

Knowing the Difference

Give generously to [the poor] and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you (Deuteronomy 15:10).

Scripture: Deuteronomy 15:7-11

Song: “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”

While Tonya began chemo, her daughter Savannah underwent heart surgery. Bills piled up and collectors came calling. Our friend Chris knew he couldn't make all their debt disappear, but he did own a truck. By conventional wisdom, giving someone your vehicle is a losing investment; but because of his trust in God's promises, Chris knew better.

After outlining the rules for “the year for canceling debts” (15:9), God directed the Israelites on another matter: giving to the poor. When money is involved, it is human nature to treat the matter as a business decision. We assess the risks and the benefits, and we make the choice that is in our best interests. But God is clear: giving is a matter of the heart.

While life is full of both business transactions and giving opportunities, we are sternly warned to know the difference. When giving, we are called to set aside our tabulations in favor of trusting in the Father's provisions. By doing so we evade sin in our hearts and open the door for His blessings in the lives of the poor, as well as in our own.

Dear Father, help me to know the difference that giving makes and to recognize Your blessings in my life. In Jesus' name, amen.

October 12–18. **Shannon Baldrige** volunteers in youth ministry at her church and in her Atlanta-area community, where she resides with her husband, two daughters, and four-legged running partner.

Perfecting Love

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:18).

Scripture: 1 John 4:16b-21

Song: “When My Love to Christ Grows Weak”

Pow! The snare drums’ crisp rim shot is in unison. Crashing cymbals pierce my ear as they flash and dance like synchronized swimmers. The snare drummers, maintaining a disciplined stick height, deliver a flood of blood-pumping rhythm, while the tenors magically morph it into a melody. The precision of the bass run rumbles my stomach, and excitement creeps through my body. It’s flawless. It’s skilled. It’s perfect. In case you can’t tell—I love a well-executed drum line cadence!

While we seek to live godly lives, perfection is not something we Christians spend a lot of energy on. After all, our Father, who is the very definition of big and boundless love, pours an immeasurable amount of grace over our lives, allowing us to stand confidently in a vast supply of freedom from our sins and shortcomings. But this truth doesn’t negate our Father’s own penchant for perfection.

Not only does He execute His love for us with the greatest focus and precision; He also desires that our love be pure in its delivery. Whether we are loving others or returning His love, He delights when it is strong and steady. Because our missteps are grace-covered, we are free to fearlessly strive to love like He does. His perfect love will always be unmatched, but let’s train our hearts with eyes fixed on our “conductor.” After all, it is the model and the experience of His unerring love that ultimately elevates the precision of ours.

Heavenly Father, may my focus be on Your perfecting love as I strive to mirror it. In Jesus’ name, amen.

The Most Important 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”
(Mark 12:30).

Scripture: Mark 12:28-34

Song: “Father, I Adore You”

With new neighbors came an excuse for me to cook up a Cajun-style shrimp boil. While chatting up my guests over the rippling water, I squeezed in lemon and dumped in seasonings. In splashed red potatoes followed by corn, sausage, and shrimp. But as we all took the first bite, disappointment flashed across each face. I had forgotten to add any oil! Without oil to make the spices cling to the contents of the pot, what should have been a bold dish was dreadfully bland. Of all the ingredients, who knew that oil was the most important one?

While debating the Sadducees, a teacher approached Jesus with a different kind of question. Surprisingly, this scribe did not seem interested in creating an entrapment; and after observing Jesus address His adversaries, he simply asked which law was the most important. Jesus answered with what is one of the most quoted sentences from the Bible.

Our minds might skip over this well-known verse in search of the new and exciting, but such passages have been used so often for good reason. This one is truly the “oil” of our faith. Without the foundation of a love fully devoted to the Lord, any service or sacrifice we offer will fall flat. Let’s meditate on the most important element with fresh eyes and feel the weight of its significance so that a whole-being kind of love for the Father infuses everything we do.

Dear Father, may my love for You consume me. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Guided by Gratitude

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice (Luke 17:15).

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19

Song: “Thank You, Lord”

Still sporting her ladybug costume, my toddler dumped out her pail of goodies. While sampling a mini chocolate bar, she placed her candy back in the bucket and dumped it again. Suddenly her eyes lit up, and with a gasp she jumped to her feet. Empty pail in hand and tutu bouncing, she scurried back to the stranger’s front door and desperately pulled on the knob. What she had been given was good, but there might be more to be had!

A group of leprosy sufferers cried out to Jesus from afar. Hearing their plea for pity, Jesus directed them to go show themselves to the priests. Trusting (or hoping?) that they would be healed en route, these men set out to receive their clean bill of health—their ticket back into society. As they shuffled down the roadside, the miraculous healing came. We can picture nine men breaking into ecstatic sprint to claim their freedom. But gratitude threw one into an about-face. He raced toward Jesus and gained an eternal freedom.

Jesus’ willingness to heal the 10 is like His willingness to die and rise for all. Many in this world will forge on in their self-pursuits, but those of us who let gratitude guide us find our way to the Savior’s feet. And our Savior always has more to give. His endless grace and goodness propel the cycle, bringing us back again. There is always more to be gained when we return, giving thanks to Jesus.

Dear Father, may gratitude lead me back to You each day. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Misplaced Passion

“Lord, do you want us to call fire down?” (Luke 9:54)

Scripture: Luke 9:51-56

Song: “I Am Resolved”

The name Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is nearly synonymous with nonviolence. Believing that nonviolence was a courageous way to win understanding, defeat injustice, and promote love over hate, the pastor and civil rights leader formed a movement that reshaped America for the better. He was clearly a passionate man with an urgent cause, but through his restraint and resolve to nonviolence, he ensured that his passion continued to serve his mission.

Jesus knew the culmination of His ministry was near, so He resolutely traveled with His disciples toward Jerusalem. Messengers were sent ahead to arrange a stop in Samaria, but the Samaritans (who had a centuries-long enmity with the Jews) refused their request. Under the mask of loyalty to Jesus, James and John became outraged; and in their emotional response, they sought a fiery revenge. Just one moment of indignation and their attention turned from mission to malevolence.

The reaction of an offended James and John should surprise us, yet in today’s culture outrage is the norm. To be offended is to be alive. But the trap of personal indignation was the same then as it is today—a convenient tool used by the evil one to hijack our passion. Jesus rebuked His disciples, and we can expect the same when we wish to call down fire on those who aim to provoke us. So let us be resolute like Jesus in keeping our passions aligned with the mission the Father has laid before us.

Dear Father, may my passion always align with Your mission. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Lessons Unlearned

“If you knew . . . who it is that asks you for a drink . . .”
(John 4:10).

Scripture: John 4:1-15

Song: “I Know Whom I Have Believed”

“Try it, Mommy!” begged both girls. After watching my husband make several successful passes through the kitchen on one of their new piggy-bank-purchased hoverboards, I stared down at the two-wheeled, motorized device placed at my feet. I formulated a strategy, took a deep breath, and jumped on. Said strategy sent me rocketing backwards into metal barstools and crashing to the floor. I was relying on what I knew, but it wasn’t enough.

Nearing the well, she spotted Him—a tired Jewish man resting there with no bucket. It was as if He was waiting for her. Assessing the uncomfortable encounter ahead, she knew that the heat that usually kept people away at this hour had sorely betrayed her this day. Culture had taught her that the encounter would be socially unacceptable. Experience had taught her it could be emotionally painful. But necessity had taught her that she couldn’t abandon the task.

Indeed, she would have to go through Jesus. But when the Samaritan woman quit relying on what she knew, she learned that Jesus was not in the way. Jesus was the way. The knowledge of this world will always leave us thirsty, but knowing our Lord and who we are in Him opens our eyes to the spiritual blessings awaiting us. May we grow daily in our knowledge of our Lord, who satisfies all our needs!

Dear Father, help me to know You more intimately each day. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Love Your Neighbor

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:28).

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

Song: “If That Isn’t Love”

In 1997, at the peak of the Confederate flag debate in South Carolina, a 23-year-old black man named Otis Gaither was on his way home from work. Nearing what looked like a mobile home engulfed in flames, he pulled over. Despite the controversial emblem flying in the front yard, Gaither entered the home and pulled an unconscious white couple from the blaze. Gaither was not interested in the qualifications of the residents. He was simply interested in their safety.

“And who is my neighbor?” (10:29) posed the scribe as he mentally dissected demographics and contemplated his own implementation of the command. He wanted an exemption. And by carving out a subset of people, this student of the law felt he could be justified. But Jesus is not derailed by the follow-up question. Defining neighbor will not bring a deeper understanding of the command. That can only come from a story that further defines love.

Whenever we aim to qualify who is worthy of our kindness and love, we only illustrate that we are not loving as the Lord commands. True kindness is not bound by criteria. After all, Jesus, through His blood, is the only one who can bestow worthiness. Our job is to simply love. We are doers. Our A-plus answers must graduate into action, because it’s the practice of love that brings blessings.

Dear Father, help me to pour out indiscriminate love on others for Your glory. In Jesus’ name, amen.