

THE DISCIPLINED LIFE

Getting in shape to seek the Kingdom of God.

PART 4: RELATIONAL DISCIPLINES



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The Fellowship of Ailbe

Relational Disciplines

Relational Disciplines
A *ReVision* Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Relational Disciplines

Welcome to *Relational Disciplines*

Welcome to *Relational Disciplines*, part 4 of a 7-part series on the disciplined life. Seeking the Kingdom of God is full-time work, and we need to be in shape if we're going to make progress in this effort. Living a disciplined life is crucial to realizing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God

Relational Disciplines guide us in the consistent and increasing exercise of our Kingdom calling to love one another and our neighbors as ourselves. By following the example of Jesus, we can improve in our ability to show His love to others, and thus to advance His rule of love on earth as it is in heaven.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Guiding Virtue

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13.13

Inside out

Following Jesus is a call to *new* life, *eternal* life, life that grows within us as a result of the work of God's Spirit, Who comes to dwell in all who believe. That inward life, the fruit of consistent spiritual disciplines, has abundant power to show through us – so much, in fact, that we can never exhaust the potential for newer and more fruitful experiences of the new life we have in Christ (Eph. 3.20).

The Spirit of God, working with the Word of God, works to transform us increasingly into new people, made in the image of God and being remade into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18). This transformation occurs primarily – though not exclusively – from the inside out. As believers apply themselves to the disciplines God prescribes for bringing renewal to their minds, hearts, and consciences, they tap into the power of God's Spirit to make them willing and able to do what is in line with the pleasure of God (Phil. 2.12, 13). From within, welling up and flowing out from their renewed and transformed souls, the followers of Christ express in words and deeds the very character of Christ.

Believers should expect that, in all their relationships, roles, and responsibilities, they will increasingly experience the *presence* of Christ within them, and will demonstrate the *life* of Christ unto the glory of God and the benefit of their neighbors.

And in the sphere of personal relationships, the guiding form of this new life will be love.

Relational disciplines

Just as there are disciplines designed to reshape and nurture our souls, so also are there disciplines which, as we master them, can direct our outward lives in ways consistent with the life of Jesus Christ. And, as the focus of *spiritual* disciplines is the soul, so the focus of *relational* disciplines is love.

Love is the greatest of all Christian virtues, and that for two reasons. First, love consummates all the other virtues of the life of faith. When we love others we are showing them patience, kindness, humility, deference, consideration, selflessness, generosity, purity, and truthfulness (1 Cor. 13.4-7). We may show each of these individual virtues by themselves, of course, but only when these are motivated and activated by love do they come with the fullness and genuineness that truly communicate.

Second, love is the greatest of Christian virtues because love most expresses the being of God, Who is love (1 Jn. 4.8). When we love others, selflessly and disinterestedly, it is not actually we who love, but Christ, Who causes His Spirit to well up within us – engaging our transformed souls – and to flow out from us in words and deeds that imitate Jesus and embody the fact that He is alive from the dead (Jn. 7.37-39).

Paul offers a succinct definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13.4-7, and I think it's a good idea that we memorize those four verses: "Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." By sticking this definition in your mind you can get your heart around it better so that love settles into your conscience as the default choice of your will in all your relationships and every encounter with other human beings.

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Love in practice

But memorizing the definition of love is just a start. *Maturing* in love, growing in the love of Jesus Christ and showing love more consistently to others, is, as the writer of Hebrews observed, a matter of *practice* (Heb. 5.12-14). That is, we need to *discipline* the words we speak and the works we do so that, when we're with other people, those words and works will channel the love of Christ.

And here we must be no respecters of persons. The virtue of love is not reserved only for those closest to us – our spouses, family, or friends. Believers are called to practice love with all people, especially those with whom they share faith in Jesus Christ, but also every person they encounter each day, even those who may wish them ill (Rom. 12.9, 10; 13.8; Matt. 5.44).

Loving others with the love of Jesus Christ does not come naturally to us. What comes naturally to us is loving our selves and looking out for our own interests above all. But loving others will be the defining motif of all our words and deeds as, through the use of spiritual disciplines, Christ is formed in us and the Spirit flows through us. We can help this process toward consistency and maturity by making sure we understand the demands of love, preparing ourselves daily for the opportunities to love, and taking whatever steps love may require of us as opportunities for loving others present.

Love is the great Christian virtue, and growing in love is the focus and goal of all relational disciplines.

For reflection or discussion

1. Why must love be the guiding virtue in all our relationships with others? What obstacles do have to overcome in order to love others as we should?
2. “Just as there are disciplines designed to reshape and nurture our souls, so also are there disciplines which, as we master them, can direct our outward lives in ways consistent with the life of Jesus Christ.” What would say are some of those disciplines?
3. How can we tell if we are *maturing* in love? What would be some indications of increasing maturity of love for our neighbors?
4. “Loving others with the love of Jesus Christ does not come naturally to us. What comes naturally to us is loving our selves and looking out for our own interests above all.” Why is this so? How does this forewarn us about the challenge of maturing in love?
5. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn?

Next steps: Next steps: Are there people in your life today concerning whom you cannot say with complete confidence, “I love this person with the love of Jesus Christ”? Begin praying daily for these people, that you would be more mindful of opportunities to love and more ready to love as each situation arises. Ask a Christian friend to pray for you as you begin mastering the relational disciplines that lead to more consistent love for others.

Prayer:

2 See Jesus

For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But we see Jesus... Hebrews 2.8, 9

Sent like Jesus

Jesus Christ came among us in order to bring near the Kingdom of God. This was His first and consistent message, and the reality of this new and heavenly realm could be seen in all His works. Jesus preached, taught, and lived a new Kingdom, a Kingdom not of this world, a Kingdom expressive of the love God has for all He has made (Jn. 3.16).

Jesus told His followers, and us through them, that in the same way He had been sent to the world, He is sending each one of us (Jn. 20.21). As followers of Christ, therefore, our primary purpose for being here is to advance the rule of love on earth as it is in heaven. Christians are the advance guard of a Kingdom that is coming on earth, growing like a great mountain (Dan. 2.44, 45), and bringing righteousness, peace, and joy to the world (Is. 9.6, 7; Rom. 14.17, 18).

And the vehicle by which this Kingdom makes progress is for us, as it was for Jesus, love.

Thus, it stands to reason that, by keeping Jesus before our minds, we might improve daily in becoming more like Him by disciplining our words and deeds to express and fulfill this glorious Kingdom calling. And this means “seeing” Jesus as He was during His incarnation, as He is even now at the right hand of God, and as He will be when He returns to establish His Kingdom in its full glory and splendor.

Jesus incarnate

God the Father has appointed the followers of His Son to bring the whole world under the sway of His rule of love. The writer of Hebrews summarized this high and holy calling by citing Psalm 8, reminding his readers that God has “put all things in subjection” to His chosen and redeemed people. But in that day, as in ours, not all things had yet been brought into subjection to the rule of divine love. So what can we do?

“But we see Jesus,” the writer reminds us, and seeing Jesus is foundational to mastering all relational disciplines – indeed, all the disciplines of the disciplined life. We must see Jesus as He walked among us by paying special attention to the reports of the four evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The gospels deserve repeated reading and meditation if we are to fix in our minds the love that Jesus spoke and showed during His sojourn among us.

As we meditate and study Christ in His incarnation we will see love in action, seeking the lost, serving those in need, shepherding the souls of His followers, sowing the Word of truth, and doing all things to bring honor and glory to His Father and ours. Read daily in the gospels. Meditate deeply on the example of Jesus’ love. Think ahead to the day before you and the opportunities for seeking, serving, shepherding, sowing, and stewarding your time and resources in ways consistent with the love of Jesus Christ. Then prepare to go into your day, sent as Jesus was sent, to advance the rule of divine love.

Jesus exalted

But look also to Jesus in His exaltation, to see the love of God emanating from Him in beauty, splendor, power, majesty, dignity, and faithfulness. Look to such Psalms as 2, 45, 47, 93, 99, and 110, and to the book of Revelation, to flesh out a vision of Jesus exalted. See what love looks like resplendent in glory, as He presents Himself in true dignity and holiness; as He “rides out” each day in truth, meekness, and righteousness; as He sends His angels to assist us in seeking and advancing His rule of love; as He equips and sends His people to refresh the world with His grace and truth; and as He receives in glory and jubilation those faithful followers whose term on earth has been completed.

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As you meditate on Jesus exalted, let those works of seeking, serving, shepherding, sowing, and stewarding be bathed in the radiance of His majesty, dignity, and power, and you'll begin to know His love more truly and consistently in all your words and deeds.

Jesus returning

Finally, see Jesus in His coming again, when we will see Him face to face, and be like Him (1 Jn. 3.1-3). See His bright eyes, that see through to the need of every soul; the many crowns indicating His rule over all nations; His blood-stained robe, the emblem of His selflessness; and the Word of truth flashing from His mouth (Rev. 19.11-16). See Him coming in righteousness and judgment, King of kings and Lord of lords, and let this mighty, ultimate portrait of our loving Savior inform your obedience to Him day by day.

No, we do not yet see all things in subjection to the rule of love. But we are called to seek that Kingdom and to advance it daily, and while our outward circumstances are changeable and can be disappointing, Jesus never is or ever will. Look to Jesus. Concentrate on Him. Fix the vision of Jesus in your mind and let the love of Jesus fill your heart, and you will go forth with Him each day, conquering and to conquer in love (Rev. 6.1, 2).

For reflection or discussion

1. What does T. M. mean by “see Jesus”? How can “seeing Jesus” help us becoming more disciplined for love?
2. What do you think about the idea of reading through the gospels, over and over? Why might this be a good idea?
3. How would you describe your vision of Christ exalted? How clear is the vision of Him exalted in glory in your mind? What role does this vision play in your walk with and work for the Lord?
4. Meditate on the vision of Jesus in Revelation 1 and 19? What can we learn from this vision about the love of Christ? How can keeping this vision in mind improve our ability to love others?
5. “Fix the vision of Jesus in your mind and let the love of Jesus fill your heart, and you will go forth with Him each day, conquering and to conquer in love (Rev. 6.1, 2).” Do you agree? Why or why not?

Next steps: How can you better practice meditating on Jesus in His incarnation, exaltation, and return? Ask a church leader or pastor to help you work out this spiritual discipline so as the better to shaper your relational disciplines in the love of Christ.

Prayer:

3 Love Seeks

And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." Luke 19.9, 10

Getting some handles on love

If we're going to love the way Jesus loved, it will help to reduce mastering love to a set of disciplines that we can exercise, practice, and improve. By focusing on Jesus in His incarnation, exaltation, and return we can develop a growing picture of the Lord of love to guide us in seeking and advancing the rule of love each day.

We can expect to sharpen and improve this effort by following the example of Jesus and pursuing our relationships in the same way He did. This begins by our becoming more proactive in love toward the people around us, or, put another way, by becoming *seekers* of others in the same way Jesus came to seek and save those who are lost.

Who are the seekers?

To love with the love of Jesus is to *seek* others, and not simply to wait around for them to find their way to us. The contemporary notion of a "seeker-friendly" church is a distortion of Biblical teaching about how the love of Jesus comes to the lost world. The Scriptures teach that, among the lost of this world, *none* are seeking God because *none* understand their need for Him (Ps. 53.1-3). Yet in our churches we throw out everything glorious in our Christian liturgical heritage, hoping to attract "seekers" by our contemporary, relaxed style and our non-threatening messages of "love."

It's instructive to note how, over the past half-generation of the rise of "seeker-friendliness" in our churches, the work of God's people in proclaiming the Good News to their neighbors, co-workers, and friends has essentially dried up. We've decided to wait for the "seekers" to find their way to us; but what we're finding is that few of our neighbors are joining our churches, and little in the way of Good News is going out to our communities. And those who have managed to find their way to us have discovered a gospel that is so compromised and watered down that it can only be described as a kind of "near Christianity" rather than the Good News of the Kingdom.

God does not expect the world to seek Him, though all are commanded to do so. Instead, He came seeking us, and in the example of His seeking, we can learn what it means to love others as Jesus did, and to love them with the kind of initiating grace that softens, piques, and attracts people to the Lord.

The disciplines of seeking

Although the practice of seeking our neighbors with the love of Christ could doubtless take many forms, I want to mention four disciplines that, if we can master them, will help us to improve daily in following the example of our Lord Jesus.

First, we must seek others with the love of Christ in *prayer*. If you have never [mapped out your Personal Mission Field](#), to discover and fix in your mind the people to whom God is sending you week after week, this would be an excellent time to do so. Once you've identified the people you see each week, begin your day by praying for those you expect to see. Ask God to fill your heart with love for them, and to prepare you to seek them as Jesus would if He were actually doing so through you.

Praying for the people you will see each day can lead to *planning* how you will actually seek them. What steps might you take to reach out to the people you will see that day with the love of Jesus? By planning your time before you actually come to it, you can expect to know the wisdom of God in how you use your time,

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especially as you reach out to others, seeking them with the love of Jesus (Ps. 90.12).

Third, make a point to *greet* the people you see each day. Greet each one personally. Learn the names of the people in your Personal Mission Field, and use their names whenever you have the opportunity. Don't wait for others to speak first. Greet people cheerily, as though you had some Good News to tell. Greet them sincerely, pausing to wait for their reply, and then replying as indicated. Think of Jesus greeting Nathaniel, the woman at the well, Zaccheus, and all the others. By initiating contact Jesus showed interest in others, and people generally respond very well when they think someone cares enough to be interested in them.

Finally, try to *engage* the people around you each day in personal and meaningful ways. Take an interest in them as persons. Listen to what they reveal about themselves, their families, or their concerns, and add these to your times of prayer. Comment positively on their work. At some point, once you've become more familiar with them, let them know that you pray for them, and encourage them to share requests with you. Be sure to follow-up on those requests as well. Look for opportunities to engage others in conversation, by asking them questions, commenting on some common interest, such as work, or seeking their opinion on a contemporary issue or situation.

Imagine yourself being "sought" in this way, say, by an elder or other shepherd in your church – to know that someone prays for you faithfully, considers and plans for ways to encourage you, greets you personally and cheerily, and listens to your needs, opinions, views, and ideas. Would that endear you to that church leader? Well, it will endear your neighbors to you as well, as you learn to seek them with love of Jesus Christ.

For reflection or discussion

1. How many different ways can you identify that Jesus was a "seeker" of the lost?
2. "God does not expect the world to seek Him, though all are commanded to do so. Instead, He came seeking us, and in the example of His seeking, we can learn what it means to love others as Jesus did, and to love them with the kind of initiating grace that softens, piques, and attracts people to the Lord." What does T. M. mean by "initiating grace"?
3. Have you mapped out your Personal Mission Field? Why is it important that we have a good idea of the people to whom God sends us regularly?
4. Review the four disciplines T. M. recommends to help us in seeking others. How might you see these working out in your own experience?
5. What obstacles do you need to overcome in order to become more consistent as a seeker or others? How can your fellow believers help you in this matter?

Next steps: Whom will you seek today with the love of Jesus? What specific steps of seeking will you take? Write your plan down, then commit it to the Lord in prayer. At the end of the day, review your work, and offer it to the Lord with thanksgiving.

Prayer:

4 Love Serves

“If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.” John 13.14, 15

Seeking leads to serving

Jesus did not come to earth, rent a building in Jerusalem, and hang out a sign that said, “Religion at 11.” That is, He did not expect the lost and needy of His world to find their way to Him.

He went looking for them, seeking them up and down, among the downcast and unlovely as well as among the well-off, high-placed, and powerful. Jesus sought people, walking throughout Judea, Galilee, Samaria, and beyond, reaching out to others as the embodiment of a new Kingdom of love that had come near by His words and works.

And, more often than not, as Jesus went about seeking others, He ended up serving them according to the needs they presented before Him. If we seek others faithfully, soon enough the Lord will open doors of opportunity for us to serve them with His love.

The nature of service

Jesus gave us an example of true service when He washed the disciples’ feet in that upper room. By analyzing that situation we can discover key aspects of a life of service, and begin practicing those disciplines in our own Personal Mission Fields.

So let’s note the following: First, serving others begins in *setting your own interests and needs aside* (Jn. 13.1-4). Jesus was about to be treacherously betrayed, falsely tried, and brutally crucified. Yet He did not allow His own concerns to dominate in that upper room. More important than what was on His mind was the opportunity to love His disciples and to teach them what it means to love one another.

The Apostle Paul put it this way: “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2.4). Then he pointed to the example of Jesus, Who came among us as a Servant. Serving others begins in self-denial, setting our own interests aside in order to be available to others.

Second, note that Jesus *identified the opportunity for serving*. He was alert to the need that presented before Him, and He quickly diagnosed what must take place for that need to be met. If we’re paying attention to people, praying for them and engaging them regularly and sincerely, God will begin to show us ways we might serve them so as to meet some need in their lives, whether small or large.

Third, Jesus *prepared Himself to serve* His disciples. He gathered the necessary equipment, dressed Himself accordingly, organized the room, and got started with His work. As we begin to discern the needs of people around us, even if it’s just for more consistent encouragement or affirmation, or assistance with some routine task, we can prepare each day in our times of prayer and planning to step up to the opportunity and lend a kind word or a helping hand.

This is not to suggest that we can meet everybody’s needs, or even that we’ll always be able to serve every person or need that presents before us. But by becoming more *servant-minded* and practicing the disciplines of self-denial, discernment, and preparation, we’ll be in a better position to serve others as we can, and thus to touch them with the love of Jesus.

Serving by words and deeds

Our contemporary approach to Christian life and ministry is so skewed and distorted as to cause many, if not most, of us to miss the significance of Jesus’ example of service. We tend to think of service in terms of

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programs or church-sponsored activities. We participate in drives or campaigns to help the poor, give up a Saturday morning to work at the rescue mission, or help prepare meals for the elderly once a week. All these examples of love *concentrated* are important, and we must not fail to do them as we are able.

But the larger New Testament teaching is not of love merely concentrated, but of love *diffused* – like light, salt, or leaven, penetrating into the nooks and crannies of society, dispelling the darkness, preserving all that is good, and bringing wholesomeness to light amid the stale loaves of a narcissistic social order. Believers become agents of diffused love by their daily words and deeds – words that edify, encourage, comfort, and please, and works that assist, support, or complement the works of others.

Every believer is called to love after the example of Jesus by making the most of the opportunities for serving others that present each day in his or her Personal Mission Field (Eph. 5.15-17). The more we can become consistent in the everyday opportunities to serve, the more convincing and powerful will be those concentrated labors of love that we take on as congregations.

Jesus gave us an example of how to love others, and that example is one of serving. Today is the day of salvation, and so today is the day we must serve others with the Kingdom love of Jesus Christ.

For reflection or discussion

1. T. M. says that seeking leads to serving. Why is this so?
2. Meditate on Mark 10.42-45. How important is serving others in the Kingdom of love?
3. What's the difference between love *concentrated* and love *diffused*? Why is each of them essential in advancing the Kingdom of love?
4. Meditate on Ephesians 5.15-17. If we don't use our time for love others, what can happen to it?
5. How can believers help one another improve their ability and consistency in serving others?

Next steps: Today, what are some things others might do in order to serve you – to encourage or assist you in your normal daily responsibilities? Following the Golden Rule, how might you do such things as these for the people around you? Try living this way today, and see what opportunities for serving others might crop up all around you.

Prayer:

5 Love Shepherds

He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep." John 21.16

The gist of shepherding

Jesus instructed Peter to "feed" His "lambs" and to "tend" His "sheep." We understand that Jesus was speaking metaphorically, but Peter latched on to that image, embraced it as his calling, and pursued it throughout the remainder of his life. At the very end of his life we find him writing to the pastors and church leaders in Asia Minor, instructing them to "shepherd" the flock entrusted to their care, just as he himself had sought to do (1 Pet. 5.1-3).

Jesus declared Himself to be the promised Good Shepherd God was sending to gather and care for His flocks (Ezek. 34.11-31; Jer. 23.1-4). Jesus understood this mission as being directed at the souls and lives of people, that they should be reoriented to and reconciled with God, and knitted together in love, so that they might know full and abundant life in Him (Jn. 10.10). The work of a shepherd, as Jesus explained in John 10, is to know, lead, defend, and nurture those entrusted to his care, so that they might know fullness of Kingdom life and love in Jesus Christ.

The many "one another" passages in the New Testament indicate that shepherding is not just a work for apostles, pastors, or elders. Shepherding one another is an important part of community life in the body of Christ. And seeing ourselves as shepherds, even to the lost people in our lives, can also encourage us in the work of evangelism. Jesus taught that shepherds are responsible to search for lost sheep and bring them into the fold, and we will be doing the work He did, and that He commends to all His followers, when we make the work of shepherding an important part of our relational disciplines.

The work of shepherding

What does this involve?

Well, if we're practicing the disciplines of seeking and serving, we'll be well on our way toward fulfilling our callings to shepherd one another and seek the lost. The New Testament calls us to "love one another," "teach and admonish one another," "bear one another's burdens," do good to one another, and to "stimulate one another to love and good works." In short, one-anothering is what people do to encourage each other in the life of faith, in the experience of Christ's love and the ability to show that love to others.

So we will be shepherding like Jesus did when we encourage our fellow believers in their walk with the Lord, coming alongside to help them improve their spiritual disciplines and to aid them in all other aspects of the disciplined life in the Kingdom of God.

In order to know, lead, defend, and nurture our fellow believers, we'll need to have a clear sense of vision – both of the Kingdom and the life of faith – as well as an understanding of how to encourage and equip our fellow believers. And we'll need to work hard to establish the relations of mutual love and trust that allow us to shepherd one another effectively.

Again, our contemporary view of faith and life tends to leave the work of equipping, such as it is, to classes, teachers, and special events. Little in the way of iron-sharpening-iron exists in most churches, and most of what passes for "shepherding" is just running programs and counting heads.

But when the followers of Christ have been equipped for works of ministry, they will be especially diligent to

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show the love of Christ to their fellow church members, doing good to them by encouraging and assisting them in their walk with and work for the Lord (Gal. 6.9, 10). The work of shepherding, which is an important relational discipline, begins with our working together to strengthen each member of the Body of Christ, so that the congregation as a whole can grow in unity and maturity in the Lord (Eph. 4.11-16). Building the Lord's church is high on His agenda (Matt. 16.18), and each of us, as shepherds to one another, must take up this work, beginning in our Personal Mission Fields.

Seeking the lost

But Jesus also taught that the work of shepherding involves seeking lost sheep and bringing them into the fold (Jn. 10.16). The people in our Personal Mission Fields, whom we are seeking and serving each day, may well be among those lost sheep who are simply waiting to be found. After all, weren't you and I once in that condition? And did it not take some faithful shepherd, bringing us the Good News of our Good Shepherd, to lead us into the fold of Christ?

Thus, the calling to shepherd the Lord's lambs requires that we be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within us to anyone who, because of our seeking and serving love, is beginning to wonder just what we're all about (1 Pet. 3.15). We won't need to learn lots of clever illustrations, memorize elaborate outlines, or be able to deal out convincing answers to objections. If we love Jesus, and are growing in His love for the people around us, when we need words to explain the *reason* why we love this way, the Spirit at work within us will give us just what we require (Lk. 12.11, 12).

Still, as Peter, that faithful shepherd taught, we must "be ready" to give such an answer, just as we must be ready to shepherd the Lord's lambs in our own church, using our words and deeds to show the love of Christ for the sake of making disciples and building-up His Body, the church.

For reflection or discussion

1. What kind of relationship does the image of "shepherding" suggest to you?
2. What opportunities for "one anothering" do you encounter during a typical week?
3. Meditate on Ephesians 4.11, 12. What does it mean to be "equipped" for "ministry"? How well equipped for ministry in your Personal Mission Field are you at this time?
4. What is our duty as shepherds in loving lost people? How well equipped for this are you?
5. How can Christians help one another to love others as shepherds?

Next steps: What does it mean for you to "be ready" to serve as a shepherd in your Personal Mission Field? Ask a pastor or church leader – one of your shepherds – to help you better prepare to fulfill this calling.

Prayer:

6 Love Sows

He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man." Matthew 13:37

Sent like Jesus

Believers in Jesus have been sent like Him to bring near the Kingdom and love of God to the people of this world. This work involves us in relationships with all kinds of people, especially those we see week-in and week-out in our Personal Mission Fields. By mastering a few basic disciplines – seeking, serving, and shepherding – we can position ourselves as agents of transforming grace to the people we see each day.

Jesus also explained that central to His mission of bringing near the Kingdom of love was the work of sowing the Word of God. This He undertook in wide variety of ways and settings, formally and informally, in large groups and small, among those who despised Him as well as with those who had become His followers, in casual conversations and in designated times of instruction, in response to questions and as questions posed to others.

As sowing the Word was an important component of Jesus' relationships, so it must be of ours as well. Being able to sow the Word among those we are daily seeking, serving, and shepherding requires that we prepare well, anticipate clearly, and make the most of every opportunity to which the Lord brings us each day.

Preparing to sow

We will not be in a position to sow the Word in our Personal Mission Fields if we are not first of all sowing the Word into our own lives. Here there is no substitute for daily reading, meditation, and study in Scripture, for practicing those disciplines that let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly so that we will be ready to give an answer for the hope that is within us and to teach or admonish others as needed (Ps. 119:9-11; 1 Pet. 3:15; Col. 3:16).

The Apostle Paul commands us to let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly. Once again we see why the practice of spiritual disciplines is so important. Without those daily disciplines of the Word – reading, meditation, and study – not only will we have little to sow into the lives of others, but our own lives will lack the credibility we need to share confidently and persuasively from the Word of God.

We must seek specific guidance from the Word for all aspects of our lives, both the inward life of our soul and the outward life of our relationships, roles, and responsibilities. The Word of God must become the lamp which guides our steps in every area of our lives (Ps. 119:105). Only then will we be ready to sow the Word as is appropriate into the lives of others.

Sowing the Word

But what does that entail? How should we expect to sow the Word as part of our daily practice of relational disciplines?

First, by our lives. As followers of Christ we are called to bring holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1). This means the Word of God must inform, shape, and guide all aspects of our being in the world – our marriages and families, work, involvement in culture and politics, our hopes, aspirations, and dreams – everything.

The Bible is able to equip us for every good work (2 Tim. 3:15-17), so it behooves us to search the Scriptures daily in order to discover its teaching for all aspects of our live (Acts 17:11). As the Spirit of God, working with the Scriptures, shapes and molds us into the image of Jesus Christ, how we live our lives, in every area of

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our lives, will refract His indwelling presence in uniquely Biblical ways. Motivated by the hope of knowing and expressing God's glory, we will bring our lives into line with Scripture, so that in every area of our lives we might do those good works that glorify God (Matt. 5.13-16; 1 Cor. 10.31).

As Peter suggests, such a way of living will pique the interest of others, prompting them to ask us to explain ourselves (1 Pet. 3.15). We can sow the Word into the lives of others as often as they express some interest in us – in what we believe or how we conduct ourselves.

But we should also feel free to share with others things we are learning from the Scriptures, or Scriptural perspectives on the issues and events of the day. Don't people do this with one another quite freely? Don't they talk about new technologies they're learning, important ideas they're considering, or ways they are changing their thinking about this, that, or something else? Why should we exclude from such conversational fodder our own experience of growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord?

We must also be ready with the Word of the Gospel to share, as often as the Lord gives us opportunity to do so. The first believers, chased out of their familiar surroundings by the threat of persecution, went everywhere "gossiping the Gospel," as Michael Green so eloquently put it (Acts 8.1-4). Like them, and like our Lord Jesus Christ, we must prepare and be ready to sow the Word into all our relationships with others, as an explanation for our lifestyle and an invitation to new life in Christ.

For reflection or discussion

1. What do you think of when "sowing the Word" comes to mind?
2. Jesus was sent as a Sower. We have been sent in the same way He was sent (Jn. 20.21). How large a place does sowing the Word have in your life at this time?
3. What are some ways that your practice of the disciplines of the Word has helped you to be more consistent as a sower of the Word?
4. Why do you suppose it's so hard for Christians to introduce the Scripture into everyday conversations? Should we be content with this situation?
5. How can believers help one another to become more consistent and effective in sowing the Word?

Next steps: What opportunities for sowing the Word will you have today? How should you prepare to sow the Word? Ask a believing friend to pray for you today as you go forth, sent like Jesus, to sow the Word of God.

Prayer:

7 Love Stewards

“I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.” John 17.4

All things for the glory of God

The Apostle Paul was merely expressing by exhortation what Jesus demonstrated by example when he wrote to the Corinthians that they should do all things for the glory of God, even down to such everyday, mundane activities as taking a meal (1 Cor. 10.31). Everything in our lives has the potential to refract the living presence of the indwelling Christ, to show our love for God and others in ways that glow with the new life we possess in the Lord Jesus.

The challenge we face each day is to make the most of every opportunity before us for glorifying God (Eph. 5.15-17), so that, at the end of each day we can say like the Lord Jesus, concerning the day just gone by, “I have glorified You on earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do,” if only for that day.

And this is a matter of stewardship. Jesus was a good steward of His time and of every opportunity for glorifying God that presented itself in His time. Relating to others with the love of Christ, and for the progress of His Kingdom of love, is a matter of stewardship – the stewardship of time, words, and deeds.

What makes for effective stewardship in the Kingdom of love?

Elements of stewardship

The parable of the talents (Matt. 25.14-30) is a good place to turn in trying to understand the essentials of good stewardship. Four principles emerge from that parable which relate to all aspects of life, including the opportunities we have for showing the love of Christ to the people around us.

First, we must learn to see *everything and everyone as a gift* from God. The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it (Ps. 24.1). He is the ruler of all time, and every moment of time, together with everything in it, comes to us freshly minted from the Word of God. We are not our own, and “our” time is really *God’s* time, loaned to us, and everything in it, for the purpose of glorifying Him and finishing His work. When we see time and relationships as gifts, we will be more likely to receive and use them according to the intentions of the Giver.

Second, and deriving from this first principle, we must learn to conduct our lives *under the heavens* rather than merely under the sun. We are always under the loving and watchful eye of our heavenly Father. We are at all times being sustained and blessed by the upholding Word of Christ. And we are never without the presence of God’s Spirit to guide and empower us for love. Indeed, we have even been seated with Christ in heavenly places, and we are commanded to set our minds there in all we do (Eph. 2.6; Col. 3.1-3). Living under the heavens means always being mindful of the Lord’s presence, and even living *from* that presence and *unto* that presence in all we do.

Third, when it comes to how we use our time, the opportunities for loving others presented in our time, and the continuous presence, oversight, and power of God available to us in our time, the watchword that guides us in all we do must be *improve, improve, improve*. Like the talents that became 10 and 4, we must invest the time of our lives, and the relationships we conduct within that time, for the sake of improving love for God and others by every means. Our goal should be to flood our Personal Mission Fields with the loving presence of Jesus Christ (Eph. 4.10). Scripture can teach us how to improve in this area, and the Holy Spirit will prompt and empower us according to what we’re learning from the Word of God. But we must be diligent to act on the teaching of Scripture and to improve the practice of love at every opportunity.

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Finally, *practice accountability* in your relationships with the people around you. Find a prayer partner or soul friend who will encourage and support in your efforts to improve love. At the end of each day, review your relationships before the Lord in prayer, and wait in silence for Him to affirm, redirect, or guide you in new ways. Keep in mind that, some day soon, all our works will be reviewed before the divine tribunal, and do everything within your power to hear “Well done” on that day, especially with respect to the love you show to others.

A stewardship prayer of preparation

We will be better stewards of the opportunities for loving others if we can manage to keep the requirements of love and the importance of each opportunity for loving before us at all times. We began this series by encouraging you to memorize 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, which outlines the requirements of love. We end it by urging you to memorize, and to pray throughout the day – in the morning, before each new activity or engagement with others, as often as you think of it – the prayer of Moses in Psalm 90:12, 16, 17:

So teach *us* to number our days,
That we may gain a heart of wisdom...
Let Your work appear to Your servants,
And Your glory to their children.
And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us,
And establish the work of our hands for us;
Yes, establish the work of our hands.

Plan to love. See loving others as the primary *work of the Lord* for your day. Seek the Lord’s help, moment by moment for the *wisdom, skill, and strength* to love. Pray the prayer of Moses daily, and watch how your stewardship of love improves, and all your relational disciplines along with it.

For reflection or discussion

1. What does T. M. mean by receiving our time as a gift of God? How should this affect the way we use our time?
2. What’s the difference between living “under the heavens” and living “under the sun”?
3. T. M. writes, “when it comes to how we use our time, the opportunities for loving others presented in our time, and the continuous presence, oversight, and power of God available to us in our time, the watchword that guides us in all we do must be *improve, improve, improve.*” How should we go about doing this in all the relational disciplines we’ve studied?
4. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study?
5. How are you planning to incorporate that lesson into your walk with and work for the Lord?

Next steps: Find a prayer partner or soul friend to hold you accountable for loving others. Download a copy of this series and share it with your soul friend.

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.