

## Unit 1

### Outside In

We live in a world where we're challenged by competing identities. Gender, ethnicity, nationality, political affiliation, socioeconomic status, and religion are some of the categories by which we understand ourselves and how we can separate ourselves from one another. Living within our self-imposed boundaries can leave us defensive and vulnerable to a sense of loneliness and incompleteness.

But in times of crisis, we find ourselves naturally transcending such barriers. Many people set aside differences for a higher cause. Such fleeting times of unity help us glimpse the dream God holds for the human family: that every person is of infinite worth and occupies an important place in the world.

[Lesson 1](#) sets the tone. In a time when the Babylonians had conquered their nation,

God's people were called to live fully with, and to fully love, their captors. Is this God's call for us today as well?

[Lesson 2](#) fast forwards to a dramatic encounter among a sinner, a Pharisee, and Jesus. Identity with God is now determined by the freedom of grace and not the restriction of law. Growing in knowledge about God must first stem from experiencing grace from God.

In [Lessons 3](#) and [4](#), we overhear Paul's guidance to the early Christians. The apostle's genius lay in his ability to reimagine our relationship with God and one another through the lens of *agape* love. Old religious categories that fostered human distinctions must be rethought. If the gospel eliminates "us" and "them," how do we live as if we are all children equal in God's eyes?

The call of biblical voices is the call to question lesser loyalties in light of the claim of God's kingdom on our lives. The early Christians expressed this by forming authentic, honest relationships with those they once would have excluded. Such a fellowship attracted many in a culture that, like ours, thrived on divisive identities. Heeding the call to break down human barriers and expand God's family was, and is, the fuel of the church.

# September 5

## Lesson 1

## Hospitality to Strangers

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**Focal Passage:** Jeremiah 29:4-14

**Background Texts:** Jeremiah 22:3-5; 29:1-23

**Purpose Statement:** To explore how to live out God's call to show hospitality to the "strangers" in our lives

### Jeremiah 29:4-14

<sup>4</sup>The LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. <sup>7</sup>Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

<sup>8</sup>The LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims: Don't let the prophets and diviners in your midst mislead you. Don't pay attention to your dreams. <sup>9</sup>They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I didn't send them, declares the LORD.

<sup>10</sup>The LORD proclaims: When Babylon's seventy years are up, I will come and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup>I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. <sup>12</sup>When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup>When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me. <sup>14</sup>I will be present for you, declares the LORD, and I will end your captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have scattered you, and I will bring you home after your long exile, declares the LORD.

**Key Verse:** "Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7).

A verse found in Jeremiah 29 has given comfort and hope to people throughout the centuries. One study suggests that it is the most cited Old Testament verse in recent years.<sup>1</sup> It transcends time, leaps from the page, and touches the heart.

For example, a young man was going through an extremely painful period in his life. The hurt of a broken engagement, the death of his mother, and the diagnosis of Alzheimer's for his father led him to the brink of depression.

One evening, he took the Bible and, opening it at random, prayed for help. His eyes fell on Jeremiah 29:11: "I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope."

He felt stunned. He took it that God was spanning the centuries to touch him with the words he needed to hear at that critical period in his life. While he still faced a long road ahead, he felt confident he would not be traveling it alone.

There is, however, more than comfort in this passage. As the young man heard God speaking to him through these ancient words, he was also overhearing Jeremiah speak during a crisis in his nation's history. By looking at the broader context of Jeremiah 29:11, we'll gain an even greater understanding, and appreciation, of God's word of hope during a period of difficulty.

### Impending Doom

Jeremiah prophesied when Judah, the Southern Kingdom, lived in fear of the Babylonians. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, had already been destroyed by the Assyrians (721 BC) and its inhabitants taken into captivity. They were never heard from again. Would the same fate await Judah?

The prophet steadfastly asserted that the Southern Kingdom would fall to Babylon. The reason was Judah's resistance to God's bedrock command: "Do what is just and right; rescue the oppressed from the power of the oppressor. Don't exploit or mistreat the refugee, the orphan, and the widow. Don't spill the blood of the innocent in this place" (Jeremiah 22:3).

The immigrant, widow, and orphan were the most vulnerable in Hebrew society. There was no societal safety net other than the God whose heart cried out for them.

This dedication pushed God to make a promise: Judah would be delivered from the hands of the Babylonians if the people did what was “just and right” on behalf of the powerless.

Instead of obedience, though, the Judean authorities sought protection by forging an alliance with Egypt (37:3-8). They also courted the prophets who told them what they wanted to hear (Chapter 28). After approximately 20 years of Babylonian oppression, Jeremiah's prophecy was fulfilled. Jerusalem ultimately fell in 586 BC, with the invaders taking many of the inhabitants back to Babylon as prisoners.

This destruction presented a crisis of faith for the Jews. The people who had inherited the Promised Land now saw their country destroyed and the Temple, containing all that was sacred, desecrated. The punishment felt greater than the sin. Had God finally given up on them?

*Who would God call out as the vulnerable and the oppressed in our society today, and how should we be advocates for them? How is ministering to them an act of obedience to God?*

### **A Surprising Commandment**

Chapter 29 contains a letter from Jeremiah that the prophet sent to the Jews already living in Babylonia. Rival prophets had forecast that this exile would soon end and that the Jews taken prisoner from earlier invasions (605 BC and 598 BC) would return to their homeland. In Chapter 28, Hananiah prophesied that this would happen within only two years. The sentiment behind such predictions was the nationalistic hope of a quick restoration of Judah.

But would such a brief exile be sufficient for the change needed in the Hebrews' hearts? A restoration of Judah wouldn't necessarily mean a renewed, deepened relationship with God. Consequently, in Chapter 29, Jeremiah declared that the Exile would last 70 years.

Additionally, during this time, the Jews were not to rebel against the oppressor. On the contrary, the prophet commanded them to pray for their captors just as if they were praying for leaders of their own nation. They were to immerse themselves in the Babylonian culture, being good neighbors to people they considered pagan, and even raising their children among them (verses 5-7).

It may be difficult to imagine the shock the Jews felt when they read Jeremiah's letter. They had viewed themselves as the chosen people, a cut above the pagan, idola-

trous Babylonians. They were also steeped in the Levitical law: “Broken bone for broken bone, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The same injury the person inflicted on the other will be inflicted on them” (Leviticus 24:20).

And they were now to be kind to them?

Accordingly, Jeremiah is often referred to as the “weeping prophet” because such unfiltered prophesying led to his personal suffering. On different occasions, he would be beaten, imprisoned, and left for dead (Jeremiah 15:15-18; 20:1-6; 37:15-38:13).

Centuries later, Jesus commanded us to love and pray for our enemies (Luke 6:27-28). What are our objections to loving those who are unlike us or who hurt us?

*What are the consequences, and what personal examples can you give, of choosing the unpopular course of loving enemies?*

### **Devotion to God Through Devotion to People**

To pray for the welfare of the cities of their oppressors was counterintuitive. The Babylonians had a culture, government, and religion considered unclean by Jewish standards. Additionally, they had murdered and enslaved them. So, instead of feeling love for their enemies, they felt hate. Psalm 137:8-9 verbalizes their emotions: “Daughter Babylon, you destroyer, a blessing on the one who pays you back the very deed you did to us! A blessing on the one who seizes your children and smashes them against the rock!”

To obey God, transcending these natural emotions, would be difficult. Jeremiah himself characterized such a burden by wearing a heavy yoke around his neck (Jeremiah 27). Yet, in the very act of obeying such a difficult commandment, the people were shaping themselves into the people God had dreamed them to be. If the Jews were to reconnect with God, it would take them reorienting their hearts to the rhythm of God's. The Lord's passion is uniting a human family that has been self-divided through human distinctions.

To show hospitality to all means to have the humility of heart God craves for us. It, like the yoke, is the sign that we are living into a vision wider than the one limited by our assumptions or prejudices. The ultimate reflection of humility is being kind, even to those who stoke the fires of our anger.

Hospitality also means to let judgment remain with God and not ourselves. Jeremiah noted elsewhere (Chapters 50, 51) that Babylon would pay for its violence against Judah. That judgment, though, would come from God and within God's time-

frame. It is a dangerous breach of humility to assume that we have the right to cast judgments in the Lord's name.

As Christians, we may feel as if we live as strangers in the modern world. We may live with people from different cultures, religions, and ethnicities. Even within our congregations, we may find many differences. Our challenge, just as that of the ancient Jews, is to live with them humbly and judgment-free.

Such a change of heart requires many things, including courage and repentance. It's not an overnight conversion for a person, a congregation, or a nation. Perhaps Jeremiah had this in mind when he prophesied a seven-decade period for this transformation.

*What acts of hospitality are we called to perform on behalf of the "Babylonians" in our midst? What obstacles will we need to overcome in order to show such hospitality?*

### Hope Based in Action

It's tempting to take the "I know the plans I have for you" verse and engrave it in visible places as a reminder that God cares for you regardless of the chaos you may be experiencing today. While this is true, we're now able to see that God's message is more than solace.

Jeremiah shows us that faith in God's love and providence always comes with a call to action. In this case, it's a wakeup call to the exiled Jews. Build a home in Babylon. Find meaningful work. Connect with the land (Jeremiah 29:5). "Get married and have children" (verse 6). Get involved in the city, and even pray for its welfare (verse 7).

In the process of doing this, as their hearts changed toward their neighbors, their hearts would also change toward God. They would be capable of discovering a deeper, more intimate relationship with the one who redeemed them from slavery and formed them as a nation. Such a relationship is stronger than simply a feeling of well-being. It's an assurance that enables the people to hope and dream again.

Jeremiah described this connection in stunning fashion in Chapter 31. No longer would the Lord relate to the Hebrews by a set of laws written on stone and obeyed without reflection. Instead, after their long exile in which they lived with and loved their oppressors, God promised, "I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. They will no longer need to teach each other to say, 'Know the LORD!' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD" (31:33-34).

As we will see, the early church embodied this divine intimacy. They carried Jeremiah's call of radical hospitality into an inhospitable world. Because they would show love without question or limits, they experienced a closeness with God that nothing could damage (Romans 8:37-39). In so doing, their "Babylonians" were irresistibly drawn into their fellowship. The church would embody the vision Jeremiah saw, where all would be joined not by title, but by kinship as beloved children of God.

If God knows the plans for our future, the Lord also knows the plans for our present. When we live out God's call for making a hospitable home open to all, even to the seemingly alien ones, we will not just know God cares. We will also be able to live out our lives grounded in the hope such knowledge gives.

*In what ways have you personally experienced your faith deepening through acts of compassion and justice? What barriers were broken down by extending such Christian love to others?*

### Reimagining the Stranger

Perhaps our biggest obstacle in connecting with those different from ourselves is fear. We may want to "create a free space where the stranger may enter," as Father Nouwen said in our spiritual practice overview, but what if we are afraid of them? Not only will there be no free space; there will be no open door.

Unfortunately, the internet and social media make it easy to treat others as one-dimensional people. Stories and opinions encourage us to stereotype. Such labeling insults the uniqueness of another person and inhibits the richness a relationship with them can hold.

Engaging in a reimagining exercise may help us transcend our fears. Recall individuals who would be your "Babylonians." These persons may be somehow different from you, perhaps in lifestyle or beliefs. They may also have offended you in some way.

Use your imagination. What experiences might have shaped these persons to make them who they are? What pain could they be hiding? What hurt may they have endured as children? What tenderness could they have shown? What hopes and fears may they be harboring? How similar are they to you in the areas of life that matter?

Imagining the stranger in this manner makes them more real. You'd like to invite them into a conversation, so you could hear their real stories. Is there a way you could do that?

Ultimately, there is neither Hebrew nor Babylonian, but only people created in God's image. In freeing space for strangers, we may find that they may be the very ones helping us grow into Christ's image.

**O Lord our God, we thank you for opening your heart to us. When the world was a cold, lonely place, your acceptance and forgiveness warmed us. As you have loved**

**us, let us so love the strangers in our midst. May they find in us generous, trusting friends; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

<sup>1</sup>From *Christianity Today*, March 23, 2016 ([christianitytoday.com](http://christianitytoday.com)). The most cited verse from the New Testament is Philippians 4:6: "Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks."



## The Spiritual Practice of Hospitality

Hospitality refers to welcoming guests and being attentive to their needs. It's where we get the word *hospital*. It's also a recurring theme that runs throughout the Bible. We encounter it in Genesis, where Abram welcomed strangers who were actually angelic messengers (Genesis 18:1-8). Then, throughout the Old Testament, the Hebrews are repeatedly commanded to care and provide justice for the outsider (Deuteronomy 24:17-19). Finally, hospitality is included in the non-negotiable qualities of a leader in the early church (1 Timothy 3:2).

Perhaps hospitality is central because without it, God's dream of uniting all people around the banquet table will never be realized. How else can we sit together unless we are attentive to one another's concerns as if we are family?

Consequently, one of the most important things we can do inwardly is to cultivate a spirit of radical welcoming. Father Henri Nouwen, the late Catholic priest, theologian, and spiritual writer, gave a beautiful, practical description of what this means: "Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter

and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines."<sup>1</sup>

Creating such free space where we can be our authentic selves with one another takes work. There is much in today's society that pushes against it. Headlines, talk shows, and social media provoke fear of those different from us. As long as we allow stereotypes of the "other" to keep us estranged, then God's table will be incomplete.

Each lesson in this unit will conclude with a practical exercise to help transcend such fear and draw us closer together as a human family sharing the same Parent. These exercises are intended to help us see life through the eyes of those with different perspectives. Such empathy transcends human differences and helps us realize how much we have in common. This makes hospitality not an obligation but an opportunity.

Moses said, "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9, NRSV). In reality, we are all strangers in this world, and we already know one another's hearts. We all belong to God, and practicing hospitality helps us celebrate that.

<sup>1</sup>From *You Are the Beloved*, by Henri J. M. Nouwen (Convergent Books, 2017).

# September 12

## Lesson 2

## Being Bold to Join

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**Focal Passage:** Luke 7:36-50

**Background Text:** Mark 2:13-17

**Purpose Statement:** To grow in sensitivity to the feelings of outsiders, letting that awareness shape our outreach to them

**Luke 7:36-50**

<sup>36</sup>One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to eat with him. After he entered the Pharisee's home, he took his place at the table. <sup>37</sup>Meanwhile, a woman from the city, a sinner, discovered that Jesus was dining in the Pharisee's house. She brought perfumed oil in a vase made of alabaster. <sup>38</sup>Standing behind him at his feet and crying, she began to wet his feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured the oil on them. <sup>39</sup>When the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw what was happening, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. He would know that she is a sinner.

<sup>40</sup>Jesus replied, "Simon, I have something to say to you."

"Teacher, speak," he said.

<sup>41</sup>"A certain lender had two debtors. One owed enough money to pay five hundred people for a day's work. The other owed enough money for fifty. <sup>42</sup>When they couldn't pay, the lender forgave the debts of them both. Which of them will love him more?"

<sup>43</sup>Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the largest debt canceled."

Jesus said, "You have judged correctly."

<sup>44</sup>Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? When I entered your home, you didn't give me water for my feet, but she wet my feet with tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup>You didn't greet me with a kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet since I came in. <sup>46</sup>You didn't anoint my head with oil, but she has poured perfumed oil on my feet. <sup>47</sup>This is why I tell you that her many sins have been forgiven; so she has shown great love. The one who is forgiven little loves little."

<sup>48</sup>Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

<sup>49</sup>The other table guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this person that even forgives sins?"

<sup>50</sup>Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

**Key Verse:** "Jesus said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you. Go in peace' " (Luke 7:50).

If you've ever moved, you've experienced what it's like to be an outsider. You've gone from rootedness, where you know people and traditions, to a locale with strange faces and names.

One of the hardest things to do is to break into existing groups, such as a church. It may be awkward to walk through the door for the first time. People may be talking in code, referring to activities or groups they are aware of and you're not. They have a shared history that you're not part of, with inside stories and jokes that don't make sense to you.

Moving from outside to inside is difficult. It's especially hard, though, when you're afraid you won't be accepted because of who you are or what you've done. Today's passage showcases a woman who felt this way but did something risky and bold.

Would she be accepted or rejected?

## Luke's Unique Story

The narrative of the woman anointing Jesus with expensive perfume is found in all four Gospels. Luke's, however, is distinct from the others.

In Mark (14:3-9) and Matthew (26:6-13), the incident takes place a few days prior to the Crucifixion. In Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, an anonymous woman anointed Jesus' head.

In John (12:1-8), it happens in a similar timeframe. However, it took place in the house of Lazarus. Mary, sister of Martha, did the anointing of Jesus' feet.

In all three of these accounts, the disciples grumbled about the expense of the ointment, although John specifies Judas as the disgruntled one. Jesus tied in the anointing with his burial.

Luke's version varies so much from these, though, that some scholars think he must have been relating a similar but different account. The incident recorded in Luke's Gospel happened early in Jesus' ministry, in Galilee, near his headquarters of Capernaum. It took place in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Luke identified the woman as a sinner who anointed his feet not only with the oil, but also with her tears. Jesus used the occasion to tell a parable, found only in this passage.

Understanding Luke's background and purpose in writing will help put this unique story into context. Early Christian tradition has linked the authorship of this Gospel and Acts to Luke, a physician and close coworker with Paul. He was a Gentile convert as well as a witness to the early church, affirming the equality between Jew and Gentile (Acts 15:12-21; Galatians 3:28). Consequently, Luke was writing with a Gentile audience in mind. Whether it was his understanding of the original tradition of the anointing story, or a unique story, his purpose is clear. Jesus is Lord over a church that knows no barriers to God's love, especially when those barriers are human distinctions.

*If you were a non-Jew hearing Luke's narrative for the first time, what would be most striking to you? Do people need to be told to change their ways before they can be accepted into a Christian fellowship? Why or why not?*

## An Intruder

In ancient Palestine, to invite someone to dinner as Simon did showed hospitality

and respect. Given that he was a Pharisee, a group that antagonized Jesus relentlessly, this reflects an openness and civility that were admirable.

Such a dinner was a formal affair, requiring much preparation (Luke 10:38-42; 19:1-10). At this banquet, all eyes would be on the guest of honor, except when a woman made an unexpected, shocking entrance.

The woman entered the room and stood behind Jesus, at his feet. In the custom of the time, he would have been reclining on his side on cushions, his hand propping up his head as he ate and talked. The other attendees recognized her and felt scandalized by her being there. She may have been a well-known and successful prostitute, although Luke simply identifies her as "a woman from the city, a sinner" (7:37). She had brought the perfumed oil in an alabaster vase, which was used to protect expensive liquids.

Her demeanor would have also shocked the people. They had probably never seen her so visibly upset, crying so much that tears streamed down her face and onto Jesus' feet.

Luke doesn't explain what prompted those tears. We can surmise, though, that something had happened prior to her coming to Simon's house. The oil she brought was a gift for the Lord.

She may have observed and listened to Jesus when he visited in other homes. Mark 2:13-17 depicts a time when, again in the Capernaum area, he called Levi the tax collector to be a disciple. To celebrate this invitation, the new follower invited Jesus and the disciples to be his guests for dinner. Also attending were other tax collectors and sinners.

Perhaps the woman had been in Levi's house that evening. If so, she would have seen Jesus easily relating to the fringe people in society that other religious leaders shunned. She would also have heard him talking about his mission being to such people, not to the "healthy" who don't feel the need for a physician.

*What do you imagine the woman's feelings were as she stood behind Jesus and bathed his feet with tears and perfumed oil? What was she risking in going to him in such a public fashion, and for what did she hope?*

## Which Comes First, Love or Forgiveness?

The story Jesus told in response to Simon's taking offense seems straightforward at first. If you owe someone a lot of money and that person unexpectedly forgives your



debt, you'll be overwhelmed with joy and gratitude. Similarly, if your debt is small, your emotional response will be proportionally smaller. Jesus summarized, "The one who is forgiven little loves little" (Luke 7:47). However, a closer reading reveals that this story doesn't exactly apply to the woman.

The parable says that because the person was forgiven his debt, his love was great. But the woman at Jesus' feet had not asked for forgiveness, nor had Jesus given it. She was simply expressing her love for him. It was only after his words to Simon that he turned to her and forgave her.

Perhaps, by being in Jesus' presence and not being rejected, she had already experienced grace. She had done many things that would have deserved rejection by a righteous man of her day. She entered, uninvited. She touched him, which was a shocking sign of intimacy. She uncovered her hair, which also transgressed Jewish mores.

Jesus had not stopped her from touching his feet, which was also scandalous. This is similar to what happens in the next chapter, when an ill woman touches Jesus and is healed (8:43-48). Instead of being offended, he blessed her with the same blessing he gave this woman: "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace" (7:50; 8:48).

Jesus' encounter with this intruder reflects one of the many moments he was moved by compassion. When people felt that compassion, they experienced the freedom of grace.

Father Henri Nouwen articulated this. In referring to Jesus' encounter with another sinner (John 8:1-11), he wrote, "My recent illness has really convinced me of the importance of not judging or condemning, not even our own past, and of looking at people with immense compassion and love in the way Jesus looked at the adulterous woman and made her discover her own goodness . . . and thus find the strength to 'sin no more.' "1

Ultimately, the parable Jesus told Simon, which was the catalyst for conversation between Jesus and Simon, was a revelation of the heart. Jesus felt the anguish of a woman trapped in a degrading lifestyle. Moving past society's judgment, he allowed her to express her gratitude at being accepted and forgiven. Simon, instead of feeling her desperation, only saw someone he defined through legalistic right and wrong.

***What things prevent us from feeling the pain outsiders may feel? What experiences have you had where showing acceptance to someone who is vulnerable became a moment of grace?***

## **Pre-Emptive Grace**

Jesus was always going to people, including Simon the Pharisee. This woman, though, came to him. How did she know he would be there? Did someone tell her? Did she overhear people talking? Regardless, she had the courage to enter an inhospitable house and take a chance that Jesus would accept her and her gift.

One implication of this story is that the church can't be viewed as a "Simon's house," where outsiders are uncertain if they will be welcomed in Christ's name.

The impetus of the Methodist movement was fear that the established church, the Church of England, had put up barriers to outsiders entering and experiencing Christ's love and forgiveness. John Wesley, Methodism's founder, felt compelled to go where people were and preach Christ's grace to those estranged from organized Christianity. If his church did not present an authentic "open hearts, open doors, open minds" to outsiders, then he would take that spirit to them.

Wesley was amazed at the reaction to his boldness in proclaiming the gospel in the fields. He was so moved by how outsiders hungered to hear his message that he grew bolder. As he recorded in his journal on April 2, 1738, "I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation." For this, he faced strong criticism from the religious establishment. At least one preaching invitation was withdrawn.

If he were alive today, Wesley would still go out boldly beyond the walls of the church to seek out those hungering for new life. But he would also ask each of his churches if there are barriers that prevent people from experiencing love and forgiveness within those walls. He would inquire, "Is your church willing to appear 'more vile' in order for all to be welcomed by Christ?"

Perhaps it starts with empathizing with those, like the sinful woman, who are fearful of the reception they might receive. What are their needs? What are their apprehensions?

Many churches have vision, mission, and welcome statements. Do such statements reflect sensitivity to the concerns of outsiders? How do members live out the ideals of those statements?

Looking at your church's life through the eyes of those beyond the walls may be life-changing for all involved. It is simply imitating Christ, who conveyed grace regardless of the house in which he found himself.

After this encounter where Jesus met the woman's boldness with an equally bold pronouncement of grace, Luke notes for the first time that women started following him (8:1-3). Such recipients of grace embodied the character Jesus imagined for his church.

***When have you seen your church reach out to those estranged from institutional Christianity? How does your church embody a welcoming spirit to those seeking fellowship?***

### **An Exercise in Hospitality**

One of the easiest things to do is to feel settled in church. During worship, we sit in the same place and know what to expect. We're familiar with the weekly and seasonal activities. We know the small group and service opportunities available. We easily navigate the building and campus, including where the restrooms are. However, if you're a first-timer, how would your church building and programs appear? Are they welcoming?

For the next few times when you go to church, put yourself in the shoes of a newcomer. Each time you go, imagine yourself as a different person or persons: a single

parent of a young child, an elderly couple, a recent college graduate, a family who is new to town.

Such an exercise points out little things that may interfere with people moving easily from the outer circle to the inner. It will also help us empathize with their experiences and better understand their needs. Hopefully, we will, in some small way, grow more sensitive to the stranger and be their welcoming advocate.

Jesus explained to Simon that, even though the Pharisee was the host, it was a fellow stranger, the woman, who extended true hospitality. She had done that simply by expressing her deepest feelings of love and gratitude.

It will be our feelings of love and gratitude to strangers that move us to unconditional hospitality. In so doing, we will be welcoming Christ.

**O God, we thank you for Jesus, who reveals your heart of acceptance and grace. Shape us into people who accept others as graciously as you've accepted us; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

 From *You Are the Beloved*, by Henri J. M. Nouwen (Convergent Books, 2017).

## September 19

### Lesson 3

## Opening the Door to Christ

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**Focal Passage:** Galatians 2:11-21

**Background Text:** Romans 10:1-13

**Purpose Statement:** To discover how responsible freedom in Christ shapes our lives as Christians in today's world

### Galatians 2:11-21

<sup>11</sup>But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was wrong. <sup>12</sup>He had been eating with the Gentiles before certain people came from James. But when they came, he began to back out and separate himself, because he was afraid of the people who promoted circumcision. <sup>13</sup>And the rest of the Jews also joined him in this hypocrisy so that even Barnabas got carried away with them in their hypocrisy. <sup>14</sup>But when I saw that they weren't acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of everyone, "If you, though you're a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you require the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

<sup>15</sup>We are born Jews—we're not Gentile sinners. <sup>16</sup>However, we know that a person isn't made righteous by the works of the Law but rather through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. We ourselves believed in Christ Jesus so that we could be made righteous by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the Law—because no one will be made righteous by the works of the Law. <sup>17</sup>But if it is discovered that we ourselves are sinners while we are trying to be made righteous in Christ, then is Christ a servant of sin? Absolutely not! <sup>18</sup>If I rebuild the very things that I tore down, I show that I myself am breaking the Law. <sup>19</sup>I died to the Law through the Law, so that I could live for God. <sup>20</sup>I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live in my body, I live by faith, indeed, by the faithfulness of God's Son, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup>I

don't ignore the grace of God, because if we become righteous through the Law, then Christ died for no purpose.

**Key Verse:** "However, we know that a person isn't made righteous by the works of the Law but rather through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16).

I was talking casually with a clergy colleague in his office when one of his parishioners dropped by. She expressed her concern about an issue facing the congregation. My friend listened empathetically and expressed support for the position she was taking. Satisfied that she'd been heard and that she had his backing, she left.

Within a half hour, another parishioner walked in. He had concerns about the same issue, but took a stance opposed to the other member's. Once again, my colleague listened empathetically, then offered support for the position he was taking. Equally as satisfied as the other member, he left on a positive note.

I marveled at my colleague's diplomatic astuteness. Few pastors I know, myself being one, enjoy congregational conflict. Sometimes out of self-defense, we adapt Paul's motto of becoming "all things to all people" (1 Corinthians 9:22) as a rationale to keep church wheels turning without too much grinding.

However, sometimes the diplomatically astute method of church leadership isn't appropriate. When do you take a stand, risking that those wheels might grind to a halt?

In Galatians 2:11, we read that Paul "opposed [Peter] to his face, because he was wrong." He didn't avoid, but actually intensified, a conflict brewing in the life of the early church.

What was at stake that made Paul so bold, severely criticizing someone of Peter's stature? As we'll see, Paul viewed this issue as central to the heart of the gospel. If he didn't move to resolve it, the church's mission of making disciples would be compromised.

Whether in the first or twenty-first centuries, situations arise that must be confronted and resolved. This is the only way the church can fully open its doors to all.

### The Divisive Issue

Put yourself into the mindset of the first Christians. They were Jews steeped in



Hebrew history, law, tradition, and ritual. Jesus, of course, was a Jew as well. After the Resurrection, the leaders of the church were Jewish Christians, with James, Jesus' brother, being the leader.

If the church had remained in Palestine, with the Christians all being from Jewish backgrounds, then there would have been little conflict because there would have been little diversity. However, Jesus' message couldn't be constrained geographically. The good news that we have been reconciled to God through him spread rapidly.

That meant it would have crossed into regions where the population was predominantly Gentile (non-Jewish). The churches that Paul helped establish in the region of Galatia (Acts 16:6), in Asia Minor, were examples of this.

Because these people from pagan backgrounds were professing faith in Christ, a dilemma arose. Must they become Jewish first in order to be accepted into the church? Some of the earliest Christians felt strongly that they should. It would be honoring the faith tradition that Jesus fulfilled. In that sense, obeying Jewish cultic and dietary laws, including circumcision for the men, would be honoring Jesus.

This debate takes up several chapters in Acts, culminating in the Council in Jerusalem deciding that the Gentiles did not need to become Jewish first. "No burden should be placed" on them (Acts 15:28-29), said James.

However, it would take time for non-Jewish Christians to achieve this equal status. It was similar to the Civil War abolishing slavery, yet the work for African Americans to gain civil rights would take decades.

This strain produced, in reality, two churches. One was composed of those with power and tradition behind them, namely, the Jewish Christians. The other fellowship was made up of non-Jews, some of whom had never heard of Moses.

Galatians 2:12 notes that Cephas (Peter) was fellow-shiping with the Christians from a pagan background. When some of the powerful Jewish Christian leaders arrived, he went to them, leaving the Gentiles. Paul saw this as an insult to that group. When he accused Peter of being hypocritical, he was saying that the two-church reality should not be brokered by him.

*Where do we see a "two-church" reality today, where some have more privilege than others? When have you found yourself in the power and tradition church? in the secondary church?*

## **A Deeper Understanding of the Gospel**

Sometimes a church conflict can be the impetus for a deeper reflection on the gospel. For Paul, Peter's hypocrisy was more than a justice issue. It called into question the nature and power of the Crucifixion.

The apostle saw in Christ's death the beginning of a new relationship with God characterized by freedom through grace instead of legalistic obedience to what he called "the Law." The Law had served its purpose up until Christ. It was a "custodian" (Galatians 3:24-25). It outlined what God expected of us. However, it also showed that we can never measure up. The power of "the flesh" (Romans 7:13-25) was too strong. Trying to keep all the laws wasn't only impossible, but harmful. Trying to achieve righteousness through the Law actually resulted in self-righteousness that promoted division.

Christ did on the cross what we couldn't do. He showed a steadfast faithfulness that completed the intent of the Law. Our righteousness now lies simply in trusting his sacrifice for us. We are made righteous through his power and love, not through anything we can do, including fastidiously following countless Jewish requirements. No wonder Paul exclaimed later, "God forbid that I should boast about anything except for the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14).

An immediate result of this higher righteousness is an intimacy with God that's impossible otherwise. If we live trusting what Jesus has done for us, then we're no longer slaves under penalty of the Law. Instead, Jesus has enabled us to join him as children, "heirs" (3:29), of his Father. Indeed, through faith in Jesus' faithfulness, we can experience Christ living within us.

We now understand the intensity of Paul's anger in the opening verses of Galatians. He had proclaimed this gospel of grace when he founded the churches, only to see false teachers come in and undermine it by emphasizing adherence to laws. This is why his letter is a forceful, eloquent description of the good news.

To revert to a righteousness based on human obedience to ancient rules is an insult to Christ. It would be as if "Christ died for no purpose (2:21).

*How does your understanding of the cross affect your view of God and your relationship with others? What temptations do you face in resisting the lure of relying on "Law" instead of grace?*

## **A New Vision for Church**

Understanding Paul's emphasis upon a righteousness based on Christ's faithful-

ness results in a new understanding of the church. The barrier of prejudice between Jew and Gentile, including how this could play out in the young church, has been eradicated through the power of the cross. As Paul would say later in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

This was reflected in how the early church celebrated the sacraments. The very act of Communion pointed to inclusiveness. Christians would celebrate the Lord’s Supper as equals, with former Gentile and former Jew sharing the bread and cup side by side. It would be part of a larger meal, where they would sit conversing with one another.

In traditional Judaism at that time, such fellowshiping would have defiled a Jew (Acts 11:1-3). However, in Christian fellowship, this was unthinkable. The Lord’s Supper would always be seen as a meal among equals, with no seats of honor (James 2:2-4).

The way the church celebrated baptism, the sacrament of entrance into the church, affirmed this radical equality even more dramatically. When persons were ready for baptism, after an extensive period of study and examination, there would be one thing left to do before entering the water. After making appropriate arrangements for modesty, church leaders would have them remove their clothes.

The lesson behind this unusual requirement was clear. All are equal before Christ. All human distinctions, such as race, gender, wealth, and education are crucified with him. We all are sinners being cleansed as we descend into baptismal water. All are brothers and sisters when we arise from it.

***What examples of unity do you see when your church family comes together to worship? How has your church helped open the door for such inclusion?***

## **A Bold Christian Freedom**

The Focal Passage sets up the key concept that Paul establishes in Galatians: freedom. He had said his Jewish Christian opponents had secretly infiltrated the church to “spy on our freedom” (Galatians 2:4). He later stated bluntly, “Christ has set us free for freedom” (5:1).

We no longer have a rules-based relationship with God and, consequently, with one another. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross established that. But if we are freed from the Law, what are we freed for?

Paul answered this clearly: “All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement:

*“Love your neighbor as yourself” (5:14).*

This echoes Jesus’ answer to the legal experts who wanted to know which commandment was most important (Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:13-34; Luke 20:20-40). After he quoted the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:5) regarding loving God, he gave loving our neighbor equal status. As he summarized in Mark 12:31, “no other commandment is greater than these.”

Paul took this to its natural conclusion. All other Jewish laws were now to be interpreted in light of loving neighbor as self. We are free to express compassion for another person without putting up roadblocks of old laws and customs. Such baggage served its purpose in the past, but now it is to be discarded if it interferes with welcoming new brothers and sisters into the church.

Would there be guidelines for such unbound expression? Paul warns not to use this freedom for selfishness, but rather as an opportunity to serve one another, letting the Spirit be the guide. Responsible freedom through unconditional love will produce the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:13-25). It is striving to honor the dignity and worth of each person.

It is up to Christians from each generation to seek the Spirit’s guidance in viewing past laws and traditions in the light of the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Such freedom enables us to open wider the door of hospitality.

***In what way may Christ be calling you to show “responsible freedom through love” to someone?***

## **The Cost of Hospitality**

The story of the early church dealing with the split between Jewish and Gentile Christians reflects a timeless truth. In order for the church to be the community Jesus imagined, those with privilege and power must be willing to relinquish it in order to welcome those with less. The Jewish Christians, for example, would have to lessen the importance of their Jewish traditions and customs in order to welcome those outside Palestine.

This calls us to personal reflection. Take a moment and ask yourself, *Where are the places of privilege in my life?* These places may include such things as social or economic status, ethnicity, gender, and religion. How do these things form your understanding of yourself and of what you believe to be right or true? Now ask, *Do any of these things interfere with me relating openly with another person?*



To relate to people with less privilege and power demands entering their world as equals. What would it take, and what might you need to give up, in order to see life through their eyes? What would you gain?

True hospitality as envisioned by Paul requires sacrifice. In giving up some lesser things, however, we gain that which is priceless: welcoming new brothers and sisters into our faith community.

**Lord, open our eyes to the richness of those who may be less privileged. Give us courage to start conversations and follow where they lead; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

<sup>1</sup>From *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, by Alan Kreider (Baker Academic, 2016); page 182.

# September 26

## Lesson 4

### Citizens of God's Household

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**Focal Passages:** Philippians 3:2-21; Ephesians 2:19-22

**Background Texts:** Philippians 3:2-21; Ephesians 2:11-22

**Purpose Statement:** To discover the privileges and responsibilities of being a citizen in God's household

#### Philippians 3:2-21

<sup>2</sup>Watch out for the “dogs.” Watch out for people who do evil things. Watch out for those who insist on circumcision, which is really mutilation. <sup>3</sup>We are the circumcision. We are the ones who serve by God's Spirit and who boast in Christ Jesus. We don't put our confidence in rituals performed on the body, <sup>4</sup>though I have good reason to have this kind of confidence. If anyone else has reason to put their confidence in physical advantages, I have even more:

<sup>5</sup>I was circumcised on the eighth day.

I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin.

I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews.

With respect to observing the Law, I'm a Pharisee.

<sup>6</sup>With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church.

With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless.

<sup>7</sup>These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup>But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith. <sup>10</sup>The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death <sup>11</sup>so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead.

<sup>12</sup>It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. <sup>13</sup>Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. <sup>14</sup>The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup>So all of us who are spiritually mature should think this way, and if anyone thinks differently, God will reveal it to him or her. <sup>16</sup>Only let's live in a way that is consistent with whatever level we have reached.

<sup>17</sup>Brothers and sisters, become imitators of me and watch those who live this way—you can use us as models. <sup>18</sup>As I have told you many times and now say with deep sadness, many people live as enemies of the cross. <sup>19</sup>Their lives end with destruction. Their god is their stomach, and they take pride in their disgrace because their thoughts focus on earthly things. <sup>20</sup>Our citizenship is in heaven. We look forward to a savior that comes from there—the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>21</sup>He will transform our humble bodies so that they are like his glorious body, by the power that also makes him able to subject all things to himself.

#### Ephesians 2:19-22

<sup>19</sup>So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household. <sup>20</sup>As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself

as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup>The whole building is joined together in him, and it grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord. <sup>22</sup>Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit.

**Key Verse: “So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God’s people, and you belong to God’s household” (Ephesians 2:19).**

It was the first day of my first class in seminary, and I was petrified. I had started the masters of divinity degree program at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. Having been a religion major at a small Missouri college, I had the privilege of enrolling in an advanced church history class, which I did.

Now, though, I was having second thoughts.

There were doctoral students in this class. As they entered, it was obvious that they knew one another and had a shared history. Worse yet, they even looked like doctoral students, older and wiser; one even wore a jacket that had patches on the elbows, the sure sign of a scholar. I was on the outside, looking in, and wondering if I was in the right school.

The professor, a dignified-looking man, entered and set down his briefcase. After greeting the class, he asked, “Does anyone know why the early medieval period is often called the ‘Dark Ages’?” He paused, as we searched for an academic response, then answered his own question. “Because it had so many ‘knights’ in it.”

My anxiety disappeared. If the teacher of this class could start things with a corny joke, I might have a chance after all. His humor broke down the invisible walls within that classroom. We were all students, after all, united in a quest for knowledge.

Paul struggled with breaking down the walls that were apparent in the early years of the church. While he didn’t use humor, he did use imagery with which the early Christians, living in the Roman Empire, could easily identify. As we’ll see, that imagery speaks to us today as clearly as it spoke 2,000 years ago.

## **The Privileges of Citizenship**

Paul wrote about citizenship in his letters to the Philippians and Ephesians. Those congregations were located in Asia Minor and were firmly entrenched in the Roman Empire. Consequently, they were well-acquainted with the importance of being legal

residents.

Rome was one of the first civilizations to establish rights for its citizens. Such citizenship was coveted because with it came privileges and protections that noncitizens did not enjoy. These included the right to vote, hold political office, and have differences settled in a court of law.

Paul himself was a Roman citizen. It provided him protection from angry mobs; when attacked, he made the authorities aware of his status, and they came to his defense (Acts 16:37-39; 22:3-29; 23:26-30). It also provided him the privilege of appealing to Rome when charges were made against him. When he wrote Philippians, he was probably writing from the confines of a Roman prison, awaiting trial.

The importance placed on citizenship meant that Rome was a class-and-status-driven society. Everyone wanted to be a citizen. If you weren’t born a citizen, you could become one through other means, such as purchasing it (Acts 22:28) or serving in the military.

Not everyone, though, could attain that honor. There would be those living under Roman rule who would not be protected by the authorities, but rather persecuted by them. They would not have voting power, and they could not have a fair trial if they were accused of a crime. They would not have access to the better jobs and greater prestige that would come from citizenship status.

The earliest Christian communities were born into this class-conscious society. Some members had such power and privilege, and others didn’t. How much would society play in how these congregations would organize themselves?

***It would be a difficult question to answer. In what ways may a Christian’s citizenship in a nation present a challenge to their faith? In what ways may it help express their faith?***

## **A Citizenship Based on Grace**

Against this backdrop, Paul introduced a new understanding of citizenship. He penned revolutionary words in Philippians 3:20, where he wrote, “Our citizenship is in heaven. We look forward to a savior that comes from there—the Lord Jesus Christ.” This literally means that Christians are citizens of a city/state that is in “the heavens,” a realm that eclipses, towers over, any nation. Such a city/state is governed by Jesus.

The Roman authorities would have seen this as traitorous. A citizen of Rome had allegiance, thoughts, and emotions all tied to the state, pledging an oath to Caesar.

This emperor ruled through power and oppression, fueling the class order. By contrast, Paul asserted that Christians pledge their ultimate loyalty to a new emperor, a Christ who rules over all. This emperor was killed by the Roman state but, through the Resurrection, was ultimately validated.

Such citizenship demands a different lifestyle. Instead of vying for status and power, obedience to Christ means giving up the very things that promoted upward mobility in Rome. Paul stated this clearly in the early verses of Philippians 3. He described all the things he had done that would have elevated him in Jewish society, even asserting that he was “blameless” in following the Law (verse 6).

All his claims to status, though, he now dismissed using strong, even offensive, language (calling them “sewer trash,” CEB; “rubbish,” NRSV; “garbage,” NIV; “dung,” KJV). For Paul, nothing is as valuable as the blessings we receive through Jesus Christ. Paul’s status as a citizen in Christ’s kingdom didn’t rest on his competitive striving. Such striving is egocentric, a reflection of the power of the Law. Rather, his citizenship was given him as a gift because of the cross. It’s not what Paul had done, but what Christ has done that’s important!

This is what he means in a favorite phrase he used in Ephesians. Twice he proclaimed, “By grace you have been saved” (2:5, 8). That can be paraphrased, “By God’s generosity, you have been granted citizenship in the Kingdom.”

*What makes it difficult to receive such a free gift instead of having to earn it?*

## Breaking Down the Walls

Roman society has been called “sharply vertical.” Citizens, starting with the wealthiest, were at the top. At the bottom were noncitizens, the enslaved, the poor. It’s been estimated that in first-century Roman society, 65 percent of the population were near or under the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> The church, by contrast, would align itself horizontally.

In Ephesians Paul draws a sharp distinction between Jews, the citizens of Israel, and Gentiles, who were aliens, outsiders (Ephesians 2:12). However, Christ destroyed this distinction through his sacrifice on the cross. As the apostle sums up verse 14, “Christ is our peace. He made Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us.”

When Paul said that Christ is our peace, he used a Greek word that carries a meaning similar to the Hebrew *shalom*, which refers to a state of completeness, wholeness.

In this case, the wall of “hatred” that fractured the human family no longer separates (verse 14); the divisions have been healed and form a perfect whole. This Christian peace, brought about by Christ, is in sharp contrast to the Roman peace (*Pax Romana*) that was secured by military might.

As Paul continued this line of thought, an image came to his mind that reinforced his emphasis upon the equality of all in God’s kingdom. Since now we each have equal access to God, and since we’re all fellow citizens, then we all “belong to God’s household” (verse 19).

The term *household* can be used interchangeably with *family*. It is a more intimate term than state or nation. It implies people living closely together under one roof, related by kinship, each valued and respected. No doubt when Paul wrote this, he was remembering the distinction of all being made “heirs” in God’s family thanks to Christ (Galatians 3:29).

This completes the thought of a horizontal alignment of the Christian community. There can be no one more or less important, more or less privileged, than anyone else. To be given citizenship in such a community is to be given new designations. Instead of Jew or Gentile, there will now be only brother or sister.

*How are “invisible walls” broken down in church? What examples of a horizontal alignment come to mind?*

## Building the House

In the Ephesians passage, Paul carried the image of household into the construction of the house. The body of Christ, uniting the human family, is the cornerstone of the building.

This structure, however, isn’t finished. It must continue growing until its final goal is achieved. “It grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord. Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:21-22).

Citizenship in God’s household, then, doesn’t just mean privileges. It also entails responsibilities. How does a member help build the house so it will be the dwelling place of the Spirit?

Paul gives us direction when we return to Philippians. He developed a central theme that runs throughout that letter. It’s summarized in his command: “Adopt the *attitude* which was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5, italics added). The foremost duty of the Christian is to look at life through Jesus’ eyes.



Paul discussed the importance of this several times. We must think the same way (2:2). We must strive to know Jesus (3:8, 10). We must forget what lies behind (3:13). We must have a peace that passes understanding (4:7) and focus our thoughts on spiritual values (4:8).

It would not be easy to keep such a Christlike attitude. The pressures of living in a class-based Roman society would always intrude. Similarly, the pressures of living in our modern culture make it difficult to have the mind of Christ.

We live in a time of competing identities, fueled by instantaneous social media. We identify ourselves and others according to groups. Liberal or conservative? Citizen or immigrant? Perhaps the most volatile identity is political. It's been suggested that our political affiliation may shape our values and not the other way around.<sup>2</sup> The same may apply according to the passions of our other identities.

One of the resources we have in prioritizing Christ's attitude is practicing with our fellow household citizens. It's not an accident that, after teaching we should have a Jesus-first outlook, Paul inserted a hymn that the early Christian community used in worship (2:6-11). It served as a constant reminder to them to relentlessly practice building the house by tearing down invisible walls. The beginning of the hymn recalls how Jesus embodied this. "Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave" (verses 6-7).

If we can prioritize such humility with one another, then we will be fulfilling our duty as citizens in Christ's household. A divided world needs such a witness. In a legislature, in an office, or even in a seminary classroom.

*What are the characteristics of a Christlike attitude? How can we demonstrate humility and respect toward people with whom we disagree?*

## A Church "National Anthem"

Singing the national anthem prior to an event can be a powerful experience. It

bonds fellow citizens around a shared history and culture. It can instill a sense of pride and appreciation as well.

If the church were to have such a representative song, what would it be? Spend time reviewing the different Christian music that celebrates the church. Use an internet search engine and look for "songs about church," explore the list, and read a few of the pieces. Alternatively, you may comb through a hymnal or ask other members what their favorites may be.

Some of the music will be traditional hymns, such as "The Church's One Foundation" and "I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord." Others will be contemporary, such as "If We Are the Body" and "Let the Church Rise." As you read the lyrics, compare what the songwriters are saying to Paul's words in the texts for this lesson. What is the church's mission? What qualities must a congregation have?

One strong theme is that of a diverse, yet strongly united, fellowship. A verse from "In Christ There Is No East or West" could have been written by Paul: "In Christ is neither Jew nor Greek, and neither slave nor free; both male and female heirs are made, and all are kin to me."

*Which hymn or contemporary chorus best describes the church for you? Why?*

**O Lord our God, how grateful we are that you have called us into your household! You have given us comfort in this house, as well as challenge. You have given us brothers and sisters to widen our eyes and broaden our hearts. So now, give each of us a restlessness to grow and deepen your household. Help us shape our church so that those who enter know that in you there is no east or west; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

<sup>1</sup>From *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, by Alan Kreider (Baker Academic, 2016); page 109.

<sup>2</sup>From "Tribalism Isn't the Real Reason America Is Divided," by S. E. Cupp, [CNN.com](https://www.cnn.com) (November 13, 2019).



