



Focus verses

“Keep being concerned about each other as the Lord’s followers should be. Be sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it. Remember the Lord’s people who are in jail and be concerned for them. Don’t forget those who are suffering, but imagine that you are there with them.”
Hebrews 13:1-3 (CEV)

“... to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”
Ephesians 4:12-13 (NIV)

“Be compassionate in the way your Father is compassionate.”
Luke 6:36 (SV)

LEGACIES OF CARE

LESSON TWO: LOOKING INWARD

Opening prayer

*Lord, you are our one true source,
God in Jesus the Christ.
We are yours, yours alone.
through whom rivers of love flow
smoothing away barriers,
eroding boulders,
but always, nevertheless,
on course.
Flowing from a source
that we cannot see
but that we know exists,
to a place we cannot imagine
but we know is true.*
—V. M. Kabat

Introduction to the lesson

The radical love of Jesus is a challenging commandment. Although we all desire to be faithful, most of us fall short. Before we explore outward expressions of how we love and care for one another, let’s take some time to look inward.

Last week’s challenge

Share from the challenge you chose to do during this past week.

»» Class discussion

Many of us learned about helping others as children. Look at the following statements and add others that come to mind:

- Charity begins at home.
- My mother always took food to neighbors if they were sick.
- I got where I am today by my own hard work; no one ever gave me a handout.
- We went to a nursing home once a month to sing hymns with the residents.
- Jesus said the poor would always be among us; it’s just a fact of life.
- Eat your vegetables! Children in (fill in the country) are starving!

Do any of these comments strike home with you? What are your memories associated with that comment? What emotions are triggered?

Religious education

Many of us also learned about caring for others at church. Here are some commonly held teachings from scripture (add others offered from the class). Read each aloud as class members respond by sharing meaning, memories and emotions about each teaching.

- The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:2-12)
- Faith, love and charity, but the greatest of these is charity (1 Corinthians 13:13)
- The Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37)
- The Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:1-22)
- Love your neighbor as yourself (Romans 13:9)

Cultural influences

We live in a world deluged with media messages – all of which imply that we are incomplete as human beings if we don't have (*this product*). Everywhere we see excess – from the larger houses we build to the storage sheds we erect to hold our stuff, from the supersizing of fast food items to the number of vehicles in our garages. These are powerful messages that inundate us constantly.

The teachings of Jesus about the rich young man is as relevant today as it was in Jesus' culture. Given our addiction to everything from specialty coffees to designer jeans, from custom chocolates to another pair of shoes, there is no doubt that our culture competes with Jesus' teachings for the control of our hearts.

Motivations and expectations

The majority of Americans are wealthy – wealthier than half of the world's population, which lives on less than \$2 a day. We were born into a culture that promulgates a certain mindset of motivations and expectations. "If you work hard, you'll succeed." "Anything is possible if you apply yourself." We've all heard these truisms that encode independence and self-sufficiency deeply into our psyches. Often that success is measured by how much money we make, where we live, what we drive, what our job title is and how many possessions we own.

A growing percentage of us, however, cannot afford health insurance or child care. We must work more hours than ever to make ends meet. Even when we do have equal opportunity, we do not have equal outcomes. This concept of success is a fairy tale for those who spend each day surviving (finding food, relief from the heat or cold, medication for illness, a safe place to sleep).

Until we can understand and accept this very uneven playing field that exists in our country, we will be inclined toward a spirit of judgment and entitlement. Nevertheless, what Jesus modeled through love is continuously the call before us; we are to overcome our former nature and become a new creation – one in which every single human life has dignity and worth and every person has a name – brother, sister. We have to discern daily how God is calling us to serve and to love. And, we have to decide daily if, and how, we will follow.

» Context for today

Listen as a class volunteer reads the following scenario and then discuss the questions that follow:

Jan and her husband Bob had just begun volunteering at the local homeless shelter for women and children. They met weekly with Martha, a middle age woman who had recently come out of rehab for her heroin addiction. Martha had been married, in a good job, and actively involved in raising her two teen-age children. But one day her daughter drove to the store to get milk and never came back. She was killed in an automobile accident. That's when Martha picked up a habit she had only experimented with in her younger days.

Jan, a mother herself, was especially stricken by Martha's story, and longed to help her get back on her feet. The couple talked with Martha about job interviewing techniques, presentation, and helped her explore employment opportunities. Jan even brought some of her nicer clothes from home to give to Martha to wear on her interviews.

But one week, the executive director of the homeless shelter called to tell them not to come in.

Martha had left the shelter, and the director had heard from others on the street that she was using again.

Jan and Bob were stunned. Everything seemed to be going so well. Martha had shown such determination in their meetings. They were disappointed, angry, and even felt betrayed by Martha's lapse. Later, the shelter director counseled the couple with this advice: "Here, we have to redefine our expectations and what we mean by success."

- What are our motivations and expectations about helping others?
- How do you interpret the shelter director's advice?
- How would you advise Bob and Jan?
- Have you had a similar experience?

Be encouraged

As you can see in even this brief sharing of memories, there are many experiences in our lives that influence how we think about caring for those in need – some positive, some not. In the weeks ahead, we will discover that systematized caregiving and the ideologies that created it also have influenced us.

There also are many ways to love and care for others. Be encouraged that whatever your gift is, God can manifest blessing through your willingness to offer it. Even if your gift seems meager – such as the small child's fishes and loaves – it is your cheerful bringing of it to Jesus that enables him to multiply it and make it more than enough.

»» Silence before God

After today's focus verses are read aloud, reflect on them and note any word or phrase that particularly impacts you. Close your eyes and repeat the phrase to yourself slowly. Again. Is the Spirit enlivening this phrase in you at this time? Why might that be?

Key points from today's lesson

- Our views toward helping others are influenced by many factors.
- These influences have imprinted us more deeply than we may realize.
- The things that are valued in our culture are not always the things God values.
- Many of us have been raised with a set of values that idealizes independence, self-sufficiency and materialism. This set of values is quite different from those of people caught in the cycle of poverty.
- We are called to think and act differently. What is important to God is that we honor God by obediently offering our gift; we trust God for the outcomes.

»» Challenge

Choose from the following options for the coming week:

- Recall a personal experience of helping someone. Write adjectives that describe how you felt when offering that service.
- If you could do one thing on a regular basis to help someone, what would it be and for whom (i.e., what age, what population, what societal need)? Why have you chosen this?
- If you have identified a situation that touches your heart, find out what, if any, services your church or community offers for people in this situation.

Good deeds and good news can't and shouldn't be separated. It's not really 'church' if it's not engaged in the life of the community through ministry and service to others.

– Rick Rusaw & Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church*. (2004)

