



**Fall 2016 Discipleship Group Materials**



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Ridge

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# Introduction

Our fall discipleship series, beginning on Sunday September 18, will focus on “The Fruit of the Spirit” listed in Galatians 5. “Fruit” is a metaphor used frequently in scripture to describe the product of a life lived in partnership with the Spirit of God. In his letter to the first century churches in Galatia, the Apostle Paul gets very specific and practical about what such a life looks like in reality. The list of nine attributes, although not exhaustive, lays down a clear challenge about how to live. This is where the rubber hits the road. If we want to “be the change we want to see in the world,” if we want to become the kind of people God believes we can be, if we want to be better people and make the world a better place, then this list can be our inspiration. The good news, as Paul explains, is that the way forward is not about just trying a little harder or following a set of dogmatic rules, but about being set free from within and, through partnership with the Spirit of God, finding the life-giving force of God’s love that cultivates this fruit over time.

## Overview

Each week we will look at a different attribute of the fruit of the Spirit, consider what it means and what it looks like, and explore practices that can develop and strengthen it in our lives. The series will cover the following themes:

- *September 18: Love*  
Unconditional, self-sacrificing love as the root, means and end of the fruit of the Spirit.
- *September 25: Joy*  
Experiencing and choosing joy as celebration of God’s gifts and God’s deliverance, as well as joy found in the midst of hardship and suffering.
- *October 2: Peace*  
Jesus as our Peace; the source and model of wholeness for ourselves, our relationships and our society.
- *October 9: Patience*  
Slowing down to respond to challenges with love, recognizing God’s patience towards us; persisting in doing right, even when we cannot see any results.
- *October 16: Kindness and Goodness*  
Intentional action for the wellbeing of others, as well as our unconscious impact on those around us.
- *October 23: Gentleness*  
A deep inner strength and security rooted in the power and love of God that allows us to release our desires to compete and control.

- *October 30: Self-Control*  
Being set free to surrender control to the Spirit of God working deep within us, and engaging in a journey of struggle to experience more of God's healing love.
- *November 13: Faithfulness*  
Developing a pathway to help us be faithful in every aspect of our lives, empowered by God's unswerving commitment to us.
- *November 20: Gratefulness*  
A transformational and contagious characteristic that impacts how we view ourselves, others, God and the world.

Our prayer is that through this series, we will intentionally partner with God in becoming more like Christ. We want to identify areas in our lives in need of transformation, surrender these areas to God, and develop practices to cultivate more of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives as individuals and as a community.

## Practicalities

- In this packet you will find the discussion questions and/or recommendations for activities for each week. Each of them assumes you have heard the message for that week, so if you were not able to be at Cedar Ridge that Sunday, **please listen or watch the message online** ([www.crc.org/messages/](http://www.crc.org/messages/))
- **Weeks 1-7 (September 18 – October 30)** have discussion questions relating to the Sunday morning message and an activity for group members to do during the week.
- **Week 8 (October 6)** is our Fall Day of Service. Through service, we can demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in practical ways and help bring God's love to our neighbors. We will meet at 9 AM for breakfast and a brief time of worship before heading off to various service projects.
- **Weeks 9 and 10 (November 13 and 20)** are the final weeks of the series. In place of discussion questions based on that week's message, there is a selection of activities and practices that you can consider doing together as a group. We encourage discipleship groups to continue meeting in order to encourage and support one another, but to use the time for prayer, celebration or service, as appropriate to the needs and interests of the group.

- In all discipleship series we encourage you to leave ample time to **pray together** as a group. The final discussion question is designed to facilitate a transition into a time of prayer.
- Each week, the materials include a **prayer exercise or activity**. These exercises and activities are intended to deepen reflection on the message theme, and to strengthen the growth of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. A journal is helpful for recording thoughts and feelings related to these exercises.
- We are all God’s children—whatever our age! Older children and youth will be covering similar, age-appropriate material during their Sunday morning groups. We encourage you to find creative ways to incorporate **children and youth** in your discipleship group meetings, and to engage with them on the topic throughout the week. To support this, each week contains an exercise or activity that is suitable for children.
- Appendix 1 contains suggestions for **additional reading** on the themes covered in this discipleship series.

## Fall Discipleship Series 2016

### The Fruit of the Spirit

## Week 1: Love

Love is the first of the listed characteristics of the “fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:22-23. Although there may not be any particular relevance to the order of these qualities, it does seem significant that love is first. Love is the theme of the whole story of scripture. Jesus called us to love God, love one another, and to love ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40); Paul says, “love is the greatest” (1 Corinthians 13:13); and John gives us the definitive statement “God is love” (1 John 4:8). The imperative to love is clear. At the same time, our own lives and the state of the world around us show just how difficult this is. Not only is love really important, it is also the root, the means and the end of all the other qualities of the fruit of the Spirit. Throughout this series we will come back to love time and time again.

There are many ancient words for love (in the original Greek language) and the one used here is “agape” which means pure, unconditional, self-sacrificing love or even “divine love.” It is used to describe God’s love, the love Jesus showed, and it is what we are also called to extend to everyone. In this week’s session, we will explore the beginning of love as God’s love for each of us in both a very personal and a universal way. We will also take up the challenge to love and accept ourselves as the basis for being able to reach out to others with love. Then we will explore what loving others looks like and how we cultivate this fruit in our lives. The opposite of love is fear (1 John 4:18) and we will consider the multiple ways fear plays out in our own lives and in our culture, so that we consciously address these and open ourselves and the world to more love.

### This week’s discussion questions

1. What struck you about the message on Sunday? What did you find most helpful? What was most difficult or challenging?
2. Read Galatians 5:16-26. With Sunday’s message this week and last in mind, what do you think the writer (the Apostle Paul) means by “live by the Spirit” in v16? How is this possible for us?
3. When we think about the “fruit of the Spirit” as described, it could easily become a to-do list that makes us try harder. We might even try to “fake it” and do our best to demonstrate these qualities in our public persona while struggling on the inside.
  - What keeps us from being honest with ourselves and one another about these things?

- Share a little with one another about how you feel you are doing with each of these listed qualities.
  - How can we be a source of inspiration and encouragement to one another?
4. Read 1 John 4:7-21
- How does this passage define love?
  - Where does love come from?
  - From this passage, what kind of response does a real experience of God's love evoke?
  - What do you think v16 means?
5. Read 1 Corinthians 13: 1-8 and then reflect on it in the following ways (you might like to read it again each time with the new focus below):
- What if this is how God loves us? How does each element of the description of love apply? How does this change our understanding or experience of God?
  - What if we could love ourselves this way? What would that look like? What stops us loving ourselves this way? What do we need to do to love and accept ourselves more?
  - What if we could love others this way? What would this look like? What needs to change for us to love this way?
6. Group prayer practice:
- Take a few minutes as a group to sit in silence and try to enter into to the mystery of God through breath prayer. Set a timer to go off after 5 minutes so you can all participate without having to check the time. Start by quietly asking God's Spirit to fill you and make you aware of God's love. Sit comfortably with your back straight, feet planted on the floor, arms relaxed and hands supported in your lap. Close your eyes and relax your shoulders. To begin, listen to your breath as you breathe. Feel your breath in your nostrils, chest and abdomen, inhaling and then exhaling fully and deeply—hold your exhale a bit longer than usual to completely expel air. This has a very soothing, cleansing effect. Breathing accompanied by prayer will also help you to "wake up" and "breathe in" the love of God as you calm your mind, heart and body. As you breathe, imagine the room filled with God's love for you. Take a few moments to get used to this. Allow yourself to imagine God's passionate affection for you. As you breathe in, breathe in God's love. As you breathe out, relax into this love. With each in-breath imagine yourself being filled more and more with God's love. With each out-breath relax deeper and deeper into this love. Don't resist it, but surrender to it. If your thoughts stray or you begin to feel unloved, just become aware of your breathing again and focus on breathing in God's love.



### **Practice for this week: Compassionate Presence**

This week, practice intentional compassionate presence with people. Wait for an opportunity when you are communicating with someone who you do not find easy. This may be a normal low-stress conversation or may be a difficult one. During this interaction, make a conscious effort to empathize with the other person. Rather than think about them in (perhaps) the usual negative way, think positively about them. Consciously and deliberately take up a posture of love and forgiveness towards them. Imagine being in their shoes: what struggles they might be experiencing and having to overcome. Avoid pity or condescension, but allow yourself to feel one with them.

Try to do this at least once every day. It could be with the same person or different people each time.

### **Alternative practice for this week: True Love Starts With Me**

What is it that gets in your way of loving yourself? What tracks run on repeat in your head; negative thoughts that clearly aren't the voice of God? Make a list of the ways you are hard on yourself, and then imagine what the God who is Love would say to you in each of these areas. Use the breath prayer on the previous page to let go of these negative thoughts and breathe in the love of God.

### **Practice for families with children: Showing Empathy**

Look for opportunities this week to illustrate empathy to the child(ren) you are close to. For example:

- When a vehicle cuts in front of you, discuss what may be causing the driver to be in such a hurry, and how stressful it feels to be late.
- When someone is rude or brusque, talk to your child (out of earshot of the person!) about how we all have bad days, headaches, get tired and grumpy, etc.
- After being approached for money, talk to your child(ren) about how sad and difficult it must be to be homeless.
- Look for simple ways to help people (picking up a dropped item, giving a seat on the metro/bus, letting someone go ahead of you in the grocery check-out) and talk to your child about the importance of showing God's love to everyone.

## Fall Discipleship Series 2016 The Fruit of the Spirit

### Week 2: Joy

With a constant bombardment of news about natural disasters, violence, greed, injustice, political rhetoric and other “bad news,” it can be difficult to find much reason for joy. Yet joy is one of the hallmarks of the Christian faith, a quality Paul says is a fruit produced by the Holy Spirit. This week, we will explore how we might grow in joy, even in challenging times. Joy can be described as “being awake and deeply alive, aware of the love and goodness of God, and mindful of the wondrous gift of life. This is a holistic awareness, involving thoughts, emotions, breath, body and community” (Mary Clark Moshella). In the Scriptures, we find a few kinds of joy. One kind is a human response to events or people that are perceived to be good and wonderful. We celebrate these gifts with gratitude for the joy they bring to us. Joy can also be felt after experiencing God’s rescuing activity: there can be great joy when we are brought through times of sorrow, sickness or defeat. A third and surprising kind of joy is that which is experienced in spite of our circumstances—when we have joy in the midst of suffering or hardship.

Throughout these biblical references to joy, we find that joy is both a gift from God and a choice we make. Joy (as a noun) can well up spontaneously, but it is also a verb that we can choose to pursue: “rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). Yet there are things in our lives and our culture that may keep us from experiencing joy. Fortunately, there are some proven practices that can open us to living with joy, no matter our circumstances. Celebrating the good things in life, finding ways to experience God’s presence, dwelling on the positive, and remembering Jesus are ways we can cultivate joy.

#### **This week’s discussion questions**

1. What was your experience with the Compassionate Presence or True Love Starts with Me activity this past week? What thoughts or insights do you want to share?
2. What struck you about the message on Sunday? What did you find most helpful? What was most difficult or challenging?
3. Read the description of joy quoted in the first paragraph above. Have you had this kind of experience before? If so, share about a time when you felt full of joy.

4. What are some of the ways you like to celebrate the good, positive experiences of life? In what ways are these celebrations a form of worship or gratitude to God?
5. Read Psalm 30 together. Tell about a time when you went from “weeping” to “rejoicing,” from “wailing” to “dancing.” How did you express your joy at that time?
6. Do you think it is actually possible to experience joy in the midst of struggle and suffering?
  - What does it look like?
  - Is it just a form of denial, or is there something deeper going on?
7. In the message on Sunday, the speaker mentioned factors that stand in the way of joy, such as busyness, negativity, puritanical seriousness, pain, fear, and a scarcity or “not enough” mindset.
  - Which of these factors can you relate to?
  - Are there other things that keep you from experiencing joy?
8. Of the ways to cultivate joy mentioned in the message and summarized at the end of the second paragraph above, which have helped you grow in joy?
  - What other practices would you suggest?
  - Which one will you try this week?
9. Pray together for each other, that you might grow in joy. Consider ending with the blessing found in Romans 15:13 *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”*

## **Practices for the week: Scripture Reading, and Being Present**

### **Scripture Reading**

Read the letter to the Philippians in the New Testament, ideally in one sitting. Note that Paul wrote this small book while he was in jail for preaching about Jesus, to a group of Jesus-followers who were under the threat of persecution. Note how many times Paul uses the word “joy” or “rejoice.” What observations can you make about joy? What seems to be the source of joy? Can you relate to Paul’s joyful attitude while in difficult circumstances? Why or why not?

### **Being in the Moment**

This week, at least once a day, concentrate on being in the moment. What do you see? Smell? How does it feel? How does God see this moment? What brings God joy in this moment? Strive to be more present and find joy in the fullness of life as we know it.

If you are inclined, spend some time expressing that joy to God through the way that makes you most comfortable—creating a prayer, song, artwork, or other fitting expression for any feelings of joy you have.

### **Practice for families with children: Joy Jar**

Each night (at dinner or bed time), have each family member write or draw a highlight of the day (a positive, joyful experience, event, “fruit” or person encountered that day) on a small piece of paper and put it in an empty fruit/canning jar. Watch the Joy Jar contents build until Thanksgiving week, then as a family pull out and read the notes. Celebrate and express gratitude for these things. You may want to create a wall decoration or other keepsake from the notes after they have been pulled from the jar.

## Fall Discipleship Series 2016

### The Fruit of the Spirit

## Week 3: Peace

In the ancient Hebrew context, “peace” had a very broad, holistic meaning. The Hebrew word *shalom* captures a sense of harmony, oneness and unity in a spiritual, personal and social way. It is a positive, active term, rather than passive, signifying life the way it should be. The Greek word that Paul uses in Galatians 5 carries similar meaning, and he is writing in a context where the background of *shalom* would be understood. The challenge to bear the fruit of peace has deep and broad implications for all of us, not just in our personal lives but in what we strive for in society, too.

In this week’s session, we will especially look at Jesus as one who embodied peace. In fact, Jesus is not only prophetically and traditionally called the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) but is actually defined as Peace (Ephesians 2:14). Jesus embodied peace and oneness with God, and was at peace with himself. He lived out of this peaceful center, and was able to extend peace to others through love, forgiveness and acceptance. We will use Jesus’ example to explore our own potential for peace with God, peace with ourselves, and peaceful relationships. We will also take up the challenge of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets who claimed that there could be no peace without justice. Peace is not an absence of conflict, nor is it about hiding out in already peaceful or comfortable environments. The call to be peacemakers may well mean we create conflict, and will certainly take us out of our comfort zones as we strive for justice, healing and wholeness (*shalom*) in our society.

### This week’s discussion questions

1. What was your experience with the scripture reading or being in the moment activity this past week? What thoughts or insights do you want to share?
2. What struck you about the message on Sunday? What did you find most helpful? What was most difficult or challenging?
3. Read Luke 7:36-50.
  - What stands out to you in this story?
  - With whom do you identify most closely in this story?
  - Jesus says to the woman, “Go in peace.” In what ways is Jesus bringing peace to this situation? In what ways is he bringing conflict? Are these two actions at odds with one another?

4. With the above story in mind, would you say you feel at peace with God? What does this kind of peace look like to you?
5. Do you feel at peace with yourself? What is your normal level of “self-anxiety”? What does peace with yourself look like, and how could you experience more of it?
6. Read Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:1-48. Jesus calls us to be peacemakers (v9). He also recognizes that we all harbor anger and hatred (v21-22) and calls us to love and peace with everyone—even our enemies (v43-44). To live this way, he calls us to non-violence (v38-39). These are challenging teachings! With all this in mind, discuss:
  - How could this affect our understanding and experience of God’s peaceful intentions towards us personally?
  - What would be the implications of making this kind of peace with ourselves? How would life be different?
  - What keeps us from extending peace like this to those around us? Does this kind of peace seem realistic?
7. In the message on Sunday, the speaker made the point that peace is not the absence of conflict. Jesus said, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). This seems to refer to the fact that “peace” in Jesus’ view is not superficial comfort and niceness. Rather, to get to a real, deep *shalom* peace, we may need to confront some issues that stand in its way. What issues stand in the way of peace that you feel you have a responsibility to challenge or confront?
  - In your personal relationships?
  - In society around you?
  - What is a way forward in these areas?
8. Group prayer practice
  - Personal reflection time (10 mins)
    - i. Take 10 minutes to sit alone and in silence. Reflect honestly on your life and identify one situation where you need to be a peacemaker. Try not to force this, but let it emerge naturally. It may be a broken relationship where you need to forgive or ask forgiveness. It may be a dynamic in your family or at work where you need to speak out. It might be an issue of injustice in society about which you have felt motivated and passionate to act. Most likely you will have thought about the identified relationship or issue before; it will not be new. So just let it emerge.
    - ii. Write the situation in your journal or in this book, as well as what you think you need to do about it. What does peace look like in this situation?

How can you make movement towards this? How can you be a peacemaker?

- Break-out sharing (10 mins)
  - i. Now break into groups of 3 for 10 minutes and share about your reflection experience.
  - ii. Then pray for one another.

### **Practice for this week: Agents of Peace**

As you listen to the news this week, lift up people or situations of great pain or struggle. Invite God's peace into our world by praying for each situation. Ask God to use you as an instrument of peace this week.

Take time to be with others and bring peace to their situations by listening and being fully present. Be aware of God's promptings to connect and participate in God's work of bringing peace on earth.

### **Alternative practice for this week: Centering Prayer**

Try to do this practice once every day.

One aspect of the human condition is that we are constantly bombarded with messages, images, suggestions and pressures. Much of this is external, but a lot of it is "inside our head." We have all kinds of thoughts, conversations and commentaries going on in our minds constantly. It can be hard to switch these off, and slowly these thoughts become our reality; they become truth to us, even though often we don't even know where they come from.

Centering prayer is a practice that helps us switch off these thoughts, feelings and emotions to give ourselves some peace and rest. It is an ancient practice that followers of Jesus have used for many centuries to experience a deeper connection to God. It is the essence of surrender: surrendering our whole beings to God—thoughts, plans, memories, emotions—everything. We do this by sitting in silence and continuously consenting to let God have it all. Practiced faithfully over time, the practice of Centering Prayer can bring deep peace and transformation. Find a time and place where you can sit comfortably with as few distractions as possible. Ideally, you will be able to set aside 20 minutes for this practice. You may want to set your cell phone or a timer.

Select a "sacred word" or "prayer word" that will symbolize your intent and consent to focus only on God during this time. It should be short and not distract you. Something simple like love, God, Jesus or peace will be fine. You will simply use this word as a trigger to return to a surrendered state of mind whenever you become distracted in this exercise. And you will be distracted!! So don't be discouraged. The word itself is not important—the intent to surrender

is what's important. The word is not one you will reflect upon or contemplate; it is just an aid in returning you to surrender.

Close your eyes and tell God that you are willing to release your whole being in order to be one with God, and that you are offering your sacred word to signify your intent. Ask Jesus to help you. Begin by slowly and silently letting the word rest in your mind. This is not a mantra to be repeated, it is only to signify intent, and your word will slowly drift away along with your thoughts.

Whenever you notice a thought, emotion or memory, silently and gently offer your prayer word to replace it. Let your thoughts float by—do not be distressed by their presence, just acknowledge them and let them go with the help of your sacred word. Let go of even “spiritual” thoughts or prayers, and allow God to work in your mind and heart, unencumbered by your “self.”

It is inevitable that you will be distracted, probably many times. Don't worry and don't feel guilty. Each time return to God by remembering and using your sacred word. The point is returning to God, so it really doesn't matter how many times you are distracted.

At the end of your time, remain in silence with your eyes closed for a few minutes, allowing your thoughts to return. Thank God for being present to you.

### **Reflection with children: Snow Globes**

Jesus has given us the gift of peace. One way to imagine that gift is as a snow globe inside of us. This snow globe is a special, safe place where we can go in our mind to remember that God is with us and surrounds us with love. Help your child(ren) to imagine their very own snow globe:

- What does it look like in the snow globe? (e.g., a lake, forest, blanket fort, etc.)
- What does it smell like?
- What can you touch in the snow globe, and how does that feel?

Share your own idea of a peaceful snow globe.

Encourage your child(ren) to go to this special place when they feel angry, sad or afraid, and to remember that God is there, filling the globe with love and peace.



## Fall Discipleship Series 2016 The Fruit of the Spirit

### Week 4: Patience

Patience is sometimes considered an outdated virtue. Our culture values efficiency, short-cuts and immediacy in all areas of life. From communication to entertainment, meals to relationships, instant gratification is regarded as the norm. Yet, as a community, we recognize the importance of “slowing down from the frenzied pace of life.” By slowing down, we make room for God’s Spirit to temper our responses to challenging people and circumstances, and to give us insight into the perspectives and feelings of others. By recognizing God’s patience with our own weaknesses and failings, we are empowered to act rather than react, and to respond in ways that are gracious and kind.

Patience is an active quality—diametrically opposed to resignation, cynicism and despair. Patience gives us the strength to wait on God and to faithfully continue to do what is right, even when we cannot see any results from our actions. As with all the fruit of the Spirit, the root is love. Knowing that God is love, we can trust God to uphold us through difficult times. As we increasingly understand and experience our oneness with God through a life lived “in Christ” we can allow God to transform our hearts and equip us to reject instinctive responses to provocation—such as defensiveness and a desire for retaliation—and instead respond in loving, Christ-like ways.

#### **This week’s discussion questions**

1. What was your experience with the Agents of Peace or Centering Prayer exercise this past week? What thoughts or insights do you want to share?
2. What struck you about the message on Sunday? What did you find most helpful? What was most difficult or challenging?
3. Would you consider yourself to be a patient or impatient person? In what situations do you generally become impatient?
4. The speaker on Sunday argued that our culture does not value patience. In what ways do you think this is true? In what ways is it not true?
5. Perhaps in contrast with our own cultural context, ancient Hebrew culture did place value on patience. Read the following verses from Proverbs and (i) consider what each

teaches about the value of patience; and (ii) share examples from your own life of patience being applied in ways similar to that in the verse:

- Proverbs 14:29
- Proverbs 15:18
- Proverbs 16:32
- Proverbs 19:11
- Proverbs 25:15

6. Read Matthew 18:15-35.

- What does this passage teach about patience?
- How are patience and forgiveness connected?
- What connections and tensions do you see between the instruction about dealing with sin (v15-17) and the parable (v23-35)?

7. Nine times in scripture, God is described as "slow to anger." This is the literal meaning of the word translated "patience" in Galatians 5:22. Read James 1:19-27:

- How can we demonstrate patience in the way we listen and speak?
- Why does James twice warn against deceiving ourselves?
- Being slow to react does not mean we do not act. Share any situations you are facing currently where you are finding yourself (i) quick to anger, or (ii) slow to act.

8. Read James 5:7-12. In this passage, "patience" carries the meaning of steadfast endurance.

- Job is held up as an example of patience in suffering, although he spoke honestly and bitterly of his afflictions. What does this teach us about patience?
- What can we learn about patience from the prophets?
- Read James 5:12 again in The Message translation. In what areas of your life do you long to "hurry up God"?

9. Reflecting on responses to the third bullet in questions 7 and 8 above, spend some time in prayer for one another.

### **Practice for this week: Slowing Down our Reactions**

Intentionally practice being "quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

At the end of each day, think through any tense or stressful moments. For each instance:

- Assess whether you reacted immediately, with your first thought or feeling; or whether you took time to consider how to respond.

- What was the outcome?
- How might you have responded differently?

Ask God to help you slow down and respond to challenging situations from a deep knowledge of God’s unfailing love and patience with us.

### **Practice for families with children: Mindful Eating**

Help the child(ren) you are close to slow down through the following mindful eating activity:

- Take a single raisin (or chocolate chip or mini marshmallow).
- Think about what it looks like.
- Smell it. What does it smell like?
- Touch it. What does it feel like?
- Place it in your mouth. What does it taste like on your tongue?
- Slowly chew. How does it feel and taste?

Talk to your child(ren) about how this experience was different from quickly grabbing and eating raisins. Discuss how slowing down can help us experience more of life—to see, feel and taste more than we would otherwise notice. Apply this to other experiences throughout the week (e.g., going for a walk, looking at a picture, etc.)

### **Alternate Practice for families with children: Deep Breaths**

We all know discussions can get heated. Talk to your child(ren) about being “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” Agree to slow down when conversations start to get tense, and for all parties to take three deep breaths together.

Ask your child(ren) what makes them angry and share what makes you angry. Model calming behavior when challenging situations arise.

For younger children, sitting cross-legged with the child in your lap and your arms around them might help them feel safe while you both are practicing deep breathing.

## Fall Discipleship Series 2016 The Fruit of the Spirit

### Week 5: Kindness and Goodness

This week, we will look at two of the qualities of the fruit of the Spirit together: kindness and goodness. The word for kindness used in Galatians 5 (*chrestotes* in the original Greek) is actually often translated “goodness” elsewhere in the scriptures. The word Paul uses for “goodness” here (*agathosune* in the original Greek) is a word not often used elsewhere. Together we could perhaps consider these concepts as “goodness” being a state of being, a posture or demeanor towards life and people, while kindness is the practical expression of that demeanor. In this session, we will focus on the term “kindness” but really we are considering both concepts.

Kindness is often used biblically to describe good leadership of people, especially by monarchs and political leaders. There is a sense of benevolence and tenderness, and this is also how God’s response to humanity is described (Ephesians 2:6-7). Kindness in this sense is indiscriminate and unconditional (Luke 6:35); it has the wellbeing of others in mind first and foremost, and is powerful in that it can have a transformative effect (Romans 2:4). Kindness in this sense can be very intentional, based on conscious effort and action towards others. But there is another dimension to kindness here, which is more about how we impact others unconsciously. How do we affect and respond to others when we are not consciously thinking about it; when we are not in the intentional mode of carrying out acts of kindness? Perhaps we are more truly ourselves in those moments—which is sobering, but also presents us with so much opportunity to grow and bear the fruit of goodness and kindness naturally.

#### **This week’s discussion questions**

1. What was your experience with the slowing down activity this past week? What thoughts or insights do you want to share?
2. What struck you about the message on Sunday? What did you find most helpful? What was most difficult or challenging?
3. In your view, what constitutes a “good” person? What makes them good? Are there any examples of people in your life you would describe this way, and why?
4. Describe some instances where people have shown you kindness. Why would you say their behavior was kind? How did it feel? What was the outcome, if any?

5. Read Ephesians 4:31-32. Paul seems to be connecting kindness to an understanding that we are all imperfect and in need of forgiveness, one way or another.
  - Consider a person towards whom you find it hard to feel kindness: how might reflection on your own imperfection help you see that person differently?
  - Consider a person who has been unkind to you: how might reflection on their imperfection help you to forgive them?
6. Share some simple ways together that you can be intentionally and practically kind to others in everyday life.
7. Group prayer practice
  - Take 15 minutes to sit alone, in silence and write your reflections in your journal or in this book. Read Matthew 11:28-30. Jesus describes our relationship with him as being “yoked” in partnership with him (like oxen). But this yoke is “easy and light” rather than oppressive or harsh. The real meaning of the word “easy” here is “kindness” (the same word that Paul used in Galatians). With this in mind reflect on the following:
    - i. How might Jesus’ natural disposition of kindness towards you affect how you see yourself?
    - ii. How might we extend more kindness to ourselves? What burdens have we imposed on ourselves that we need to let go?
    - iii. What kind of “yoke” do we impose on others in relationships (family, friends, school, work, etc.)? How do people experience us when we are off-guard? How do we respond? How approachable are we? How carefully do people tread around us? How vulnerable are people with us?
  - Break-out sharing (20 mins)
    - i. Now break into groups of 3 for 20 minutes and share about your reflection experience. Try to be as honest as possible.
    - ii. Then pray for one another.

### **Practice for this week: The Kindness Examen**

The Examen is an ancient Christian practice that can be practiced daily, weekly, monthly, even annually as a way of celebrating how we have grown, and also identifying areas where we may be in need of growth. It is a way of deeply reflecting on our lives—looking at outward actions and listening to internal attitudes and beliefs for the purpose of greater conscious awareness of how we are giving and receiving God’s love and kindness. We do this reflection not judgmentally of ourselves, but with God’s help and in an atmosphere of God’s complete love and acceptance of us.

Below is a way of doing this Examen specifically with kindness in mind. Set aside 20 minutes for this and read the instructions through completely each time before you begin until the practice is familiar to you. A great time to do this is at the end of the day.

Sit comfortably in silence with your back straight, feet planted on the floor, arms relaxed and hands supported in your lap. Close your eyes and relax your shoulders. To begin, listen to your breath as you breathe. Feel your breath in your nostrils, chest and abdomen, inhaling and then exhaling fully and deeply—hold your exhale a bit longer than usual to completely expel air. Continue with regular rhythmic deep breathing. Allow tension to fade away from your body, and your spirit to be at peace.

Consciously think back over the previous day. Trace the story of your life during this period of time and observe what happened. Begin with when you awoke and work your way slowly through your day. As you do, this consider the following, but remember not to evaluate or judge yourself; just be honest and kind towards yourself:

At what times during your story did you experience kindness?

- When did you receive kindness? How did you respond?
- When did you act kindly? What did you do and why?
- Were you aware of this kindness at the time, or is it only now as you look back that you realize it?
- What was the outcome?

At what times during your story did you experience unkindness?

- When were you treated unkindly? How did you act or respond?
- How did you act unkindly? What did you do and why?
- Were you aware of this unkindness at the time, or is it only now as you look back that you realize it?
- How could you have thought, responded or acted in a kinder way that would have embraced and expressed more of God's love and kindness?

When you have finished reflecting on your story, continue with deep breathing for a few moments and invite God into the story that lies ahead of you. Ask God to help you be more embracing of God's love tomorrow.

### **Practice for families with children: Kindness Examen for Kids**

Sit down with your child(ren) and ask them to talk you through their day. Let them take their time and let them dwell on telling what seems important to them. Use the following questions:

- Who was kind to them today? What did they do, and how did this make them feel?
- When were they kind today? What did they do, and why? What was the outcome?
- Was anyone unkind to them today? What happened and how did they respond?
- Did they do anything unkind today? What did they do, and why?
- How could they have acted more kindly?

Ask these questions at relevant points where they seem applicable or your child shows some emotion or passion. If it is not clear when to ask these, ask them at the end.

Now repeat the exercise with you sharing your day with the same questions.

When you have finished, chat together about what these experiences teach us about kindness.

Pray together to ask God to help us be kinder tomorrow.

## Fall Discipleship Series 2016

### The Fruit of the Spirit

## Week 6: Gentleness

This week we are considering gentleness. As with all fruit of the Spirit, cultivating gentleness entails deep inner change and is not something we can just “put on.” The life of Jesus illustrates that gentleness comes not from weakness, but from a deep inner strength and security rooted in the power and love of God. When we humble ourselves and surrender to God’s love and sovereignty, we can release our desires to control and compete, and instead approach the world from a gentler perspective, without the need to rule over or defend ourselves from “the other.”

In the story of Saint Francis, we learn about a man whose gentle spirit embraced all humanity and beyond: animals, the earth, and even “sister death.” Gentleness is increasingly countercultural in our acquisitive, competitive and violent society—even the gospel is sometimes wielded like a weapon! We can more fully open our hearts to the divine love that results in a gentle spirit by cultivating humility and practicing surrender of our “agendas.” Try fully listening in conversation this week, speaking as little as possible about yourself, and purposefully “giving in” and relinquishing your position in a disagreement or debate.

### This week’s discussion questions

1. What was your experience with the Kindness Examen this past week? What thoughts or insights do you want to share?
2. What struck you about the message on Sunday? What did you find most helpful? What was most difficult or challenging?
3. The Message version of the Bible translates gentleness as “not needing to force our way in life.” Is there a particular area of life where you sometimes feel you have to force your way, such as work, specific relationships, political dialogue, physical fitness, or sexuality?
  - What might these circumstances be triggering in you that makes you respond that way? Fear? Insecurity?
  - What might you be trying to protect?
  - How can you surrender that to God?



4. Consider the following advice from Saint Francis De Sales:  
*"We ought not to become overly disturbed with ourselves because of our imperfections . . . Fits of anger, vexation, and bitterness against ourselves tend to pride and they spring from no other source than self-love, which is disturbed and upset at seeing that it is imperfect."*
  - Do you agree or disagree with this advice? Why?
  - Do you find it difficult to be gentle with yourself due to a need for perfection?
  
5. In Ephesians 4: 1-3, Paul urges believers to "be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love," i.e., forgiving hurts and releasing any desire for retaliation. Share your thoughts on the connections between humility, forgiveness, and gentleness, and discuss a struggle you have experienced in these areas.
  
6. What do you think of the idea of treating the earth or inanimate objects with gentleness, in the way of Saint Francis of Assisi? What benefit might you derive from treating "things" with more respect and care?
  
7. The speaker on Sunday talked about approaching aging and even death with a gentle acceptance, releasing our grasping hold on life itself.
  - Have you known people with this attitude? How do you think they obtained such peace?
  - Share your feelings and fears about aging and death with the group and then consider together how the words of Philippians 4: 6-7 might apply.
  
8. Saint Theresa wrote the following:  
*"Steps to humility: To speak as little as possible of one's self; to mind one's own business; not to want to manage other people's affairs; to avoid curiosity; to accept contradictions and correction cheerfully; to pass over the mistakes of others; to accept insults and injuries; to accept being slighted, forgotten and disliked; to be kind and gentle even under provocation; never to stand on one's dignity; to choose always the more difficult task."*
  - Which attributes do you have, aspire to, or perhaps disagree with?
  - Choose one or two you would like to practice this week, share your intention with the group, and then move into a time of prayer for each other about your intentions.

### **Practice for the week: Mindful Food Preparation**

Saint Francis of Assisi showed gentle care and respect for all living things and for the earth itself. This week choose a time when you can slow down and pay special attention to the preparation of a meal. As you work, be mindful and gentle with your tools and implements and handle the food with respect and care. Consider where each item of food came from.

Was it once a living animal? Do you know how it was raised? Was your produce grown by farmers in Mexico, and do you know if they were fairly paid? Is the food wrapped in lots of plastic, cardboard, or foam? Will the food be gentle on your body, or does it contain a long list of chemical additives you can't pronounce? Food production can be a cruel, destructive or wasteful process, and we often don't know much about it. Can you think of ways to meet your needs for nutrition and enjoyment while being gentler on the earth, animals and your body?

### **Practice for families with children: Gentle Hands**

Encourage children to slowly and gently stroke the palms of their hands each morning, one at a time. Tell them to be as soft and gentle as possible and let them know that this is the kind of gentle loving care and attention that God has for them. Tell them that they can use their hands to share God's special gentleness with other people and animals all day long. If they forget and start getting angry or rough during the day, they can remind themselves to be gentle by touching their palms again.

## Fall Discipleship Series 2016 The Fruit of the Spirit

### Week 7: Self-Control

Self-control is something we all instinctively feel we should possess. Despite our best efforts to control others, we inevitably come to the conclusion that such attempts are futile and we can only exercise control over ourselves. Yet, for all of us, to varying degrees, certain aspects of our lives feel very much out of control. Some of this might be due to circumstances or people beyond our influence, but all of us have to confess in honesty that we are not fully in control of our own instincts, thoughts, behaviors and actions. They can seem to run away with us despite our best attempts. Paul addresses this issue in lots of his writings, and offers a way of breaking the cycle of trying harder and failing again. This can be achieved, he says, through an inner experience of the Spirit of God setting us free.

This week we will explore what this kind of freedom looks like. We will look at Jesus as an example of someone who fully engages emotionally and relationally, but does so from a self-controlled center. We will explore what “out of control” looks like for each of us personally, and respond to the loving invitation to be honest and open with ourselves and others, coming to a place of acceptance about who we really are. This acceptance is not a basis for staying where we are. Rather, from this point of departure into freedom, we will look at what needs to change in our lives, and explore a journey of struggle to experience more of the Spirit of God working deep within us. Supporting one another, we will take small steps together and begin to form new patterns of behavior.

#### **This week’s discussion questions**

1. What was your experience with the mindful food preparation activity this past week? What thoughts or insights do you want to share?
2. What struck you about the message on Sunday? What did you find most helpful? What was most difficult or challenging?
3. Read Galatians 5:19-21. Read it in a translation like the New International Version and then in The Message. (Different bible translations can be found on [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com)) This is a list of characteristics that are the opposite of the fruit of the Spirit. What might these characteristics look like in our own day and culture? Are any of these our own experience?

4. Read the following stories about Jesus and for each one discuss what kinds of control are going on. Who is trying to control Jesus? How does Jesus control himself? Are there any ways in which Jesus is not in control? How could we apply these issues to our own situations?
  - John 7: 1-13
  - Luke 9: 46-56
  - John 8: 3-11
  - John 2: 13-16
  - Mark 8: 27-33
5. Self-control is not about stifling our emotions or denying our feelings. It is not about putting on a veneer of control to hide behind in public life. How might such an approach actually be damaging to us and others?
6. Some recovery traditions talk about making a “fearless moral inventory” of ourselves. Have you ever been that honest with yourself about what is out of control in your life? What stops you from doing this?
7. Group prayer practice
  - Personal reflection (15 mins)
    - i. Take 15 minutes to sit alone and in silence. Perform your own moral inventory. Think about what areas of your life are out of control. These might be bad habits; compulsive or obsessive behaviors; damaging patterns in relationships; things you consume, look at or think about; or could even just be time you spend on things that seems out of proportion with their worth.
    - ii. Don’t judge these things. Just honestly name them and write them down in your journal or in this book.
    - iii. Now sit with these things. Reflect back on some of the ways we have explored God’s demeanor towards us over the past few weeks: God’s love, God’s peaceful approach to us, and God’s kindness. With this list in mind, deliberately take a compassionate stance to yourself. Extend love and kindness to yourself as God does to you and as you would to others in the same situation.
    - iv. Pick one issue and write down what you would like to do about it. Spend a moment inviting God into that space. Ask God’s Spirit to fill you and set you free.
  - Break-out sharing (20 mins)
    - i. Now break into groups of 3 for 20 minutes and share about your experience. Have you done anything like this before? How hard or easy

was this? Was it easy to extend compassion towards yourself? Why or why not?

- ii. No one should be pressured to do this part, but if you can, share the one thing you wrote down and what you would like to do about it. After someone shares, sit in silence together for one minute (no advice, feedback or commentary) before the next person shares.
- iii. Then pray for one another.

## Practice for this week: Scripture Reading

Make a commitment this week to read the scripture passage below every day. It's a passage from Paul's letter to the church in Rome ("Romans"). It's fairly long, but set aside time to read it in an unrushed reflective mode every day. Sit for one minute in silence. Then read. As you read, rather than critique it, internalize and accept it. Read it as though this is true for you. At first this might be difficult, but commit to read it every day. Each time you finish reading sit for one more minute in silence. If possible try to do this reading at the beginning of the day, before you set out on your daily tasks

### Romans 7: 14 – 8: 39 (The Message)

I can anticipate the response that is coming: "I know that all God's commands are spiritual, but I'm not. Isn't this also your experience?" Yes. I'm full of myself—after all, I've spent a long time in sin's prison. What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary.

But I need something *more!* For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don't *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?

The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, that fateful dilemma is resolved. Those who enter into Christ's being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death.

God went for the jugular when he sent his own Son. He didn't deal with the problem as something remote and unimportant. In his Son, Jesus, he personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity in order to set it right once and for all. The law code, weakened as it always was by fractured human nature, could never have done that.

The law always ended up being used as a Band-Aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it. And now what the law code asked for but we couldn't deliver is accomplished as we, instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in us.

Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them—living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. And God isn't pleased at being ignored.

But if God himself has taken up residence in your life, you can hardly be thinking more of yourself than of him. Anyone, of course, who has not welcomed this invisible but clearly present God, the Spirit of Christ, won't know what we're talking about. But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells—even though you still experience all the limitations of sin—you yourself experience life on God's terms. It stands to reason, doesn't it, that if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, he'll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus, bringing you alive to himself? When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life. With his Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ's!

So don't you see that we don't owe this old do-it-yourself life one red cent. There's nothing in it for us, nothing at all. The best thing to do is give it a decent burial and get on with your new life. God's Spirit beckons. There are things to do and places to go!

This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next, Papa?" God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him!

That's why I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens.

All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's *within* us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant

mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.

God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him. After God made that decision of what his children should be like, he followed it up by calling people by name. After he called them by name, he set them on a solid basis with himself. And then, after getting them established, he stayed with them to the end, gloriously completing what he had begun.

So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture:

They kill us in cold blood because they hate you.  
We're sitting ducks; they pick us off one by one.

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.

### **Practice for families with children: Bubble Game**

Make some bubble mixture from washing up liquid (or buy some) and blow bubbles with your child(ren). For the first few minutes, encourage your child(ren) to chase, touch and pop the bubbles. Then explain that we are practicing self-control. For the next round, bubbles will be floating all around them, but they should try to **not** touch or chase them.

Discuss how it feels to exercise self-control, and how hard it can be. What did your children tell themselves to resist the urge to touch and chase? Talk about times in their day when they need to exercise self-control. Explain that God wants to help them when it feels hard to do the right thing.

## Fall Discipleship Series 2016

### The Fruit of the Spirit

## Week 9: Faithfulness

Faithfulness is something we all long for. We want faithfulness in our relationships, our homes and our work places. Commitment and faithfulness extended towards us helps us feel secure and keeps us motivated. Once faithfulness is called into question, we can very quickly feel disempowered. Likewise we all strive to be faithful. We work hard to follow through on the commitments we have made to relationships, jobs and tasks, and often set goals to keep us on track. But faithfulness is also a huge struggle for us. We live in an increasingly changeable culture where jobs don't last long, careers change, and relationships often come and go. Our increased mobility means relocation is common and we can feel in constant start-up mode. Our increased connectivity means we have the potential at least to keep up with a vast number of relationships and activities, and can take our work and tasks wherever we go. But rather than helping us be more faithful and stay true to our commitments, this can overwhelm us, and things seem to fall through our fingers. We let people down, we don't meet expectations, we disappoint others and ourselves and we end up doing a lot of things but none of them well. In this unsustainable existence, we may feel a constant nagging that we are unfaithful and that we have failed.

In this week's session we will look at faithfulness as a very viable, doable and sweet-tasting fruit! Rather than look at all the aspects of faithfulness in all areas of our lives, we will focus on faithfulness to a spiritual center. We will consider first and foremost that God is faithful to us. This is not something to shame us ("God is faithful but we are not") but rather a source of empowerment. God is relentlessly committed to us: through thick and thin, through the dark times and the good, through failure and success, no matter what. This is because God loves us and nothing can change that. This is the inspiration and power for faithfulness. As the Spirit of God sets us free through love, as we come to a deeper understanding of God's commitment to us, we are motivated to faithfulness from within.

We will also explore how a faithful response needs more than good intentions. Intentions are important: we need to be honest with ourselves about what we really want (rather than what has been imposed on us or what we feel guilty about). But we also need structure in our lives to help us stay true to our commitments. We need a simple pathway. Another analogy would be a trellis: many plants and fruits (like tomatoes and grapes) require a supportive structure (a trellis) to help them grow healthily and bear good fruit. So we will look at some simple ways we



can build this kind of empowering structure into our lives. As we work at faithfulness in our spiritual center we will see clarity, alignment and faithfulness develop in all our life.

## Suggestions for practices and activities this week

### Personal reflections

#### A. Establishing a Pathway of Faithfulness

In the message on Sunday the speaker suggested a pathway that can help us cultivate faithfulness. This is just an example, not a prescribed formula:

1. **Love:** Knowing and experiencing that we are completely and unconditionally loved by God
2. **Honesty:** Regularly reflecting honestly on our own lives; accepting that we are not perfect and that we need to change
3. **Surrender:** Not trying to fix ourselves the best way we or others see fit, but embracing silence and stillness to hear and receive what God is saying to us
4. **Practice:** Developing spiritual habits (or disciplines) that intentionally open us to God's presence and action within us
5. **Time:** Remaining faithful to spiritual practice and giving time for God to transform us
6. **Healing:** Recognizing when we are stuck and need more help, and seeking that from others
7. **Community:** We need one another for help, encouragement, and support

Reflection:

- What do each of these mean for you?
- What would each look like in your own life?
- How could you incorporate them as regular practices?

#### B. Establish a Rule of Life

Read the resource below and use it to help develop a "Rule of Life"

- [Crafting a Rule of Life: An Invitation to the Well-Ordered Way](#) by Stephen A. Macchia

#### C. Refine Your Intentions

Spend some time reflecting on your life and journaling:

- What relationships are most important to you?
  - How can you spend more time in those relationships?
  - What do you need to stop doing to make this time?
- What activities are most important to you?
  - How can you give those tasks adequate time?
  - What do you need to stop doing to make this time?

- What activities do you think are unhelpful or even destructive?
  - How could you stop those activities?

## **Personal activities**

### **A. Write a Letter of Appreciation**

Write a letter to someone who has been faithful to you over time. Let them know how much that means to you. Give them examples of their faithfulness and the impact that has had on you.

### **B. Commit to a Relationship**

Meet with a person to whom you want to be more faithful in relationship. Let them know how much the relationship means to you and why.

## **Group activities**

### **A. Share over a Group Meal**

Meet as a group for a meal and each share your personal spiritual journey. Look back over the journey and look for signs of God's faithfulness to you. Leave some time after each person shares for others to reflect back on this as well.

### **B. Review your Commitments as a Group**

Review your commitments to one another as a group. Discuss how you feel you are all doing together in practicing spiritual growth, community and servanthood. What has slipped? What has never really developed? What action can you take?

### **C. Serve Together**

Set up a time to follow through on a group commitment to serve. This might be something you have discussed before, but not yet done or not done for a long time. It could be reaching out to care for a member of the group or serving others in need.

## Fall Discipleship Series 2016 The Fruit of the Spirit

### Week 10: Gratefulness

The list of nine godly characteristics in Galatians 5:22-23 is clearly not meant to be exhaustive. The Spirit of God produces many other Christ-like qualities, such as humility, courage, honesty, contentment, purity, generosity, and so on. Gratefulness, while not listed as a fruit of the Spirit, is commanded throughout scripture. Gratefulness, and its outward communication as thankfulness, is not just good manners, but is fundamental and transformational. Gratitude impacts how we view ourselves, others, God and the world.

Feelings of entitlement, jealousy, resentment and self-pity can make it difficult for us to choose gratitude. But by choosing to focus on the positive things in life, we begin to see an ever-greater number of small, beautiful, everyday miracles for which to be grateful. This helps us live increasingly in the present, leaving aside regret for the past and anxiety for the future. Gratefulness opens us up to God and to other people, as we seek to bless others, knowing that we ourselves are blessed. Gratitude is contagious and can change the atmosphere. Even in hard times, gratefulness for God's loving presence can help dissolve the bitterness of suffering.

### Suggestions for practices and activities this week

#### Personal reflections

##### A. Thankfulness for the day

Take a few moments each day to focus on the positive experiences of the day. Rather than creating another thing to do, use times you are already doing something (taking a shower, drinking your morning coffee, commuting to home after work, etc.) to practice gratitude.

##### B. Gratitude journal

Take time each day to complete a gratitude journal:

- List 5 things you are grateful for.
- List 2 challenging situations, and what you are learning through each of them.
- List 3 people who made your life happier today.
- Choose one moment from your day that made you happy.
- Give thanks to God for all of the above!

## **Personal activities**

### **A. Express thanks**

Write a letter, send an email, give flowers, bake cookies, or find some other way to express thanks to 3-5 people in your life for whom you are grateful.

### **B. Gratitude walk**

Take a stroll and see how many things you pass on the way that you are grateful for.

### **C. Gratitude Lookout**

Actively watch for things that others do that are helpful, kind and considerate. Be generous with saying, "Thank you."

## **Group activities**

### **A. Thankfulness meal**

Meet together for a meal and take turns sharing what you are grateful for. Tell stories of how God has blessed you, or times when you had a special experience of God's presence.

### **B. Going around the circle**

Sit in a circle and give everyone an index card or piece of paper and a pen. Write the name of the person on your right at the top of the paper. Underneath, write one thing about that person that you are grateful for. Pass the paper to the person on your left, and continue this process until the paper with your name at the top reaches you.

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## **Appendix 1: Suggested Reading**

### **Love:**

- Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging by Brennan Manning
- Return of the Prodigal Son by Henri Nouwen

### **Joy:**

- Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life, edited by Miroslav Volf and Justin Crisp
- Fulness of Joy: The Presence of God in Human Life by Brother Ramon SSF

### **Peace:**

- Invitation to Love by Thomas Keating
- The Powers That Be by Walter Wink
- The Nonviolent God by J. Denny Weaver
- Peace Is Every Step by Thich Nhat Hanh and Arnold Kotler

### **Patience:**

- Slowing Down to The Speed of Life: How To Create A More Peaceful, Simpler Life From The Inside Out by Richard Carlson
- Waiting: Finding Hope When God is Silent by Ben Patterson
- When the Heart Waits by Sue Monk Kidd

### **Kindness and Goodness:**

- The Ragamuffin Gospel by Brennan Manning
- Beautiful Mercy: Experiencing God's Unconditional Love So We Can Share It With Others by Pope Francis (et al)
- Conspiracy of Kindness by Steve Sjogren

### **Gentleness:**

- Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? by Brian McLaren
- When Saint Francis Saved the Church: How a Converted Medieval Troubadour Created a Spiritual Vision for the Ages by Jon M. Sweeney
- Harvest for Hope: A Guide to Mindful Eating by Jane Goodall
- Serve God, Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action by J. Matthew Sleeth

- The Story of Ferdinand by Munro Leaf [a children's story]

**Self-control:**

- Breathing Under Water by Richard Rohr
- Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions by Gerald G. May

**Faithfulness:**

- A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society by Eugene Peterson
- Crafting a Rule of Life: An Invitation to the Well-Ordered Way by Stephen A. Macchia

**Gratefulness:**

- Choosing Gratitude: Your Journey to Joy by Nancy Leigh DeMoss
- Spirituality of Gratitude: The Unexpected Blessings of Thankfulness by Joshua Choonmin Kang

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**Notes:**