

PRACTICING VICTORY

*A Three Session Study in
Spiritual Warfare*

Created by Megan Koch

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START HERE

A Note from Megan

“We feel like we have to make it happen. And that’s what we need to lay down. We don’t make it happen. We turn it loose.” – Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ’s Presence*

Do anything worthwhile, and you’ll encounter resistance. Nothing is more worthwhile than the mission of God. It does not surprise us, then, that when we follow Jesus, we encounter adversity of every kind. In fact, many Christians might even say they’re more familiar with adversity than they are with victory. Perhaps you’ve felt the same way. Everywhere you look, there are forces bent on deforming and destructing the good things God made. It’s in the world, in the enemy, and in the human heart. The good news is, that’s not the end of the story.

Over the years, I’ve learned so much about that resistance; where it comes from, and what to do about it. I’ve also observed that many Christians are eager to engage in the battle, but simply do not know how. Or once they begin, it’s easy to become overwhelmed, frightened, or disillusioned. It can be tempting to just back off or give up and stick to what we know. The purpose of this three-part series is to help you understand the kinds of resistance you will encounter every day, and how to rebel against them with Jesus.

These exercises will position you within the problems, and shed light on the solutions. I think it’s tempting to get hung up on learning exactly what to do. We want steps and checklists. We want to know we’re doing things the right way. We’re desperate to know what we’re supposed to do, but the key is to tap in to what Jesus is already doing, and roll with him. Everything good originates from God, not us. Like Dallas Willard said, we don’t make these things happen. We partner with Jesus to turn them loose. When we really get that, it changes everything.

Every session will work the same way. You’ll interact with the content on your own, and then you’ll come together to discuss it. It’s my prayer that you’ll meet one on one with Jesus as you work through these pages, and that you’ll leave those times re-formed, cleaned out, and made right. And I’m praying that the gifts keep coming as you gather together to discuss it, where Jesus makes something altogether new and incredible out of the things you each bring to the table. I’ve broken our typical format and written everything in the first person because I want you to know this doesn’t have to be a one-way conversation. If you ever have questions, want more resources, or just want to talk, let me know. There’s a whole lot more where this came from.

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IDENTITY AND AUTHORITY

Who You Are, and What That Means

We're going to begin with a little exercise.

Take out your phone and shut down all your sounds and notifications. Set a timer for five minutes, and do nothing but sit with this verse of scripture. Read it through several times, then meditate on it until the timer sounds. There are really only two rules: train all your focus onto these words, and don't turn the page until it's time. Journal thoughts on the page if you want to. Got it? Go.

"God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

Let's do that again.

Set a timer for five minutes, and do nothing but sit with this Psalm. Read it through several times, then meditate on it until the timer sounds. Remember our two rules: train all your focus onto these words, and don't turn the page until it's time.

Psalm 8

Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
in the heavens.
Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.
When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?
You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:
all flocks and herds,
and the animals of the wild,
the birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.
Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

LIGHT AND DARK

We've got a lot to cover together, so to get started, let's establish some things that will build a framework for the rest of our time together. Let's talk about light and dark. Our conversation is based on some assumptions, and I'll blow through these quickly. I assume that we agree that Satan is a real being in total opposition to God, and that demonic forces—dark spirits with limited but significant power—do influence our world and lives when able or invited to do so. Evil is anything that distorts or corrupts the will of God. Evil is more than just Satan's work or our sinful choices. Evil is anything that is in opposition to God's original and perfect intent for his creation. When a natural disaster destroys a village or cancer tears a body apart, that's evil before your eyes. Dallas Willard often defines love as "will to good". God is love and only wills good. Evil is anything God declares "not good".

The natural pattern of the world and our lives is to gradually move away from God, not closer. When we break someone's heart, that's indeed an evil thing, but evil and sin are not the same. Sin applies only to God's image-bearers, both as an original state and as choices we make (knowingly or unknowingly) in defiance to the will of God. Satan is evil and works evil. Humans easily move with the natural current of the world, partnering with sin and the corruption of what God made, which is indeed evil. Individual and institutional corruption is everywhere. Anything against God's perfect standard is "evil", and Jesus triumphed over all of it on the cross. As Christians, everything we have to say and do about all this evil is framed by that victory. The Kingdom of God is here and it's coming, and we hold every evil thing up to that bright reality.

With that in mind, let's turn our focus on the evil of Satan himself. Think back over the years you've been in or around the Church. What have you been taught about Satan, dark spirits, and the influence this does (or does not) have in our daily lives?

If you were taught to engage in battle against the enemy, what were you taught to do?

Satan hates God, but can't harm him, so instead he tries to destroy what God has made—especially the ones who bear his image. Satan rebelled against God and wants to encourage us to reject him too. Christians can't be possessed by

the enemy, because we belong to Jesus. But we can absolutely be oppressed by the enemy. That's all over the Bible, and I'm confident it's all over your life, too. The enemy can't change what's true about you. That's solid. You are a redeemed child of God, full of the Holy Spirit. You are loved and wanted, gifted and called. Satan can only try to accuse and confuse you. He lies to you, and tries to distort your perception of reality. He wants you to get hurt, and then hurt others. That way, you start to do his work for him. Thankfully, you don't have to fall for it.

Let's pause for a moment. Every person, if they're honest, can name the top three ways Satan tries to accuse and confuse us, distorting our perceptions of reality. Ask Jesus to take any of your blinders off and help you clearly name three ways you're most likely to fall for this:

Lay those down in Jesus' hands, then ask him to replace them with three true things. He'll give them to you right now. Just ask. If you're not sure you heard anything, or worry you're just making it up, take a guess anyway. List them here:

LIGHT WINS

Imagine walking into a closet and shutting the door. It's dark, right? Now light a match. Did it work? I've never seen darkness where light couldn't shine. There seems to be an elemental truth built into the universe: light always wins. When believers go into dark places, we partner with Jesus to expose the truth. We're turning on the lights. Jesus has overcome the powers of sin, pain, and the enemy, and in Christ, so have we. God not only has authority to heal and deliver, but in Christ, he shares that authority with us. You're adopted and empowered. The power comes from God, and it's extended out through you. Never hesitate to embrace that. You demonstrate God's power to the world. When you're exercising that power in full submission to God, all the glory will go to Jesus, not you. If we believe Jesus is who he says he is, then we'll have to believe we are who he says we are. It's not a power trip; it's your birthright (Gal. 4:6).

EVERYDAY VICTORY

Even before his death and resurrection, Jesus extended his power through his followers (Luke 9:1-6, and 10:1-23). When his disciples rejoiced that even demons submitted to them in Jesus' name, he replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:18-20). Then Jesus prays out loud, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do" (v. 21). Victory over the enemy should be an everyday thing for us, but our joy is rooted not in the amazing things we see or do, but in our identity in Christ. We're children of God; our ultimate wellbeing rests in our choice to live in devoted submission to him (James 4:7-10).

Have you ever seen spiritual power exercised in the “wrong” way? How?

LOVE DISARMS

“True, whole prayer is nothing but love.” – St. Augustine

Exercising authority in Christ reflects the person of Christ. When we operate in Jesus’ authority, what we do is always ruled by love and compassion, not anger, control, pride, or fear. If you’ve seen people confront darkness in a way that didn’t communicate love, I’m sorry. But it is possible; not just possible, but the best way to do it. We Christians get tough with our love. We fight evil with things like surrender, forgiveness, humility, and kindness. Want to demolish strongholds? Embrace the life of a servant. That’s what we Christians do. We put others before ourselves. We lay down all our rights and abandon the outcomes to God. That’s how we win. There’s no room for power in what we do unless it’s fueled by God’s love. Every effective pathway to freedom and healing is rooted in that love, and everything we do to help others heal should be saturated in the language of compassion. Ever approached an agitated person with words of truth and encouragement, and just watched their face melt off? That’s the authority of love. Love literally disarms evil.

WHAT TO DO

“When your focus is more on the problems and demons, then they will get the better of you. If the focus is on Jesus, then they do not stand a chance.” – Mark Anderson

Contrary to what Satan wants you to believe, you have much more ability to shut down and remove the enemy’s work than you realize. I repeat: we should never exercise authority over darkness just because we like to throw our spiritual weight around. All of our interactions with spiritual oppression should accomplish one result: we commit to silencing and immobilizing the enemy so that Christ can be revealed (2 Tim. 1:9-11). The enemy works to corrupt our communication with God. He doesn’t want us to see and hear Jesus clearly, and he doesn’t want us to understand what’s really going on. The enemy wants to distract us, freak us out, isolate us, and divide us from Jesus and each other.

Your best first step is to ask Jesus to silence and immobilize the enemy. When we shut the enemy down, it creates some quiet, bright space where we can see and hear Jesus without enemy interference. When you encounter darkness, pray to silence and immobilize the enemy so you can have some uninterrupted time to talk back and forth with Jesus without anything getting in the way. He’ll show you what the real problems are, and how to solve them. The enemy works like rats to garbage; he’s looking for broken people and places and trying to gain a hold through what’s already falling apart. He also works hard to convince you the problem is this when it’s actually that. The real

problem, the core foothold or stronghold, the true mission of the enemy, is almost never what it appears to be on the surface. When you pray to stop and remove what the enemy is doing, don't just try to make the enemy go away for now; ask Jesus what the root of the problems are so they can be addressed and the things that are so attractive to the enemy can be removed for good.

DON'T FOLLOW STEPS. FOLLOW JESUS

It can get tempting to get caught up in "how" to exercise authority, but the point is to get caught up in Jesus. After that, everything else falls into line. Follow Jesus. Learn his voice. Learn to obey him moment by moment. You'll know what to do. You don't need a checklist; you need the ease of relationship we can only get by spending hours and hours with someone we love. You'll find you're fighting battles all the time, but it'll usually look more like you and Jesus talking back and forth as friends, and less like an epic battle scene from *The Lord of the Rings*. Know Jesus as deeply as possible. That's how to know how to fight every battle, because every situation is unique, and Jesus knows all of it intimately. You will just know what to do next, and you don't have to do it perfectly. All the power is with Jesus, and he wants to fight battles for you and with you. He'll give you what you need. Trust that.

That's how we help others fight their battles, too. The only way to sustainably help and heal someone is to introduce them to a walking and talking relationship with Jesus; or in other words, to make a disciple. When we're anchored in our identity in Christ, all enemy effort against us serves to make the great gifts of salvation more brilliant and tangible. When evil attacks, we live up to our inheritance. It's so much easier to see what we have in Christ when we're confronted with darkness. The differences are impossible to miss, and the light is impossible to snuff out.

LAST WORD

In our present moment, it can seem as though many Evangelical churches barely scratch the surface of how to effectively engage with evil, but when we study ancient catechisms of the earliest churches, we see that taking authority over evil spirits wasn't just a hit-or-miss event. It was everyday life both in larger-scale resistance against the Church, and in the Christian's own pursuit of life with Jesus. In fact, by the 250's, many churches had even appointed specific people to serve as "exorcists"; Christians who led new converts in naming and renouncing old connections with evil and replacing them with new ways of life in Christ. According to the Apostolic Tradition, as candidates for baptism moved out of catechism and closer to the ritual itself, exorcists regularly laid hands on the candidates and prayed over them, guiding them in a process of declaring what they are turning away from as they walk into new life in Christ. If the candidate's life did not reflect the change they professed, they couldn't be baptized. They couldn't just know what is true; they needed to live like it was true.

For the Christian, there is nothing in opposition to life in Jesus that life with Jesus does not overcome. The most effective warfare is done in a spirit of worship and surrender to God in response to who he is and who we are in him.

Perhaps the most powerful way to wage war against the enemy is at the feet of Jesus with our hands in the air. The best way to exhaust the enemy is with your obedience to God. The best way to confuse the enemy is with love in practice. Every attempt we make to speak with authority and command over the enemy should be direct, uncomplicated, and motivated by a deep love for Jesus and the people he made. It should be undramatic and simple, because Jesus' authority is absolute. When we directly combat the enemy, the end result should be people more deeply devoted to Jesus and confident of his love. Every enemy attack is an opportunity to shut down dark voices and have a Jesus party. We don't wage war as the world does. The Word of God is indeed a sword. We defy the enemy with our Jesus stories. We torment the enemy with our worship. We destroy enemy strongholds with the joy of the Lord.

The earliest churches faced constant, violent oppression, but they knew that while the world would try to destroy the Body of Christ, it could never succeed against a community of rooted, healthy, holy disciples. They took the interior lives of their converts very seriously, because they knew when a Christian surrenders the internal battles of their heart and mind to Jesus, they become indestructible against any external arrow the enemy could throw. We'll talk more about that next time.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What have you been taught (or observed others teach) over the years about battle with demonic forces?
2. Have you ever witnessed Christians exercise authority in ways that seemed more destructive than helpful? On the flip side, how have you witnessed Christians activate authority in effective and compassionate ways?
3. The real, core problem at work in any dark situation is almost never what it appears to be on the surface. Do you agree? Have you experienced this in your own life and ministry? How?
4. There is a difference between knowing what to do and knowing Jesus. What is it?
5. That said, as you look over this document, what are some solid steps you can take the next time you spot the work of the enemy? Come up with a simplified "cheat sheet" together.

THE BREAKDOWN

You're Broken, and Jesus Wants to Fix It

"For everybody has a past, and every past spawns fierce and fiery emotions about what it means. Nobody can be autonomous in making choices today unless she grasps how she's being internally yanked around by stuff that came before." – Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir*

"You dream of resurrection
But you're too scared to die" – the Collection, *Birds*

We're broken people. This world can be a harsh place. Bad things happen. People do wrong things. We sin again and again. From the moment we're conceived, we can get hurt. Because life is dangerous, we figure out ways to survive. We come up with tricks to avoid pain, and find comforts that give us a false sense of security for a while. We distract ourselves. We can even try to hurt others before they can hurt us. We spend a lot of energy building up protective shields and personality quirks on our surface to cover up who we really are on the inside; we're afraid of what people will see. Much of what we present to the world isn't really us at all; it's a hustle.

Whether it's performance, relationships, or religion, we're looking to measure up. Jesus steps in and offers us a new way. You are not what you do. You are who you are. You're a child of God. Jesus doesn't just want to help you survive, he wants you to thrive. We're not born into the family of God so we can white-knuckle it through life, waiting to die. Jesus promises us the good stuff right now, even in the midst of all the pain in the world. We should take him up on that. God doesn't author brokenness, but he is happy to redeem it.

In the Old Testament, God dwelled with his people and gave them instructions on how to stay safe and healthy. He wanted them to live disciplined lives of holy devotion to him. In the New Testament, we see the fulfillment of the law in Christ (Matthew 5:17, Romans 13:10). Wherever Jesus went, people were healed physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It seems that healing is a natural side effect of being with Jesus and taking what he's got to give. It should be a side effect for you and me, too. We should constantly get healthier ourselves, and that should naturally help other people get healthy too.

If you broke your leg today, you'd go to the ER, get the break realigned, and then get a cast. If you didn't, your body would still go to work to fuse the bone back together– but it wouldn't be perfect. You'd find something to use as a crutch. You'd make sure no one touched that leg. You'd probably walk with a limp the rest of your life. Our spiritual and emotional wounds function the same way our physical ones do; if something gets broken, it needs to get re-set right in the place where it happened. That's the only way to heal all the way. Unresolved pain doesn't disappear, even if we move on. Time does not heal all wounds; Jesus does.

THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE

When we get saved, we're immediately forgiven, reconciled, and adopted. Our slate is wiped clean. That's called justification (Romans 3:23-34). As we live with Jesus, he changes us. We start to look and act like him. We want what he wants, and do what he's doing. Broken things start to heal. Got something broken down in your life? Unresolved sin? Old resentments? Pain you've been trying to forget? Mark my words, Jesus is coming for it. Jesus is cleaning you out and making you whole. That's called sanctification. You can't spend time with Jesus and stay the same. You'll either gradually turn into someone who looks just like him, or avoid him, and perhaps eventually reject him altogether. You don't have to let Jesus make you right. It's your choice.

Even devoted Christians can be tempted to rest on being justified, but resist being sanctified. Perhaps we see a pattern of sin in our lives and keep asking God for forgiveness, without actually letting him change us. What's the difference?

The enemy can't change the fact that you're saved, so instead, he fights to keep you broken. He brings resistance into your walk with God and people. He wants to keep as many things wrong as possible. It's probably simpler to combat that resistance than you realize, but we just have to be ready to follow Jesus. That's the deal. If we want him to help us win that battle, we'll have to hand over our rights to run our lives the way we want to. We've got to be willing to see, do, and say everything God asks of us. That's how it works. Easy, right? Of course not. But, that's probably why many of us aren't living as free and full as Jesus promises us we can. We're giving the enemy power and settling for less because the alternative requires so much humility and submission on our part. Neither of these things come naturally to us. We've got to choose them.

BULLSEYE

Because the enemy wants to keep you down, he targets your wounds; the places in your life where something got broken down and never got fully resolved. That's the path of least resistance for Satan's end goal. He'll press on those old bruises and speak lies into the places you're hurting. Satan hopes you'll start to agree with those lies, and begin living them out. Ever heard of footholds and strongholds? This is how they start. Remember: we hate hanging out with our pain! We love to get distracted, and we love to pretend we're fine. We also hate asking for help. When we avoid pain, and don't admit we're tired of handling things on our own, we're a perfect target for the enemy. We give him so much great material to work with.

Look back at your responses from Part 1. What are the top three ways the enemy tries to throw you off? How might those lies be connected to your past experiences? You don't have to answer right now; just pause to consider it before moving on.

It's hard to ask for help, but it's easy to get addicted to helping others. Why is that? If we keep ourselves in the position of "helper", but never place ourselves in the position of "helped", what does that do to us? How does it impact ministry?

KNOWING AND DOING

One way to locate our unresolved issues is to identify the areas where we "know" what's right, but we keep acting in contradiction to that knowledge. The space between what we know to be true and what we actually do is the place where Jesus wants to restore us. The enemy wants to keep us preoccupied with things on the surface, and he works hard to cover up the root of the problem; the wound that needs to get healed. Certain things trip us up again and again; parts of life where we can't seem to grow as easily as other people, or we feel ashamed we can't "get it together". The enemy loves that. Satan hopes we'll exhaust ourselves with behavior modification and keeping up appearances. He wants us preoccupied with those embarrassing habits we can't seem to drop. If you've got an addiction, he wants you focused on managing it, and he'll put a lot of energy into distracting you from the root place where the behavior got started.

Satan wants you preoccupied with your faults, almost like backwards worship; always meditating on yourself instead of Jesus. That way you live like someone trimming dandelions with a pair of scissors. You might make some progress on the surface, but it's all just going to grow back. The enemy is terrified you'll find out how easy it is to break free once you ask Jesus to show you the pain under the oppression, and let him work from there. Don't focus on your repeat sins and your addictions. Ask Jesus to show you why those things are struggles in the first place. Then it can get resolved.

The space between what we know to be true and what we actually do is the place where Jesus wants to restore us. Stop and consider the last week, month, and year. Ask Jesus to help you see how this invitation is at play in your own life. Take notes.

Remember: the enemy can't do anything about your salvation, but he will fight to keep you broken. Our wounds (past and present) are targets for the enemy. That's where we're weak, confused, and bound up. And let's face it: these are often things we want to keep hidden, or just don't want to talk about. That's why the enemy loves to use our wounds so much. If we won't talk about it, the root source of our issue never gets resolved. This is where the garbage of life

collects. This is where we harbor resentment, unforgiveness, and confusion. We've got to clean that stuff out. We forfeit the freedom Jesus is waiting to give us because we're ashamed, afraid, or just blind to what is really going on.

When we've been hurt, we often try to convince ourselves that we've moved on, but we haven't. Not really. It's the areas of life where we "know better" but we aren't doing better that God wants to restore. When we're experiencing that frustration, there's probably a wound in our past connected to it; some part of us is broken down, and just can't catch up with where we are today. When we're ready to finally slay that dragon for good, and we're willing to pray through anything God brings up, it's a huge relief to finally get to the bottom of things.

DON'T ESCAPE. ENGAGE.

Most Christians have no idea how much power they're giving the enemy to work in their lives. The fact of the matter is, the enemy can really only "stick" to the parts of our lives we're holding back from Jesus, whether we know it or not. Remember: we hate feeling pain, so we avoid going there at all costs. When hard things happen, we want to move past it and press on. When we can't avoid the ache, we want to numb it, not face it. We also like feeling in control, because it seems safe. So we hold grudges, refuse to forgive, and hold on to resentments. That's what we do to survive. But remember, Jesus wants us to thrive. Wherever you're broken down and hurting, you've got to face it. You're not as fine as you think you are. Again, you're not as fine as you think you are. One more time: you are not as fine as you think you are. If you do feel pain, don't rush to escape it. Engage. It might be the last thing you want to do, but do it anyway.

DISCIPLESHIP AND DELIVERANCE

Enemy oppression is just a side effect of brokenness, not the main cause. The answer to real healing is always Jesus. Therefore, the answer is always discipleship. Spend time with your master, Jesus, and let him change you. We want to look and act just like him. When we're facing broken things in our own lives or in the lives of the people we serve, we can't just focus on deliverance from the enemy alone, because that doesn't address the root of the problem. Wherever there's a wound, Jesus is ready to heal it. If we try to exercise authority to drive out the enemy without first addressing the wounds beneath the oppression, we do no lasting good.¹ We might even do more harm than good, because we've stirred things up, then theft the person with an open wound. But again, we've got to be all-in on the deal. If we want God's help to make things right, we've got to go all the way. We can't just ask Jesus to handle enemy opposition in our life for us, not if we want real change. If you want Jesus to deliver you, or the world, from evil, you need to realize that the oppression is working from a place that's broken down. If you're not ready to confront the brokenness beneath the enemy, don't confront the enemy. It won't work. You can't get lasting spiritual freedom for yourself or others unless

¹ This applies to both personal restoration and the restoration of institutions, communities, families, etc. If you want to see restoration and reconciliation, find the deep wounds beneath the surface of what's going on and pray into those. (The racial issues we have today are indeed still connected to myriad events of the past, like slavery, enforced zoning laws, etc.) Nothing is just "in the past". Everything is connected. In true reconciling ministry, there is almost always deep work to do regarding the enemy, the pull of the world, and the sin of people. Reconciliation work is essentially about untangling complex knots one movement at a time; with Jesus, in the name of Jesus. It's a slow, steady pursuit.

the oppressed person wants to heal what's wrong at the source. You've got to commit to both. Jesus is working, but again, you don't have to join him. You get to choose.

JESUS IS REAL.

Disciples walk and talk with Jesus. Disciples don't just know Jesus is alive, but live like he is. Disciples are anchored in the person of Jesus and who they are in him. Disciples don't simply thrive on what Jesus did for them, they thrive on what Jesus is doing right now. As ministers, we want every person to be certain Jesus is actually with them, a real person who is present and active in the room. That's something many Christians have never really been able to grasp. Many don't even think to wonder about it. It's our everyday job to introduce people to some of the most elemental and out-of-this-world basics of the faith: God is talking, and you can talk with him. Jesus came to set you free, and you can be free today. The most critical thing you need to do as a leader is follow Jesus intimately, then invite other people to do the same thing. If you know someone who's desperate for help from God, but isn't changing, they probably know about Jesus, but don't know Jesus yet. Perhaps you've been that person, too.

BATTLE ARMOR

Read this passage:

Ephesians 6:10-18 NIV

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

When we talk about doing battle against the enemy, this passage often comes up. We imagine ourselves suiting up for battle, tough and ready. But while we live in the world, we don't do battle like the world does (2 Cor. 10:3). Look over this passage with me and answer the following questions:

Where does our strength come from?

Whose armor should we put on?

What forces are we fighting against?

We put on truth, righteousness, peace, trust, salvation, and our one offensive weapon: the word of God. Paul uses imagery every person of the day would recognize: battle armor. But he entirely flips it around. Where does our truth, righteousness, peace, confidence, and salvation come from? Jesus. Our one fitting weapon against the enemy is to speak God's words, Spirit words. And Paul's directive for what to do in light of all this armor? Pray.

Do we actually need to put on anything new when we face adversity? No. We need to remember who we already are, and what we already have. Putting on the full armor of God isn't about covering up; it's about taking up who we already are in Christ, and actively remembering he is in us, and stands between us and any enemy.

We spend a lifetime constructing corrupted armor to survive in a harsh world. But in Christ, we are not just protected, but ultimately, we're invincible. With Jesus, we can safely dismantle every piece of heavy armor we've put up to protect ourselves, because powerful, invincible, victorious life in Christ isn't about suiting up; it's about stripping down. The most dangerous warriors in the Kingdom of God stand before the enemy with nothing but Jesus to protect them, fuel them, guide them, and empower them. That is the life you were born for.

CULTIVATE

"A carefully cultivated heart will, assisted by the grace of God, foresee, forestall, or transform most of the painful situations before which others stand like helpless children saying, "Why?"—Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*

The enemy will never stop working to destroy you. If you want to experience powerful ministry in the name of Jesus, total health is your only option. You have to see your old personality crutches and choose to put them down to walk straight. You have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. You have to get familiar with vulnerability to the point that, difficult as it is, you crave real communion with God and people, especially when you're aware of some kind of interior breakdown or resistance. You have to adopt a rule of life that is completely in opposition to what the world, and most of the church, teaches you and expects of you.

We have to commit to cultivating our hearts. We can't do any of the work to heal ourselves or anyone else. God does that. What we do is choose to cultivate. Cultivation is about getting the ground ready; removing weeds and foreign objects. Cultivation is about plowing the soil. God sows the seeds, but a well-cultivated heart is open and ready for them. We avoid vulnerability because it could mean rejection or more pain. But vulnerability is also a means of grace. The practices of heart health put us in the perfect position to receive every kind of good thing God wants to give us. If you want to be a person ready for grace, and you want to cultivate a community ready for grace, you'll need to commit to practices that keep you clean and open. We'll talk about that next time.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. You can't get lasting spiritual freedom for yourself or others unless the oppressed person wants to heal what's wrong at the source.

Have you ever encountered someone in who wants deliverance from oppression or pain, but doesn't actually want Jesus to help them at the source of their need? How do you help them?

2. Christians often want to "put the past behind them" and just look ahead with Jesus. What they perhaps don't realize is that salvation works in every direction. Jesus saved their entire life; not just their life from salvation forward. Redemption isn't just possible now and in the future, but Jesus wants to redeem the past as well.

What's the difference between "putting our past behind us" and putting our past in Jesus' hands?

3. "To be a witness means to offer your own faith experience and to make your doubts and hopes, failures and successes, loneliness and woundedness, available to others as a context in which they can struggle with their own humanness and quest for meaning." – Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*.

We need to embrace and model vulnerable transparency, but we need to do it in a healthy way. Brene Brown often says vulnerability without boundaries is reckless. In other words, just as it's unhealthy to live in a suit of armor, it can be just as unhealthy to be an "open book" anywhere and everywhere.

Do you agree? What's the difference between practicing healthy vulnerability, and being a hot mess?

4. In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brene Brown writes, "[On stage] I only share stories or experiences that I've worked through and feel that I can share from solid ground. I don't share what I define as "intimate" stories, nor do I share stories that are fresh wounds." In other words, she doesn't share unresolved, raw wounds or struggles from the stage.

That's a helpful rule for all of us. The key is: Brown doesn't share unresolved wounds from the stage (but that doesn't mean she doesn't share them at all). You may never get on a stage, but model vulnerability everywhere you go. Just make it a rule of life to share openly and appropriately.

What are some healthy boundaries you can put in place as you connect with others? How will you practice vulnerability in your closest relationships? With your church? With people outside the church?

Talk together and find two or three "rules" to live by that keep you open but not dangerously exposed.

5. Invincibility in Christ is not about suiting up; it's about stripping down. Do you agree? Why or why not?

CURIOSLY DIFFERENT

Practicing Community in the Way of Jesus

"So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:16-21)

"In our day, whenever the church is ineffective and its witness remains unproductive, the first questions that must be raised are whether the church functions as authentic community and whether it lives out the reality of its oneness. In a community-starved world, the most potent means of witness to the truth of the gospel is the magnetic power of the oneness that was committed by Christ to his new community at the center of history." – Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101*

"There is nothing wrong with the church that discipleship can't cure." – Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ's Presence*

The gospel in action is a radical movement of reconciliation. We are reconciled to God, which *immediately* works out reconciliation into every relationship we have, and compels us into relationships we *never* would have had, save for the intervention of Jesus in our lives, and his call for us to love unconditionally, give sacrificially, and serve in the absence of self-interest. This is how the broken world is remade: countless counter-intuitive choices to obey Jesus and pursue unity when the world, and often our own impulses, tell us to run the other direction. As we get holier, our desires refine and we resist reconciliation less and less. It becomes more natural to pursue unity, but making real peace is *never* the easy way. If you want to reform the world in the name of Jesus, decide now if this kind of life is worth it to you, because you are called to be a reconciler, and resistance to that cause will be constant.

Look back at your relationships since you began following Jesus. Have you formed any significant relationships with people that you would never have grown close to if you didn't have Jesus in common? Write down some thoughts.

From the earliest days of the Christian church, the gospel has been illustrated by radical, counter-cultural unity. The church of Jesus refuses to respect any boundary or dividing wall of hostility. Christians do not accept division.

Consider Jesus' first followers and the distinctives of their gatherings. Landowners ate with slaves. Jews kissed Gentiles. Stonemasons prayed over soldiers. Women learned with men. Everyone "out" was in, and no one got in because of their status, money, or connections. There was one entrance point: Jesus. The only inheritance that now mattered was the birthright of every adopted child of God. This level of unity was not easy for the early church (much of the New Testament is devoted to ironing out discord and division). But this was a small community of people who had two things in common: a risen savior, and a mandate to obey everything he says to do. The world did not accept them, but opposition didn't stamp out this revolution of peace-making. The resistance refined believers, clarified their purpose, and illustrated the urgency of Christ's call to reconciliation. Our churches today should be so curiously unified.

Look back at your experiences in the church. Is there more unity, or discord? Write down any thoughts that come to mind.

DIFFERENT

As a key part of a forming church community, no doubt you've encountered many questions and opinions about how church "should" be done, and how your growing community can thrive. What makes a church a church? What's the difference between a small group and a book club? *What happens in your church gatherings that can't happen anywhere else?* What is your church here for, and why is that essential? The fact of the matter is, many churches gather without any clear answers for these questions. And when no one agrees about what to fight for, we just...fight.

We can't possibly dive as deeply into this as I'd like, but here is the deal: a church is a banded-together community of Jesus-followers. The thing that ultimately separates the Christian gathering from any other kind of social event or affinity club is that you are disciples of Jesus. You are a living, breathing, growing body of people mastered by Jesus and eager to obey him. This causes you to do things that look radical or dangerous to the world. Many will be repelled by this, but some will be curiously attracted. This is how you grow: not by measuring up to the best the world has to offer, but by being *entirely different* from anything the world has to offer. Your church can and should offer something unique that cannot be found anywhere outside the Body of Christ. When your community is rooted in everyday practices that are Jesus-centered and Spirit-led, you will constantly get healthier and holier. You won't have to figure out how to convince people to come to church or small groups. You won't have to guilt people into sharing their faith, because they won't be able to stop talking about it.

Let's explore some distinctive practices of Christian community that you simply can't get like this anywhere else: interactive prayer, forgiveness, and hospitality. The world and the enemy will never stop trying to pull your church apart. These are core habits of communities that don't just stick together through adversity, but *grow* in spite of it. These habits are not flashy. They are costly, and they take a lifetime to work out. These are practices that most people don't want to do right away, so you'll have to prove their power to others as you work them out in your own life. They are often misunderstood, or only understood at a surface-level, so you'll likely need to do some "unlearning" yourself before you really start to "get it", and you'll have to guide others in that same process before they can really press in. These ways of living produce fruit and growth, but so slowly you'll have to stay committed for the long-haul. But if you decide you want to be a community who *consistently* lives this way, you will be radically different, and very, very healthy. Nearly all Christian churches say they value these things to some degree. Let's be a church that actually does.

INTERACTIVE PRAYER

Prayer is talking to God. You know this. Prayer, by definition, is a conversation. There's a back and forth. But many Christians wouldn't describe their prayer life that way. I've talked to lots of them. Prayer isn't just talking *to* God, it's talking *with* God—it's talking to God, and hearing from him too. Many Christians are quick to say prayer is "talking to God," but if you told someone in your church you talked to God today, and he talked back, they might say you were hallucinating. This, friends, is one of the most *curiously different* things we Christians are born to do. Christians have unprecedented access to God. As a faith community, you can invite people into an *interactive* prayer life; prayer that flows like a back and forth conversation with God. We were created to live in a tangible world with God. Our prayers should be embodied in this same way. Much more than a simple exchange of information, our prayer life should be a *formational* experience that engages all of our senses. Prayer, in short, should actually *do* something. It's a creative, collaborative act.

Jesus says we'll know the voice of the Shepherd (John 10:27), so invite him to speak in your gatherings. The enemy wants us to think it'll be complicated to hear God's voice. He doesn't want our prayer lives to thrive. He wants us to doubt if we're really hearing from God or if we're making it up. Jesus is always with us (Matthew 28:20). He is real, alive, and present. We can make it an ordinary practice to ask the Holy Spirit to inspire our people to see, hear, and interact with Jesus. Want to know God? Jesus is where we look, and he's here right now. James K.A. Smith says we're, "moved more than we are convinced". This kind of prayer I'm talking about isn't just in our heads. It *moves* us. You can talk *about* God with people all day long, but make spaces for them to talk *with* God; that is where we change.

Leave room for Jesus to speak in your gatherings. This works in worship services, small groups, and one on one. Here's a great example: instead of simply inviting people to lay a burden at the feet of Jesus during prayer time, leave some room for silence and listening. Give Jesus a chance to talk. Invite Jesus to speak right to each person individually, and help them name the thing that's *really* a burden to them (because we are so quick to *think* we know what's wrong). And once we've had a moment to get clarity on that, don't just invite people to hand those burdens over to Jesus. Let the moment come full circle. As people hand over the burden, leave some breathing room and

silence, and invite Jesus to speak back to them, to give something back to them. He'll do it, and when he does, people will know they didn't make it up. Jesus really interacted with them. He's really there. That's the bedrock of discipleship: interacting with the real man, Jesus. You can show people it's actually possible.

You might think this sounds messy, uncomfortable, complicated, or awkward. That's why so many Christians stay on the edges of prayer, when God is inviting us all-in. We are often quick to lead people in what *they* should do with Jesus, but we rarely leave room for them to see what *Jesus* is doing. Model conversational prayer in your gatherings, and you'll start to shape how people pursue God every day.

FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is revolutionary. The world can embrace it to an extent, but the forgiveness we're offered and commanded to offer others is scandalous. It's no wonder that unforgiveness is one of the first and most effective ways the enemy uses to hold us back and weigh us down. If we refuse to forgive others, we stop up the good gifts God wants to give us and we're sitting ducks for an enemy attack. When we withhold forgiveness, we're trying to be in control. We want to be the judge. We get wildly distorted views about what's actually wrong, and usually grow blind to what we've done wrong ourselves. We try put ourselves in a place only God should occupy. That's why it is so important that your church family be a habitually *forgiving* family.

Cultivate a community of people who think holding a grudge is unacceptable. Do not allow bitter roots to grow. Illustrate how it's done by openly living that way yourself. Look for ways you've hurt others by what you've done or not done, and seek forgiveness for your own sins. Have you ever had someone come to you to admit they're at fault and seek forgiveness? It's incredibly disarming. Forgive others habitually, before anything has a chance to grow. Practice forgiveness diligently, because it's one of the most powerful and effective weapons you have against the schemes of the enemy. *Your church can face incredible external opposition, but if you refuse to get tangled up in internal divisive battles, you'll be untouchable.*

Forgiveness is so much more than saying we're sorry. There are so many ways we can hold grudges. Here are some ways you can guide people to unpack a burden and work through forgiveness in every direction²:

1. Get right with God and people you've hurt.

If God shows us something we've done wrong, we need to ask him for forgiveness for our own sin and seek forgiveness from anyone we've sinned against as God leads us.

² You can read an overview of the Six Steps of Forgiveness in Tim Howard and Brian S. Burke's book, *With Gentle Authority* (p. 145-163).

2. We need to forgive *ourselves*.

Strangely, it can be “easier” to forgive others for what they've done, or to receive forgiveness from God for our own sin than it is to let ourselves off the hook. Have you ever done something you really, really regret? Forgive yourself for doing it. Let it go.

3. We need to forgive the things other people have done that have hurt us (whether it was intentional or not).

Even if you're sure they never intended to hurt you, they hurt you nonetheless. It's a burden, so forgive it and let it go.

4. We need to forgive *God*.

Yes, God. Most of us don't realize this is even possible, because God is perfect, and doesn't make mistakes or sin. But again, forgiveness isn't *only* about forgiving a way someone has sinned against us. *Forgiveness is necessary any time we're holding a grudge against someone else— and yes, we can hold a grudge against God.* If we're mad that God allowed something happen, and hurt that he didn't intervene to stop it, we can surrender even *that* to him, and let him show us what we need to see so we can heal.

HOSPITALITY

We are called to be peacemakers (Romans 12:18). Hostility is a sense of opposition or resistance to someone or something. Disciples don't choose to live in hostility toward God, or anyone else. Is any part of your heart hostile to God? Do you ever keep God out or push him away? Is any part of you hostile toward a person, or a group of people? Are you shutting out anyone who needs to be welcomed in? What about your church community? Is it open, or closed? Who can get in? Who's left out?

Fred Rogers wrote, “When your heart has room for everybody, then your heart is full of love.” Who is invited to your house? Do you only invite the people you want to get to know better? How do you decide who to welcome in? Who has eaten with you at your table this year? How about your relationships? Have you had a falling out with anyone that's left division between you? Are you willing to ask God to mend it? If your heart won't make room for everyone, then to some degree, all the love you give is *conditional*. You're making a judgement call, deciding who is worthy of love, and who is not. You're deciding who you have room for. This is not the way of Jesus.

To stretch this even further, we are not only called to actively love those we know, but to live with open invitation to strangers, foreigners, and outsiders. The world can embrace the notions of equality and sharing resources to some degree, but this is where Jesus people start to cross every “acceptable” line. Romans 12:13 says, “When God's people

are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality." The Greek word for hospitality in this verse is *philoxenia*. It means, "to receive and show hospitality to a stranger, that is, someone who is not regarded as a member of the extended family or a close friend." To show biblical hospitality is to receive a *stranger* as a *guest*. Even if this only applied to Christians ("God's people", as the verse says) that would still be a huge stretch for many of us, but as you build a biblical theology of hospitality, the mandate is consistent throughout scripture: open your arms to the "other".

In sharing what is most dear to us, a moment of conversion happens: someone we once identified as a stranger is welcomed as a guest and is transformed into a friend. This is our own story as we were once outside the family of God, and have been welcomed in. God commands us to live out that story again and again with one another. Whether we're confronted with people inside the church or outside of it, we are called to be radically open.

So how do we live this out? God is love, and he has the capacity to demonstrate active, perfect love to every person, all the time. God can do that. Love is not only what God does; it's who he is. He never gets tired. But when God commands *us* to love others, he isn't asking us (or our churches) to spread ourselves thin, or wear ourselves out trying to do his job for him. We aren't called to actively minister to *every* person on the planet all at once. But we *are* called to be open and generous. All the time. God is calling us to live out the spirit of hospitality with the people in front of us; ready to make room for *anyone*, at any time.

Hospitality is a position of the heart. Is your heart open? Are your hands ready? God is calling us to take a generous approach to everything we do, seeing this world and the people in it like he does. *God isn't asking us to exhaust ourselves by taking care of everyone*. He's calling us to keep the door open and a seat ready at our table. He's calling us to keep a reserve ready of all the goods we have (our food, our clothes, our money) so we are always ready to share with those in need. We love as we allow the life of Jesus in us to spill over to others. Your capacity to act is limited, but your ability to love unconditionally is not. Jesus will empower you to love like he does, if you let him. This will look radical, or even offensive to the world. If your community adopts biblical hospitality as a regular, ordinary, everyday way of life, you will be forced to depend on Jesus in ways that are altogether foreign to the world and even rarely seen in many churches, and your community will indeed look very curiously different. The way you live out any typical Tuesday afternoon can illustrate the gospel to the world.

VICTORY IS A HABIT

There are no silver bullets when it comes to spiritual victory. The fact of the matter is, victory is won with methods that are lived out in faithful repetition in the midst of ordinary, everyday life. Victorious living can often look boring, and will rarely get you applause. Victory is won when we make it a habit to do hard things because Jesus asks us to. The forces of the world and the enemy are constantly moving to pull us apart, isolate us, and destroy us, but we are reconcilers. We fight back by submitting ourselves to practices that hold us together and keep us rooted and secure. Do you want to lead a brilliantly healthy community? Be people who interact with Jesus all day long. Be people who

forgive burdens whether it feels right or not. Be people who go looking for strangers to welcome inside. Satan wants you divided, blind, and afraid. Choose to stay connected to God and the people around you, and keep inviting more people inside.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What happens in your gatherings that *can't* happen anywhere outside the church? What do you have as a church that the world can't compete with? In other words, *why does this church matter so much?*
2. Many churches say prayer, forgiveness, and hospitality are values, but don't live like it's true. Preaching them from the pulpit is essential, but how do these things actually sink in to someone's real life? This is a million dollar question many of us don't solve. Essentially: how do you teach someone to *actually* adopt the practices of Christianity?
3. We are often quick to lead people in what *they* should do with Jesus, but we rarely leave room for them to see what *Jesus* is doing. What's the difference? Are you more comfortable with one over the other?
4. Unforgiveness is one of the enemy's primary tools for division and destruction in our relationships. Why are broken relationships such a useful target?

Most people define forgiveness as apologizing for something, or forgiving someone else who has hurt them. Forgiveness *is* these things, but it's also so much more. What are some other ways that you can explain forgiveness to someone who's never thought about it?

5. God calls us to keep a posture that is open and ready to receive strangers. Who is a stranger?

Think about your own life: do you only invite people into your home when you want to know them better? How do you decide who is welcome? How does this transfer itself into your church family? How will your church decide who's welcome?

What are some practical things your church family can do to be actively *ready* to invite "strangers" in so you've got "no excuses" when the opportunity comes?

Consider how this applies to "the other", but also how you can be ready for *the lost*. Are you ready for a revival? Is your church family *ready* for lost people? *Could your church handle all those new believers?* Discuss.

6. Victory is won when we make it a habit to do hard things because Jesus asks us to. The forces of the world and the enemy are constantly moving to pull us apart, isolate us, and destroy us, but we are reconcilers.

What are you doing in your life today that you *would not be doing* if Jesus hadn't asked you to do it? In other words, are you making choices in your everyday life that look curiously different to the world?