

Pastor Mike Lawrence



**“If possible, so far as it depends on you,
be at peace with all people.”**

Romans 12:18 (NASB)

A Month of Dedication
March 19-April 16, 2017
North Eugene Faith Center

This guide has been written by North Eugene
Faith Center Pastor Mike Lawrence; design,
editing and support writing by Associate Pastor
Heidi Picinic.

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He is Risen! April 16

Celebrate the Resurrection with us

Sunday Morning, 10am

Foreward by Associate Pastor Heidi Picinic

“Be At Peace”

What a lovely idea! Yet what an uncommon reality. From the daily commute, to mealtime conversations, store checkout lines, newspaper headlines, all kinds of entertainment options... very few of our encounters with others or experiences in the world could honestly be considered “peaceful.” Yet that is what God would like us to experience!

“If possible, so far as it depends on you,
be at peace with all people.”
Romans 12:18 (NASB)

Please join us for the four weeks leading to Easter as we explore ways to make it a little more possible to experience peace in our relationships, our community, and our own hearts. There is much we cannot control, but when our hearts are settled on God and His Word, we bring a little light, hope and love into the world instead of increasing the conflict.

How You Can Be Involved

Each week has a new take on the theme, with Scriptures to read and thoughts to consider. You can go at your own pace, but there are about five sections to consider each week. Read, discuss, think and pray with those in your daily life. You can also share your thoughts on our Facebook page, or catch mine on my blog, apursuingheart.wordpress.com.

The final week, we invite you to join us for our Good Friday “Stations of the Cross” event on April 14, and for Easter, April 16, as we celebrate the Resurrection!

Romans 12 (NIV)

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. **If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.** Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Be At Peace

by Pastor Mike Lawrence

Week One: March 19-25

READ: Genesis 21:22-31
on Abraham's conflict with Abimelech

There are many stories about people who get into fights and conflicts about crazy things which end with terrible results.

- In Orlando, a 48-year-old man was shot to death by his wife after a fight over the satellite TV controls.
- In California, a man was stabbed to death by his girlfriend because he brought home a McDonalds ham, egg, and cheese bagel instead of the two Egg McMuffins that she'd asked for. (*Husbands, let that be a lesson to all of you — get it right!*)
- In Dallas, a 37-year-old man was beaten to death by the man he shared a house with after a fight over the thermostat setting in the house.
- In Maryland, a 15-year-old boy was charged with homicide in the shooting death of a man who was playing reggae music very loudly on his car stereo. *Apparently, the boy really hated reggae music.*

Although these are extreme cases and responses, it can sometimes be difficult maintaining positive relationships with people. As humans and Followers of Jesus we will have times of conflict:

- perhaps with a neighbor who seems unbearable;
- perhaps with an employer or a customer;
- perhaps with a government official who seems unreasonable, overly demanding or unfair;
- perhaps with a close family member or other relative;
- perhaps even with another Follower of Jesus;
- or maybe even with another church.

The answer to handling these types of problems is not revenge or hostility, which is not beneficial at all. The answer to handling these types of problems is not in hiding your head in the sand hoping the problem goes away or some other sort of avoidance of the problem. These are not real possibilities anyway. What does the Bible (*our perfect instruction book*) tell us about relationships?

What does the Bible say?

READ: Romans 12

There are MANY scriptures about healthy relationships which we will ponder, but one of the essential ones I'd like us to focus on for this Month of Dedication is Romans 12:18 where we are told that we are to do everything possible on our part to live in peace with everybody.

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

In your own life, with whom are you having trouble
“living at peace”?

- In your household?
- In your long-term relationships?
- In your daily/weekly interactions?
- In your community (*neighborhood, apartments, college, church, city government*)?
- In your world (*a group of people you just don't understand, fear, or feel a bit venomous towards*)?

Although I cannot think of a specific Scripture verse that says so, I have often heard it said that the only thing we can take to heaven with us is relationships.

So, for this Month of Dedication, our need and goal should be to know how to build better relationships. I believe this passage of Romans 12:18 can help us in that goal because in it I can see at least **Four Principles for Building Better Relationships**. But before we explore those principles, I think it would be wise for us to read an account from Scripture where we can see these Principles at work.

READ: Genesis 20:1-18
Abraham & Sarah's deception of Abimelech

This is the account of Abraham's encounter with the Ruler of Gerar. This ruler was called Abimelech, which is a title rather than a name. As you read, consider:

- Was Abraham truly striving to live at peace with all men?
- What about Abraham's fear and ensuing lie?
- Who seemed to have greater integrity, Abraham or Abimelech?
- Who had the greater striving to live at peace with all men?
- What did Abimelech do to hopefully ensure peace?
- Have you had any situations where you were less than truthful in order to avoid a possible conflict?
- What might you have done differently that might have been more beneficial?

Principal #1:
Be Proactive In Avoiding Future Conflicts

READ: Genesis 21:22-24

Some years later Abraham and Abimelech had another encounter. It had been perhaps as many as 20 years since the incident recorded in Genesis 20.

Genesis 21:22 (NIV) "At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his forces said to Abraham, 'God is with you in everything you do.'"

As you will recall from Genesis 20, Abraham and Abimelech had a prior relationship that was anything but positive and so they each went their separate ways. Nevertheless it became obvious to Abimelech that something more needed to be

done because as he said to Abraham, “**God is with you in everything you do.**” God’s promised favor was upon Abraham and therefore his entourage was growing. Abraham was acquiring more livestock and more people, therefore he would soon need even more area to support them and the only available pasture was in what was considered Abimelech’s territory. Abimelech rightly perceived this as a potential conflict so he took the initiative in resolving this problem before it started. In essence, he came to Abraham and said, “Let’s come to an agreement and understanding.” In this act he reveals the first principal of building better relationships: *be proactive in avoiding future conflicts.*

- It is appropriate for us to claim the promises of Scripture like verse 22 for our own personal lives. In Hebrews 13:5 God said He would never leave us nor forsake us — “...for He [God] Himself has said, ‘**I will not in any way fail you nor give you up nor leave you without support. [I will] not, [I will] not, [I will] not in any degree leave you helpless nor forsake nor let [you] down (relax My hold on you)! [Assuredly not!]**’” (Amplified Bible)
- Several times over, say to yourself, “**God is with me in everything I do.**” Repeat it until you believe it. It’s true!
- Sometimes we must come to an agreement within ourselves: Abimelech came to Abraham and said, “Let’s come to an agreement and understanding.” In what area of your sense of self and identity in God have you never come to an agreement and understanding?
- In what area of your relationship with others have you never come to an agreement and understanding?

Be Proactive Instead of Reactive

It seems most of us are often **reactive** rather than **proactive**. Often we wait for conflict to manifest itself and intensify before we do anything to try to resolve it. This might be a little better than just ignoring the problem or resorting to worldly solutions (hostility, revenge, etc.), but in many cases we can avoid conflict altogether by being proactive. We need to use godly wisdom to see potential conflicts and respond accordingly.

Illustration: I can give you a personal application of this principle. As you know, when Pastor Joe Walters came to be an Assisting Minister at NEFC, he departed his affiliation with another Foursquare Church in Eugene. After Joe and I had had a few conversations together and it seemed the Lord was leading him to come on staff at NEFC, I contacted the Senior Pastor at Joe's former church. This Pastor and I had been friends for several years and I certainly did NOT want there to be any potential for conflict between us. In my relationship with that Pastor he had always seemed to me to be a very humble, kind, and cooperative person who probably would not have a problem with this – but I did see the potential for conflict. So I met with that Pastor and we came to an understanding so that we could avoid any future problems. Why do this when no problem currently exist? Because it is one of the principles of building better relationships.

This is true when dealing with neighbors, employers, or anyone else. It is much easier to head off problems **before** they start rather than trying to solve them **later**. In the same

way, it is easier to use sunscreen now than it is to treat skin cancer later!

- Spend some time today meditating and perhaps journaling about your thoughts on John 13:34 – **“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”**
- What does this tell you concerning your response to an unkind word from a spouse or other family member?
- When you consider what Jesus has done for you, (*“While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,” Romans 5:8*) what do you think your appropriate response to others might be?
- Consider Proverbs 17:19 – **“Whoever loves a quarrel loves sin...”** Ask God to reveal to you any person with whom you have prolonged a quarrel.
- Pray and ask God to help you give others the grace He has given you.

If you look again at Genesis 21:23-24 you will see that Abimelech, along with Phicol (his Chief of Staff), seeks to enter into a covenant relationship with Abraham. This was the typical way in ancient times that people and nations avoided conflict. He asks Abraham for such an agreement (which is not unusual) but he also adds one unusual phrase to the wording of the agreement when he says, **“Swear... that you will not deal falsely with me or my children or my descendants.”**

- Why do you think Abimelech might use this phrase?
- Why would you use such a condition?

Perhaps it was Abimelech's past experiences! Abraham's deceitfulness about Sarah's relationship to him had caused problems in the past and Abimelech recognizes that **dishonesty** can be a source of conflict in the future. This leads us to principle #2 of building better relationships, which we will begin to discuss next week.

Today, however, let's look at ways we might have been dishonest.

- **Colossians 3:9-10** – “Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”
- In looking at people with whom you may have had a quarrel, have you lied to them? ...even just “a little white lie”?
- Do you think that person still feels like they can trust you to not deal falsely with them?
- **Luke 16:10 (NIV/ESV)** – Jesus said, "Whoever can be trusted (*One who is faithful...*) with very little can also be trusted (*will also be faithful...*) with much, and whoever is dishonest (*unfaithful*) with very little will also be dishonest (*unfaithful*) with much.”

Examine YOURSELF for your faithfulness quotient.

WEEK 2: March 26-April 1

Principle # 2: Deal Honestly With Others

READ: Ephesians 4

It is amazing how many conflicts are caused or magnified by simple dishonesty. This is a common theme in Genesis, especially in the story of how Jacob's dishonesty led to conflict with Esau and how Laban's dishonesty led to conflict with Jacob. Ephesians 4 brings up many things that can get in the way of peace, and destroy unity between people. In **Ephesians 4:11-25 we are told (NIV summary):**

*“Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up to maturity, not tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, **speaking the truth in love**, we will grow together. Do not live as unbelievers! Be made new in the attitude of your minds; put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must **put off falsehood and speak truthfully** to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.”*

The context of this Scripture passage deals with unity so it again is showing us how dishonesty spoils positive relationships. When Abimelech sought Abraham out in Genesis 21, he knew he could never have a positive relationship with Abraham until he was sure he could trust

him. This could only happen if Abraham was honest from this point forward.

- How do you feel when you know someone has just lied to you?
- Does that feeling change when perhaps they are truthful with you now, but you know they lied to you in the past?
- How do you think they feel if they know you have lied to them in the past?
- Examine your life very carefully (*be honest, now!*) for infractions of Ephesians 4:25 in your own life.
- Consider **Proverbs 12:22 – The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy.**

“Honesty is the best policy!”

READ: Romans 3:4-24

In this second week of our Month of Dedication, we’re going to examine more scriptures regarding our personal honesty. Sadly, even devoted Followers of Jesus still lie. (*Now, no protesting until you hear me out!*) Romans 3:10-13 is a passage I have often wished didn’t apply to me, but sadly it does! And it might apply to you too.

Romans 3:10,12-13 – As it is written (*Ecclesiastes 7:20*): “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands... All have turned

away... Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.”

Probably the person to whom I lie (*deceive*) most often is myself. For example, I tell myself I can do things in less time than I actually can. Lying to myself this way sets me up to lie to others, because I then feel compelled to justify my lateness in finishing a task.

Perhaps we rarely if ever tell blatant lies, but all lies are equally offensive to God (*Romans 6:23* – “...*the wages of (all/any) sin is death...*”), so that’s a great reason to even avoid telling “little white lies.”

- Telling a white lie to be “tactful” or to spare someone’s feelings is a foolish thing to do. Those who regularly tell white lies will damage their credibility. But do tell the truth *in love*. Or sometimes it is best to keep silent!
- White lies have a way of propagating themselves. Telling more lies to cover up the original lie is standard procedure, and the lies get progressively less “white.”
- Trying to remember what lies were told to what person also complicates relationships and makes further lying even more likely.
- Telling a white lie to benefit yourself is nothing but selfishness. When our words are motivated by the pride of life, we are falling into temptation (1 John 2:16).

- Little white lies are sometimes told to “*preserve the peace,*” as if telling the truth would in some way destroy peace. Yet the Bible presents truth and peace as existing together: “**Therefore, love the truth and peace**” (Zechariah 8:19).
- Tellers of white lies believe they are speaking lies “*out of love*”; however, the Bible tells us to speak “*the truth in love*” (Ephesians 4:15).

Sometimes telling the truth is not easy; in fact, it can be downright unpleasant. But we are called to be truth-tellers. Spend some time meditating/journaling on these verses over the next couple of days:

- Being truthful is precious to God (Proverbs 12:22).
- Being truthful demonstrates the fear of Lord.
- To tell the truth is not a suggestion, it is a command (Psalm 15:2; Zechariah 8:16; Ephesians 4:25).
- Being truthful flies in the face of Satan, the “father of lies” (John 8:44).
- Being truthful honors the Lord, who is the “God of truth” (Psalm 31:5).

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

Honesty with Kindness

READ: Colossians 3:9-17

In practice this means being *honest but kind* about our feelings, situations, likes and dislikes, etc. In addition to his request for honesty from Abraham, Abimelech reminds Abraham of the kindness that he had shown to him even though he was "living as an alien" in the land. In essence he is saying, "*When I had the upper hand I did not take advantage of your situation so I ask that you do the same for me.*" Your acts of kindness in the past can be very rewarding in the future.

- **Ephesians 4:15** – “**We will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.**”
 - Have you recently been “*brutally honest*” with someone; that is, have you been less than kind about your feelings toward them?

- **Colossians 3:12-13** – “**Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.**”
 - Examine your own *compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness* quotient with people.
 - Frankly speaking, you cannot exercise *compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness* without going to God

and asking for His help and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Invite God's presence and the infilling of the Holy Spirit in your life today.

What's Really Behind Your Words?

READ: James 3; 1 Corinthians 13

We cannot live at peace with each other if we are not being honest, but “honest” words that come from a source of bitterness, pride or anger can also do a great deal to harm our relationships. Before you open your mouth to speak to another person, consider the source of those words in your own heart. If our words are “honest” but are hurtful toward others, then we are probably not being fully “honest” with ourselves to know why we feel the need to spew out negative or hurtful thoughts and feelings on others. I may *honestly* be mad at you, I may *honestly* think you are doing something wrong or making a bad decision, or I may simply *honestly* think you look ridiculous. But that doesn't mean I should say it — because the source of those thoughts is my own selfishness: *my pride that my **opinions** are **truth***. God's truth will always coincide with love. With God's perspective, our truth becomes grace instead of anger, compassion instead of frustration, and an eternal perspective on attractiveness and wisdom instead of a physical, temporal perspective.

Consider the following with God today:

- Are my thoughts in line with God's thoughts?
- Where might I need God's perspective on an issue that is causing me to be unkind?
- Are there areas of fear, pride, bitterness, anger etc. that are clouding my perception of truth?
- Is there anyone to whom I should apologize, for not speaking in love and kindness?

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

WEEK 3: April 2-8

Principle # 3: Openness Preserves Unity

READ: Genesis 21:25-26

Then Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized. But Abimelech said, "I don't know who has done this. You did not tell me, and I heard about it only today."

There were few things of more importance in the Middle East than water. Many serious disputes arose over water rights both then and to this day. Abraham could have just kept quiet and kept the peace but the reality is that such an approach would have only made any future conflicts worse. It is good to overlook offenses as the Bible tells us in **Proverbs 19:11** (“*A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense*”), but if the problem is serious or ongoing then we are instructed to go to our brother and point out the offense as it says in **Matthew 18:15** (“*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.*”)

Sometimes problems and conflicts are made much worse by not being open about the problems with the person who has offended us. We may talk to everyone else but not to them. Often in our efforts to keep the peace we make things worse by not speaking up. This is true at work where we may not be up front about issues that are bugging us. This may be the case with a neighbor when we're not open about a serious divisive issue or it may be in the church when we are not sharing our real concerns with other people or leadership in an appropriate manner.

Illustration: Many years ago at a church I previously pastored we had division and conflict which possibly could have been avoided if people had been more open about their desires concerning the direction of the church. There were people who wanted that church to become involved in what they saw as an “exciting move of the Spirit.” I appreciate a true move of the Spirit, but what I was seeing locally was mass manipulation filled with unbiblical practices and lots of “red warning flags.”

For the most part people were not sharing with me what they secretly wanted so I assumed everything was all right. I was just as guilty about not speaking up because I had some major concerns about the movement they had become involved in. When they tried to “force it into the church” things came to a head like a volcano exploding under pressure. The conflict could have been handled much more delicately if we had all been more open in the early stages.

It is easy for people to deceive themselves into thinking that if they ignore a problem long enough it will go away. Unfortunately, problems rarely – if ever – just disappear. The longer we ignore them, the worse they become. Ignore a chest cold and it can become bronchitis; ignore a knock in your engine, and eventually it will blow; ignore a conflict with your child, and it can result in total rebellion.

So what about you? Are there potential conflicts about which you are simply hoping they go away without really dealing with them? Are there some preventative steps you should take now in being open about some problems? What might the steps be that you could take? Make an **Action Plan** today for what you are going to do.

The Bait of Satan: Taking Offense

READ: Luke 17:1-2 NKJV

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones."

Principal #3: Openness Preserves Unity

This principle in no way excuses un-Christlike openness. We are told to approach those who have offended us, but we are told to do so with love, humility, and in private.

That brings up a whole new topic – taking offense or being offended. Jesus made it clear that it is impossible to live in this world and not have the opportunity to become offended (*to have someone sin against you*). We must be prepared and armed for offenses because our response determines our future.

The Greek word for “**offenses**” (or “*stumbling block*” in *NIV*) in Luke 17:1 is skandalon from which we get the word **scandal**. It originally referred to the part of a trap to which the bait was attached. The word signifies laying a trap in someone’s way, a stumbling block, an offense! The TRAP requires one of two things to be successful: It must be hidden so the prey will stumble over it. It must be baited to lure the prey into the trap. Satan baits traps that can cause us to stumble or take offense. People say things sometimes that cause us to be hurt, so we take offense and then we stumble into hard-heartedness, bitterness and anger towards that person. And that is sin.

In **Matthew 5:44-48** in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said– “I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who

persecute (*offend*) you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven... If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect (*mature*), therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (*mature*).”

- What do you think you should do when you get offended?
- What would you want done for you when you unintentionally offend?
- What do you think Jesus meant when He said we should be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect?

Bait of Satan, Part Two

READ: Matthew 24

Today, let's take another look at Satan's bait. In Matthew 24 Jesus was giving the signs of the end of this age. His disciples asked, “**What will be the sign of Your coming?**” In vv. 10-13 Jesus said, “**And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved.**” (*The underlining for emphasis is mine, of course.*)

First, we have to ask, “Who are these offended?” Are they Christians or just society in general? We find the answer as we continue to read: “**And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.**” The Greek word

for *love* in this verse is *agape* (pronounced *ah-GA-pay*). There are several Greek words for *love* in the New Testament, but the two most common are *agape* and *phileo* (pronounced *fee-LAY-o*).

Phileo defines a love found among friends. It is an affectionate love that is conditional. *Phileo* says, “*You scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours,*” or “*You treat me kindly, and I’ll do the same.*”

On the other hand, *agape* is the love God sheds abroad in the hearts of His children. It is the same love Jesus gives freely to us. It is unconditional. It is not based on performance or even whether it is returned. It is a love that gives even when rejected.

Without God we can only love with a selfish love – one that cannot be given if it is not received and returned. However, *agape* loves regardless of the response. This *agape* is the love Jesus shed when He forgave from the cross. So “the many” Jesus refers to are Christians whose *agape* has grown cold.

Why did their love grow cold? Because they were offended at one another.

- Are you offended at someone? What *must* you do about it if your love is not to grow cold(er)?
- Make a list of offenses you are holding, take them to God, repent and forgive the person. The bottom line of forgiveness is that you are saying about that person, “I am not your judge. God is.”

Bait of Satan, Part Three

READ: Proverbs 18:19

*A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city,
and contentions are like the bars of a castle.*

The strong, ancient cities had walls around them. These walls were the city's assurance of protection. They kept unwelcome people out. We construct walls when we are hurt to safeguard our hearts and prevent any future wounds. We become selective, denying entry to all we fear will hurt us. We filter out anyone we think owes us something. We withhold access until these people have paid their debts in full. We open our lives only to those we believe are on our side. 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that Love does not seek its own. Hurt people become more and more self-seeking and self-contained. In this climate the love of God grows cold.

- Who have you offended? Make a list if you KNOW you have offended them.
- It may very well be difficult but seek these people out and ask forgiveness of them.
- *Romans 12:18 NIV “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”*

Do Not Make Assumptions About Another’s Knowledge Of A Problem

READ: Genesis 21:26-31

Apparently Abraham’s complaint about the well was worded in such a way that he assumed Abimelech knew of the problem because Abimelech is quick to defend himself and say, **“I don’t know who has done this. You did not tell**

me, and I heard about it only today.” Sometimes conflicts are not resolved nor a mutual understanding reached because the offended person assumes that the offender knows of the problem. We act as if people have a sixth sense about these things or we assume that our subtle remarks and innuendos are clear, when they are not!

Many people do not even know that they have offended you, or if they do sense a hostility from you towards them they are bewildered as to what the problem is. It may be obvious to you but not to the offender.

Illustration: I wish I had a dollar for every time someone came to me offended and hurt because no one from the church had visited them while they were in the hospital. About 99% of the time, no one from the church visited them in the hospital because no one from the church was aware they were in the hospital (*or that their sister had died, or that something catastrophic had happened in their life.*)

Do Not Make Assumptions About Another Person's Knowledge Of A Problem!

Illustration: I once ministered to a family who left the church after having been there for many years. When I asked them why they were leaving they spoke of a problem they had with how the worship services were conducted – *“There are just not enough hymns.”* They expressed that this had bothered them for many years. Yet they never directly told me of this concern! I asked them, "Why didn't you tell me this was a concern before you left the church?" Their answer was that I already knew of their concerns. I didn't! They had assumed that their subtle remarks about certain old hymns

were enough to make me aware of their desire. Sadly, I don't "read between the lines" very well.

Unfortunately, I have been guilty of doing the same kind of thing. We must be very careful not to take for granted that people are aware of a problem unless we have directly and clearly articulated the problem and its seriousness for us.

- Can you think of a time when you made an assumption about another person's awareness of a problem you were having?
- Can you think of a time when another person made an assumption about your awareness of a problem they were having?
- What do you think is the solution to problems of this nature?

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

WEEK 4: April 9-15

Principle #4: Don't Just Pretend to Love

Romans 12:9 (NLT)

“Don't just pretend that you love others. Really love them.”

Love looks like prioritizing relationship

Re-READ: Genesis 21:25-26

Abraham accepted Abimelech's answer that he had no knowledge of the well problem, and responded by entering a covenant agreement in verse 27. In those times, the animals exchanged between parties were like a seal or confirmation of that agreement, much like a handshake or signature is today. Then, to make sure that there were no misunderstandings concerning the ownership of the disputed well, Abraham gives Abimelech seven lambs (21:29-30). This was an ancient way of making a clear pronouncement of ownership. Abimelech's acceptance acted as “a witness” or a testimony that Abraham had dug and therefore owned the well. Abraham is now the one being proactive in avoiding future conflicts, and working to preserve unity.

Illustration: In the fourth century AD, Christians were attempting to escape the pagan society. There was one Christian in Rome who came up with a novel idea for escaping worldliness without leaving Rome. At the ruins of a large building, he found a freestanding 60-foot pillar. Somehow he managed to construct a crude ladder and climb his way to the top of the pillar. Then he kicked away the ladder and watched it break into pieces as it hit the ground. There was no turning back now, no way of escape. And for the next 30 years, he called the top of this pillar “home.”

How did he survive all those years on a pillar sixty feet above ground? Well, when he climbed to the top, he had the foresight to take a rope and a bucket with him. On occasion he would lower the rope, and people passing by would drop food in the bucket, or fill it with water, and he would pull up the rope.

Believe it or not, this became somewhat of a trend among the early Christians. Others began to climb to the top of abandoned pillars and take up residence. These people came to be called “pillar saints”!

I really have to respect the **desire** of these early Christians to escape the influence of the sinful world in order to give full concentration to a relationship with God. However, the pillar saints overlooked an essential element of spirituality: a right relationship with other people.

There is no true spirituality without right relationships with others (1 John 2:9-11). It is not God’s desire that we escape the world but that we put our efforts toward building better relationships. We can do that by applying the principles we learn in God’s Word.

- Are there relationships you need to place in a higher priority?
- How can you foster a greater connection between your own spirituality and your closest relationships?
- How might your relationships with neighbors or co-workers be improved by a little pro-active effort to avoid conflict and preserve unity?

Love looks like caring

READ: Matthew 7:1-12

Do for others what you would like them to do for you. This is a summary of all that is taught in the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

Last week as I was driving into a parking lot, in my peripheral vision I watched a man stumble and fall. As I was pulling into a nearby space, I realized he could not get up as he began to call out for help. I quickly parked, untangled myself from the seat belt and started hurrying to him. Before I could get there, two men who were carrying street-corner pan-handling signs (“*I’m hungry. Anything helps.*”) — perhaps homeless men — had left their street corner and run to the man and were helping him up. I simply stood there while one man whipped out his cell phone and called 911. I stuck around until the ambulance arrived but the homeless men totally — and graciously — handled the situation.

I went back to my pickup ashamed of myself. Why? Because my action wasn’t really out of love. I was just pretending to love. The reason I had stuck around was to make sure the two “homeless” men didn’t rip the guy off somehow. They didn’t. But in my attitude I had “ripped off” (denied) the dignity of the two men.

Romans 12:9,10 says, “Don’t just pretend that you love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Stand on the side of the good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.” (NLT)

Don’t just pretend that you love others. I wasn’t loving towards those men – I tolerated them. I didn’t *really* love them. I didn’t *hate* what is wrong in my guarded suspicious attitude. Did I stand on the side of the good? Yes, but my motive was wrong. Those two homeless men truly cared for

(loved) the injured man with genuine affection, and took delight in honoring him.

Action Plan: Examine your attitudes towards the groups of people with whom you are uncomfortable or suspicious.

“Instead, do what the Scriptures say: ‘If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink, and they will be ashamed of what they have done to you.’ Don’t let evil get the best of you, but conquer evil by doing good.” Romans 12:20,21

Love never gives up

READ: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. It is never glad about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

Galatians 6:9 *So don’t get tired of doing what is good. Don’t get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing at the appropriate time.*

John 13:34 *So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other.*

No greater love has ever been shown than the Love of God for us through Jesus Christ. His love for us is an unending, un-turn-off-able love that knows no limits. Christ loved us so much that He even laid down his life on the Cross for us while we were still sinners (*Romans 5:8*). And though we have been saved by grace through faith (*Ephesians 2:8*), the sad fact is that we still sin – and Christ still loves us beyond measure and continues to cleanse us from all sin – past, present, and future (*1 John 1:7*).

If you have worth to God for that kind of love (and you DO!) aren't the people around you worth the same love? If God has never given up on you (and He hasn't) aren't the people around you worth never being given up on? 1 John 1:6 tells us "If we say that we have relationship with God, and yet still have hatred for people, we lie and do not practice the truth." Love God. Love People. Do you see this principle at work in your life?

Love keeps no record of wrongs

READ: Romans 5:1-11

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (Romans 5:10)

It is always amazing to me to think about Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' closest friends, who totally missed the point, and betrayed Jesus. And yet we never see Jesus treat Judas with anger. It really feels like Jesus keeps giving Judas chances, and when his course is set and he betrays Jesus, still we don't see anger, but deep sadness toward his friend.

John 13 tells of how just before his death, Jesus washed his disciples' feet. Among those disciples was Judas, though Jesus knew he had already spoken to the priests to betray him. Jesus said, in **John 13:14,15** "And since I, the Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you." Jesus lived out the truth of **1 Peter 4:8**: "Continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins."

Another amazing passage is **Luke 23:34**. When the soldiers were crucifying Jesus and callously making games of dividing up his clothes, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." What kind of love is this?

Truth: Jesus washed your feet when they were dirty, nasty, smelly and travel-soiled from the world's filth we all walk through every day. Jesus washed your feet even though you intentionally walked through the excrement that soils this world. Get the picture? He didn't give up on you... at all! Ever! For any reason!

I'm not suggesting that we must literally wash one another's feet, but I am suggesting that there are numerous ways we can refresh others by offering cleansing words, kind actions, and gracious treatment.

Action Plan: How will you intentionally treat others today, even at cost to yourself? Even if they intentionally soiled you? Even if they betrayed you? Can you consider that perhaps those who are hurting you really don't know what they are doing?

GOOD FRIDAY
Love lays down its life
READ: Luke 23

*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down
one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13)*

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! (Romans 5:6-9)

The cross is where we see the convergence of great suffering and God's forgiveness. Psalm 85:10 sings of a day when "righteousness and peace" will "kiss each other." The cross of Jesus is where that occurred, where God's commands and His righteousness were met with His mercy. We receive divine forgiveness, mercy, and peace because Jesus willingly took our divine punishment, the result of God's righteousness against sin. Our observance of Good Friday celebrates that "For the joy set before him" (Hebrews 12:2) Jesus endured the cross, knowing it would lead to **HIS** resurrection, **OUR** salvation, and the beginning of God's reign of **love, righteousness, and peace.**

*He paid a debt He did not owe, I owed a debt I could not pay
I needed someone to wash my sins away
And now I sing a brand new song, Amazing Grace!
Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay
(He Paid A Debt He Did Not Owe, by Ellis J. Crum)*

*So far as it depends
on you, be at peace
with all people.*

Romans 12:18

North Eugene Faith Center
151 River Ave, Eugene 97404
541-461-0797
nefcchurch@gmail.com
mike@northeugenefaitcenter.org

Website: www.northeugenefaitcenter.org
Blog: apursuingheart.wordpress.com
posts by Associate Pastor Heidi Picinic