

# River Community Church

## Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season



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## **Closing the Gap 4.9.18**

Spring is confused. It cannot decide who it will be. Yesterday it held fast to winter with its cold and its dark. Tomorrow it might choose summer, embracing its warm sunny ways. Today it wants to love both, the dark and the light. Decide, spring, and live decided! Leave the days of deciding behind.

Welcome to a season of focused attention on loving others well. Make this a time of putting away the question, "Will I love those God has given me to love today?" Ask only the question, "How will I love those God has given me to love today?" Practice living a "decided" rather than a "deciding" life.

### **Week 14 "Carry one another's burdens"**

#### **Day 1**

##### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

##### **Read:**

Gal. 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. 2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3 If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4 Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, 5 for each one should carry his own load.

##### **Reflect:**

You can't live this way alone and no one can do it for you. This is the tension of the Christian life. There is a tendency to lean one way or another; if you lean too far and too long in either direction, you will eventually fall. One approach leans too much on self and believes that you do not need others to remain faithful and fruitful. This is not how God has designed us to live. The other approach looks too much to others and fails to take full responsibility for self. This causes us to look to external solutions for internal problems and opportunities. This tension explains why Paul writes that you should "carry each other's burdens", but then he follows with "each one should carry his own load." The burden we are to share is something too heavy for one person to carry. The load is more like a backpack; it is something we must bear ourselves. Paul is giving us the balanced approach of both sharing the heavy burdens and carrying your own load. Which way does the wind blow in your life? Are you prone to be a spiritual loner? Perhaps you have friends and talk with people, but you do not let them into your struggles. Do you believe that you should be able, with God's help, to make life happen without the assistance of others? Will you repent of this pride? You need to let others help you carry your burdens, both for your sake and for theirs. Perhaps you lean the opposite way. Are you prone to look to others too much to do for you what you should do for yourself? This approach can often turn into a demanding spirit. Sometimes people

who struggle with this can come across externally as independent, while on the inside they are very dependent on others. The “pull” these people have on others can be conflicting. On the one hand, they can act indifferently to needing help; while on the other hand, they can become angry or sulk when the “right” kind of help is not offered. Don’t play these games! Will you repent of this demanding spirit? Carry the burdens of others and also let them help you carry yours. Carry your own load and do not look to others to do what God has called you to do. Close the gap on loving others. Look today to let others more deeply into your life and look for ways to invest more deeply in the lives of others.

### **Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

## Closing the Gap 4.10.18

### Week 14 "Carry one another's burdens"

#### Day 2

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Gal. 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. 2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3 If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4 Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, 5 for each one should carry his own load.

#### Reflect:

Pride separates people; love brings them together. Pride makes us foolish. It does not allow us to see ourselves as we truly are and it prevents us from seeing others as they are. Pride loves to play the comparison game and it is that comparison that keeps us from deep, transformational engagement in the lives of others. Love is not blind to our own strengths or to others' weaknesses. Love is not afraid of our own weaknesses or others' strengths. Love does not play games with people. Love is interested in what is real and good. When we think too highly of ourselves, we have lost touch with reality. We are nothing apart from Jesus. What do you have that you have not been given? Even if you have "earned" something or worked hard to get to a certain level of achievement or knowledge, you were given that opportunity and that capacity. To look down on anyone in any way is foolish. To do so is to be self-deceived. Often, when people are aware that they are near the end of their lives, they finally lose interest in the comparison game. Not always, but often, things become much clearer. What others think of them becomes much less important. How they compare to others in regards to looks, possessions, or popularity tends to become a non-issue. The problem with end-of-life clarity, as valuable as it is, is that it comes at the end of your life. Solomon urged his readers to "remember your Creator in the days of your youth" (Eccl. 12:1). Has pride kept you from loving well those people God has put in your life? Are you tired of playing the empty comparison game? Will you close the gap on how you see life now and how you will see life when it is over? You do not have to wait until the end to have end-of-life clarity. This clarity will grow as you learn to look first at Jesus, then in the mirror. Look first at Jesus, then at others.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth

of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 4.11.18

### Week 14 "Carry one another's burdens"

#### Day 3

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Gal. 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. 2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3 If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4 Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, 5 for each one should carry his own load.

#### Reflect:

Life ebbs and flows for everyone. There are times when you are not struggling, but your brother or sister is. You must help them with gentleness and humility because you are never above struggle or failure yourself. Maybe right now you are the struggler and you desperately need gentle and humble assistance from one who is spiritual. What does it mean to be "spiritual"? In the Scriptures, it is simply a contrast between what is 'of Christ' and what is 'of the sinful flesh.' To be spiritual means to be currently living in obedience to Jesus. No one is perfect in thought and deed and everyone struggles against the desires of the flesh. But, this is not about perfection; it is about a heart that is surrendered to Jesus. This heart is revealed in the way you treat others. The one who is spiritual does not accept the sin, but neither does he reject the sinner. The spiritual believer does not think himself beyond sinning or above the sinner. If he does, he must be careful because that kind of pride will set him up for a potential fall. If you are in a situation to help someone who has been caught in sin, then approach with caution. First, understand they are "caught." Of course, they chose this path, but at the same time they are not living in freedom. Sin is indeed a trap. See the other person as being in need. Second, speak as one speaking the words of God and act with the strength that God provides. How did Jesus speak to those caught in sin? How has he spoken to you when you were caught? He speaks with gentleness and with compassion and you must do the same. Finally, see yourself as a brother or sister, not as a judge. See yourself as one who has received, but has not earned God's grace. Now, go to the one caught in sin and "pay the debt of love" that you owe them. Go with the attitude and the words of one who has been forgiven much.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth

of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 4.12.18

### Week 14 "Carry one another's burdens"

#### Day 4

##### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

##### **Read:**

Gal. 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. 2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3 If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4 Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, 5 for each one should carry his own load.

##### **Reflect:**

Trust is earned over time through authentic love expressed and experienced in real life situations. When trust is present, good things can happen very quickly. Words do not have to be perfect because the heart behind the words is seen as good. When trust is present, misunderstandings can happen yet grace is given. Trust gives the benefit of the doubt. When trust is absent, everything good slows down. When trust is absent, every word and facial expression is scrutinized and held in suspicion. When trust is absent, misunderstanding is the norm, even good intentions are misjudged and rejected. Do you trust the people God has put in your life to the point that, if they must restore you when you are caught in a sin, you will listen to them? What if their words are not perfect? What if their perception of the circumstances is not completely accurate? What if their timing is way off? Will you demand perfection from them? Or will you accept the liberty that God is offering you through them? Has someone tried to help you recently and you rejected them because they didn't get everything just right? Were they partially right? Was there a single pearl in the basket of shells? If so, will you cast off that pearl because of the shells? Perhaps God has given you help in shouldering your burdens, but you have treated God's provision as less than the gift of grace that it is. The wise love correction, and they will take it from less than perfect sources. Maybe you have a burden to help someone caught in sin. Have you done the work to earn their trust? If not, then do not assume that you have the privilege of speaking truth to them. They may allow you to have a voice in their life, but remember that trust is earned; it is never forced on someone. Start closing the gap today between the level of trust you have with others and where it could be. Be gentle with people. Act humbly towards them. Carry their burdens. Learn the joy of living in relationships of trust.

##### **Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

## **Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season**

A Focus on Loving One Another

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Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 4.13.18

### Week 14 "Carry one another's burdens"

#### Day 5

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Gal. 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. 2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3 If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4 Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, 5 for each one should carry his own load.

#### Reflect:

Carrying others' burdens will often be inconvenient. People don't normally plan their problems (even if they caused them). You can't necessarily put "carry someone's burden" on your calendar in advance. However, there is something you can do ahead of the time. You can decide that, if able and if given the opportunity, you will love the ones God has put in your life to love. You can decide, then live decided, rather than still deciding. If you approach carrying the burdens of others in a "deciding" fashion, then you may help when needed, but you may also grumble and begrudge the fact that it is not convenient for you. When you have this attitude, then the one you are helping will likely "feel like the burden" rather than being a person "with a burden." Decide who you want to be, then go and live decided. You will still find helping people difficult and often inconvenient, but you will also find, if you continually take on this mindset of Christ, that you grumble less and enjoy helping others more. Christ, for the joy set before him, endured the cross (Heb. 12:2). You need never feel like your life is a burden to Christ. Carrying your sin was part of his joy, even though it was an unthinkable burden. Will you help others in ways that make their burdens lighter, rather than making them feeling like they themselves are your burden? Decide, then go live decided. Make your question, "How do I love?" rather than, "Will I love?" Prepare your minds for action. Ask God to help you have his heart for people. Reflect now on the fact that all that God wants from you can be summed up by this statement, "Carry one another's burdens." Don't miss the largeness of God's opportunity for you today because it looks small and it feels inconvenient.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask

## **Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season**

A Focus on Loving One Another

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Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 4.16.18

### Week 15 "Encourage One Another"

#### Day 1

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

1Thessalonians 5:9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

#### Reflect:

"Will everything be alright?" This is the question people ask when they are afraid. Sometimes friends and family will say, "Yes, everything is going to be fine." Is that a promise that anyone can really make? It is understandable and laudable that people will try to instill courage into failing hearts with those comforting words. But it can be false courage, a promise that will fail them in the end. We may try to make things turn out "alright," but no human has the ultimate power or authority to ensure this will happen. James reminds us that we don't even know what will happen tomorrow, because our lives are like "a mist" (James 4:14). We cannot control all the outcomes. We can't know if "everything will be alright." Or can we? It depends on what you mean by "everything" and "alright." God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through Jesus Christ. This is the fact of the gospel that is to be the ultimate source of our courage. Will you keep your job? Maybe. Will your loved ones be healthy? Perhaps, but all will die in the end. Will I suffer God's wrath if I have believed the gospel? No. When I die will all be lost? No. If I trust Christ and live for his glory, will all I give my life for be a waste in the end? No. So, will everything "be alright?" Have you believed the gospel? Then, yes! Now go and encourage one another with these truths. You can act courageously and still feel fear. Feeling fear is a normal human response. The question is, "Will you be courageous?" The question is not, will you be "free of fear"? Courage that is fact-based is courage that is gospel-based. Pour courage into your friends, your family, and yourself, all while thinking often and deeply about the gospel. As fear rises up in your own heart over things that are out of your control, do not try to stop "feeling afraid." Instead, remember what the foundation for your courage is. He died for you so that you will live together with him.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth

of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 4.17.18

### Week 15 "Encourage One Another"

#### Day 2

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Heb. 3:12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

#### Reflect:

It is obvious that to be "encouraged" is the opposite of to be "discouraged." But, what is not obvious, is that hardness is often a consequence of long-term discouragement. When your heart is discouraged, it has become low on, or empty of, courage. Not courage as a "lack of fear," but courage as "the presence of hope." Discouragement opens the door to the lies of sin. "Why keep trying this? It's not working." Or, "Look at you. What difference is there in your life than someone who doesn't claim to know Christ? Except maybe they are doing better than you are." Or even, "You deserve a break, indulge that habit; give into that temptation." When we listen to and obey the lies of sin, then our hearts become hard. Hardened to discouragement. Hardened to the help of others. Hardened to the Holy Spirit. Hardened to hope. See to it that it doesn't happen to you or to your friends. This must not happen and it is your responsibility to see to it that it does not. You must pour courage into your friends and they must pour courage into you for as long as it is called Today. When would today not be called today? When "The Day" has come, the day of the Lord's final salvation when all is made new. When "today" has become "the Day," courage will flow without end like a river into our hearts. But today, see to it, brothers and sisters, that you stay encouraged.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

# Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season

A Focus on Loving One Another

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## Closing the Gap 4.18.18

### Week 15 "Encourage One Another"

#### Day 3

##### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

##### Read:

Hebrews 10:23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

##### Reflect:

Encouragement is person relative. What might encourage you, might not encourage someone else. Effective encouragement requires the work of careful consideration. To consider is to make the effort to understand what is real, true, and best. "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out" (Pr. 20:5). A man or woman of understanding is not simply a smart person, but rather a person who lives with a level of consideration. A person of understanding does the work to think about others and not just think about self. This kind of understanding is very different than judgment. Judgment (at least the wrong kind) is to come to conclusions about a person's motives and intentions in order to criticize or condemn them. Consideration is to think deeply about another person's life in order to know how to best encourage and serve them. Paul wrote to the Philippians and challenged them to not act out of selfishness or vanity, "but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3). This doesn't mean to think less of yourself; it means to become a person who thinks first of others. Consideration here means that you are to become a person whose first thought is, "What is best for them?" Think about who has encouraged you in your life. How did they do it? Why was it encouraging? It is very likely that they had given careful consideration to who you are and what encourages your heart. It is also likely you had a level of trust for them because you believed they wanted the best for you. Give consideration to how you can learn to encourage others. You can do better and you want to do better. Close the gap. Move towards being a person who is known as an encourager. Proverbs 25:11 says, "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver." A word that pours courage into a person's heart because it is "aptly" or appropriately spoken is a thing of real beauty to everyone. Be a person of beautiful, considerate, and encouraging words, all for the glory of God, for the good of others, and for your own joy.

##### Pray:

## Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season

A Focus on Loving One Another

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(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## **Closing the Gap 4.19.18**

### **Week 15 "Encourage One Another"**

#### **Day 4**

##### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

##### **Read:**

Hebrews 10:23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

##### **Reflect:**

If you show up, good things can happen; if you do not, they will not. Meeting together and encouragement are directly connected. If this is true, then why would some give up on meeting together? Doesn't everyone like to be encouraged? Some give up on meeting together because the impact is not always immediately evident. The encouragement that comes from being active in community can be subtle. Your heart may be encouraged in such a small way that it is barely perceptible when it happens. But the cumulative impact of even 'small' encouragement is enough to keep you in the fight. When you fail to meet together with other believers, you may not feel any immediate difference. But if you continue to neglect meeting together, you certainly will experience a difference. Or something worse may happen, you may not feel any difference at all because the cumulative impact of not meeting with others has hardened your heart and discouragement has become the accepted norm in your life. Do not give up. Show up and keep showing up! Meeting together in community in all its various forms is a good thing. Do not become weary in doing this good thing, because you will reap a harvest if you do not give up. The harvest takes planting, watering, and waiting, but if you continue to do what is good to do, then the harvest will come in due time. When you meet together with other believers, remember why you are there – to encourage one another. Pour the courage of the gospel into one another when you meet. Let others complain, let them blame, let them talk about things that don't matter. But let us continue to meet together and, when we do, let us encourage one another.

##### **Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to

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## **Closing the Gap 4.20.18**

### **Week 15 "Encourage One Another"**

#### **Day 5**

#### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### **Read:**

1Thessalonians. 5:9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Hebrews 3:12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Hebrews 10:23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

#### **Reflect:**

Encourage is a verb; it is what you do. Your goal in encouragement is not to evoke a feeling, but to help others continue to move towards Christ in faith and towards others in love. They may feel encouraged or not, but the goal of encouraging others is to spur movement in the direction of courage. If they are encouraged, they will continue on whether or not they feel a certain way. Encouragement towards faith and love is based on the settled facts of the gospel. Those facts are to be the foundation of your encouragement for others and their encouragement for you. Whether the discouragement has come because of poor health, broken relationships, or disappointment over unfulfilled expectations, the courage to continue is based on the fact that God's purposes will prevail. His glory and your ultimate good are not dependent on temporary circumstances. This fact will not always help you or others feel encouraged, but this fact can help you be encouraged. It can help you continue to move forward in courage and in faith. The gospel truth can encourage your heart all by itself, if comprehended by our minds and applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. However, the way God has designed us is such that maximal encouragement happens when the gospel truth comes in the form of a friend who walks side-by-side with us.

Communicated truth is powerful; demonstrated truth is transformational. Encourage someone today, not merely by throwing words their way, but by walking side-by-side with them. Let someone encourage you today. If you need to humble yourself and ask for encouragement, do so. You will encourage them if you

let them encourage you. People will be challenged by your strengths, but they will be encouraged by your weakness.

**Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 4.23.18

### Week 16 "Live in Harmony with One Another"

#### Day 1

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Rom. 12:9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

#### Reflect:

Love that it is real, with substance, cannot hang in midair with no foundation. Many try to begin their definition and expression of love with love itself. Love must have a foundation and that foundation is God. He describes what love is and he prescribes how it should be expressed. How do we know what love is? We look to God, because he is love. How do we know how love is expressed? We look to Jesus, because he shows us how. "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 each other" (1 John 3:16). Because love begins with God, he is love's moral foundation. Love hates what is evil and clings to what is good. Love does not keep a record of wrongs, but love is not blind to what is wrong. Love judges actions and attitudes that are a threat to its health. It is clear-eyed in its assessment of evil and it clings desperately to what is good. Love always protects, not self, but the relationship. Begin your judgment with yourself. Those attitudes of self-pity, or defensiveness, or pettiness that keep you at a distance from loved ones, judge them. Those words that are not in line with love, judge them. Those acts of selfishness that put you first over those you are called to love, judge them. Judge all of these – your attitudes, words, and selfish acts – as the enemies of that which is most valuable, love. Then, judge the threats to love that you see in your friends and family. Do not judge the people; judge the threats. How you do this will vary from person to person and from situation to situation. It will be complicated at times to know how to judge the threat without condemning the person. But, if you begin with the right heart, you will be positioned to come to the right conclusion. Begin here: Jesus Christ laid down his life for others. And we must do the same.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

## **Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season**

A Focus on Loving One Another

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Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 4.24.18

### Week 16 "Live in Harmony with One Another"

#### Day 2

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Rom. 12:9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

#### Reflect:

Notice the repetition of "one another" in the passage you just read. One another simply means each other. It is how Philippians 2:4 happens in practice, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." If each one is looking to the interests of the other, there is going to be harmony with one another. If each one is looking first to what is best for themselves, there can be no harmony. What happens when one is looking to the interests of the other, but the other is not reciprocating? What if you are in a family or friend relationship where you cannot find harmony because it seems that much or all of what you try to do is misunderstood or rejected? You must control what you can control and leave the rest with God. It takes two people to live in harmony, but it only takes one to live in faithfulness. Will you trust God in this difficult relationship? This is the kind of situation where faith is tested by the fires of real life. Few things can be as difficult as having a broken or strained relationship and knowing you cannot do anything to change the other's perception. What can you do then? You can be faithful. You can do your half of the "one another." You can make whatever appropriate choices you have in order to live in harmony with the other, even if they do not make those same choices. This is enormously challenging and it does not guarantee that everything will work out between you in the end. The other person may not respond well, no matter what good choices you make. But if faithfulness is your goal, in the end you will be whole. Broken relationships can be heartbreaking, but faithfulness to what God has called you to will, in the end, lead to a "whole heart." "Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart" (Pr. 3:3).

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 4.25.18

### Week 16 "Live in Harmony with One Another"

#### Day 3

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Rom. 12:9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

#### Reflect:

A musical harmony occurs when multiple notes or pitches are played at the same time. Relational harmony occurs when multiple people act together for common purposes and with common values. In harmony, neither the musical notes nor the people are identical, but they come together with the same aim – whether to create a song or something much grander. The common cause for those who follow Christ is the glory of God. God is both the goal of the Church's harmony and its cause. He empowers very different people to come together as one people. The church is unique in the world in many ways, but one of the more evident ways is how a group of such diverse people can operate in harmony. It is not surprising that there are problems in the church; it is surprising that there is such harmony among people who are so different from one another. It has been said that Sunday morning is the most segregated time of the week. This belief fails to take into account the many ways in which people are different from one another. You may be of a different race than someone else and yet have much in common with them, such as personality, preferences, economics, and the like. You may be of the same race as someone and yet totally different from them in most other ways. The fact is, each individual represents a unique "inner culture." For any two people to live in harmony requires that they consider more than their own needs, interests, and perspectives. They must find a common cause and a common point of interest. If you are a Christ follower, your fundamental life purpose is to glorify God. A very practical way this happens is when you live in harmony with others. Jesus said that people know we follow him when we love one another (John 13:35). Make God's glory your goal, because it is your greatest good. Practically, this means you must look for ways to live in harmony with others. Don't be distracted by the "small stuff," but focus on the "largeness" of God's glory in your relationships with others.

#### Pray:

## Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season

A Focus on Loving One Another

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(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## **Closing the Gap 4.26.18**

### **Week 16 "Live in Harmony with One Another"**

#### **Day 4**

#### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### **Read:**

Rom. 12:9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

#### **Reflect:**

A person who is moody tends to interact with others largely based on what he is currently feeling on the inside. The opposite is a person whose interior feelings do not dictate his exterior demeanor. Everyone has moods, but not everyone is held captive to them. What is your mood right now? Are you feeling happy or sad? Are you feeling hopeful or discouraged? Are you ambivalent, caught between competing emotions? To live in harmony with others requires that you enter into their lives and that you do not live entirely out of your own circumstances and moods. How can you rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn in an authentic way? Remember – and believe – that there are people who care about you who are reading this passage as well. They must be aware of your joy and your sadness, if they are to practice this kind of love towards you. Be authentic and be open about the reality of your internal and external circumstances. This does not mean that if others are sad, you must disguise your joy, or if they are happy, you must hide your sadness. God desires for his children to live in harmonious relationships. When people living in very different life situations move towards each other in love, for God's glory and for their own good, it creates a beautiful harmony. Furthermore, when each person enters into another's joy and sadness in appropriate ways, there is an ongoing opportunity for balanced living. Their joy gives perspective to your sadness and their sadness gives perspective to your joy. Joy and sadness are both valid expressions of a gospel life. When joy lacks the perspective of sadness, it can become "earthbound" and lose its eternal foundation. When sadness lacks the perspective of joy, it can take over a person's soul and remove gospel hope. Live in harmony by choosing to enter into the lives of others and by letting them enter deeply into yours.

#### **Pray:**

## Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season

A Focus on Loving One Another

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(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 4.27.18

### Week 16 "Live in Harmony with One Another"

#### Day 5

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Romans 12:18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

#### Reflect:

The Bible describes reality and prescribes reality-based thinking and living. It is no surprise, then, that Paul was a realist. He understood that God is ultimate reality. He knew that the gospel was the real power of God to change lives and to bring men and women into relationship with God. So, as important and beautiful as harmony with others is, it is not always possible. It takes two to build a relationship, but it only takes one to break it. Peace with everyone cannot be the goal because it is not something we have control over. The goal in all relationships must be the glory of God revealed in faithfulness to God. You can control whether or not you are faithful in thought and deed. You cannot control all the outcomes of your faithfulness. Never mind that you will not always be faithful, the point is that you are oriented that way. Faithfulness, not fruitfulness, is your calling. God determines the fruit that will result from your faithfulness. "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2). You have been entrusted with the gospel and with the opportunity to live out the gospel in your life. What God requires of you related to that trust (and everything else he has given) is that you be found faithful. You may desperately want peace with someone in your life. You may believe that if you could just do more, pray more, give more, then surely harmony would result. By all means, do all you can do to have peace with others, as long as it is done within the boundaries of faithfulness to God. As far as possible, as much as it depends on you, live at peace with others. Of course, the implication is that peace is not always possible because it doesn't just depend on you. Set your heart and set your habits on faithfulness. This is what God requires from you. While faithfulness on your part will not guarantee your favored outcomes, it will guarantee God's favor in your life. Live in harmony when you can; live faithfully always.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

# Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season

A Focus on Loving One Another

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## **Closing the Gap 4.30.18**

### **Week 17 "Serve One Another"**

#### **Day 1**

#### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### **Read:**

Galatians 5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. 14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. 16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

#### **Reflect:**

Jesus took "the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phil. 2:7). What this says about you is that your very nature, as a human, is that of a servant. This is offensive to some who might believe that it is beneath them to be called or treated as a servant. The great push in society is to maneuver into a position where others will serve you. Those who are highly esteemed in most cultures are those who have servants, not those who are servants. However, when you consider that Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve, it should give an entirely different perspective on what it means to be a servant. Contemplate the sun for a moment. It is a vast nuclear reactor, with a core temperature of 27 million degrees. A single solar flare could be 35 times the size of our planet. Now, think about the fact that the sun is one of billions in our galaxy and our galaxy is one of billions in the universe. Push your mind out of the room you are in, off the planet you are on, and into the vastness of the universe. Now, with that larger perspective, think about the men and women who live for a very short time on a very small planet, but who often believe they are above being a servant and detest being treated like one. Think of yourself and your own attitude in this regard. Now, consider the following facts: "Through [Jesus] all things were made" (John 1:3). Jesus "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life" for others (Mark 10:45). The one who spoke the universe into existence came as a human to redeem humanity and, in the process, also demonstrated what true greatness is; it is to serve others. In your life today, you will have opportunity to serve. You may be treated like a servant. How will you respond in your thoughts and your actions? Will you embrace the greatness of service to others?

#### **Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

## Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season

A Focus on Loving One Another

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Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## **Closing the Gap 5.1.18**

### **Week 17 "Serve One Another"**

#### **Day 2**

##### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

##### **Read:**

Galatians 5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. 14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. 16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

##### **Reflect:**

The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). To understand what God wants in regard to others is not complex; he wants you to love them. However, to consistently do this in practice is not easy; in fact, it is very difficult. Of course, there are those people who are easier to love than others. There are also times when people are easier to love than other times, but to move towards consistency in loving others requires the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and ongoing attention on our part. In competition for our constancy in loving others is the ongoing compulsion to indulge ourselves. To love others well, we must put their interests ahead of our own, yet our sinful nature does not take kindly to being in "second place." "Indulge and satisfy" versus "love and serve" are the battle lines in your life. You must continually decide to move your attitudes and actions fully into the realm of "love and serve." Live by the Spirit and you will not live your life on the wrong side of the battle. You will live to serve others, not to serve yourself. To live by the Spirit simply means to operate within the realm of the Spirit's desire for your life. The realm of his desire is the realm of his power. To move out of that realm of his will and into the desires of the flesh is to live without his power operating in you. He will not empower you for rebellion and selfishness. Why would he? Are you struggling to love and serve others? Do you feel trapped in the gravitational pull of your own selfish desires? The first step is to repent. Ask God to forgive you and ask the Holy Spirit to fill you. Move back into the realm of his will for your life and you will find that is the realm of his power for your life as well. Power to live as he would have you live, loving and serving one another.

##### **Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth

of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.2.18

### Week 17 "Serve One Another"

#### Day 3

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Galatians 5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. 14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. 16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature

#### Reflect:

Altruism is the selfless concern for the well-being of others. There is a correlation between this approach to life and personal happiness. There are many theories as to why this is, but the bottom line reason is that this is how God has made you. His design specifications for humanity are such that, when we live selfishly, our unhappiness increases. When we pursue selfless lifestyles, our personal satisfaction and sense of purpose increases. But isn't it self-serving to serve others in order to be more personally satisfied? Perhaps, but the problem is not wanting to be satisfied and happy, the problem is when we pursue those things outside of the will and ways of God. The pursuit of life apart from God is always a lose-lose scenario. We do not find anything good in that lifestyle. Those around us, likewise, fail to experience good from our lives as well. However, serving one another in love is a win-win scenario; others find increased joy from our lives, as do we. The commands of God are always win-win. They may appear to be burdensome, but they are the way of liberty. "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free" (Ps. 119:32). "Love your neighbor as yourself" is God's invitation to join him in his joyful and free life. It doesn't always have to feel good to be good. Putting the interests of others ahead of your own today may not bring any immediate feel-good feedback. Nevertheless, it is good. Run that good path often enough and your joy will increase as will your experience of liberty. You will have increasing freedom from the heavy burden of selfish living. Has selfishness "worked" in your life yet? No? That's because it never will. Pursue a better path today.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask

Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.3.18

### Week 17 "Serve One Another"

#### Day 4

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Galatians 5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. 14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. 16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature

#### Reflect:

You were called to be free. Freedom is the ability to do what you ought to do and to be who you were made to be. Freedom is not doing anything you want to do; it is wanting to do what is best to do. The sinful nature pursues freedom apart from God, but that pursuit leads to decreasing liberty. The Spirit of God leads you in the pursuit of God and that path leads to real liberty. The liberty of God is expressed in love for others. Love for others will often include willfully limiting your personal freedoms for the good of others. It is a bit of a paradox. You are free to limit your freedoms in order to love others well. When you live a life of those "love limits," your freedom increases. What might these limits look like? Perhaps you choose to forgive, even though the other person does not see how they wronged you. Maybe you stop trying to convince someone of your position and simply accept them where they are. Whatever the case, when you take the strong position and love people where they are, then you grow on the inside. It is there, on the inside, that your liberty increases. These willing "love limits" free your heart from bitterness, from jealousy, and from a desire to exact revenge. These chosen limits can, over time, decrease anxiety, discouragement, and other emotions that hamper your personal liberty to enjoy God, life, and other people. Use your freedom to serve one another, not yourself. When you do, your freedom will increase, as will your joy. This is where faith and love intersect. Believe God when he tells you, "Walk here, this is the path of liberty." That path is the path Jesus walked, the path of laying down your life for others.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask

Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.4.18

### Week 17 "Serve One Another"

#### Day 5

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Galatians 5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. 14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. 16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature

#### Reflect:

You cannot control the attitudes and actions of others. Yet, those attitudes and actions have a tremendous impact on your life. What are you to do then? The most common approaches are to wallow in worry, to escalate attempts to control others, to become bitter, or to disengage from people altogether. These approaches lead to Paul's vivid description of "biting and devouring each other" with the final outcome of being "destroyed by each other." There is a striking contrast in this passage between "serving one another" and "biting and devouring each other." To serve is to give what you have that someone else needs. To "bite and devour" is to try and forcefully take what you are demanding from them. You are a child of God under the control of the Spirit. You are not meant to live like an animal under the control of impulses and instincts. Do you have a demanding heart or a trusting heart? Do you demand that God, others, and life give you what you believe you must have to be fulfilled? Are you quick to judge, to pout, or to become angry when others do not behave in a way that you want them to? Are you easily offended and ready to blame others for your unhappiness? You do not have to think or to live this way. You can, if you choose to do so, but you do not have to. Will you move away from this bitter and hard country of "demanding" and, instead, travel to the pleasant and beautiful country of "trusting?" You cannot control the choices of others; you can only control your own choices. God has given you both that privilege and that responsibility. Choose to trust God for what you need and relinquish the impulse to control others. The practical application of trusting God is to serve others. Faith in God is revealed in the way we respond to others. Do you believe God is 'enough'? Do you want to experience that reality more and more in your life? Then trust God by serving others and see him both meet your needs and reveal his love to others more fully through your life.

#### Pray:

## Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season

A Focus on Loving One Another

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(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.7.18

### Week 18 "Speak Truth to One Another"

#### Day 1

##### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

##### Read:

Ephesians 4:25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

##### Reflect:

Paul exhorts us to not allow any unwholesome talk out of our mouths. James, on the other hand, warns that only a perfect man will never be at fault in what he says (James 3:2). What are we to do? We cannot be perfect, yet we must always speak in helpful ways. James' point was primarily that words originate in the heart, not in the vocal cords. Paul would agree with James. That's why Paul writes: "put off falsehood, speak truthfully, and do not let unwholesome words out of your mouth." The implication is that we choose our words. They do not just "come out"; we have to let them out. You have operational control over your words because you have a choice in what is happening to your heart. If your words are not truthful and helpful and designed to bless others, then you must begin with an examination of the heart, not the tongue. Perhaps you have habitualized unwholesome talk. Have half-truths, exaggerations, complaining, and criticizing become reflexive for you? First, you must decide who it is that you want to be. Do you want to be the person who leaves others better off after having been with you? Do you want to leave others hopeful and encouraged because they have been touched by your words? If you want to be (or become) this type of person, then you must begin to build habits into your heart that will find their way to your tongue. You can do this! Many people have leveraged new heart habits into wholesome talk. Wholesome words are words that leave people "whole." Their souls are refreshed by their interaction with you. The world needs more people like this. You can be one of them. Peter cast this compelling vision, "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God" (1 Peter 4:11). Take that vision to heart and, then, let that vision out of your mouth for the glory of God and the good of others.

##### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask

Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.8.18

### Week 18 "Speak Truth to One Another"

#### Day 2

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Ephesians 4:21 Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.

25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

#### Reflect:

To speak truthfully to one another is to honor Jesus with authentic speech. Falsehood can take direct forms like an outright lie. But more subtly, untruth can come in the form of flattery, which is telling people what they want to hear for your own personal benefit. It can come as exaggeration, where you willingly inflate the facts to make your position more compelling. It can be intended deception, where you allow people to believe something you know is not true without correcting them because you are proud, or ashamed, or insecure. Or maybe you just hold back relevant and important things because of fear or pettiness. We must avoid all these forms of falsehood in our speech. Speaking truthfully to each other goes way beyond falsehood to being appropriately honest with who we are. It doesn't mean we always tell all that we could tell, but it does mean that what we do tell others is in accordance with the truth that "is in Jesus". It is authentic speech, true to the facts as best we know them, out of respect for the Lord Jesus, who is the "truth." We must be "truth tellers," not in the sense that we are quick to correct others, but in the sense that we are always on guard against words that are less than accurate and authentic. It does not mean our words are going to always be perfect. Oftentimes, we don't know which words to choose and even when we don't mean to, we can say things that are wrong. This is more about a heart direction than words of perfection. The direction of our heart must be oriented towards God-honoring love for others. When our heart's desire is that our words benefit those who hear them, then over time, our words will become increasingly in-line with the truth that is in Jesus. Our words will encourage others to move in his direction.

#### Pray:

## Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season

A Focus on Loving One Another

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(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.9.18

### Week 18 "Speak Truth to One Another"

#### Day 3

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Ephesians 4:25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

#### Reflect:

Satan is the father of lies; Jesus is the truth. Lying destroys relationships; truth builds them up. Our physical bodies require ongoing communication to function in full health. For instance, some diseases or injuries impair the brain's ability to communicate accurately with other parts of the body. When your physical body's ability to communicate "truthfully" breaks down because of some neurological problem, then your body begins to fall into a state of disease and disintegration. Truthful and accurate information is essential to both physical and relational health. Why do people not speak truthfully to one another since it is so important? Largely because they believe that deception, or less than the full truth, will somehow lead to better outcomes. They believe it will be better for them in some self-protective way. In some cases, people believe lying will benefit others as they "protect" them from the truth. Speaking truthfully is not always telling people what you could tell them, but it is always telling people what you should tell them. How do you know what to tell them? The starting point is to understand the purposes of telling people anything. We are to speak to others for their benefit, not for our own. It doesn't mean we don't benefit from these conversations. It means that in our speech, as in our actions, we are to put the interests of others ahead of our own. How would it change your conversations if your primary objective were to build others up according to "their" needs? Move away from lies and move resolutely towards the truth. If you have practiced self-protective and deceitful speech for a long time, it may take some time to change, but you can. You will need to pray about, plan for, and practice truth-telling. God will help you, but you must decide and move into that decision daily. Pray now, plan now, and then move out today and practice.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

## **Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season**

A Focus on Loving One Another

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Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.10.18

### Week 18 "Speak Truth to One Another"

#### Day 4

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Ephesians 4:25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

#### Reflect:

Every word you speak, along with every action you take, is supposed to be “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17). This means that your words should represent him well. It is as if Jesus has given you “power of attorney” to speak for him. At the end of your conversation you should be able to sign his name to what you just said. Does that give you pause? It should. Jesus said that we will give account for “every careless word” we speak (Matt. 12:36). This does not mean we should only talk about “spiritual stuff” and we must never engage in small talk. That would be tiresome and unhelpful in relationships. It does mean that words are vitally powerful and important things. The accountability that Jesus refers to is tied to the fact that our words betray our hearts. They “speak” to who we are on the inside. The opportunity to speak to one another is so common that we can lose sight of how powerful and important words are. They originate from our hearts and they can penetrate into the hearts of others. Can you remember specific words spoken to you years ago? Of course, you can. What was the content of those words? Either they cut you down or they built you up. In either case, the power of the words seared them into your memory. But they are not just in your memory; they have ongoing shaping power in your life. The vibrations of the vocal chords pushing sound waves to vibrate your eardrums have long ceased. However, the power of those simple words has not ended; they continue to be a force in your life for good or for ill. Don't take yourself too seriously. Be good at small talk, but remember that even small talk has the power to build others up or tear them down. In all of your talk, big and small, have a big goal...the building up of others for the glory of God. Speak words that Jesus would be happy to sign his name to.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth

of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.11.18

### Week 18 "Speak Truth to One Another"

#### Day 5

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Ephesians 4:25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

#### Reflect:

C.S. Lewis said, "Sarcasm is the language of the devil." This doesn't mean there is never a place for sarcasm as a type of speech, but it does mean that it is very often destructive in people's lives. "Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows is a man who deceives his neighbor and says, 'I was only joking!' " (Pr. 26:18-19). Sarcasm is often like shooting someone with a painful arrow and then claiming, "I was just kidding." Using words as a weapon is never a joke. Words are tools and raw materials that should be used to "build" others up. There is a place for joking and laughing; in fact, humor is a key component of human resiliency and healthy relationships. However, the humor that is a tool leaves people refreshed, joyful, and lighter in their spirits. The humor that is a weapon leaves people tarnished, guilty, and further from God. What is "unwholesome" talk? It is speech that tears down instead of building up. It could even be a "spiritual conversation," but if it is transacted in such a way that others are judged, condemned, and unloved, then it was unwholesome. You are not fully responsible for how others "feel" about your words, although you should care about this. You are, though, fully responsible for the motive of your words. Why are you saying this? Where is it coming from? Are you speaking words merely because you want to speak them or mainly because others need to hear them? People don't need to hear your words because they are so impressive, but because God wants to speak encouragement to them through you. This is an awesome privilege and responsibility. Speak in a way that moves people towards God. The "pull" of your words should not be that others are impressed with you, but that they are drawn to God. Is speaking in this way beyond you? Is it too much to ask? Not at all! God will help you, but you must decide to put his help into regular practice.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

## **Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season**

A Focus on Loving One Another

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Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.14.18

### Week 19: "Be kind and forgive one another"

#### Day 1

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Ephesians 4:29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

#### Reflect:

If we can grieve the Holy Spirit, then it stands to reason we can bring him joy as well. When we express kindness, compassion and forgiveness to each other, it brings him joy. These choices reflect the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives. Did you notice the word "choices"? It is important that you do, because there is a tendency to think of kindness, compassion and forgiveness as feelings. The fruit of the Spirit is not primarily feelings; it is actions. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). You might wonder about "joy and peace." Aren't those feelings? Joy and peace certainly can involve feelings, but peace is a reality that exists between the Christian and God, regardless of feelings. Peace is also a state of affairs that exists between two people who are not at odds. To have peace means you have done the things, or taken the actions, that lead to peace. Joy is often a choice, a decision to experience what God is offering to us in the midst of circumstances that are not in themselves joyful. Do not wait to feel kind or compassionate or forgiving or gentle, but, instead, do these things to one another. As you choose to move into these actions, then they will move more deeply into you. In other words, as you do what you are called to do, you will become who you are called to be. As a follower of Christ, you have the Holy Spirit resident within you. This is mysterious and beyond our ability to fully comprehend, but is it not beyond our ability to experience. His presence and power in your life are available for you to live in a way that brings him joy. You can rest assured that if it brings him joy, it will do the same for you. You must see acting with kindness, compassion and forgiveness as decisions empowered by the Spirit, not mere human feelings. If you wait for or pursue feelings of love, joy, and peace (and the other fruits of the Spirit) before choosing them, you are moving in the wrong direction. Say "yes" to God in the choices you have, then act on that "yes" in the way you treat others. As you live out this "yes" in your actions, you will live in the realm of the Holy Spirit's fruit. He is in you. Say "yes" to him and his fruit will come out from you.

**Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## **Closing the Gap 5.15.18**

### **Week 19: "Be kind and forgive one another"**

#### **Day 2**

#### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### **Read:**

Ephesians 4:29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

#### **Reflect:**

Who has hurt you the most? It was probably someone close to you. The deepest wounds come from those who have made their way deepest into our hearts. Maybe you don't feel deep wounds, just a thousand little "cuts" that accumulate over time. Whatever the case, the standard for how we are to deal with others is high. We are to forgive as, in Christ, God forgave us. What does this mean exactly? Well, it doesn't mean we can bear the sins of others, only Christ can do that. It doesn't mean we can forget what others do to us. It doesn't mean that we cannot protect ourselves from others who might want to continue to wound us. Then what does it mean? It means we do not continually hold the sins of others against them. So, in our words and actions we do not attempt to bring them harm in any way. In our hearts we release their sin and our hurt to God, so that if we had the power to "pay them back," we would not do so. You can forgive a person and still not trust them in every way. Forgiveness is related to past actions, trust is related to future reliability. This does not mean we are to say to others, "I forgive you, but I will never trust you again." In that case, you would be playing the role of God, but the future is not yours to predict or to declare. When asked and when appropriate, you must be prepared to simply say, "I forgive you." In your heart, they are forgiven. You must let grace "marinate your mind" in your view of them, but in your actions you are responsible. You must let wisdom guide your choices. If someone has stabbed you in the back, you would be wise to not turn your back towards them, but, at the same time, you must not harden your heart towards them.

#### **Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask

Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.16.18

### Week 19: "Be kind and forgive one another"

#### Day 3

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Ephesians 4:29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

#### Reflect:

There are likely people in your life who you cannot help but step on their toes. It seems you cannot always know what will offend them, only that you will eventually offend them. What are you to do about this? Certainly, you cannot always try to live your life to avoid offending people. This would be impossible, if for no other reason than the choices necessary to avoid offending one person might, at the same time, be offensive to someone else. You must live your life doing all you can to be at peace with all people, while also realizing that you cannot always actually be at peace with others. There is something else you can do with this reality of people in your life who seem to have perpetually "large toes." You can learn from their negative lesson and be careful to not be like that yourself. It can be hard to see in ourselves what we do not like in others, but it is important that we do. Be honest. Are you easy to offend? Do you find that people are often "stepping on your toes?" Then perhaps you should pray that God would decrease the "size of your toes" and increase the "size of your heart." Don't be a petty person. You do not have to let things bother you like they do. I am not speaking of large, truly hurtful wrongs done to you. This is about the ongoing things that others, who mean you no harm, do that offend you. You must become more generous in your heart towards others. To be continually offended by multiple, smaller offenses is an indication that you have made life about you. It is not. Pray that God will give you a "larger heart" and "smaller toes." You might find that you have fewer things to forgive others for than you thought you did.

#### Pray:

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask

Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## **Closing the Gap 5.17.18**

### **Week 19: "Be kind and forgive one another"**

#### **Day 4**

#### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### **Read:**

Ephesians 4:29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

#### **Reflect:**

What if others don't deserve to be forgiven? What if they are not sorry for what they have done? What if they continue to do hurtful and wrong things? No one really "deserves" forgiveness, but everyone needs it. However, some people do not seem to realize they need it, or they just don't care. But, not only does everyone need forgiveness, everyone needs to forgive as well. Even when others do not care about your offers of forgiveness, it is right that you give it to them. Even if they refuse to benefit from grace offered to them, you can benefit by giving grace to others. It takes two to have a relationship. When relationships have been broken, it requires that forgiveness be both offered and received, if the friendship is to be restored. However, it only takes one to forgive. Forgiveness does not mean forgetfulness or foolishness, but it is essential that you give it to those who need it. It is not your concern whether they want it or deserve it. You give forgiveness because it has been given to you. You give forgiveness because you want to live in the liberty of Christ. What if you offer forgiveness and the offer is rejected? What if they reject you, misunderstand you, and misrepresent you? Then you have the chance to live what you say you believe. Jesus is Lord of your life and he is the one you live to please. Now you have a real chance to demonstrate this fact. He has seen your offer of forgiveness and he is pleased. Let his pleasure be enough.

#### **Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

# Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season

A Focus on Loving One Another

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## **Closing the Gap 5.18.18**

### **Week 19: "Be kind and forgive one another"**

#### **Day 5**

#### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### **Read:**

Ephesians. 4:29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

#### **Reflect:**

You must get rid of all the manifestations of the old life from your life. You must be rid of bitterness, which is the opposite of kindness, not of sweetness. Rage and anger must go, as well as their verbal expressions of brawling and slander. In fact, every form of malice must be continually "shown the door." Malice is depravity; it is the manifestation of the old "us" without Christ. Is the Christian life nothing more than an exercise in futility? Do not let any unwholesome talk out of your mouth. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit. Get rid of all this bad stuff. Be kind and forgive as Christ forgave you. All of these direct commands to consistently be and do and to not be and not do may just seem impossible. Reorient yourself to the reality of God right now. Your life in Christ is not a pass/fail endeavor. It is a relationship, a growing relationship. God is not growing, but you are. If you are a Christian, you are accepted in Christ Jesus. You are okay; you cannot earn what has been freely given to you. Now look again at all of these "impossible" things you are asked to do and be. It is not an exercise in futility; it is an invitation to liberty. Believe that it is possible for you to be this kind of person, more and more as time and choices go by. Expect that your choices matter. God has given you the privilege of being a part of what happens to you. Decide to move into the choices that will shape you into this kind of person. This really is about a life of direction, not a life of perfection.

#### **Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

# Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season

A Focus on Loving One Another

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## Closing the Gap 5.21.18

### Week 20: "Accept One Another"

#### Day 1

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Romans 15:1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." 4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

#### Reflect:

In the secular worldview, the law of the strong defines reality. Survival of the fittest is both a description of how humans have become what they are and a prescription of how humans are to deal with life and others. You demonstrate your fitness by winning. The highest good is survival, so only the best survive. In the end, it doesn't matter how you survive just that you did. Consequently, in some societies laws are in place to keep people's survival tactics inside some acceptable boundaries. In lawless or despot-ruled societies, however, the "strong" consume the weak without limits. In the end, what eventually becomes of the strong in all these scenarios? They ultimately become the weak. The tables are turned on them and they are no longer the fittest. Therefore, they do not survive in the end. It is all a demonic lie. No one is "fit" and, in the end, there are no survivors. The mad rush for survival that describes the lives of many is a chasing after illusion. Stop for a moment and take a deep breath of sanity. "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." Life is not about survival; it is about God's glory. When you live your life like he is truly alive, his glory is revealed in your life. Since he is alive, you do not have to live to protect yourself. Since he is alive, you do not have to live for what you believe will bring pleasure. Since he is alive, you do not have to "win." Since he is alive, he is your protection, your purpose, and your pleasure. Christ has won so that you can share in his "winnings." He won because he was the "fittest," but in his fitness he sacrificed for all those who are not "fit" and do not deserve to survive. In his strength, he died for the weak so that that the weak might survive. The survival of the unfit – which includes you, me and everyone else – is completely dependent upon the willing sacrifice of the only one who has ever been truly "fit", the Lord Jesus. Become like him in his "weakness" and experience him in his strength. Look to

the good of others not just your own.

**Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.22.18

### Week 20: "Accept One Another"

#### Day 2

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Romans 15:1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." 4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

#### Reflect:

Accepting one another is difficult when the other person does and says things that are unacceptable. It is important to remember how or, rather, when Christ accepted you. "While you were still a sinner, Christ died for you" (Rom. 5:8). We must take people where they are and love them just as they are. That is exactly what Christ did, and continues to do for us. This, of course, does not mean that we must accept all that people do and say. Jesus does not accept all that you think, do, and say. However, if you belong to him, he does accept you. His love for you cannot allow him to accept what is unacceptable about you and, at the same time, it means you are completely acceptable just as you are. Is this a contradiction? No, it is just two different ways of looking at the same person. A loving father might tell a child, "I love you no matter what you do. You will always be my accepted son or daughter." That same father will say to the rebellious child, "What you did is completely unacceptable. You can do better and I am disappointed." The father is not confused and, likely, neither is the child. The difference is clear in principle and practice. It is sometimes described as, "Love the sinner, not the sin." When you accept someone where they are, and they understand what they really means, you have empowered them to change. When we feel like we can only fail, we probably will. When others believe in us and accept us as we are and, yet, call us forward towards much more, we are likely to become much more. Live the tension by accepting others without accepting all that they do; you will be used by God to help them become more like Christ over time. How does God want you to express acceptance to someone in your life? In your attitude, words, and actions you help them understand they are valuable and worthwhile...just as they are. From that position of acceptance, how can you then encourage them to become more than they are? Acceptance and encouragement are powerful forces in the lives of people. Use them today for the glory of God, for the

good of others, and for your own joy.

**Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.23.18

### Week 20: "Accept One Another"

#### Day 3

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Romans 15:1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." 4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

#### Reflect:

We are not merely to accept others; we are to accept "one another." You must accept others as Christ has, but you must also allow them to do the same for you. For some, allowing others to accept them may be a greater challenge than to be the one accepting others. To allow others to accept you means you will be known by them. They must know you adequately and accurately enough to be able to have an authentic relationship with you. You will not be able to do image management and, at the same time, allow others to accept you as Christ accepted you. But you may wonder, isn't this a contradiction? If they are going to accept me as I am, wouldn't that indicate they should accept my insecurities, and even my desire to put forth a "good image," though it will be inaccurate and incomplete? No, it's not a contradiction; it is looking at accepting one another from different perspectives. When you look at others in their weaknesses and failures, you must choose to accept them right where they are. In regard to being accepted by others, you are not to demand they accept you, but you are to allow them to do so. You must do your level best to let them see who you really are, both in your strengths and weaknesses, in order that they can accept the real you, not some fabrication of a false you. Is this a double standard? No, it is a single standard, sometimes called the "Great Commandment." You are to love others in the same way that you would want others to love you. So, in regard to accepting others, you take them right where they are. In regard to being accepted by others, you offer them the real you. This is a dual application of a single standard. You cannot choose for others, but you must choose for yourself. Make the good and God-blessed choice of accepting one another. Do both. Accept them as they are and allow them to accept you, as you actually are.

**Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.24.18

### Week 20: "Accept One Another"

#### Day 4

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Romans 15:1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." 4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

#### Reflect:

There is an old parable of a man who put his ladder against a wall, then spent his entire life climbing that ladder. Finally, at the end of his life he realized he had put the ladder against the wrong wall. Many people are guessing as to what life is all about and hoping that what they value will actually prove to be valuable in the end. But, humans are terrible guessers and there are no do-overs. These two facts make it vitally important that we actually get it right in terms of what we trade our lives for. You don't have to be a prophet in order to make accurate predictions of the future, but you do have to be a historian. What has happened in the past is a great way of understanding what is likely to occur in the future. But, even then, is it a guarantee? Yes and no. No, it is not a guarantee in terms of absolute confidence that past outcomes will repeat themselves in the future. However, you do have a guarantee that who God was in the past, he will also be in the future. He does not change. He does not grow or get smarter or stronger or better. He is perfect in every way. You can look in the Bible and see how God has interacted with people and you can see the outcomes of their ways of life. From those interactions, you can learn both negative and positive lessons for your own life. You can escape the negative and embrace the positive without having to go through all of the pain of learning either lesson from personal experience. Personal experience is an important teacher, but learning from the experience of others can be even better. So, in looking into the Scriptures what do you find that tells you what you should give your life for? Of course, there are many things, but the one thing that stands out is that Christ did not live merely to please himself. He lived for the glory of his father and for the good of others. His life was and is one of abiding joy. If you chase happiness, it will surely flee from you. If you pursue the glory of God by accepting and loving others, then happiness will chase you and, over and over again, it will find you.

**Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.25.18

### Week 20: "Accept One Another"

#### Day 5

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

Romans 15:1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." 4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

#### Reflect:

C.S. Lewis spoke of a quest that drives people to be included in "The Inner Ring." It could be at work, at school, at a social club, or even at church. These "rings" are not inherently bad; in fact, any group of people with a common story and struggle will form one. They are made into something bad, however, by our propensity to want to be included and to exclude others. Lewis said that the Inner Ring exists for the purpose of exclusion. It would not be meaningful to be an insider if there were no outsiders. The invisible line that forms the ring would have no meaning unless most people were on the wrong side of it. Exclusion is the essence of the Inner Ring and the quest to be "in" will ruin your heart unless you act decisively against this urge. The gospel both forms an Inner Ring and, at the same time, breaks down the barriers that divide people. In the church, all who are in Christ are in his "Ring" and they are to accept one another even as he has accepted them. So, in Christ, there is "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). It is not that these cultural and gender distinctions don't exist, but, rather, it is that they don't divide people anymore because Christ has made them one. So, you are in Christ, included by him through faith into his Inner Ring and, therefore, you must not exclude anyone intentionally from your life. It doesn't mean you can't have close friends or that there won't be people you like more than others; it simply means that you will "accept one another... just as Christ accepted you." In your heart and in your home, you must make room for people you would not likely be friends with, apart from Christ in you. To accept one another in the way Paul intends is not merely to tolerate others, but it is to embrace them into your friendship. How has Christ accepted you? What conditions has he put on his acceptance? Did you clean up your act first? Did you become free of things that displease him? No, he accepted you as you are and then proceeded to help you become better

than you are. This is how you are to accept one another. Take each other as you are, in order that each person will become far more than they are or even thought they could be. Others in Christ's Inner Ring will likewise accept you as you are. You will find, and perhaps you already have, that some of your most treasured relationships are with people you would never have let into your "ring," if Christ had not already let both of you into his.

**Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.28.18

### Week 21: "Confess Your Sins to One Another"

#### Day 1

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Matthew 5:23 Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

#### Reflect:

It is not surprising that Christians can get at odds with one another, but what is surprising is how often they work through their differences and are able to have restored relationship. Sinning against each other is not necessary, but it is likely. Therefore, making peace with confessing your sins to others is always going to be an important part of your spiritual journey. If you are going to live in close relationships with others, and you should, you will need to confess your failures when they happen. Confession of failure can be challenging for several reasons. It may be that you do not feel you are completely at fault. Perhaps you believe the blame for the problems between you and someone else is shared equally between you. It could be that you believe they are more at fault than you are. An important guiding principle is to learn to take total responsibility for your own sin. Even if you believe you are only 10 percent of the problem, then take 100 percent responsibility for your 10 percent. Leave their 90 percent to them and to God. Another issue that can make confession difficult is insecurity. You may feel it will make you more vulnerable or make you look weak if you admit to having failed. Think of a time when someone confessed their failure or sin to you or, perhaps, you saw a person admit they were wrong to someone else. How did you feel about that person? Did your respect for them decrease or increase? Confession of sin, on the whole, increases respect because it shows maturity to be able to be wrong. Confessing your sins to each other is like healing medicine applied to a wound. Because of our sinful nature we are going to wound one other, but since Christ is in us we can apply the healing power of confession to those wounds. Confess your sins to one another. It may feel like it is going to be such a difficult and painful experience until you actually do it. Then, afterwards, you will realize that avoiding or dreading confession is worse than actually doing the confessing.

**Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## **Closing the Gap 5.29.18**

### **Week 21: "Confess Your Sins to One Another"**

#### **Day 2**

#### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### **Read:**

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Matthew 5:23 Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

#### **Reflect:**

The prayer of a righteous man or woman is powerful and effective. But who is righteous? It is likely you do not feel like you are, but being righteous is not being perfect, it is being forgiven. When you have confessed your sins to God and to others, you are forgiven and, therefore, righteous. Elijah was a man of powerful and effective prayers, but he was certainly not a perfect man. He was, in fact, just like you. This fact is both encouraging and challenging. It is encouraging in that there is no good reason why you cannot experience powerful and effective prayers. It is challenging because to experience that kind of praying requires keeping short accounts with God and with others. Look again at the order of events James gives here: confess your sins to one another, be healed, and pray powerfully and effectively. This is no magic formula, but it is a description of how important it is to confess our sins to one another. Paul wrote that the "only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love" (Gal. 5:6). Obviously, if we sin against one another, then love would require that we confess that sin and do all we can to make things right. As a result, our faith is seen in our love to one another. Our love to one another is seen in continually keeping short accounts with each other. Unconfessed sin between you and someone else is a hindrance to effective prayer. Jesus said that if you are offering your gift to God but remember you have sinned against another person, then you are to stop what you are doing, go make things right with the person, and only then can you offer your gift to God. If you are not right with others, it will not be possible for you to be right with God. Prayer is conversation with God, talking with him about things that are important to you both. If you are at odds with another person, God is interested in that situation, not in the other things you might want to talk to him about. You will find he has a one-track mind when it comes to these things. Go. Confess your sins to each other. Then come back to God and you will find your conversations with him are

powerful and effective.

**Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## **Closing the Gap 5.30.18**

### **Week 21: "Confess Your Sins to One Another"**

#### **Day 3**

#### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### **Read:**

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Matthew 5:23 Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

#### **Reflect:**

There is no promise in Scripture that all disease or injury will be healed if only you just believe or pray or do the right things. After all, death is a final failure of the physical body, so in the end all will die of something. However, there are times when God does desire to heal people of physical ailments in order to reveal his glory in those circumstances. You are free at any time to ask him to heal, but you should at all times trust him with his purposes in your life. There may be times when the root of your physical problem is sin. Unforgiveness and bitterness are known causes of disease. To harbor a grudge - to refuse to give and to receive forgiveness - can literally make us sick. To forgive and to be forgiven is good for you in many ways. In addition to the practical physical and mental benefits, the willingness to make things right with others opens up our hearts to God in ways that can make our praying more effective. If we ask God to bring healing (or anything else for that matter) and, yet, we harbor unconfessed or unforgiven sin, then we should not wonder why our prayers are ineffective. Confess your sins to one another. Ask for forgiveness when necessary and give forgiveness when you have the opportunity. This is fairly simple to understand and apply, but enormously important for your physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Not to mention your relational well-being, both with others and with God. Confess your sins and pray for each other so that you may be healed. Do this so you may be healed of physical "sin-sickness" as well as relational "sin-sickness." To live in the fullest possible health it is necessary that, as far as it is within your own ability, you live in right relationship with others. This is both right to do and good for you to do.

#### **Pray:**

## Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season

A Focus on Loving One Another

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(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## Closing the Gap 5.31.18

### Week 21: "Confess Your Sins to One Another"

#### Day 4

#### Pray:

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### Read:

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Matthew 5:23 Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.=

#### Reflect:

King Saul liked to do things his own way while, at the same time, pretending he was obeying God. The final straw that cost him his kingdom was when he decided God needed an "offering" from him more than obedience. Samuel confronted Saul regarding his rebellion and Saul essentially said, "Yeah, I knew what God wanted, but I had a better idea. Rather than destroying all this good stuff, I kept it as a sacrifice for God." Samuel replied, "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22). Jesus would echo the same principle when he taught that if you were making an offering (a sacrifice) in worship and remembered that you had sinned against someone, then stop what you are doing! Go and do your best to be reconciled to your brother or sister, then come back and make your offering. God does not want your worship or your sacrifice unless he has your obedience. Why? Because if he is not seen as sovereign Lord, then it's really not worship. If he is not obeyed, then he is not seen as sovereign Lord. Saul saw himself as a 'sort of' junior partner to God. This would be humorous if it were not so blatantly wrong. God does not need our help, or our advice, or our sacrifice. He needs nothing from us, but he wants obedience from us. Living in healthy relationships with one another is bottom-line obedience to God. As far as it is within your power, maintain clear relationships with one another. Only then will your "offerings" be acceptable to God. Because only when he is fully obeyed are we actually perceiving him as he really is. He is the Lord of heaven and earth and he needs nothing from us, but there are things he wants from us. Forgiving one another is one of those things.

#### Pray:

## Closing the Gap Devotional Spring Season

A Focus on Loving One Another

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(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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## **Closing the Gap 6.1.18**

### **Week 21: "Confess Your Sins to One Another"**

#### **Day 5**

#### **Pray:**

Ask God to reorient you to Himself. Confess any known sin. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Be still and reflect on Jesus and His sacrifice for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to God's Word. Pray for others in your life that they, too, would know and love God today.

#### **Read:**

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Matthew 5:23 Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

#### **Reflect:**

Consistently confessing your sins can help you see the futility of those sins. Sinning against one another is empty and unfulfilling. Everyone, if they are paying attention, will experience this emptiness. The problem is that the experience of the emptiness of sin is most acute after the fact. How can we learn to see the emptiness of sin before the act of sinning? Getting perspective after failure is important; it leads to repentance, confession, and restoration. Getting perspective before failure is ideal; it leads to wisdom and the avoidance of sin altogether. Perspective by itself will not always be enough to keep you from making bad choices. Often people will "see" what is right to do, but still plow ahead into sin anyway. However, perspective over time can and does shape our choices. If we see at the beginning the futility that will come in the end because of some choice we are considering, it can help us avoid that choice. Confession can help with that perspective. Often people will sin against someone and then just wait for time to take away its "edge." An unkind word, a bad attitude, or a sinful action against someone needs to be dealt with directly, not passively. Do not just "wait it out." Instead, take action. Go to the person you have sinned against and ask for forgiveness. Use these words: "I was wrong. Would you forgive me?" Be direct. Do this every time you sin. In the first place, it is the right thing to do. In the second place, it will help you make better choices in the future. When you have asked for forgiveness for the same bad attitude or the same foolish choice over and over again, it can help you learn to just skip the sin altogether. If you get "sick" of confessing the same sin over and over, don't stop confessing. Instead, move that perspective backwards on the timeline. As you are about to make the bad choice, remember where you will end up if you do so. Do the math. Has this bad choice ever really been worth it? What are the chances it will be worth it this time? There are other factors that are important in dealing with and avoiding sin, but

consistent and full confession of sin to one another is clearly an important one. Confess your sins to one another and you will be healed.

**Pray:**

(Personalize this prayer today; make it specific to the circumstances that face you.)

Ask God to lead you through His Spirit as you go through your day. Ask Him to bring to mind the truth of the gospel and its implications for what you will encounter today. Tell Him "Yes" to His will and ask Him for His power and protection to live this "yes." Ask God to create and reveal opportunities to proclaim the good news today.

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