

RESILIENCE: Devoted Love in a Host Culture of Disconnection

LIVE with Jesus in Community

INTRODUCTION

Our Host Culture

We live in a culture that values independence over devotion. Nearly half of marriages don't survive, let alone friendships. Friends cancel or ghost one another over offenses or failures, real or perceived, and our culture applauds this as moral. So, although loneliness is the most prevalent and harmful disease of western culture, we have little vision for a community of loyal love. Instead, our culture promotes a secular form of self-actualization at any expense.

We also don't transmit from one generation to the other the necessary skills to repair damaged relationships. Fallen people will inevitably conflict with each other, but without a map for repair, marriages and friendships end. Too many of us have not seen repair modeled so we fear and avoid difficult conversations—choosing to *move on* rather than *work through issues*.

Jesus and His Church

The evening before his death, Jesus hosts a private dinner for his friends to show them the depth of his love. He knows they all will abandon, deny, and even betray him in the hours to come. Yet John says, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end," (John 13:1). Then Jesus gets down on his knees and washes his friends' feet.

To his astonished friends, Jesus says, "you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you," (vv. 14-15). Later that same evening he tells them, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another," (vv. 34-35).

The next time Jesus sees his disciples in such a room, it is after his crucifixion. They are gathered with the door locked in fear of the authorities. Even so, he appears among them, and where they may have expected him to scold them for their faithlessness to him, he does not. He greets them with, "Peace be with you!" And he shows them his wounds. Their hearts must comprehend that his devoted love toward them continues, steady and unquenched.

Here he shows them again the nature of the love he wants them to have for one another. He wants a church radiating *his* love—loyal, steadfast, merciful, self-sacrificing, and humble.

Paul pleads with his church to embody this love: “I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” (Ephesians 4:1-2). “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves,” he teaches (Romans 12:10).

The love Jesus showed his friends, and the love he calls them to have for one another, embodies the love his Father has for him; the same love the Father shows to mankind in the Old Testament. The word for this love in Hebrew is *hesed*. We often translate it “steadfast love,” as in Psalm 33:5: “The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.” There is no English equivalent for this rich word. It connotes not just steadfastness, but loyalty, kindness, mercy, goodness, faithfulness, favor bestowed, and even beauty. Devotion, Paul’s word, captures some of this depth of meaning.

Jesus envisions his church as a joyful circle of resilience, a network of devoted, love-drenched, life-sustaining friendships—friendships so deep that we will wash one another’s feet and lay down our lives for one another, living out with one another the love of him who holds us together and welcoming all who would join us in that love.

THE PRACTICE

“When we become disillusioned, the temptation we face is to disengage in various ways: (1) we search for a “better” church community; (2) we stay on the edges of community; or (3) we convince ourselves that we’re better off practicing solo Christianity. These temptations are almost automatic due to the individualistic and consumeristic culture in the Western world. When we disengage from Christian community, it becomes fragmented, and we collectively fail to create a new social order of love and to shine God’s light in the world,” Todd W. Hall.

We become like Jesus as we allow him to form in us a long-suffering love for and devotion to one another. He loves his people steadfastly—through our failures and successes he forgives our faults and always believes in what we will become. We must love one another with the same love. “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen,” says John (1 John 4:20). And wildly, Jesus promises that when we love one another the way he loves us it will fill us with joy: “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full,” (John 15:11).

As we follow Jesus, then, we grow more joyful and more beautifully like him as we surrender to his shaping of us into a people who forgive and steadily love others. If instead we seek to be perfectly loved ourselves or to find the fictional community where all is to our liking, we will carry our broken hearts and the unformed parts of us with us, having missed an opportunity to grow.

This is why Jesus tells Peter to forgive his brother a figuratively infinite number of times: “Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times!’” (Matthew 18:21-22).

Thankfully, Jesus also says we cannot do this without his help: “Apart from me you can do nothing,” (John 15:5). God promises to provide the love we need by pouring his love into our hearts by his Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). To embody Jesus’ vision for us, then, we need the power of the Holy Spirit, giving us the actual *hesed* of God in our hearts to empower us in devotion. And we need the courage and equipping to fight *for* our relationships instead of *against* one another.

How do we Grow into People of Devoted Love?

First, by settling down for the long haul in our local church.

“Love the one you’re with,” is a helpful saying. To do this, we resist the temptation that we will find a better church with better people somewhere else and instead look at the people around us as the people God has given us to love and to be loved by.

Questions for Reflection:

1. If you have committed to a local church, what do you find life-giving about this commitment?
2. If you are not an official member of your church, is there anything that holds you back from making such a commitment?
3. What next step, if any, do you feel stirred to take as you consider being settled down for the long haul in your church? Inquiring about membership? Asking lingering theological questions? Writing a note of thanks to someone in leadership or a friend in your church?
4. Please see Greenwood’s Practice *Worship in Community* for further reflection.

Second, by drawing close to people in our community and sharing life with one another.

We must find a group of less than fifteen people in our local church with whom we can grow in authenticity and vulnerability as we follow Jesus together. We need people with whom we can share what God is doing in our lives and who can encourage and even challenge us to grow in our discipleship to Jesus.

Questions for Reflection:

1. If you are a part of a small group, think for a moment about what gifts have come to you through your commitment to this group. Please thank your Father for these gifts.
2. If you are not a part of a small group, what resistance do you sense to this commitment? Is there anything you can do to press through this resistance? Process past hurts? Explore the different kinds of groups available at your church? Make changes to your weekly schedule?
3. Please see Greenwood’s Practice *Small Groups* for further reflection.

Third, when offense, conflict, and even hurt occur, we need to resist feeling surprised and instead lean in to work through the issue if possible.

Jesus gives Peter such hyperbolic advice about forgiveness because he understands people doing life together will need to forgive one another over and over. We are fallen people and those we love are fallen too. Steadfast love *must* include mercy—given and received. When we choose to lean in, we accept the opportunity to grow in the love of God, who loves “the ignorant and wayward,” (Hebrews 5:2), “the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45), and whose love gives him joy.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Is there someone in your church whom you hold anger against or find difficult to love? If so, please see Greenwood’s Practice *Forgiveness* for help with this.
2. Is there someone with whom you need to initiate repair in your relationship, someone who needs to hear you say you are sorry? Please ask the Lord for his help in repairing this relationship.
3. If you feel tempted to leave your church rather than work through an offense or hurt feelings, what next step do you feel prompted to take instead because of thinking through this Practice?

Lastly, we can seek help in these difficult challenges.

We can ask our support network to pray for us and counsel us. We can seek prayer from the prayer teams in our church or make an appointment with one of our pastors. We can also seek equipping in working through conflict and relational repair. There are some resources below that can help as we seek to lean in and grow in love through difficult relationships or disappointments.

HELPFUL SCRIPTURES

“In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others . . . be devoted to one another in love.” Romans 12:5, 10

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Romans 12:18

“As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” 1 Corinthians 12:20-21

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” Ephesians 4:32

“You must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you.

Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.” Colossians 3:12-14

“If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you’ve made a friend.” Matthew 18:15 (MSG)

“And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” Mark 11:25

“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” Matthew 5:23-24

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, Peter Scazzero

Life Together, Dietrick Bonhoeffer

The Good and Beautiful Community, James Bryan Smith

Peacemaker Ministries App—A guide for relational repair

Greenwood’s Practice, *Forgiveness*

INTERESTING QUOTES

“Christian spirituality can be nothing other than living the Christian life in union with the Trinity in the church.” – Simon Chan

“No one can have God for his father, who does not have the church for his mother.” – Cyprian (d. 258 AD)

“God’s one plan for reaching the world is rooted in the community of broken people who gather with a desire to bring in God’s own dream kingdom of love and shalom. We will never be perfect people, but imperfect people committed to a radical Spirit-empowered love can change their relationships and the world.” – Adele Calhoun

“Within our local spiritual community, we work side by side with each other to create a community characterized by the mutual love of the Trinity and to offer this mutual love and belonging to the world . . . in order to be part of building something larger than ourselves, we have to stay and remain engaged when things get difficult.” – Todd W. Hall

“A creative minority is a Christian community in a web of *stubbornly loyal relationships* knotted together in a living network of persons who are committed to practicing the way of Jesus *together* for the renewal of the world.” – Jon Tyson

“A community who has been forgiven must become a community who forgives. God’s forgiveness toward us is unrestricted; how can our forgiveness for one another be restricted?” – James Bryan Smith

“Christ forgives through us, and that is why we can forgive.” – Miroslav Volf

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

Before you explore this practice:

1. Please read the practice, quotes, and scriptures. What stands out to you? Why do you believe this is so?
2. Where do you feel drawn to this practice?
3. Where do you sense resistance?
4. When has the church showed you the devoted love of God?
5. What do you think makes resilient love in churches difficult?
6. Please commit to spending some time praying about this practice before your group meets again. Consider, do you have unresolved difficulties with a person in your church or with the church as a whole? As you consider, please pay attention to any way you sense Jesus inviting you to grow in devoted love.

After you have considered this practice:

1. As you have considered this practice, do you sense Jesus inviting you to lean in?
2. What excites you about this?
3. What resistance do you feel? Why do you think this is so?
4. How may your small group pray for you? Please be cautious how you share. Names may not be necessary, and please focus more on how you feel drawn to grow than on how you feel offended or hurt. How may your small group pray for you?