

High Priority Loving

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

Scripture: 1 Peter 4:7-11

Song: “We Are One in the Spirit”

Armando struggled to find love and acceptance as a freshman in our college fraternity. As a believer, I chose to love him unconditionally. Over time, our relationship grew, and God used me to lead him to Christ. I bought him a Bible for his new life in Christ and wrote a brief message in the front. That summer, his older brother, a fellow believer, called me. Armando had just been killed in an auto accident. His brother found the Bible I’d given Armando and saw my note in the front, in which I spoke of the confidence we can have because of our salvation. Choking back tears, the brother thanked me for loving Armando enough to share Christ with him.

Though Peter wrote today’s verse to believers, loving others deeply can draw unbelievers to the feet of Jesus. No wonder Jesus considers loving others to be the second greatest command (Matthew 22:39). Few uses of our time will create a greater impact for Christ in the lives of others—individually and collectively.

As we move through the day, God can give us opportunities to love fellow believers along with our unsaved friends and contacts. Such love may be the most powerful message they experience today.

Father, make me a vessel of Your powerful love today. In Jesus’ name, amen.

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February 22–28. Having worked as an educator in both public and private sectors, **Jeff Rast** and his wife have also served as missionaries and church planters.

Responding Rather than Reacting

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse
(Romans 12:14).

Scripture: Romans 12:9-19

Song: “Forgiveness”

While attending a secular university, the pro-life/pro-choice debate was the topic in several issues of the campus newspaper, with a volley of heated exchanges. One writer angrily leveraged the debate to promote an atheistic position. I responded with a letter to the newspaper, outlining biblical support for God’s existence and compassion for all. The atheistic student countered with another letter attacking me.

I chose to phone the student rather than reply through the paper. I told him that despite our opposing positions on the matter, I cared about him and would pray that he would eventually come to know God and His love for him.

I confess that my natural bent, then and still today, is to retaliate when someone attacks me and my position. But God compelled me through today’s verse to respond with blessing and to leave the results in His hands. Though I chose not to respond with another article in the campus paper, the following week’s issue contained several letters by other believers who stepped in to add light and love to the debate.

It’s all too natural for us to bite back when someone hurts us. All too quickly, we can react with words and actions that we later wish we could undo. But by thinking about how we can bless others before we react, we’re more likely to create harmony and goodness.

Father, thank You for Your Spirit within us, who enables us to respond with blessing. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Faithful in Persecution

After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brother and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left (Acts 16:40).

Scripture: Acts 16:35-40

Song: "Guilty"

I served as a missionary in a country that was almost entirely Muslim. While there, I enjoyed fellowship with a successful businessman who had converted to Christianity. He encouraged me with his infectious joy and deep peace. Initially, this struck me as odd, given he had already been arrested several times for his evangelistic efforts to his Muslim contacts. Even during his stints in jail, his joy in Christ held steady. Upon each release from jail, this brother dived right back in to reach out to his countrymen.

This brother endured persecution but did not cower in fear or discouragement. He focused on what Jesus had done for his salvation and kept his mission in mind to help him maintain his vibrant testimony before those around him. He accepted the risk of persecution as part of his faithfulness to God and grew in boldness for reaching more people.

We may, sooner or later, face persecution. Whether such persecution is extreme or mild, our strength for victory is in Christ and His grace (2 Corinthians 12:9-10) and not in ourselves. Look to Jesus and press ahead, for He is the source of our joy, peace, and strength in challenging circumstances.

Father, thank You for the joy we have because of the sacrifice of Your Son. Help us grow in strength from that joy. And when we face persecution for Your sake, help us follow the examples of Jesus and Paul. In Jesus' name, amen.

Strong Marriages for Kingdom Health

Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife (1 Timothy 3:2).

Scripture: 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:9-10

Song: “Family”

Near the beginning of a high school biology class I taught, two sophomore girls chatted briefly about marriage. Knowing that I could hear their conversation, one turned to me and exclaimed sadly, and loud enough for all to hear, that she never wanted to get married. Before I could say a thing, nearly every other student voiced the same sentiment. Their reason: many of them came from broken homes or homes in which parents seemed very unfulfilled in their marriages.

In today’s passage, Paul clarifies to Timothy the high priority of healthy, monogamous marriage. Later he stresses that widows were to be included on the list for social support by the church if they met certain qualifications, including fidelity to their husbands (1 Timothy 5:9). God takes marriage very seriously for reasons more than just building strong families and communities. Marriage is a metaphor for Christ’s relationship to His church (Ephesians 5:21-33). God intends for the relationship between a husband and wife to demonstrate the unity of Christ and His church.

The quality of our marriage relationships may, for some people, provide the best testimony of Christ’s love for His bride, the church. Though marriage enhances our well-being as couples and builds well-adjusted children, it must also honor Christ and His love for the church. The ripple effects extend well beyond the relationship between husband and wife.

Father, thank You for the gift of marriage. Help us nurture our marriages to strengthen our families and glorify You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

The Foolishness of God

The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength (1 Corinthians 1:25).

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Song: “God’s Own Fool”

While serving as a missionary in the Middle East in the early 1980s, I met a young Muslim who wanted to become a Christian. However, he kept running into a conceptual barrier that stopped him from committing his life to Jesus. The idea that he could receive salvation by trusting in Christ’s finished work on the cross seemed far too simple to him. I assured him that while the process remains simple on our part, it was by no means easy. Jesus paid a very heavy price through much persecution and an unimaginably cruel execution.

It seemed so foolish to this young man that he personally was not required to do anything to earn salvation. We talked about how impossible it is for sin-marred humans to truly earn any merit before God’s absolutely holy perfection. His face brightened as he began to grasp the wisdom of God’s plan that Jesus, the perfect spotless Lamb of God, would pay the price for us. Finally, after several years of searching, he placed his faith in Jesus.

This same “foolish” grace that paid the price for our salvation enables us to walk in the freedom secured at the cross. We were born again in grace to walk in that same grace every day.

Father, thank You that Your ways are higher than our ways and Your thoughts are higher than our thoughts. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Keeping It Simple for Powerful Ministry

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power (1 Corinthians 2:4).

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Song: "Humble Thyself in the Sight of the Lord"

My wife and I once participated in a "Bible study" attended mostly by faculty and graduate students from two neighboring secular universities. One discussion veered to the topic of the origin of the universe. Clearly, the three faculty members held confidently to the theory of evolution. However, the only member of the group who had not pursued college studies kept asking one question: "Well, what came before that?" She wanted to understand their view. Eventually, the position of the scholars began to crumble before this simple, sincere question so humbly repeated. Obviously rattled, one professor slept little that night as he reflected more deeply on his views of God as Creator. God undoubtedly worked through the simple question of a humble soul. He used her humility to lead others to deeper truth.

Regardless of the somewhat intimidating intellectual prowess of those who may challenge our beliefs, we need to focus our well-intended conversations on the simple truths of God. He moves in power through those who rely on Him for His wisdom. As we move ahead in humble obedience, He will supply the words we need (Matthew 10:19-20)—and the results.

Father, help us be confident when we focus humbly on Christ and the cross in our conversations with others. Let Your power flow through us. In Jesus' name, amen.

Boasting: Handle with Care

“Let him who boasts boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:31).

Scripture: Acts 16:11-15, 40; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Song: “I Will Boast”

While teaching high school chemistry, I enjoyed demonstrating how aggressively pure metallic sodium reacts with water. In its pure form, this shiny soft metal is so unstable, it needs to be stored in an oil medium to prevent contact with water or air. For safety purposes, I would use very small chunks (though it would have been fun to use big chunks outdoors!). We would also watch videos demonstrating the effects of large chunks thrown into ponds. Despite its highly reactive and even explosive instability, sodium serves many useful purposes, especially when combined with other elements. In fact, we need it to live.

In some ways, I consider boasting to be a bit like sodium. When we boast of ourselves, it's too easy to cross the line into a pride that destabilizes our walks with God. While I understand the need to feel a certain satisfaction with one's accomplishments, boasting about them ultimately leads to undesirable consequences. Boasting, like pure sodium, needs to be handled with care.

However, there is a boasting that leads to greater personal satisfaction and to greater ministry effectiveness. Boasting in the Lord and what He has done draws us into a deeper walk with Him. It also points others to the humble Savior who gives life in endless measure.

Father, purge any sinful pride from my heart so that I will be more useful to You and Your kingdom. In Jesus' name, amen.