ONE WHO DOES NOT LOVE DOES NOT KNOW GOD, FOR GOD IS LOVE. BY THIS THE LOVE OF GOD WAS MANIFESTED IN US, THAT GOD HAS SENT HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON INTO THE WORLD SO THAT WE MIGHT LIVE THROUGH HIM. IN THIS IS LOVE, NOT THAT WE LOVED GOD, BUT THAT HE LOVED US AND SENT HIS SON TO BE THE PROPITIATION FOR OUR SINS. BELOVED, IF GOD SO LOVED US, WE ALSO OUGHT TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER.” —1 JOHN 4:7-11

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

➔ Christ gave us the commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” He also said to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37, 39). How do you think your relationship with the Lord is expressed in the relationships you have with your “neighbors”—within and outside of church? Can you think of any specific examples?
IT’S A BLESSING WHEN A FRIEND shares with us in a way that draws us closer—not only to him or her but also closer to Jesus. Early Celtic believers called a relationship like this a “soul friend.” These unique friendships were oriented around spiritual growth—encouraging, confiding in, and walking toward Christ with one another. These friends know you and relate to you on a deep spiritual level, and together you can work to “spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24 NIV).

It isn’t always easy to be open and honest, even with other believers. But much like our relationship with God, an intimate friendship requires revealing our true self in trust and love. This usually means inviting one another into the ups and downs—the messy places. That kind of vulnerability may lead others to feel as if they can share with us: Confiding in a beloved friend often propels one’s own desire to be more open in the relationship, building trust and deepening the connection. It’s an incredible gift to see God at work in one another’s life.
TRY THIS

Think about your friendships with other believers. Is there anyone in your life whom you could call a “soul friend”? If there isn’t, think of someone who has the potential to be that kind of companion. Ask him or her to read a Christian book or do a Bible study with you.

KEY VERSES

“THEREFORE IF THERE IS ANY ENCOURAGEMENT IN CHRIST, IF THERE IS ANY CONSOLATION OF LOVE, IF THERE IS ANY FELLOWSHIP OF THE SPIRIT, IF ANY AFFECTION AND COMPASSION, MAKE MY JOY COMPLETE BY BEING OF THE SAME MIND, MAINTAINING THE SAME LOVE, UNITED IN SPIRIT, INTENT ON ONE PURPOSE.” —PHILIPPIANS 2:1-2

“This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.” —JOHN 15:12

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ In your closest friendships, how do you encourage one another spiritually?

→ What does it look like to “spur one another on toward love and good deeds”? 
IN TODAY’S DIGITAL LANDSCAPE, communities aren’t limited by geography. We now have access to people around the world who share our passions, and we can connect with them from anywhere. This kind of community-building innovation is unprecedented, but God calls Christians to a specific kind of fellowship:

Our common bond is God’s saving grace.

Jesus knew authentic community was important and surrounded Himself with a small group of disciples to minister and serve with Him. The Greek word most often used in Scripture for Christian community is koinonia, which expresses sharing life with such significant depth and intimacy that it’s almost untranslatable.

This is the word John uses when he says, “What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). What might it look like to joyfully encourage this kind of genuine, intimate connection to develop?
TRY THIS

Consider what steps you can take to cultivate this kind of tight-knit spiritual community (koinonia) in your life. Write the names of one or two people you could serve or encourage this week, and how you might do it. Try to think of a fellow believer you might not normally run into at church or in a social setting.

KEY VERSE

“They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer . . . day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.” —Acts 2:42, 46

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ What does true fellowship look like to you? How does your life reflect this kind of community—in other words, this eternal, spiritual family?

→ Do you have relationships that are grounded in the unifying love of Christ, even if you aren’t in the same social circles?
Imagine what the world would be like if Christians used their lives to truly serve one another. And if through this service, we could express who God is—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to those who don’t know Him. This isn’t just a nice thought. It’s the calling on the life of each believer.

God created us in His image as relational beings, and this is true whether we have already found salvation in Christ or are still on that journey. But truly serving God through service to others can happen only after you’ve been freed by His forgiveness and grace.

In Galatians, Paul reminds us that we are called to freedom. He continues by cautioning us not to use our freedom as an opportunity to indulge our flesh—instead encouraging us to serve one another through love (5:13). What does it look like to set aside our own desires and pleasures, serving eagerly and enthusiastically out of love for Jesus and gratitude for all He has done?
TRY THIS

After washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus tells us to follow His example (John 13:15). As you go about your week, look for opportunities to serve people around you. Maybe it’s offering to lend a hand to a neighbor doing yard work, helping someone carry groceries to the car, or taking a meal to a family with a new baby. Gestures don’t have to be grand in the eyes of the world—God can multiply small efforts for His purpose.

KEY VERSES

“WHATEVER YOU DO, DO YOUR WORK HEARTILY, AS FOR THE LORD RATHER THAN FOR MEN, KNOWING THAT FROM THE LORD YOU WILL RECEIVE THE REWARD OF THE INHERITANCE. IT IS THE LORD CHRIST WHOM YOU SERVE.” —COLOSSIANS 3:23-24

“FOR EVEN THE SON OF MAN DID NOT COME TO BE SERVED, BUT TO SERVE, AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE A RANSOM FOR MANY.” —MARK 10:45

“SERVE THE LORD WITH GLADNESS; COME BEFORE HIM WITH JOYFUL SINGING.” —PSALM 100:2

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ How do you feel when you serve others?

→ What does it look like to let go of any desires for reciprocity and allow God’s delight to be your reward?
Though the Father created us for Himself, He also wants us to have eternal relationships with others. And it is through those connections that we actively live out what He is teaching us.

—Charles F. Stanley, Standing Strong
Together for Good
It’s an uncomfortable reality, but there are many families and students in our suburbs and schools who are homeless. They wear the burden quietly, fitting in but feeling very different. Today, a substantial number of American families can be undone by a single unexpected occurrence: a car accident, reduced hours at work, medical emergencies. Yet through ministries like Family Promise of Gwinnett County, Georgia, dozens of families each year get a leg up, even a fresh start.

Through a network of over 40 churches, families experiencing homelessness can enroll in the Family Promise program and, each week they participate, receive a warm dinner, beds to sleep in, and a carry-out breakfast in the morning. “Most never expected to be here,” said Margaret Leeper, a program volunteer at Westminster Presbyterian. “And once you are—how do you catch up?” The program succeeds because of churches willing to open their doors, and volunteers willing to open their hearts. Up to eight families can be accommodated at once, each for as long as 90 days, moving from one hosting church to another week by week—a strategy that prevents any one congregation from overextending its resources.

A 4-year-old in pink, wearing a set of fairy wings and a birthday crown, shuffled out of the rain and into Gwinnett Community Church. In a small, tired voice she said, “I want a cupcake.” Yesterday she celebrated her birthday here. The girl, with her mother and older sisters, moved from Illinois to help the girls’ aunt after her surgery. But when the landlord discovered the extra occupants, this family of four was given 10 days to move out. Now they sleep in area churches, moving to a new one each week. The
Living faith

little girl’s mother said, “It’s the first time in my life I’ve needed assistance.”

With the churches providing meals and lodging, working parents save significant portions of their income toward a more permanent housing solution, reliable transportation, and future emergencies. “They are such wonderful people, and they just need a little help,” said Roxanne Houppert, volunteering for Oak Road Lutheran. “I love coming and helping with these children. I don’t have any small children in my life.”

Not only does the program benefit the families, but it’s also connecting churches from different denominations. Some don’t have the space to accommodate three or four families, while others lack volunteers. “Our church is much smaller than it used to be,” said Leeper. “But we’re working together with other churches. That’s a life-saver.”

At another congregation, hand-drawn signs decorate the children’s worship area, a bounty of fruit, grits, and cereal bars spread out for the next morning. Four boys toss a foam football, becoming fast friends. As they move on to the next church together, their families are given a card that reads, “You came as our guest and leave as our friend. Know that you are always welcome at McKendree United Methodist.”

Families do return. Mothers stop by, beaming with the news that they now have a house of their own. One program graduate got a job as a chef. A teenager dropped in to say he’d been accepted to West Point. And at Gwinnett Community, a former program family is now absorbed into the life of the church.

As for the church coordinators, they have to fill as many as 50 slots—from bringing meals to spending nights—a herculean task for a small congregation like Suwanee First United Methodist. “I don’t know how God makes it work,” said Jeanette Price, “but it works.” As these volunteers learn to serve people in their community, they faithfully demonstrate Christ’s love, bringing life and hope to families not unlike their own.
WE ALL HAVE PEOPLE IN OUR LIFE who are difficult to interact with—a parent, neighbor, colleague, boss, or even one of our own children. (Some of us are those difficult people in the lives of others.) As we navigate these relationships, it’s hard to believe that God has these individuals in our life for a specific purpose. And it feels practically impossible to forgive if we have been hurt by them.

Because of our human nature, we are naturally inclined to make excuses for our own faults and blame others, seeking grace for ourselves and justice—or even revenge—when others commit the same offense. So to forgive as God forgives us is truly an act of faith. It requires us to let go of our resentment and accept that God is the only one who can change another person.
TRY THIS

Think about one difficult relationship in your life. Practice praying for this person daily, asking God for the grace to see everyone, but especially that particularly difficult person, as a gift and image-bearer of God. As you pray, also ask the Holy Spirit to draw more patience, kindness, and love out of you toward this person.

KEY VERSES

“PUT ON A HEART OF COMPASSION, KINDNESS, HUMILITY, GENTLENESS AND PATIENCE: BEARING WITH ONE ANOTHER, AND FORGIVING EACH OTHER ... JUST AS THE LORD FORGAVE YOU, SO ALSO SHOULD YOU.”
—COLOSSIANS 3:12–13

“But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either.”
—LUKE 6:27–29

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ Have there been times in your life when you have needed and received forgiveness?

→ When someone wrongs us, what should it look like to entrust justice and the consequences to God?
For authentic Christian community to flourish, we have to shift the focus away from ourselves and toward loving each other the way Jesus loves us. But that’s easier said than done.

If we’re being honest, many of us struggle with accepting or offering love in our relationships with other people. Even before Jesus revealed the truth of Himself to humankind, we see that there was a need to be reminded constantly of God’s unchanging love. In Psalm 136, for example, the psalmist reminds us 26 times that “His love endures forever” (NIV).

We can take comfort in knowing that we don’t have to figure out how to love like this on our own. God calls us into relationship with Him so that we can understand His love and share it with the world. This connection with the Lord guides our relationships with fellow believers. Whether we are within the four walls of a church or on the streets of the neighborhoods around it, we have many opportunities to connect with one another in meaningful and even life-changing ways.

This month, we explored how our relationship with God informs the depth of our connection with other believers. As we shift our focus from relationships within our own communities to welcoming those who are new or not a part of our congregations, continue to ask God to show you more about what it means to be in Christian community. He is present in all of our interactions with one another—something we’ll take a closer look at in the coming month.
When are you the most like God?

When you are loving somebody.

—Charles F. Stanley, “Created to Be Lovers”
The Whole Church: How Do We Welcome the Outsider?
Imagine this: You’re washing dishes when family members or close friends drive up. In all likelihood, you’d stop what you’re doing and go greet them. You might even insist they stay for dinner. Now picture this scene with strangers approaching your door instead of someone you know. Would you still rush to greet them and urge them to join you for a meal?

That’s precisely what happened in Genesis 18 when unexpected visitors appeared in front of Abraham and Sarah’s home. Biblical scholars disagree about who these three visitors were—some say they were angels, messengers sent by the Lord. But for now, we can shift our focus away from who they were and what message they brought. Instead, let’s focus on the way Abraham and Sarah responded.

When Abraham noticed the men, he ran to them and insisted they take time to rest and refresh themselves. Then he hurried to prepare a meal, including a choice calf from his herd. Finally, after his guests had eaten and rested, Abraham walked them out—stepping away from the comfort and safety of his own home—to make sure they found their way safely.

This story is just one of many biblical examples of hospitality, and it’s helpful because it clearly shows how God wants His people to act. Although Abraham and Sarah weren’t expecting visitors, they were still quick to greet them with an offer of rest and comfort.

God has commanded us to extend kindness to others, but what does that look like? What would happen if we tried to imitate Abraham and Sarah, not just at home but in our churches and neighborhoods?

*Heavenly Father,*

Your kindness, love, and sacrifice have given me an example to follow in my own life. Help me reflect those attributes in my interactions with others. Lord, give me eyes to see the needs of people around me and, if it’s Your will, to meet them with generosity. I pray You would give me a heart full of love for my neighbors as well as the strangers I meet. Fill me, Holy Spirit, with courage to risk loving my enemies, and show me opportunities to be more welcoming.

Help me to be an extension of Your hospitality in the world. Amen.
Throughout Scripture, the Lord makes it clear that hospitality is a requirement, not a request. We are called to graciously welcome people. But hospitality is more than entertaining guests at Thanksgiving and Christmas. It’s a way of living and interacting with the people around us all year long, making a way to accommodate them when they show up. It’s about letting them know they belong—not just in our homes, but in our communities.

Our overtures need not be extravagant—we just have to be willing to give freely, and often in small ways. This kindness and warmth is seen in the little things we do to make others feel comfortable, but sometimes offering them comfort requires inconvenience, surrender, or even sacrifice.

God’s love for His creation is a beautiful example of hospitality. He welcomes creation into existence and sustains all living creatures. And when we extend hospitality to others, we can delight in the opportunity to reflect this love.
TRY THIS

Write down two or three things you can do this week to show hospitality to others. Maybe it’s inviting a new family in your neighborhood over for dinner, offering bottled water to delivery people who come to your door, or volunteering to greet visitors at church.

KEY VERSES

“ABOVE ALL, KEEP FERVENT IN YOUR LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER, BECAUSE LOVE COVERS A MULTITUDE OF SINS. BE HOSPITABLE TO ONE ANOTHER WITHOUT COMPLAINT. AS EACH ONE HAS RECEIVED A SPECIAL GIFT, EMPLOY IT IN SERVING ONE ANOTHER AS GOOD STEWARDS OF THE MANIFOLD GRACE OF GOD.” —1 PETER 4:8-10

“LOVE ONE ANOTHER WITH BROTHERLY AFFECTION. OUTDO ONE ANOTHER IN SHOWING HONOR. DO NOT BE SLOTHFUL IN ZEAL, BE FERVENT IN SPIRIT, SERVE THE LORD. REJOICE IN HOPE, BE PATIENT IN TRIBULATION, BE CONSTANT IN PRAYER. CONTRIBUTE TO THE NEEDS OF THE SAINTS AND SEEK TO SHOW HOSPITALITY.” —ROMANS 12:10-13 (ESV)

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

—we show hospitality to the Lord by extending welcome to others. As a reminder of this, some Christians keep an empty seat at the table, acknowledging that Jesus is present with us at all times. What are some practical things you can do to develop a more hospitable mindset?
At some point, we’ve all been concerned about fitting in or being accepted—perhaps when starting at a new school or job, visiting a church for the first time, or moving to a different neighborhood. The truth is, even when we do have a sense of belonging, there are times when we still feel like outsiders. It could be that we are transitioning from one stage of life to another or have suffered the loss of an important relationship.

And we’re in good company. From Adam and Eve to Jesus, the Bible is full of people who found themselves closed off from others or who didn’t find acceptance. When Christ came to earth, He wasn’t immediately received by His own people. He experienced isolation and was treated like an outsider. And now, because of Him, we know we will never be alone in our fears of not fitting in. But there are people around us who don’t yet have that same reassurance. We have the opportunity to meet them where they are—by opening our door, lending a listening ear, and upholding their dignity.
TRY THIS

Think of one or two people who have recently joined your church or moved into your neighborhood. This week, try to have a conversation with them. It can be as simple as thanking them for being there, introducing yourself, and inviting them to share a meal or cup of coffee with you.

KEY VERSES

“When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.” —Leviticus 19:33-34

“He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.” —John 1:10-11

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

➔ If you’ve ever felt like an outsider, did anyone reach out to you, welcome you, or try to get to know you?

➔ What are some things you can do to make new people feel welcome at work, church, school, or other parts of your community?
MANAGING FAMILY SCHEDULES. Navigating a difficult commute. Commitments to our church, friends, and relatives. With so many things going on in our life, it’s easy to rush from one to the next, barely noticing the people around us—and definitely not considering their stories. But God has laid out a different example for us.

Throughout His ministry on earth, Jesus was willing to stop everything and take time for people—especially those others avoided, looked down on, ignored, or even despised. By giving them His time and attention, Jesus offered them comfort, dignity, and redemption.

We, too, have the opportunity to meet strangers and make them into neighbors and friends—and if God wills it, help draw them closer to Him. We just have to seek them out.
TRY THIS

Take time this week to notice people you might otherwise overlook. (Start with a cashier at the store, the person who delivers your mail, or someone at work you often see sitting alone.) Ask about their job or how their day is going, and thank them if they’re serving you somehow. If it’s a place you visit regularly, like a coffee shop, make it a point to say hello and ask how they’re doing each time you see them.

KEY VERSES

“BELOVED, YOU ARE ACTING FAITHFULLY IN WHATSOEVER YOU ACCOMPLISH FOR THE BRETHREN, AND ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY ARE STRANGERS.” — 3 JOHN 1:5

“And he also went on to say to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’” — LUKE 14:12–14

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

Consider Jesus’ words: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40 ESV). What does it mean to show Christ’s love and mercy to “the least” around you?
When Paul first visited the Galatians, they gave him a wonderful welcome filled with warmth and grace, even though he was very sick (Gal. 4:13-14). It’s easy to picture lavish gifts or sumptuous feasts, but Paul doesn’t mention that. Instead he emphasizes the way they received him—he came to them while suffering, but they regarded him with the same admiration and respect they would have had for Jesus Himself.

While shared meals are one way to connect with and welcome others, we can’t measure the success of our hospitality by the decorations on the table, the flavor of the food, or the cleverness of our conversation. We make others feel they belong by meeting them where they are. Whether it’s buying groceries for a family in need, listening carefully to what a friend is going through, or offering to babysit for a neighbor, there’s no end to the ways we can joyfully serve the people around us, remembering that they, too, are made in the image of God.
TRY THIS

What holds you back from showing hospitality? For example, you might be unfamiliar with others’ dietary restrictions or feel as if you don’t have enough time. Write down three or four ways to make this easier, such as saving recipes that are easy to prepare for large groups, adjusting your budget to create opportunities to bless others, storing an inflatable mattress and extra sheets, or making a list of people to call this week just to say hello.

KEY VERSE

“DO NOT NEGLECT TO SHOW HOSPITALITY TO STRANGERS, FOR BY THIS SOME HAVE ENTERTAINED ANGELS WITHOUT KNOWING IT.” —HEBREWS 13:2

“LOVE DOES NO WRONG TO A NEIGHBOR; THEREFORE LOVE IS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW.” —ROMANS 13:10

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Sometimes it’s hard to receive people around us in the way that the Galatians welcomed Paul. Are you struggling to think of someone in your life as God’s image-bearer? What could you do to demonstrate love and kindness in that relationship?
We don’t often think of coming together to share a meal as a revolutionary act. But in the days of the Old Testament, people who were different from one another weren’t able to enjoy a meal together—the Jews were instructed not to sit at the Gentiles’ dinner tables. In fact, they weren’t even supposed to enter a non-Jewish home.

But then something remarkable happened: As the redeeming message of Jesus’ death and resurrection spread throughout the world, the separation was ended. Jesus invited everyone, both Jews and Gentiles, to His table. There no longer needs to be a barrier—He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility (Eph. 2:14).

As Christians, we have the opportunity to extend this kind of gracious and unifying hospitality to the people around us—using our actions to let them know this invitation is for them, too. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, “It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (1:16). Isn’t that a relief? Everyone who believes—not just Jews or Gentiles or people of a particular background, culture, or location.

This month, we explored God’s call to be hospitable—extending welcome and affection to both believers and nonbelievers, whether they are strangers or friends. As we look into God’s mission for the body of Christ, keep reflecting on how you can welcome outsiders and love them with an open heart. All believers are invited to participate in building His kingdom, and we’ll focus more on that next month.
Deep, Constant, Godly
Friendships don’t just happen.
They are built.

—Charles F. Stanley, Walking Wisely
THE WHOLE CHurch: HOW DO WE BUILD GOD'S KINGDOM?
One of the most striking parts of C. S. Lewis’s famous book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is the liberation of Narnia. Long held under the curse of being frozen, it begins to show signs of freedom—ice melts, trees lift their weary branches, flowers bloom. And throughout this imaginary country, whenever these small reminders surface, someone says five simple words: “Aslan is on the move!” The Narnians knew that Aslan—the story’s Christ figure—was near, reclaiming his rightful place as the ruler of Narnia. A quiet excitement stirred within his people every time his name left their lips.

Aslan, of course, is modeled after the one true King who came to restore His people and establish His kingdom on earth. And we are called to join Him in that great work—supporting, loving, encouraging, praying, and advocating for those Jesus seeks.

For some Christians, this will mean giving time and money. Or it could mean directly serving and volunteering in our communities. For others, it means answering a call to reach a specific group of people with God’s love—whether in our cities, another state, or even another country. Or it might be any number of things in between, from fostering and adopting children to simply showing a genuine interest in another person’s welfare.

As you think about your own life, can you see any signs of the work God is doing and how He’s asking you to participate? Can you tell where He is calling you to come closer and remind others that they, too, are made in His image?

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**USE THIS PRAYER, OR LET IT INSPIRE ONE IN YOUR OWN WORDS, AS YOU MOVE THROUGH THE WEEKLY REFLECTIONS IN THE FOLLOWING SECTION.**

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*Heavenly Father,*

*I thank You for calling each of us to take part in the work of advancing Your kingdom. Help me to be a good steward of this invitation and reflect your mission in my own community. Lord, show me how to use the unique blessings I have received from You for the good of others and, if it’s Your will, to use these interactions to draw people closer to You. Prepare me, Holy Spirit, to selflessly participate in this work wherever I am. Jesus, I humbly thank You for Your sacrifice and ask that You would help me demonstrate Your love to the people around me. Amen.*
At some point in your life, you’ve probably struggled to complete a task because you were doing it by yourself. Maybe you were moving or assembling furniture. Or maybe you were rushing to finish a project at work when you thought to yourself, This would be so much easier with another set of hands. But it can be difficult to ask for help, especially when we are worried about what other people will think.

Thankfully, God knows this about us. When Jesus sent out His disciples, He didn’t send them alone—He had them go in pairs to preach the gospel and minister to the people they encountered. And remember, even in His call to “go and make disciples of all nations,” He’s speaking to us as individuals and as a church community, promising that He is with us “always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20 NIV). We don’t have to do anything alone. Instead, we can choose to follow His lead, knowing that as we go about participating in the work Jesus came here to do, He is with us every step of the way.
TRY THIS

Try to put yourself in the shoes of the first disciples. Imagine Jesus calling you to drop what you’re doing and follow Him, inviting you to join Him in His work. Take note of how you’re feeling and write down any thoughts you have. For example, is it easy or hard to picture God being with you, inviting you in? Are there tasks you’d want to get done first or things you’d want to take with you? Do you feel excited or nervous?

KEY VERSES


“If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” —JOHN 8:31–32

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

When we think about the future, it can be easy to imagine how God fits into our plans while struggling to see how we fit into His plans. What would it look like to see God’s plan and join in, instead of making our own plans and asking God to bless them?
HAVE YOU EVER BEEN ASKED to attend a meeting on someone’s behalf? Or maybe you’ve been sent to an event as a member of your church or neighborhood? Like a spokesperson, you did your best to represent them—perhaps with the things you said, the examples you shared, or your own endorsement and support. This is what Paul means when he writes that we are “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:20). We are given the important job of representing Jesus to the world.

But before we can ask others to receive Jesus’ grace, love, and forgiveness, we have to make sure that we are demonstrating these qualities in our own life and relationships, from our actions and interactions to our thoughts and study of Scripture. Perhaps this would mean blessing others—moment by moment, whatever the situation—in the ways God has blessed us. Or maybe it’s simply taking time to slow down, read the Bible, and offer more thanks to Him.
TRY THIS

What are some of your favorite memories of serving others? Why are you grateful for those opportunities? As you pray this week, take time to thank the Lord for them. Think about how to be more intentional in representing Jesus.

KEY VERSES

“THEREFORE, WE ARE AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST, GOD MAKING HIS APPEAL THROUGH US. WE IMPLORE YOU ON BEHALF OF CHRIST, BE RECONCILED TO GOD.”
—2 CORINTHIANS 5:20 (ESV)

“REMEMBER THE WONDEROUS WORKS THAT HE HAS DONE.”
—PSALM 105:5 (ESV)

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

Jesus wasn’t troubled by the concerns that buzzed around Him, not even when the people from His childhood tried to throw Him off a cliff! (See Luke 4:29.) What would it look like for Christians today to be unhurried and follow God’s lead?
Jesus didn’t have social media, text messages, or even a megaphone. He didn’t need them for His ministry. And while contemporary platforms can be an effective way to share our faith, it’s easy to get caught up in the messaging and lose focus on the call to follow Jesus’ example of love and compassion—from ministering to the sick and comforting widows to confronting the Pharisees.

He was as unafraid to tend to the needy as He was to stand for what was true and right, even though it cost Him the good opinion of others. This is our mission, too. Jesus has invited us to join Him, trusting us to come alongside Him in building His kingdom. But if we want to follow His example, we have to focus on demonstrating love and compassion as He did—speaking truth and serving others.
**TRY THIS**

In the verse below, Paul appeals to Timothy to “guard the good deposit” of the gospel message that’s been entrusted to him. On a piece of paper, make two columns. In one, write three to five things you consider “good deposits”—skills, talents, or possessions God has entrusted to you, such as fluency in another language, organizational skills, or flexibility in your schedule. In the other column, list some ways you can use them to build His kingdom. For example, volunteering as a translator, planning a community event, or offering to drive a neighbor to an appointment.

**KEY VERSES**

“GUARD THE GOOD DEPOSIT THAT WAS ENTRUSTED TO YOU—GUARD IT WITH THE HELP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT WHO LIVES IN US.” —2 TIMOTHY 1:14 (NIV)

“FOR EVEN THE SON OF MAN DID NOT COME TO BE SERVED, BUT TO SERVE, AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE A RANSOM FOR MANY.” —MARK 10:45

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

⇒ Jesus could have had anything He wanted. But instead of setting Himself above the people around Him, Jesus chose to humble Himself. What does it mean to follow His example?

⇒ Are there areas of your life where you are focusing on getting ahead or boasting about accomplishments? How can you serve like Jesus, setting desires and ambitions aside and offering a helping hand?
CHRISTIANS MUST LOVE AND WALK IN HARMONY WITH EACH OTHER. WHEN OUTSIDERS SEE US SMILING, LAUGHING, AND WORSHIPPING TOGETHER, THAT'S HOW THEY KNOW SOMETHING IS DIFFERENT ABOUT GOD'S PEOPLE.

—Charles F. Stanley, “Unity of the Spirit”
EVERY SINGLE ONE OF US IS A TROPHY JESUS WILL PRESENT TO GOD THE FATHER. THAT IS WHAT YOU AND I ARE—A PART OF THE INCOMPARABLE, ENDLESS, UNSHAKEABLE KINGDOM OF THE LIVING GOD.

—Charles F. Stanley
“Building Bridges to the Kingdom,”
After His resurrection, Jesus asked three times if Peter loved Him. And each time the disciple answered yes, Jesus said to take care of His sheep. Like Peter, we are called to keep the Lord’s commandments and tend to one another, loving the church and going out to the “highways and hedges” (Luke 14:24) to reflect the love of Christ wherever we are. Whether we’re volunteering at an after-school program, befriending unbelievers in our workplace, or just having a conversation in the checkout line at the store, we can do good for our communities and bring glory to God.

Our mission is to join in Christ’s vision as an outpouring of His love—uplifting, engaging, and supporting the people we encounter. And just as Jesus left His seat next to the Father to go out into a cold world and rescue those who needed it most, we have the opportunity to share the loving message of the gospel in everyday ways.
TRY THIS

Is there a person or group that you’ve been wanting to support in your community? What would it look like to joyfully serve alongside them? This week, identify two or three ways you could do this—such as serving food at a cooperative ministry or shelter, donating money or goods, sorting items at a food bank, or volunteering at the local library.

KEY VERSES

“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” —1 John 5:3-4

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” —John 14:15

“So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” —1 Thessalonians 2:8 (ESV)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ Think about Christ’s commands to “love your neighbor” and “go therefore and make disciples.” How do these directives work together? What are some ways we can show Christ’s love in day-to-day life?

→ What opportunities might there be to connect with the people around you as an expression of His love?
Imagine getting a phone call from a dear friend. The familiar voice on the line is calling to offer you a ticket to an exclusive event. You would probably feel excited as you wrote down the details, eager to share the time with your friend. Likewise, God’s call on our life is an invitation—a call to participate in His mission. But we don’t always think about fulfilling this mission as an experience to share with Him. Usually when we think about God’s plan for our life, we think of very specific things we have to do in order to accomplish His goals—perhaps your list includes tithing, sharing the gospel with nonbelievers at work, or serving with an outreach ministry at your church.

What would happen if we stopped thinking about how great our accomplishments are and instead focused on God’s greatness? The Bible is filled with stories of ordinary people sharing, praying, sacrificing, and suffering to share the gospel—individuals who responded to an invitation from Jesus: “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). They learned from Him, served alongside Him, and traveled with Him. And after His death and resurrection, Jesus stood on a mountain and sent them out to continue His work.

This month, we focused on the Lord’s desire for us to share and participate in His mission, joining a long history of ordinary people doing extraordinary work. God has been doing this work since the beginning of time, and He’s with us—every step of the way.
“By treating others the way Christ treats us — with love, compassion, and forgiveness — we proclaim the message of the gospel without saying a word.”

It’s easy to think that mission and ministry are the work of “professional Christians”—nonprofit workers, missionaries, pastors, and other church leaders. But God’s mission was given to every member of His church, whether a person is a student, CEO, grandparent, soccer coach, or anything in between. He’s calling us to generously welcome the people around us.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for “hospitality” can also be translated to mean “friendliness to strangers.” Love for other Christians is essential to cultivating fellowship with one another, and when we pour out that love into the world around us—outside of our usual friend group or church community—we’re fulfilling what Scripture says. We’re literally showing kindness to strangers, and we might even learn something new, discover a common interest, or contribute to an unmet need. And through those interactions, we make small moves in the work that God is already doing.

In the last three months, we were reminded that we are all created in the image of God. We’ve explored what it means to reflect the relationship of the Trinity in our connections with the body of Christ—echoing the love that radiates from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We’ve explored practical ways to answer the Lord’s command to extend kindness to outsiders. And finally, we explored the work that God is doing and how He wants us to be involved in His mission.

As you continue to participate in the work of building relationships, seeking the outsider, and advancing God’s kingdom, you’ll likely feel there is still much more to explore. There is no end to the ways in which we can continue to know God and bring Him glory. In the next and final installment of this guide, we’ll explore what it looks like to sustain our mission, worship and offer ourselves to God, and look ahead to the future—loving and being loved by Jesus.
“WE ARE A PART OF A MIGHTY KINGDOM THAT WILL ONE DAY SHATTER THE KINGDOMS OF EARTH. AND IF CHRISTIANS GOT A GRIP ON THAT—WHO WE ARE AND THE POWER GOD HAS GIVEN TO US—WE WOULD SHOUT THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL.”

—Charles F. Stanley, "The Kingdom of God"