



40 Days of Spiritual Preparation

WEEK FIVE, COMMUNITY AWAKENING

Being an average community—or a run-of-the-mill local church family—takes only a modicum of physical presence and/or semi-regular attendance. On the other hand, being a healthy community, which includes having the corporate virtues of fidelity, speaking truthfully, having gratitude, offering hospitality, being sacrificial, practicing reconciliation, and having a posture of selflessness, takes dedicated work and endurance. This week we will focus on the various virtues that constitute healthy Christian community. The book of James will be our guide, as any local church that merely talks about community without practicing the difficult tasks of living alongside each other is, in the words of James, “dead.”

Tuesday, March 31st – Fidelity:

James 1:2-4, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

Take some time to reflect on individuals in the church body who have been faithful to you in the face of trials. What kinds of Christ-like characteristics were they displaying? What kind of responsibility do you have in order to be faithful to others, especially those outside this church body? How does unfaithfulness slowly (or rapidly) move us away from God? In what ways can we take the faithfulness that we’ve been given and show the world how to truly live? Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you to a person outside the church who needs a faithful friend.

Wednesday, April 1st – Truthfulness:

Read James 4:1, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?”

The virtue of truthfulness is one of most difficult character traits of all. How do/should we respond to questions that are seemingly harmless: “How does this outfit look?” [says spouse in embarrassing garb]. While at the same time, how do/should we be open and vulnerable? Challenging our Christian brothers and sisters can take truthful courage.

With whom do you need to work on a culture of truthfulness? How are you a representation of truthfulness to your secular friends/community? In what ways can you be simultaneously kind and challenging? Ask the Holy Spirit to give you the discernment to avoid lies and white-lies as well as tactlessness.

Thursday, April 2nd – Gratitude:

Read James 1:17, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”

In *Living Into Community*, Christine Pohl writes, “Gratitude and thanksgiving help to make all of the other practices more beautiful. When gratitude shapes our lives, fidelity is more likely to be joy-filled, truth is life-giving, and hospitality is offered with generosity and joy.”

Are there times in your church-life where you might need to get your freedom back—freely worshiping God with the gratitude that He deserves? If not, what habits can you put in place to best sustain a posture of gratitude? In what ways can you recognize the beautiful little things of life? How are you actively showing the world where true freedom comes? Ask the Holy Spirit to help you be freely grateful in your private and public church community life for the sake of the lost around you.

Friday, April 3rd - Hospitality:

Read James 5:13-15, “Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.”

What role has hospitality played throughout Church history? What Old Testament and New Testament stories come to mind when thinking about taking in a stranger or providing a meal for someone who is “least of these?” Are there movements in your life where you can be a welcoming presence to a foreigner in your midst—all the while potentially welcoming an angel or the Lord Himself? Ask the Holy Spirit to direct your home to be a welcome place of hospitality for those outside our church body.

Saturday, April 4th – Sacrifice:

Read James 4:4-5, “You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?”

A sacrifice constitutes the giving up of something we need or desire. What areas in your life could you sacrifice, beyond this Lenten season? Are there ways to simplify your life for the sake of both the church community and the secular environment in which you live and work? We’ve heard about being “So heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good.” But could it be possible that the bigger struggle in the American church is that our communities are so earthly minded that we’re no heavenly good? Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to what items in your house you could give away to someone in need this week—practicing the virtues of sacrifice and generosity.

Palm Sunday, April 5th – Reconciliation:

Read James 5:16, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”

One of the main tasks of corporate community gatherings at church is the practice of reconciliation. Have you accidentally or intentionally wronged a Christian sister or brother? Have you wronged someone outside our church? Do you feel that someone owes you an apology? What if we started by first apologizing for our wrongs, whether or not we get reciprocation? Ask the Holy Spirit to make known to you what areas in your life have put a rift between you and God and you and the Spring Arbor/Jackson community. Seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

Monday, April 6th – Having a Posture of Selflessness:

Read James 5:14-15, “Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.”

We know from the early Church’s example that taking on the needs of others before oneself is the hallmark of a healthy Christian community. Are you currently serving the church in the world? Is your current task critical for the community to be an unerring witness to Jesus? If not, do you have other passions where you can give through the local church to the secular world for the sake of the gospel? How can you pray for your pastors and church leaders? Ask the Holy Spirit to tell you what the needs of the outside community are? How can we put others before ourselves?

Living Out Your Prayer:

- ◆ Consider taking one or all of these action steps in the coming days.
- ◆ Offset a utility bill for a person in need. Or pay for the groceries of the person next to you in the checkout line.
- ◆ Give an anonymous gift.
- ◆ Try to say “thank you” at least 5 times today.
- ◆ Write a letter of gratitude to your church leaders.
- ◆ Fast from negativity - don’t speak any negative or critical words for the next week.
- ◆ Humble yourself and give an encouraging word or take a step toward someone you have had a strained relationship