

Hands Together – One in Christ

Many hands worked together to create this year's Women's Ministry study resource. The vision was to make this resource reflect our 2007-2008 theme of community in the midst of diversity. Thirteen women were asked write a study/program using an "assigned" scripture. The only other instructions that were given had to do with the length of the study. Each writer was encouraged to write from her heart, using her own unique gifts and perspective. At first it was difficult for many to write from such freedom. Eventually, all the women opened up to that freedom creating something unique and original.

This year's resource contains devotions, prayer activities, active learning, reflection questions, commentary, and even singing! What a wonderful tool we have with which to learn and grow in God's spirit. Thanks to all the women who were not afraid to step out into the unknown. We will be blessed to hear God speak to us this coming year through your thoughts and voices.

Hands Together – One in Christ (Theme) – Sherry Ladd

Prayer/Bible Study

Hands Together through Baptism – Donna Heflin

Hands Together through Prayer – Jenny Edwards

Hands Together through Study – Iris Straube

Mission/Service/Outreach

Hands Together through Acts of Social Justice – Cornelia Swain

Hands Together through Acts of Kindness – Jo Ann Shugert

Hands Together through Service – Donna Clark & Sherry Poteet

Hands Together through Social Justice – Michelle Rackley

Hands Together through Stewardship – Janie Moody

Fellowship/Encouragement

Hands Together through Encouragement – Margie Vanderlaan

Hands Together through Sisterhood – Carolyn Knight

Hands Together through Reconciliation – Melissa Reid Goodloe



Hands Together – One in Christ Ephesians 4:1-6 and Philippians 2:1-2



In Ephesians Paul urges us to live a life worthy of the calling we have received. Sometimes Christians become confused about what is expected of them. Sometimes we may choose to remain in the background, saying nothing, as opposed to being bold in the Lord. When we are bold in the Lord we can bring a new level of adventure and sense of true unity to our community of faith.

Paul goes on to write that we need to be completely humble and gentle; to be patient, and to bear one another with love. Does this mean that we allow people to use us as door mats and then act grateful for it? Absolutely not! True humility is recognizing ourselves as children of God. We are worthy beings in the image of God. Yet humility calls for us to view others this way as well. In the body of Christ we have all been saved through Jesus Christ. This does not mean that we become “cookie-cutter” images of one another. We are one in Christ, yet diverse in our personalities, our ways of thinking, and our backgrounds. Yet Christ takes all of us in and transforms us through a lifetime journey of faith. **Are there times you regret not standing up for something? Have you ever regretted taking a stand?**

With people coming from different backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives there are bound to be misunderstandings and disagreements at some point. Look at how much time the Apostle Paul spent writing to churches that had disagreement among members. Since we do come from varying backgrounds we all have something distinctive to offer to the body of Christ. We all come with various talents and knowledge. Isn't it wonderful that each person has something unique to offer the community of faith?

This journey sometimes can be difficult. Sometimes we bump up against each other on this journey. It seems as if we are set to crash head-on into each other. Every relationship is going to have moments of conflict and uncertainty about the future. During these difficult times we need to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us. We need to pray to God that we will be able to see and understand another person's point of view (which does not necessarily mean we will change our own) so that we can see that person as God sees them. There have been many times, still are many times, (and will be many more times in the future) when I have prayed to God, “Please help me to have a better attitude toward this person. Please help me to see this person as you do, God.”

We are called to treat one another with gentleness. If we are gentle then we do not expect that our opinions are the only ones that matter. We treat others as we desire to be treated. This may mean that we may have to give up control. When we give up controlling, we open ourselves up to a new level of energy, creativity, and love. We open ourselves to experiencing a new level of friendship with others. Openness comes from compassion and respect for one another. It also means that we risk stepping out in faith that the Holy Spirit is at the center of our faith community helping us to work through awkward situations.

What does it mean to have unity? Does it mean that we never disagree? Does it mean that we do not deal with issues? Sometimes people have a misunderstanding of what it means to have unity. **Discuss what you think unity is and what it looks like in a group.**

Unity means that we are united in a common purpose. All of us come to the table with different perceptions of how things could be and/or should be done. We bring with us our past experiences. We can have different viewpoints and ideas, and yet have a unity of spirit because we all have the big picture in mind. When we see that the common goal of our unity is to love Jesus Christ and to help bring others to know the love of Jesus Christ, then our thinking shifts. It is not about whether the group will do what I want to do, rather it becomes, “Does this promote the love of Jesus Christ in the world? Will others see Christ at work in our midst if we do this?” As Paul points out in Ephesians 4:5-6, “There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all.” (New Living Translation)

Creativity is squashed when there is no one to raise questions. If all are outwardly agreeable, yet harboring inner questions, then there is actually disunity in the group. Although there may be an outer illusion of unity, there will be an underlying tension within our faith community. God gave us all different abilities and ways of thinking. This enables us to look at what we are doing from different angles. Someone may see opportunities in a situation while another person may put out the details that need to be worked out. It takes all our hands working together.

Suppose there is an agreement that the fellowship hall needs to be redone. Some members of the group have a vision of what the renovated fellowship hall can look like. Others may have an idea of what steps will need to be taken so that the vision can be accomplished. Maybe one member of the group has experience in painting and can share with the group the amount of paint needed as well as the potential costs. Another member may be good at project management. She can keep the various work teams on task as well as taking care of the budgeting. The first group with the vision of the work may not have any idea about how to budget or what materials are needed. It takes all hands working together to complete the vision. We need people who are good at dreaming as well as people who are good at taking care of the everyday business and details.

On the other hand, if we dislike any decision being made unless it is our idea we are surely creating disunity. Unity in a group, especially any church group, is a balancing act. It is never about one individual person or a subset of the group; it is all about Jesus Christ.

Suppose your Women’s Ministry group has decided to have a fund raiser to assist the youth in funding a mission trip. There are many ways to raise money. Aileen is always the first one to come up with a suggestion. She always talks as if her ideas are always the ultimate solution. The other members have put up with her domination for years. Her last idea for a project did not exactly turn out the way it could have. She had the bright idea of selling greeting cards.

Lilly had thought to herself that a lot of people now are creating their own cards on home computers. She did not want to bring this point up because she wanted to support Women’s Ministry. She was concerned about causing disharmony in the group. As it turns out, Lilly could have saved the group a lot of money by raising the question. Only one-fourth of the cards they ordered were sold. Marcia had wanted to point out that the cards looked dated. This type of

card art had gone out of style years ago. The paper the cards were printed on looked cheap. She did not want to upset Aileen, who was also an elder. Marcia was the pastor's spouse. **Have you ever been in a group where everyone was afraid to ask questions about the first and only idea presented; therefore, it turned out badly? What are some ideas to get the discussion going? Maybe the presiding person could ask if anyone has any other ideas. What is the best way to handle a person like Aileen?**

Philippians 2:1 tells us to, "...agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose." In the situation above is the purpose to always agree with Aileen, or work together on the idea of helping fund the youth mission trip? **Do we really love one another when we allow one member make the decision for the direction of the project so that, therefore, that same person always takes the fall when the idea does not work? Is it more loving to explore the various ideas and questions of the whole group? Are we really working together with one mind and purpose when we allow a person to dominate? Is the ultimate goal to help spread the gospel or to appease people?**

We can disagree with others while being gentle and humble. Loving other people means that we hear what they have to say openly. Too often we listen only to formulate in our own minds how we are going to respond! Listening may mean that we ask a person questions to clarify the meaning of what she is saying. How many times do we jump to conclusions without hearing a person all the way through? Have you ever known someone that has a response to what you are saying before you have fully explained?

There is a big difference between saying "I totally disagree" and "There is another way of looking at this which I would like to share." Suppose you are brainstorming for new and creative ways to minister to people outside the walls of your church. So far, all of the ideas presented (by only two members of the group) are duplications of other ministries in the community. **What are some ways you could raise the question of duplication in a positive and nonthreatening manner? Discuss some ways that have worked from your experience. What ideas do you have to handle something like this in the future?**

On the other hand, we need to listen to what others have to say. Sometimes we find ourselves "closing our ears" when we are confronted with someone who does not agree with our ideas. It is okay to agree to disagree. I remember working with someone who always wanted her ideas to be the ones set into motion. She would often shoot down ideas of others within our working group. It seemed as if the only ideas she thought worthy came from her own head! Her ideas were good. However, she got a reputation as not being a team player. She created disunity in any work group she was in. Despite her intelligence, her talents, and her creative ideas, she was later forced to resign. How different the story may have been if she had made unity and teamwork a priority!

In this same workgroup was a woman I will call Carly. Carly was gentle yet could stand her ground when she had to do so. She was a creative person. Carly was open to other people and their ideas. Nancy was jealous of Carly's ability to get along with others and to get work projects completed. Carly never said anything in anger to Nancy. She would calmly and patiently let her know how Nancy's attitude was affecting her. It never fails to amaze me how

God works. Within two years Carly ended up being Nancy's boss. Carly treated everyone with respect. **Can two people say the same thing in different words, yet we can hear what one person is saying while the other person's way of expressing herself causes us to become defensive? If so, what is your reaction when this happens?**

Unity in Jesus Christ means that we respect ourselves as children of God, as well as the people who are our faith family. The key word here is family. We are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Just as brothers and sisters may fuss over minor annoyances, we in the church do so as well. However, let someone else try to interfere in a fight with sisters, and one will find that the sisters turn on that person!

We can only find true unity when we agree that once a disagreement is over, it is truly over! We cannot harbor any resentment in our hearts or secretly nurse grudges. Holding on to past disagreements in our hearts harms no one but us. It is liberating to forgive one another and agree to be in unity as the people of God. Have you ever watched children at play? There can be disagreements over a toy or who gets to play a certain character. After a few minutes the children have forgotten the disagreement and are playing happily once again.

How can we bring unbelievers to Christ if we are always having disagreements among ourselves? We can show the world that it is possible to have disagreements that give way to greater unity among the church. Why should we settle for less than a Christlike way of handling our disagreement? Can you imagine getting to heaven and God asking some church members why they got in such a heated argument over the color of carpet in the sanctuary when there were people within the shadow of the church who needed to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ?

Whether we realize it or not people are observing our lives as well as our community of faith. Sometimes a church can earn a bad name because the members often seem to be disagreeable with one another. Not only that, but they talk about their disagreements with other people who are not part of the faith community.

The true way to unity is to respect each other as well as being compassionate for one another. We show respect when we listen to another person with open hearts and minds even though we may totally disagree. We are compassionate when we risk caring enough to speak the truth and yet at the same time be willing to work out our differences through dialogue.

Prayer:

Dear God, hand in hand we come to you in prayer. We pray for the true unity that can only be found in Jesus Christ. We pray that your Holy Spirit directs and guides our work together. We pray that despite differences that may arise that we keep in mind that it is your work which we are doing. It is only through you that we can do great things together. Amen.

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Hands Together through Baptism Galatians 3:26-28



Background for the leader:

Paul's letter to the Galatians is written with both emotion and intensity. Paul reminds the Galatians of their origins as Christians. He faces two crucial questions: who constitutes the people of God and what is the function of the law.

Paul tells the people of Galatia we are all one in Christ. Barriers for humans such as gender, class, and nations are not barriers for Christ. Paul cannot speak about faith without speaking about Christ. Before Christ the law was a disciplinarian. With the coming of Christ those who respond in faith are children of God. For the people of God the law is no longer the source of identification. It is now identification in Christ that assures inclusion in the promises of God. In baptism we "put on" Christ and are identified in him.

Baptism is the public act that acknowledges this new faith relationship. The baptized are clothed with Christ. Each baptized person may say, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 3:19-20). Our identity is found in Christ who lives in us.

Baptism is not something we humans do. It is something God does. In his book *"The Covenant of Grace"* Cumberland Presbyterian theologian Hubert Morrow says, "It (baptism) is a gift of God through the ministry of the church. Baptism is a gift of God because it is a sign of God's covenant of grace...The meaning of the baptism of infants is the same as that for adults. It is a sign of God's initiative to claim persons in Christ."

Christ becomes the identity of each person. Old identities are submerged in a new identity. "There is no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free...male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (vs 28). When we are clothed in Christ we are no longer clothed in old identities of ethnicity, social class or gender. Clothed in Christ the sense of superiority and inferiority between the old identities are destroyed.

Jesus coming to earth as a human was not an isolated historical event. It was the climax of a history that breaks down all human barriers and creates a new unified community of God's grace. This is not a community achieved by rule keeping. It is a community achieved by faith in a resurrected Christ that loved and gave himself for everyone.

Things to gather: the scripture passage typed on paper for each participant; newsprint, markers, on one sheet of newsprint write in large letters "One in Christ"; magazines and/or newspapers; scissors; masking tape; white cloth; white candle; lighter; bowl with water; white towel; four Bibles if you choose Option 2. The printed resources you will need based on the options you choose to use in leading the Bible Study.

Arrival: As the women arrive invite them to find pictures that represent diversity. Ask them to cut out pictures that show as many different kinds of people as they can find. To make a collage use the masking tape to form loops to put on the back of the pictures. Place the picture on the newsprint with the words "One in Christ".

Opening: After everyone has arrived gather in the round with a small round table in the center. Light a white candle to represent Christ's presence among you. Invite one group member to stand next to you. Cup your hands, scoop some water, and pour it into her hands, saying: "Child of God you are clothed in God's transforming love." Dry her hand with a white hand towel. Ask the group to continue around the circle sharing the blessing.

Read the scripture: Read aloud Galatians 3:26-28 pausing after each verse. Share a printed copy of the scripture with each participant. Invite each person to underline important ideas that shimmer or grab their attention. Read the scripture aloud slowly a second time. Working from the words participants have underlined discuss: What would you say is the thrust or intent of this passage? Paul speaks of children of God as one in Christ Jesus. What is significant about this concept? What does this passage say about our identity? What contrasts or separations strike you in these verses? What stands out as reversals from the prevailing attitudes of contemporary culture?

Background information. Share the background information with the group using your own words.

Remembering: Recall the story of your baptism or the baptism of a family member? Invite a few participants to share their stories. Is there a common theme in the stories that have been shared?

Option 1:

You may choose to read aloud part of the children's book, "*Water, Came Down! The Day You Were Baptized*".

In the sacrament of baptism in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church members of the congregation are asked a question such as, "Do you, the people of God, member's of Christ's church, promise to share with this new member the good news of the gospel, to surround (him/her) with love and compassion, and to support (him/her) through prayer, fellowship and direction?" (from Directory of Worship)

Note to leader: In the Cumberland Presbyterian Church infants and children who are baptized are entered on a role of child members. When the child decides to make a public profession of faith they then affiliate with a congregation.

At baptism we are clothed in Christ. In your congregation what happens with children in the in between time? What ministry happens in that time between baptism and church membership? How do you support parents as they make the decision to have their child baptized? You might consider making use of the Cumberland Presbyterian resource "I Have Been Baptized". Have a copy available. Women from your group may decide to visit with a family after a child is baptized to talk about baptism and how the family might be involved in the ministries of the congregation. These are ways the parents and the congregation can work together to live out the promises made at baptism. Discuss ways the women of your group may support families as they live out their baptismal promises to their children.

Recall your childhood. What faith questions were important to you? Who was there to listen or respond to those questions?

List the barriers that children encounter in contemporary society. How do you nurture

the faith of children as they encounter barriers and divisions in the world?

Invite the women to close their eyes and recall an event they have witnessed or experienced because of racial, ethnic or gender barriers? After a few moments of silence ask them to replay the incident in their mind as if all participants recognized that we are all one in Christ.

Some ideas for discussion:

What barriers or divisions existed in the incident you just recalled? On newsprint make a list of the barriers that are shared. As a baptized Christian who is clothed and identified in Christ how can you participate in breaking down these barriers? On the newsprint list the solutions next to the barriers. What can you do this week to be more open to people who are different from you? Your life is a model to the children in your church. How will you teach them by your actions to face these barriers and divisions as a Christian?

Option 2:

A. Consider the following with the group: List the barriers between people that are evident to you in this passage. How was the barrier broken by Christ Jesus? How are the barriers you listed still present in the world today?

B. If the size of your group allows divide into four groups. Give each group one of the following passages of scripture. Mark 10:13-16 (Jesus and the children); John 4:1-15, 27 (Samaritan woman at the well); Luke 10:29-37 (Parable of the good neighbor); Luke 7:1-10 (Healing of the Roman centurion's slave). Ask each group to read the passage they are given and discuss the three questions above. Provide newsprint and markers for them to briefly record their answers. After twenty minutes invite each group to share with the total group a brief summary of their discussion. Tape the newsprint on the walls (or display in an appropriate place).

Title a sheet of newsprint "What Christians Can Do". Invite learners to share their ideas about what we as Christians can do to break down the barriers participants listed from the four passages of scripture.

Tell the group that as followers of Christ we are obliged to work at breaking down the barriers that separate us from one another. Clothed and identified in Christ we are to be barrier breakers. Ask learners to select one or two suggestions from the newsprint lists that they will focus on in the coming weeks. If more than one person selects the same thing they might work together to support each other in this ministry.

Closing:

In silence, invite each learner to take a picture from the "One in Christ" collage that represents someone different from themselves. Invite the learners to place the picture in a prominent place in their home where it will be seen every day during the coming week. Let the picture remind them that we are all one in Christ. We find our identity in Christ. Make a time each day for silent prayer to commit to acting to tear down barriers. We break down barriers in order to create a new unified community in God's grace. Remind

the women that in their baptism they are clothed in Christ. While holding the picture that symbolizes a barrier to be faced invite each women to touch the water and remember her baptism. You might also want to close by either singing or reading together the hymn, *Baptized in Water*, found in many of the newer hymnals.

Prayer:

God of mercy, it is a hard thing for us to loosen our grip on self-preserving rules. Holding on to the law can keep our differences defined. Separate and apart we have no need to fear the alien and strange. Forgive our need to hide from what we fear. We have clung to reasons to exclude. Forgive us for continuing to use our hands to build walls that divide. We offer our lives to be clothed in Christ. Wearing Christ we have a new intent to reach out our hands to others in unity. We accept the cloak of Christ which breaks down barriers and binds us as your children. We reach our hands out beyond ourselves. We reach past what is comfortable and familiar. We reach our hands across the barriers that divide to walk together in servant love. May all who see us see Christ. Amen.

Resources:

Elizabeth F. Caldwell, *Making a Home for Faith Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

Charles B. Cousar, *Galatians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1982).

Hubert Morrow, *The Covenant of Grace* (Memphis, Tn: Board of Christian Education, Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1996). To order: from Cumberland Resource Distribution resources@cumberland.org; 901-276-4572 x 252.

DeVere Ramsay and Jim McGuire, *I Have Been Baptized* (Memphis, TN: Board of Christian Education, Cumberland Presbyterian Church, ?). To order: from Cumberland Resource Distribution resources@cumberland.org; 901-276-4572 x252.

Walter Wangerin, Jr., *Water Came Down! The Day You Were Baptized* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999).

Word Among Us A Worship-centered Lectionary -based Curriculum for Congregations (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1994).

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Hands Together Through Prayer II Corinthians 1:7-14; Matthew 6:9-13; John 17



There are more than one hundred references to prayer in the Scriptures which indicate the importance of prayer in our lives. In this study we will allow for prayer time in order for us to actively have time to pray.

Most of us have had experiences in our lives when we felt a deep need for others to pray for us – an illness, the loss of a loved one or perhaps there was a significant decision to be made. It is one of the most moving experiences in our Christian life to have someone pray for us or with us.

In II Corinthians 1:7-14, Paul is in much the same situation. He had suffered many hardships in the Province of Asia and was under great pressure, far beyond his ability to endure, so that he despaired even of life. He wanted the Corinthians to join their prayers with his – become prayer partners with him. A prayer partner offers a source of great spiritual support and inspiration. If you do not have a prayer partner, ask for God's guidance in choosing one.

Hands Together through Prayer

Leader – Have the group divide into pairs (or threes) to have time to prayer together for the following:

- 1) those who are in physical pain,
- 2) those experiencing sadness,
- 3) those seeking direction for their lives,
- 4) those in despair for any reason,
- 5) other needs....

In his Kerygama study guide, *Lord Teach Us to Pray*, John C. Purdy makes a beautiful comparison of some of Jesus' parables to the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. We commonly call this the Lord's Prayer.

Jesus told about a woman who leavened a large lump of dough with a pinch of yeast (Matthew 13:33), about a merchant who sold everything for one pearl of great value (Matthew 13:44), and about a man who sold all that he had to buy a field in which he had stumbled across a treasure (Matthew 13:45). The yeast, the pearl, and the treasure might all be understood in the Lord's Prayer. As it appears in Matthew's gospel, this prayer consists of an address to the Father and six brief petitions. And yet, nothing in all Christian piety and spirituality can compare to it. Like the yeast in the parable it can permeate an entire life. Like the wonderful pearl, it is to be greatly valued. And like the treasure in the field it is worth whatever it costs to make it our own.

Hands Together through Prayer

Leader – Most of us are very familiar with this prayer which Jesus taught his disciples when they asked him how they should pray (Matthew 6:9). With the above thoughts of comparison to the yeast, the pearl, and the treasure, invite the participants to join hands and hearts as the group prays together the Lord's Prayer. If there is a concern that someone in the group might not be familiar with the words of this prayer, you might want to have copies available.

It is not wrong to call this prayer which we prayed together *The Lord's Prayer*. However, when we call it that, we must also realize that strictly speaking it is the disciple's

prayer. John 17 records The Lord's Prayer for it is Jesus' own personal prayer prayed in the hearing of his closet followers. When we examine its contents, we are truly walking on holy ground, like Moses before the burning bush. We should read and study it with a special measure of reverence.

The first part of the prayer (verses 1-8) refers to Christ Himself. Conscious that the appointed time for the fulfillment of His calling has come, He prays that God may so honor him in becoming the bearer of life to all people that by him God may be honored.

The second part of the prayer (verses 9-19) is for his present disciples. He intercedes on their behalf for God's preservation of them. Jesus prays not for their removal from the evil of the world but for their preservation in the midst of this evil. As Christ has been God's missionary, his consecration of himself is in view of his disciple's consecration of themselves as missionaries.

The third part of the prayer (verses 20-26) is for his future disciples (you and me). This is such a moving and beautiful prayer that I have asked (*someone to be asked ahead of time*) to read this part of the prayer out loud. (Note to Leader: be sure and ask someone ahead of time to be prepared to read this portion of John 17). How awesome that Jesus asked God to give us the same love as His Father gave to Him!

Hands Together through Prayer

Let us pray individually and silently, prayers of praise and thanksgiving for God's great love for us. (Note to Leader: make sure that you give adequate time for this silent prayer. It often takes a few moments to quiet our minds and thoughts in order to reach a prayerful state. You might even want to play some quiet, reflective music to help create this mood and setting. Five minutes would not be too long for an exercise of this nature!)

As we continue our study of prayer, there is a powerful, one sentence prayer in I Chronicles 4:9. This is the prayer of Jabez:

"Oh, that you would bless me indeed and enlarge my territory, that your hand be with me and keep me from evil that I may not cause pain."

"Oh, that you would bless me indeed" is our prayer to be blessed that we may bless others. "Enlarge my territory" is our prayer for God to expand our opportunities and our impact in such a way that we can touch more lives for God's glory. In other words, "let me do more for your glory, God."

"That your hand be with me" is our prayer for God's strength to accomplish His will in our lives. Ask everyday for the Father's touch. "And keep me from evil that I may not cause pain" is the final petition. Like Jabez, we should plead to be kept from the powerful pull of what feels right but is wrong. In our society today we (especially our youth) are daily tempted to do what feels good but is not good.

In his book, *The Prayer of Jabez*, Bruce Wilkinson expounds on each petition of Jabez's prayer. This is a great book to have in your home. Many people have found that by praying the prayer of Jabez each day their lives have been greatly enriched spiritually.

Hands Together through Prayer

With your neighbor or a partner, pray for God's touch in your life.

When I think of the hands of Cumberland Presbyterian Women joined through prayer, I am reminded of the fingers we have on each hand and how they can be used in our prayer life. Hold up your hand.

- 1) *Your thumb is nearest you.* So begin your prayer by praying for those closest to you. They are the easiest to remember. To pray for our loved ones is, as C.S. Lewis once said, “a sweet duty.”
- 2) *The next finger is the pointing finger.* Prayer for those who teach, instruct and heal. This includes teachers, doctors, and ministers. They need support and wisdom in pointing in the right direction. Keep them in your prayers.
- 3) *The next finger is the tallest finger.* It reminds us of our leaders. Prayer for the President of our country, leaders in local government, business, industry, and administrators. These people shape our nation and guide public opinions. They need God’s guidance.
- 4) *The fourth finger is our ring finger.* Surprising to many is the fact that this is our weakest finger; as any piano teacher will testify. It should remind us to pray for those who are weak, in trouble or in pain. They need your prayers every day and night. You cannot pray too much for them.
- 5) *And lastly comes our little finger;* the smallest of all which is where we should place ourselves in relation to God and to others. As the Bible says, “The least shall be the greatest among you.” Your pinkie should remind you to pray for yourself. By the time you have prayed for the other four groups, your own needs will be put into proper perspective and you will be able to pray for yourself more effectively

(Note to leader: Some people are visual learners so you might want to make a drawing of a hand and label each finger and prayer petition. The author unknown of this prayer method is unknown.)

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we come before your throne of grace to thank you for the privilege of prayer – a time to spend with you, to praise you, to worship you and to ask for forgiveness for the many times we fail to be the person you would have us to be. We thank you for your great love for us even though we are unworthy. We ask you to touch us in such a way that others will see your love reflected in our lives. We offer our prayers to you in the name of Your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

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Hands Together through Study I Timothy 2:15



It is so easy to base our approach to life simply on our own opinions, impressions, and emotions. In a conversation I recently had concerning our purpose in life, a comment was made that I couldn't address immediately because of the weight of its implications. The comment went something like this: "We are not just made to be vessels by which God works, because we are also individual people with our own opinions and minds. God didn't make us to be robots."

For a split second it seemed like a reasonable enough statement, but as I turned it over in my mind I realized that what this person said is based on the idea that being a "vessel" of God means we are limited and bound, shackled so to speak, and slave-like. If we operate with this motion then it is as though we believe that God is dictatorial in nature, a tyrant that sits on a throne passively dishing out commands without consideration in the least of our own experience.

Many of us would never confess to thinking that God is this way, but if we take a strong look at our hearts and find even a hint of resentment there this means that we may, be it subconsciously, believe this to be true about God. If this is the case, we face the danger of either becoming robotic in our actions because we feel we can't operate in any other capacity than "just as vessels", or we turn from God altogether and go in search of "true freedom".

I am very disturbed by this notion of what it means to be a vessel of God – mainly because I have to confess that I am guilty of switching on the auto pilot mode at times in resignation, namely when I have been too lazy to turn to God's Word to learn more about who he really is and what his will really is for my life. Truth be told, despite the absolute folly of it, this notion of what it means to be a "vessel", at least at first glance, is not an unreasonable deduction to make considering our innate desire for freedom. It is not easy to swallow God's will when it is phrased so piercingly with words such as "lose your life for me" or "walk through the narrow road" or "die to yourself".

And so it is with so many other ideas that are set before us in God's Word. We are constantly challenged in our humanity to submit to these commands that seem so foreign and parochial from our standpoint, because naturally we want to be in control of our lives and make our own choices. But when God is in the picture, when we decide to curl up with God's Word for a while in the morning or in the evening, or better yet, at every given opportunity (as he desires for us to do), and when we filter the daily commentary and editorials we hear in the news, the talk shows, the office lounge, the playground or at the coffee shop- with what God has to say about it, all our impressions are kept in check – in the same way a best friend corrects us when we make a wrong assumption or walk in halfway through a conversation – and we experience true freedom, the freedom that comes only from a living and dynamic walk with God, one that sweeps us off our feet and brings us to our knees all at once.

The truth is God's will is for us to have relationships that are intimate, relationships in which we are free to be ourselves and enjoy each other without limitation. If I were to summarize the cause of the majority of life's struggles in one word it would have to be: relationships. If we take an honest look at the roots of many, if not most, of our frustrations, I think it's fair to say that they are the result of feeling misunderstood, unappreciated, unrecognized, underestimated, lonely, rejected, and other dejected feelings caused by some type of inadequacy in our relationships. This is because we are social creatures. God created us to love and to be loved.

I propose to you that 2 Timothy 2:15 has everything to do with relationships. *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth* (NIV). In ***The Pastoral Epistles of Paul***, a commentary written by Charles R. Erdman, the writer reflects on the importance of having God's mind in order to have discernment, in particular when it comes to spotting false teachers in the church. Regarding verse 20 Erdman says: *“Some vessels (in a house) are put to distasteful and unpleasant uses, and others are vessels of honor, which are associated with dignity and delight. Thus some men [and women] in a professing church can be used as warnings and examples of the perils of apostasy; but, on the other hand, a man [or woman] who will keep himself [or herself] uncontaminated by false teachings and by error, will be like a vessel of gold or silver.* Erdman's interpretation is basically that we will be known by our fruit.

As Christians we have the awesome privilege and responsibility of being ambassadors of Christ to those around us (2 Corinthians 5:20). “False teachers” do nothing more than cause division and discord in the church and even in the greater communities of the city, country and world. When there is no accountability, when we get lazy in our walks with Christ and resort to our own emotions, impressions and opinions to guide us through our days, we easily distort the truth with our actions and become “distasteful and unpleasant” vessels lacking “dignity and delight”. We become agents of discord instead of agents of truth. This is true because when we operate in this manner we never see the entire picture – only what is visible from our own limited perspective.

2 Timothy 2 describes the many damaging actions of a person who is an agent of discord: this person *quarrels about words* (vs. 14), *indulges in godless chatter* (vs. 16), his or her *words spread like gangrene* (vs. 17), and he or she *destroys the faith of some* (vs. 18). In other words, when we are constantly engaged in arguments, insistent on getting our points across to the point of becoming belligerent, or when we find pleasure in badmouthing others, maybe even to the point of starting rumors or igniting bad feelings in other people toward those we badmouth, we need to stop and ask ourselves: are we spending enough time in God's Word?

So many hearts have been broken by wrong impressions and assumptions. When left unchecked, these lead to uncontrolled emotions that fester in the heart, so that our opinions become biased, one-sided, unjustified, and even foolish. If we are left to our own devices we can cause a lot of heartache and pain in our communities, because our wrong opinions, our wrong attitudes, our wrong impressions and wrong assumptions can easily *spread like gangrene* and even *destroy the faith of some*.

Instead we need to be united in sharing the truth, holding each other accountable, and being vessels of honor and dignity in the church and the community. How do we do this when we live in an imperfect world with imperfect people? It is definitely not something that just happens on its own, nor is it a personality thing. In order to become a vessel of truth we need to love God. God is available along with all his resources. We simply need to reach for him – every day, and to do this we need to spend time meditating on God's Word.

I have been a Christian for most of my life. I can honestly say that I have loved Christ since I was a child. I remember one particular circumstance, which I believe to have been my conversion experience. I was about five years old. My family gathered together in my parent's bedroom to watch an Easter movie. Being so little, I didn't understand that what I saw on the screen was a reenactment of what had happened more than 2,000 years ago. I asked my parents, “Is this happening in Heaven right now?” I remember crying, broken-hearted, when I saw Christ being beaten and forced to drag a heavy beam across Jerusalem, only to be nailed to it on

Golgotha. I wanted to do something about it, to get my father to stop those evil soldiers. I don't think I had ever experienced sadness in my young existence to the extent that I experienced it that day. I believe it was from that moment on that Christ's cause became my cause. Even though I was very young I was filled with indignation whenever I saw injustice, brutality, and hatred. I wanted to be a warrior for the cause of the innocent, and often got myself into trouble when I reacted out of what I believed at the time to be righteous anger.

This must be why God says the kingdom belongs to the little ones (Matthew 19:14). Children are tender and passionate. They embrace those who love them. It is only when doubt and fear is implanted in their lives that children begin to form suspicions and become skeptical and even apathetic. Children allow God to love them without any prejudice whatsoever. We are the ones that get in the way of that innocence when we fail to demonstrate God's love to the youngest generations because we are too preoccupied with ourselves to teach them God's truth. This is another reason why it is so important to meditate on God's Word and build our houses on the rock (Matthew 7:24).

I feel privileged to have known Christ's love for so long; however, this doesn't mean that I have been a vessel of truth all of my life. I struggle every day to stay near to God. There were years during which I strayed very far from him, so I can say I sympathize with the prodigal son as well. The funny thing is that I always end up coming back to him, apologetically and ashamed, with dirty and torn clothing and an empty and noxious stomach, only to fall into his open embrace once again and feast desperately from his banquet.

God is a kind and loving gentleman. He doesn't impose himself on us. He loves us enough to set us free. He freed us from the chains of sin, and also gives us the freedom to make our own decisions and hold our own opinions; however, when we have truly experienced God's freedom and been injected with his passion for the cause of his children there's really nothing left for us other than Christ. As Paul said, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21)

As I reflect back across the years I can think of so many vessels of truth that God has put in my path to guide me down the narrow road – often to guide me back to the narrow road! My parents, devoted teachers, friends, and ministers that encouraged my faith with their seasoned speech and acts of love. My elementary and Sunday school teachers taught me Bible stories; the volunteers and leaders at the college ministry that brought me back to God spent countless hours patiently pointing out the answers to my questions in the Bible. My parents taught me how to pray and read the Bible every day and led my family in frequent devotions. Sadly, I can also think of vessels of discord, Christians who were into themselves more than God's truth, and who sent mixed messages and often left me confused.

We need to do our best to present ourselves to God as those approved – our acts need to pass the test of fire! Not only because they will be commended and rewarded by Almighty God, but also because as ambassadors for Christ, our lives need to reflect his love so that others can taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8). In this way our family in heaven will grow. I want to get to heaven and enjoy my big, happy family! I want to enjoy perfect intimacy with the people I meet on earth, people that I love and admire and with whom I still often have misunderstandings and disagreements, despite my love for them.

I thought a recent trip to Cali, Colombia was going to be for vacation, but it turned out to be a lot more than that. My mother was diagnosed with cancer last year. This has probably been the most difficult year of her life, and my family's as well, as she has endured three operations and an intense and painful radiation treatment to save her vocal chords, and more importantly,

her life. The battle continues as my mother still has not regained her voice and a strange growth was spotted on her larynx, which may or may not be cancerous.

In the midst of this painful setback, a group of loving and godly women from the Cauca Valley Presbytery in Cali, Colombia prepared a special event for my mother. On a sunny and breezy day, these lovely ladies from different churches in the region met together to celebrate my mother's life and ministry. That day left a mark on my life that has forever changed me. I was moved by their gesture and impacted by my mother's legacy. More than forty years later my mother's name is recognized in churches across Colombia, so much so that there were many women present of my own generation that had never met my mom but had heard about her and wanted to meet her.

I felt that I was in the midst of royalty, because I too had heard numerous stories about these faithful women and had finally had the chance to meet them. I had the honor of meeting the women who embraced my mother when she was just twenty years old and new to the Christian faith. She had been the youngest mother in the church and since she was married and had a baby, the youth group, which in most Latin churches is comprised of both teenagers and young adults, did not admit her as a member. It was then that the women's association took Athala under their wings. It was through these women that her faith grew. She flourished with them because they shared Christ in love and truth.

I was in a room full of queens – in a royal banquet of sorts. These women have been faithful vessels of God's truth for decades and their lives have and will continue to impact future generations – including the life of my daughter who was with me.

We studied the famous passage found in Proverbs 31 about the woman of noble character. One verse in particular stuck out to me: *Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised* (vs. 30). I cherish the living example found in the lives of these women, especially my mother's. I want my life to have that kind of impact on future generations.

I still have my prodigal daughter days. Those are wasted days. They only become valuable once I come back home, because I always return to God with an even greater appreciation of his unconditional embrace. I am reminded that freedom is only found in truth, and the truth is that God loves us so much he died for us.

When we tune out the noise in our heads for a moment and take the time to listen to what God has to say to us, we are then able to enjoy true intimacy with him and gain his perspective on things. When we come together to study God's Word, we can overcome every human barrier. As people who correctly handle the word of truth we can leave a legacy that will transcend time and enlarge our family – the family with which we will enjoy perfect intimacy in heaven.

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Hands Together through Acts of Social Justice Mark 12:1-11



Preparation:

1) To prepare for this Bible study, talk with teachers within your congregation or community, school guidance counselors, social workers, Department of Human Service workers, senior center directors, hospitals, or any other groups/agencies who might know about needs within your area, whether it be a mostly rural area, small town, or larger city. There are always needs to serve and work for justice within a community if you look for them.

2) Prepare slips of paper with the following scriptures on them and ask people within the group to read them when needed as you present the program.

Micah 6:6-8

Matthew 22:34-40

Matthew 25: 31-40

I Corinthians 12:4-20, 27-41

Mark 12:1-11

3) Make a poster, Power Point if you have that capability, or other visual that has the question: “What does the Lord require of you? Picture persons walking together holding hands (stick figures will be o.k.).

4) Find the camp song “What Does the Lord Require of You?” which is often sung in a round or the hymn style version written by Albert F. Bayly with music by Eric Routley. Your church music director/organist/pianist might be able to help you.

5) Either provide copies of Micah 6:8 for the members or have the words written on a chart available for all to see.

Bible Study

Read **Micah 6:6-8** and repeat verse 8.

Sing or have a person sing: “What Does the Lord Require of You? If you don’t have someone to sing it, read the words.

Look at the scripture Micah 6:8 on your copies or chart. Ask members to select the key words in the verse and underline them. List those words on a chart or white board and ask the group to talk about their meaning and what is required of Christians.

One of the key phrases is “to do justice.” Jesus picked up on this basic concept in the Matthew 25:31-40 passage often referred to as the “The Judgment of the Nations.” Read these verses and reread verses 34-36 and verses 41- 43 in 2 or 3 different versions of the Bible.

What do these verses say to us about our theme, “*Hands Together - One in Christ through Acts of Social Justice?*” We join our hands together to study and think about how to respond to this scripture, but we need to do more than study. We must be “doers” of the Word as well. So how do we do that?

Identifying Needs

Begin by making a list (on newsprint or a board) of many of the personal/physical needs that would affect people in your church or community? If someone has done preparatory work by talking with some of the persons suggested above in the “Preparation” section, have them share what they learned. You may want to add some of these needs if they have not been suggested. homeless women and children/families, abused women and children, unwanted children, unadoptable children, AIDS victims, mentally ill, hot meals for the elderly, basic cooking skills for spouses left alone, and transportation for elderly/ill/families without vehicles to doctors and other appointments.

Some needs can be met with sitting service for parents to go for job interviews, knitting preemie caps and making lap robes for local hospitals/nursing homes, providing a reading program for the illiterate, assisting persons with too little education to complete application forms, providing respite care for care givers who have 24/7 duty, and freezing meals to have as needs arise.

There may be many issues in your community that affect large numbers of people such as low wages, affordable housing, abuse of women and children, and other things that may require community action rather than action from one church. What type of organizations do you have in your community where you could work together such as Church Women United, ministerial association, agencies for specific needs such as Alzheimer’s disease, abused women and children, mentally ill, etc? Perhaps you would want to work with other persons/groups to consider organizing such agencies. Many agencies were originally begun by people who had a need and sought ways to meet the need.

Later in the study you will have opportunity to prioritize your list and think how your women’s group can join hands to meet some of these needs.

As we continue to look at words of Jesus about social justice, read **Matthew 22: 34-40**. Loving God is the first and greatest commandment, but the second one is an opportunity for social justice, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” One question to ask is “Would we be willing to work for extremely low wages, live in substandard housing, or live in situations that are inhumane?”

Stone Soup

One of the best examples of people/hands working together is the story of *Stone Soup* which has been around for many years. Travelers who roamed the countryside were always on the lookout for a place to find a good meal. One traveler hurried toward a village that he could see in the distance. On the road, he tripped over a very unusual stone on the road. The stone was perfectly smooth and oval in shape. He decided to keep the stone as he thought it might come in handy. He became hungrier as he went down the road only to find a village that was boarded up and no one seemed to be home. He finally spotted a maid and asked her for some food, but she did not have enough potatoes to share and slammed the door in his face. She suggested he try the next door neighbor, but the traveler had already tried him and found him to be very grumpy.

The traveler continued through the village but could not find anyone willing to share food with

him. As the man rested and contemplated leaving the village he remembered the beautiful stone he had picked up earlier in the day. He then had a brilliant idea and ran back to the village calling to the people to come out. He had a magic stone that would help provide food for everyone. Slowly people began to emerge from their houses while others looked out their windows.

The traveler began to invite the people to help him make a large pot of soup. He first asked for a kettle which was supplied by the grumpy villager. They built a fire for the kettle and filled it with water. The villagers were still skeptical but they watched with interest as the traveler stirred the soup. He tasted it and declared it not bad except it needed some salt and pepper which one young lady volunteered to go home and get.

The maid offered her potatoes which were added to the soup. When the traveler tasted the soup again, he said it was very good but would be much better with some carrots and cabbage. A boy ran home to get carrots and a girl ran home to get cabbage. They were having so much fun that the grumpy villager declared that they should have a party.

The villagers were enthralled with the possibilities of how the magic stone could make such wonderful soup and they could hardly wait to try it. When the traveler declared the soup to be ready everyone brought bowls and began to eat—and there was soup left over. Then the music and dancing began. People played instruments that no one knew they could play. The maid declared that there was a **lot** they didn't know until the traveler came along.

The next morning the traveler came to say his good-byes and presented the magic stone to the village with the admonition that they could always have stone soup if they worked together. He said they would never be hungry, sad or grumpy again. The villagers wished him well and invited him to return to the village again in the future. As he left the village he found another stone and admired it. He placed it in his bag with the thought that it might come in very handy sometime.

And so—the Stone Soup story is an excellent one to help us know that when people put their hands together they can work to affect the common good.

And so it is that in our communities when we work together on a project or plan that is shared in by many people, the work is easier, more is accomplished and motivation continues. We have a variety of gifts and abilities to share. Read **I Corinthians 12: 4-20, 27-31**. The important concept here is that everyone has been given spiritual gifts. It is much easier when we hold hands and work together for the important ministry that Christ began on earth and left for us to continue.

When we think in terms of ministry for each of us, we are reminded of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, who were left with the owner's vineyard while he went off to another country. He expected the tenants to be good stewards of the land and have produce for him when he returned. But the tenants found this an opportune time to either maim or kill the owners' servants when they were sent to collect the produce. Finally, the only person he had left to send was his beloved son. He thought they would not kill him, but this became the tenant's opportunity to increase

their greed so they killed him and threw him out so they could have all the proceeds.

Read **Mark 12:1-11** and carefully think about who these people represented. God was the owner, the vineyard was Israel, the tenants were religious leaders, the servants were prophets, and the son was Jesus. As the religious leaders, the tenants were exercising their own authority rather than the authority of the owner. The owner was willing to provide grace, but the tenants were unwilling to accept it. And so their authority was taken away and given to someone else.

But God was willing to continue giving and giving and giving, but the tenants were like us, often unwilling to accept what God has to offer. As God's leaders in the vineyard today, we are asked to be willing servants who work hand in hand to proclaim the Good News of God's salvation rather than seeking to go our own way.

Working for Justice

So, what are ways that we can work hand in hand? Remembering the list that we began earlier in the session, think about which activities would be the most beneficial acts of social justice that are needed in your community. Mark them "A", "B" and "C" with "A" being the most important and "C" the least important. When you complete your list, mark off everything except the "A" list. Then put that list in a priority listing of "A", "B" and "C". Then mark off the "B"s and "C"s. Prioritize your "A" list in the same way until you get down to one or two key ideas on which you feel your church needs to be working for the good of your church and community.

Decide on a plan of action, who will assume which responsibilities, how you will obtain the funding you need and how you will involve others in helping support the plan either financially or with people power. You can be powerful influences for good in your church and community as you reach out with "Hands Together - One in Christ through Acts of Social Justice."

Prayer

Loving God, We thank you for the opportunity to join hands with others as we lead them to social justice. Let our lives be a beacon of light to those in need to find a way out of despair. In God we trust. Amen.

Cornelia Swain retired January 1, 2003 after having served over 25 years as Director of Women's Ministry as well as serving in family and adult ministry for the Board of Christian Education. She is serving a two-year term as president of Memphis and Shelby County Church Women United, plus being very active in Faith Church in Memphis and Southwest Tennessee Regional Women's Ministry. She is a Master Gardener and is active in the Memphis Horticulture Society.

Hands Together through Acts of Kindness

Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9



Materials needed: White board, black board or paper for listing acts of kindness. Bibles for all.

Discussion:

Before you turn to the scripture and study, discuss acts of kindness you have experienced or witnessed. Make a list of these for all to see and for reference later. What made these acts, either given or received, special? Would you describe these acts as “Christian”? What is the difference between Christian acts and those that are in the fashion of “pass it forward” (someone does something nice to you, so you pass that niceness on to someone else)? Which of these acts would you consider to be a response to God’s commandments?

Bible Study:

Read Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9. Take turns reading or choose one reader, but have everyone follow along in their Bibles. If you wish to take the time, you can also read the story in John 12:1-8 and Luke 7:36-50. The question we are looking at will be “When are we called to be extravagant in our acts of kindness?”

Variations of this beautiful story of a woman anointing Jesus is found in all four Gospels. Matthew and Mark’s story are very similar. John adds the information that the woman anointing Jesus was Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus and Martha. Luke’s story has some striking differences, and it is wondered if it is the same story at all. Luke identifies the homeowner as Simon the Pharisee instead of Simon the Leper. The woman, identified by Luke as a sinner, anoints Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair.

In Matthew and Mark’s version, the disciples gathered for a meal before Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time. It was customary for people in Biblical times to recline on low benches or pillows rather than sit in chairs while eating. They would lie on the couch, resting on the left elbow and using the right hand to take their food. In the first part of Matthew 26 right before our story, Jesus told the disciples “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” In the few verses preceding the story in Mark, the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus and kill him. Jesus had warned the disciples several times about His death, but they either did not want to hear or they did not understand what it meant. Yet, at dinner, a woman approached Jesus and performed an act that indicated that she not only heard His word about His death, but she knew how to respond.

William Barclay mentioned in his commentary on Mark that it was the custom at that time to pour a few drops of perfume on guests when they arrived at a house or sat down to a meal. So, it would not have seemed strange that the woman would approach Jesus with the jar of perfume. But she did not give just a little, she gave it all. She broke the bottle and poured all the contents over Jesus. Joanna Weaver in *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World* writes:

That’s extravagant love. The kind of love that disregards everything else so it can focus on one thing alone: the object of that love. The kind of love that sacrifices everything, only wishing it had more to give. Nothing is too precious. Nothing is too exorbitant. The heart demands we give – and give all. (159)

William Barkley in his commentary on Matthew states the following:

Love never calculates; love never thinks how little it can decently give; love's one desire is to give to the uttermost limits; and, when it has given all it has to give, it still thinks the gift too little. We have not even begun to be Christian if we think of giving to Christ and to His Church in terms of as little as we respectably can. (364)

Mary (named in John's account), who sat at the feet of Jesus, knew His heart in ways the others did not. Are we, like her sister Martha, so busy worrying about what we are doing "for" Jesus that we miss what He is saying? Do we spend time at His feet so we can know His heart?

The disciples reacted in a negative way toward the woman's extravagant use of the oil. The oil that was used was identified as nard, a perfume made from the root of a plant grown mainly in India. It was extremely costly and was known for its strong fragrance. Its cost was stated to be more than 300 denarii or more than a year's wages for most. It was the same perfume used by the woman that Solomon praised in his Song of Solomon (1:12, 4:13). The jar the oil came in was alabaster, a fairly common, soft, semitransparent, marble-like mineral. It was easily carved so used for ornate jars, boxes, vases and flasks.

The disciples' reaction could have been one of practicality. They declared the oil could have been sold and given to the poor. It should be noted that giving to the poor was expected of pilgrims at the feast of the Passover, so they may have been looking at how they could fulfill that expectation. Their thinking could have been: "We are struggling to come up with something for the poor and here comes this woman with this extravagant waste. How dare she? Why, look how many mouths we could have fed."

When Jesus stated, "The poor you will always have with you", he was actually referencing Deuteronomy 15:11 which reads, "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land." This scripture is not an excuse to ignore the poor because they will always be with us. Rather, it is an encouragement for us to always be looking for ways to help the poor whenever we can. The opportunity is always there. However, there are special opportunities that arise that may be once in a lifetime opportunities. It may be to respond to a call to ministry, a special mission trip, a call to give of ourselves beyond what we think we are capable. These are not everyday opportunities. Like the woman in our story, we need to be watching, waiting, and ready to respond extravagantly.

Another story in the Bible that shows an extravagant action causing an indignant reaction is the story of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem and the reaction of his wife, Michal who was also Saul's daughter. **Read the story from 2 Samuel 6:12-23.** David was finally bringing the Ark into his city. His joy was uncontainable. He danced before the Lord "with all his might". *The Message* has verses 12-14 as follows: "celebrating extravagantly all the way, with frequent sacrifices of choice bulls. David, ceremonially dressed in priest's linen, danced with great abandon before God."

Michal's reaction was one of indignation. In verse 20, she said to David, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!" David responded to Michal, "It was before the Lord, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the Lord's people Israel—I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor." How did the Lord respond to Michal's indignation? She was childless until her death.

Max Lucado says this of David in his book *Facing your Giants*:

Scripture doesn't portray David dancing at any other time. He did no death dance over Goliath. He never scooted the boot among the Philistines. He didn't inaugurate his term as king with a waltz or dedicated Jerusalem with a ballroom swirl. But when God came to town, he couldn't sit still. Maybe God wonders how we do. Do we not enjoy what David wanted? The presence of God. Jesus promised, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Yet, how long since we rolled back the rug and celebrated the night away because of this? (117)

Was God offended at David's dancing? It does not appear so. In fact, Lucado suggests God was David's dance partner.

In defense of her action, Jesus said the woman who anointed Him had done a lovely, beautiful or good thing depending on the translation. The Greek has two words for "good". *Agathos* describes a thing which is morally good. *Kalos* describes a thing which is not only good, but lovely. Good can be harsh. Lovely is soft. Good can be controlling. Lovely is charming. Good can be unattractive. Lovely is winsome. How different the attitude of this woman, willing to be extravagant in her expression of love toward Jesus, and the disciples looking to fulfill a command. Unlike Michal who remained barren, Jesus said this woman's story would be told wherever the gospel was proclaimed throughout the whole world.

Discussion:

I believe most of us would want to identify with the woman rather than the disciples in this story. Yet, as we consider how we would have reacted, I think we need to ask some questions:

1. Have we ever acted as the disciples did and get "indignant" with the actions of others, especially those in the church? Where do we get angry and offended? How do we react when "it" is done differently than how we think it should be done? How do we react toward someone who is displaying exuberant worship or prayer?
2. Has our knowledge of "God with us" become ho-hum? Is our view of God so small that He only gets a glance from us at Sunday worship? Has Sunday mornings become one of gossiping with pew neighbors, discussing the unruly actions of the children in the sanctuary, and counting the attendees rather than listening for God to speak? Is our God so impersonal that He gets more yawns from us than WOWs? And when we realize there have not been WOWs in worship late, do we blame the minister?
3. Have we ever been accused of going overboard in our acts of kindness or our acts of worship?
Don't you think you're overdoing it with this religious stuff?
Why spend so much time in prayer? God knows what we need anyway.
Why go overseas as a missionary? Look what you are giving up.
You are going to the homeless shelter again?
You need to look out for yourself; no one else will.

Review the lists made at the beginning of the lesson. These acts of kindness were more than likely done in good faith and with a giving heart. But, are we just coasting? Has our work with the poor become duty? The opportunities for kindness are always before us. Respond to these opportunities,

and respond well. But, we need to be careful of that point where our spirits slip into neutral. Are we listening to that call to become extravagant in our response to God? Being extravagant is not for a show. It is, like the woman in our story, hearing the heart of Jesus and responding with all we have.

Prayer:

Lord, forgive us when our giving becomes rote. Help us to fine tune our hearing, so we can hear your heart's cry and respond wholly, completely. Forgive us when we say we can't or we don't know how or we don't want to. Show us, Lord, how to respond with all our body, mind and strength. Amen.

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Hands Together through Service Luke 17: 7-10



Background Passages: *Deuteronomy 10:12, Deuteronomy 28:47-48, Joshua 24:24, Psalm 101:6, Ecclesiastes 12:13, Matthew 4:10, Matthew 6:24, Matthew 20:26-28, Luke 22:27, John 20:21, Romans 1:1, 12:7,11, 14:17-19, Galatians 4:7, 5:13, Ephesians 6:5-8, Colossians 3:23-24, 1 Peter 5:5*

“I shall pass this world but once. Any good thing therefore, that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer it or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.” **Quote by: Stephen Grellet, American Quaker**

Subject: To Serve

List these phrases on newsprint or a sheet of paper for all to see:

Oh my, you want me to do what?... Yes, I will do it! ... Not on your life... I would but...

Give me a break ... When do I start? ... I don't think so... I can't, I have to... Who is asking? ... Sure, I don't have anything else to do... Yes, what a blessing to be asked... Next time...

Thanks for asking, but no thanks... I know the perfect person... Here am I! Send me! ...

Which statement above would most likely be your response when asked: Would you...

- Take a neighbor to the market?
- Donate money for a mission trip?
- Bake cookies for a bake sale?
- Read scripture during church service?
- Tell someone about what Jesus has done for you?
- Go on a mission trip to India?
- Open with prayer for Sunday school?

The list of statements could go on forever, as well as the request for you to SERVE.

Opportunities to serve are at every facet of our lives.

- **Which do you enjoy more being served or serving? Why?**

Introduction: Serve or be served?

In today's culture self-glorification is the norm. However in researching the topics of service and the servant's heart, I realized it is not about the individual – it is about God. Therefore, the goal of this study will be to remove the focus from “man” or “mankind” and place it where it truly belongs, on God. Psalm 29: 2 says, “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name.” Our attitude toward the service to our King, when called upon to serve should be that of the prophet Isaiah. *Isaiah 6:8 – Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me!’”* **It's all about serving GOD!**

“I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.” **Quote by: Albert Schweitzer,** French Missionary and Philosopher

Being Served or Serving -- Luke 17: 7-8

- Verse 7 – Ask yourself – What would a master say to his slave (servant) when the slave returned to the house after spending his day plowing a field or tending sheep?
- Verse 8 – Ask yourself – When would the slave eat? Does the master care?

In this parable, Jesus is asking his hearers to imagine if they had servants (slaves) working for them. Jesus then asks a rhetorical question: Do I fix dinner for the slaves or the other way around? Let me think??? Of course not, the slaves fix dinner, serve dinner, and clean up after dinner; even after a long day of usual duties. It is what is expected of them as servants.

The word “servant” means to be a slave, in bondage, in service to another, attendant, minister, deacon, or to work in service of someone else. Jesus said, (Luke 22:27) *“I am among you as the one who serves.”* Jesus shows that He is a servant by choice and example. We should serve because He served, and because we have no other appointment. In other words, we are expected to serve. It is our DUTY to serve.

Jesus knew who He was, and He fully embraced what His heavenly Father had commanded Him to be and to do. But He didn’t exalt Himself, seek His own fame and power, or attract attention to Himself. His purpose was to bring glory to the Father and to obey the Father in all things. His purpose was to serve. In Luke 12:48 Jesus teaches us how to live until He comes. *“But someone who does not know, and then does something wrong, will be punished only lightly. When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required.”*

The more we recognize all that we have been given by God – including God’s greatest gift to us, our salvation – the more we should recognize that we are required to give much in the way of service.

“We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.” **Quote by: Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and President of Children’s Defense Fund**

Thanks or not -- Luke 17: 9

Within the cultural mindset of our world people respond and react in various ways to the concept of service. Today “the individual” wants to be asked, thanked or rewarded for what service he or she is willing to render. “Only when it is convenient” is the attitude of many when it comes to idea of service or serving others.

As in Luke 17:10; when we obey God, we have only done our DUTY, and we should regard it as a privilege. Remember, obedience is not something extra we do; it is our duty. Jesus is not suggesting that our service is meaningless or useless, nor is He advocating doing away with rewards. He is attacking unwarranted self-esteem and spiritual pride.

The master doesn’t “owe” the servant a thank you, a reward or a pat on the back for his hard work. Nor should we expect a “thank you”. Once again, it is simply our DUTY to serve.

- How do you respond after completing an act of service – Do you expect a thank you for your efforts? Or did you go about your day, not expecting acknowledgement for your efforts?

“You must give some time to your fellow men. Even if it’s a little thing, do something for others – something for which you get no pay but the privilege of doing it.” **Quote by: Albert Schweitzer, French Missionary and Philosopher**

A Servant's DUTY -- Luke 17:9-10

In both verses is the word "told," meaning to give instructions as to what must be done. "Orders" or "commands" are synonyms for "told." Having been put in that context, it does not leave you much room for questions. Just do it! It is your DUTY.

The last word of verse 10 – DUTY, "be obligated," "one must, one ought" "what you have to do." These are not very popular statements in today's society. Today, everyone wants to be asked to do something, they want to be thanked and rewarded for doing it, and they want the recognition or credit for doing it.

- How do you feel about DUTY?

An Attitude of "Privilege" or "Unworthy Servant" -- Luke 17: 10

A bold statement, "*You should say, 'we are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'*" This is the only place in the Bible where Jesus says the word DUTY. But once you read the statement above, you got it.

- What kind of attitude do you have when it comes to serving or performing a DUTY?

<p>"Think of giving not as a duty but as a privilege." Quote by: John D. Rockefeller Jr. American Philanthropist</p>

Summary – Luke 17: 7-10

If we have obeyed God, we have only done our duty, and we should regard it as a privilege. Remember, obedience is not something extra we do; it is our duty. Jesus is not suggesting that our service is meaningless or useless, nor is he advocating doing away with rewards. He is attacking unwarranted self-esteem and spiritual pride.

What does God's Servant look like?

God's servant feeds, teaches, cares, loves, heals, binds, carries people, and lifts people up. God's servants have a certain glow about them that radiates kindness, compassion, tolerance, forgiveness as well as selflessness.

A true servant does not demand recognition. The reward received by those who seek praise from people is just that and only that-praise from people. Such praise comes and goes very quickly; the approval of people is very fickle and often fleeting. God's praise and blessing are reserved for those who serve other without any expectation of recognition or praise from people.

(Matthews 6: 3-4)

A servant gives without expecting anything in return from the person he or she has served. True servanthood is void of manipulation or a desire to control others.

Jesus Christ is our Lord. He is our Master, our Ruler, and our Owner. He is the One who has redeemed our lives from death. He is the One who we take our daily orders and from whom we receive all that we need. He is the One who has entrusted us to conduct spiritual business in His name. Therefore, a genuine servant knows that he/she has, in Christ Jesus, all that he/she needs!

When we give we will receive! Our hearts are overwhelmed with such peace, joy serenity, and confidence that satisfy the soul like nothing else! We build lasting relationships with others and with God. And because of our service we are entrusted with more opportunities to serve.

We are commanded to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind, and love to our neighbor as ourselves (**Matthews 22: 37-39**). It is out of love that we serve. In fact, service is the manifestation of love. If you love, but you do not give to a person and are not generous in your service to that person, on what grounds can you truly say that you love? Service is the evidence of genuine love. It is love in action.

- What new insight do you have into the nature of service?
- Do you have a servant's heart? Is having a servant's heart something one can develop?
- What does the statement "God doesn't call the qualified, or He qualifies the called" mean?
- How do you heed the call to serve?

One must have an attitude of a servant, know what to do to serve, and to serve. Service opportunities are all around us everyday. (**Ecclesiastes 9:10**) says, "*Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might*". Service is not convenient and it is not always easy. Many times one must give up something to serve but it is always rewarding.

Sometimes it is not a matter of attitude or knowledge, but simply a lack of effort or action on our part. Read **James 1: 22-25**. It is important that we listen to what God's word says, but it is much more important to obey it, to do what it says. We can measure the effectiveness of our Bible study time by the effect it has on our actions, behaviors, and attitudes.

- How will you put into action what you have studied?
- In what ways do you practice what you preach?
- Will you be God's servant?

"Each of us has been entrusted with a God given, unique calling – and the best way to succeed and be happy is to discover what that is, work at it with all your might, allow God to lead you and give it away – serve others." **Quote by: Donna Clark, Educator**

Hymns: *Here Am I, Lord!* and *I'll Go Where You Want Me to Go*

Prayer:

Gracious God, we come to You seeking forgiveness for our failure to fulfill our duty to serve You and Your kingdom. We confess that we are selfish, proud, and boastful people. Grant us, we pray, the desire to do Your will and the quietness and stillness necessary to recognize the opportunities to serve that You send our way each and every day. Grant us the confidence to say, "Yes, Lord Take Me! I will go." May we follow in Your Son's way, putting the needs of others before our own needs. May Your faith, hope, and love be with us always. In Jesus Name we pray, AMEN.

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Hands Together through Stewardship Luke 17:7-10



What is a steward? Or what is Stewardship?

Write the above statements on newsprint or a chalkboard. Ask the participants to offer their ideas and write the responses on the newsprint or board.

The *Confession of Faith* defines it this way –

6.10 - Christian stewardship acknowledges that all of life and creation is a trust from God, to be used for God's glory and service. It includes the conservation and responsible use of natural resources as well as the creative use of human skills and energies. These gifts of God are to be shared with all especially the poor.

6.11 - The motive for Christian stewardship is gratitude for God's abundant love and mercy, accompanied by the desire to share all of God's good gifts with others.

6.12 - God gives to the human family a variety of gifts, including gifts to each person for which each person has responsibility. God desires that each person engage in the mutual sharing of these gifts so that all may be enriched.

6.13 - Proportionate and regular giving of all that God entrusts to the human family is an act of devotion and a means of grace. Giving to and through the church is the privilege of every believer. Tithing as a scriptural guide for giving is an adventure of faith and a rich and rewarding practice. The tither not only experiences the grace of God but even the grace of sharing.

6.14 - All believers are responsible to God and to the covenant community for their stewardship.

(Note to Leader: It might be helpful to put all of these statements on a piece of paper and make copies for each participant.)

Luke 17:7-10 teaches when a servant comes in from plowing or taking care of sheep, he doesn't just sit down and eat, but first prepares his master's meal and serves him his supper before he eats his own. He is not even thanked for he is merely doing what he is supposed to do. Just so, if you obey me, you should not consider yourselves worthy of praise, for you have simply done your duty.

Liken unto the story of Jesus and the ten lepers, crying out to Jesus, "Have mercy on us." Jesus told them to go to the Jewish priest and show him that they were healed. As they turned to go their leprosy disappeared. Only one came back, fell upon his face and said, "Glory to God, I'm healed."

Jesus asked "Didn't I heal ten men? Where are the nine?" Jesus said to the Samaritan, "Stand up, your faith has made you well."

- How do we show that we are good stewards?
- When we pray asking from Jesus, do we praise and thank him enough for what he gives us?
- Do we tell others or do we keep it to ourselves and not share what God has done for us?

A certain rich man had a steward, a man who took care of all his possessions. He heard that the steward was wasting his property and he sent for him and said, “What is this that I hear about you?” You must soon give up your place and be my steward no longer.

Then the steward said to himself, in a few days I shall lose my place; and what shall I do? I cannot work in the fields and I am ashamed to go begging from door to door, but I have thought of a plan that will give me friends, so that when I am put out of my place, some people will take me into their houses because of what I have done for them, and this was his plan. He sent for the men who were in debt to his master and said to the first one, “How much do you owe my master?” The man told him he owed him a thousand gallons of oil. Then the steward told him he only needed to pay five hundred dollars. Then the steward said to the other man, asking how much he owed, the man answered, I owe him 1,500 bushels of wheat and the steward said to him that he only needed to pay 1,200 bushels.

When his master heard of this which his steward had done, he said that is a sharp, shrewd man who takes care of himself, and Jesus said be as earnest and thoughtful for the eternal life as men are for this present life.

Jesus did not approve of the actions of the unjust steward but he told his disciples to learn some good lessons even from his wrong deed. Are you cheating God? Are you cheating yourself out of a blessing from God by not being a good steward?

The faithful steward described in Luke 12:35-38 says “Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning, and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord, when he will return from the wedding; that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately. Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them, and if he shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants.

Read Luke 16:1-8, as it describes the unfaithful steward.

Sometimes stewardship doesn't have to come with a large contribution. In Mark, chapter 9 and verse 41, it says through giving a cup of water in Christ's name, you will be rewarded. Another example of giving is the story of the widow woman in Luke 21:1-4, who gave two mites (Hebrew, “lepton”) which was worth approximately 1/8 of cent. It was so small that its stamp was barely legible. But Jesus said that she of her want did cast in all that she had even all of her living. In Mark 4:3-8, Jesus talked about the sower who sowed his seeds in the good ground returned much, which is unlike the sower who sowed in unfertile ground which returned little.

If we have obeyed God, we have only done our duty and we should regard it as a privilege. Do you sometimes feel that you deserve extra credit for serving God? Remember obedience is not something extra that we do, it is our duty. Jesus is not suggesting that our service is meaningless or useless, nor is he advocating doing away with rewards. He is attacking unwarranted self-esteem and spiritual pride.

Genesis 1:28 says, "...and God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." My husband and I have four sons and we lived on a farm in northwest Arkansas, with cattle, hogs, and turkeys. One winter it snowed 18 inches. The conditions were very cold and severe. One morning after Bill and the boys tended to the turkeys and hogs, they noticed that the cattle were lying on the frozen pond to get the thermal heat to stay warm. Bill and the boys moved the cattle from danger, but many ranchers that didn't move their cattle lost many head of cattle from the ice breaking. As the Bible says, we are stewards and have dominion over all God's creation.

In James' gospel it tells us that faith without works is dead. As you read this study you may find yourself as I did, an empty-nester; with our four sons now grown and my husband serving as the pastor of Mars Hills CP Church on Crow Mountain in Russellville, AR, I wanted to do some other things with my time. I write devotions which I give each Sunday before he brings the message. I belong to the local Extension Homemakers Club in our area. There is a great need in all areas of help, especially for elderly people in nursing homes. Our Club decorates the nursing home doors with homemade items for Christmas as well as homemade pillows, lap-ropes and knitted hats for all the residents. Our success is great by seeing the smiles on their faces when they open their gifts. We also do one hundred gifts a month of the children's hospital in Little Rock. These include hats, covers, and pillows. There are so many thing for us to do, not needing a thank you, just realizing that we need to be good stewards of that which God has blessed us. I have found this to be very rewarding and fulfilling, and my reward is the smiles. One person, or many people, can make a difference, perhaps that person is you.

Stewardship is the act of giving not only our financial means but also our love and concern for others who need us. It is also our willingness to do unto others as we would have them do to us, not expecting anything in return. We are to give from our heart as Christ did, giving his life for the whole world.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, Lord we thank you for all your many blessings that you give to us. May what we experience be used to make us better stewards in every area of our lives. Prepare our hearts in thoughts and actions that we may follow your will to do for others as you have done for us. Amen.

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Hands Together through Social Justice

Micah 6:8

From the time of our birth, we have certain requirements that are set before us. Before we are allowed to leave the hospital, we are required to show that we are healthy and thriving. At our first doctor's visit, we are required to show that we are eating well by gaining weight and growing taller. As we grow as children, our parents and elders place certain requirements in our lives as well. We are to use our manners, treat others as we would want to be treated, say we are sorry when we have done wrong, and perhaps take on some of the household chores. As we mature into adults, we face many types of requirements; we must ascertain certain grades and participate in various activities to get into the college or university of our choice, we must fit the job description and be able to fulfill the duties within in order to have a job and make a living, if married, we are required to love our spouse and our families unconditionally through thick and thin, good and bad times. Much is required of us as we go through this life.

What are "requirements" anyway? Requirements are absolute necessities, things that one must do. There is no way to get around requirements, no easy way to get from Point A to Point B. We must travel the full length of the road ahead in order to arrive at our destination. From the beginning of our lives, we much get used to requirements because they are part of everyday life. We cannot argue our way out of them. There is no wiggle room where requirements are concerned.

In the Book of Micah, chapter six, we find that the Lord has a controversy with the people called Israel because they have forgotten the saving acts of the past, and they have forgotten what it means to walk humbly with God. The prophetic ministry of Micah takes place during the same time period as Isaiah and Amos, around 8th century B.C. This was a time of prosperity and national security for Israel, yet the economic prosperity and the national security were not reflected in the spiritual condition of the people who inhabited the land. Because times were "easy," injustice had become a way of life. Idolatry had crept into their worship practices. They had not only forgotten who they were as a people of God, but whose they were, God's people.

Along comes Micah, the prophet, who lets Israel know that God has a controversy with them, and is calling hem on the carpet for their long history of faithlessness. Their guilt is too obvious to be denied, and too great to be excused. They express their desires to once again be in God's favor. They ask the question, "With what shall I come before the Lord?" In other words, "What will the Lord be pleased with? What shall I give for my transgression? What shall I bring with me?" Though zealous in their offers, their proposals show their ignorance. They present a list of possible objects of sacrifice to atone for their transgressions: a burnt offering of a year old calf, or even better an offering of thousands of rams and ten thousands of rivers of oil, or better still, their firstborn, the fruit of their body. But these offerings cannot supply what it is that God seeks from Israel. In deed, god does not yearn for material sacrifices at all, but rather for an inner commitment: justice, kindness, and a humble walk with God.

"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you?" (v. 8a). The good, which God requires, is not the paying of a price with a sacrifice for the pardon of sins, but the doing of a duty. We must "do justice." Justice (mishpat) is related to the Hebrew verb, "to

judge,” and finds its setting within the court of law, particularly within the council of community elders who oversaw legal matters in the ancient Hebrew community. It was their responsibility to maintain the social equilibrium within the community, to defend by means of the law those who were too poor or too weak to defend themselves. They insured that the rights of individuals were honored and preserved. To do justice, we must do wrong to no one, and do right to all.

We are also told to “love kindness.” “Kindness” (chesedh) is frequently used in the Old Testament to refer to God’s covenant love: the enduring, persistent commitment, which God has for Israel and which is demonstrated both in good times and in bad. It is a loving loyalty to Israel on God’s part, this “covenant love” between God and human beings in which community is established between poor and rich, weak and strong, female and male, slave and free, etc. We are called to care for one another with mutual respect, protection, and sharing. We are to reciprocate this same loving loyalty to God as well as to the community around us and beyond. We must delight in kindness, as God does, and be glad for an opportunity to do good and do it cheerfully!

Finally, we are told to “walk humbly with your God.” The definition of being humble here is the ability to view oneself in a proper relation to God, to be aware of one’s need of, and openly acknowledge one’s dependence upon God. When we are truly humble, we are not preoccupied with ourselves. We are able to forget the busyness of our own mind and actually listen to what God is saying through his Word. We put behind us our own desires and focus fully on God’s Word and will for us. When we truly have a humble walk with God, it is then that we can fully “do justice” and “love kindness” as God so requires of us as his people.

For Discussion:

1. It is easy to confuse expectations with requirements. Discuss the difference between the two words, and how what is expected of us as Christians, and what is required of us as Christians differ. List the expectations and requirements you come up with and talk about the impact they might have on the community, both local and abroad.
2. What does it mean to live as a Christian in today’s society? How can/do we “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God?” Where do we need to stretch ourselves in order to fulfill these requirements?
3. Discuss the statement, “Faith without action is no faith at all.” How does this relate to social/societal commitments as Christians? Brainstorm about ways that your Women’s Ministry can respond to the needs of your community and to the needs within our world.

Prayer:

God of justice, in our hectic and comfortable lives, we often forget the requirement that you have set before us. Help us to seek justice for those who have no voice in this world. Help us to love kindness by showing mercy to those who feel forgotten by the world. And most of all, lead us in a humble walk with you, O God, keeping our eyes fully trained on you so that we may see through your eyes those who need to know your love and grace. Help us to join together as one

so that we may do your will, hand in hand with one another reaching out to a world hungry for your love. In your name we pray. Amen.

Michelle Rackley resides in Rydal, Georgia. She is a member of Bartow Cumberland Presbyterian where her husband, Mark, is the pastor. She is blessed to be a full-time mother to three beautiful children, Sarah Catherine, Paul, and Anna.

Hands Together through Encouragement Philippians 4:8



Opening:

Invite women to share their definition of encouragement. Ask, “Can you imagine a life without encouragement?”

Recently I received some motivating encouragement from a co-worker. There has been a transition in our office and we are both taking on some new responsibilities. We’ve been working hard to get a lot accomplished. One day she looked at me and said, “Margie you’re doing a great job.” Those words may seem so simple. But they were just what I needed to hear at that moment. Encouraging words make our lives better.

My husband Kevin has been a great encouragement to me. He’ll see me tired in the evening. He can tell I don’t really feel like folding a load of laundry but am doing it anyway. He’ll say, “Margie you are a great mom.” Or after we have eaten a meal I have fixed, he is always quick to say, “What a great meal, honey. Thank you.” There are others who are great encouragers as well.

Members at church are praying for us, supporting Kevin and I, and serving when needed. These all are encouragers to us as pastors. Laymen and pastors alike need encouragement, because this world can be very discouraging.

Paul took encouragement everywhere he went to non-believers and believers. Acts 20:1-2 says, “When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said good-bye and set out for Macedonia. He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece.” Paul spent much of his time encouraging those around him who were facing hardship and tragedy.

Encouragement was one of God’s main focuses in the New Testament. In Acts 13:15 God used the priests to help others know that these must be encouragers, “After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.”” Speaking is not always easy.

I would venture to say that those who have been through difficult times can say that if it were not for the encouragement of their church friends, they wouldn’t have been able to get through their tough time. God has given us a great example. His son Jesus was the perfect encourager.

Jesus encouraged the woman at the well even though she had faults. Even though Jesus’ disciples were not always perfect, He still said to them, “Come with me;” “Let’s pray together;” “Let me wash your feet;” “Let me die on the cross for YOUR sins.” If we want to know how to be a good encourager, look at Jesus’ hands. They can show us just what it takes to be an encourager.

Sacrifice.....

It is not always easy to encourage someone who you think should have already learned their lesson. I've struggled with encouraging family and friends who continue to make bad choice after bad choice. It seems they don't deserve encouragement. It would be easy to pull away from them, but they probably need encouragement more during their failures than during their successes. At a time in my life when I was making bad choices, I am glad there were people who continued to encourage me even though they may have wanted to pull away.

God said if you want to be great in My kingdom then learn to be the servant of all. Don't learn to be the judge of all. Sacrificing our human tendencies in order to encourage others is God's desire. "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Ephesians 5: 1-2)

Some Christians are naturally gifted at encouragement. Others have to work hard at it. Sacrificing our own desire to lie on the couch and watch television for the sake of others will be hard, but imagine the difference it will make in people's lives. Some examples of what an encouraging sister might say to you are: "You'll get through this"; "That was a great song or Bible reading"; or "Can I come over and help you make a pie tomorrow?" She may send you a card to say I care. "And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." (Hebrews 13:16)

The Holy Spirit may ask you at any moment to be an encourager. Do you realize that God *is* going to use you to encourage if you will be obedient to His Holy Spirit? You will be used by God to be His deliverer of peace. "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:26-27)

The Bible is clear that we are to encourage others. God says that it might be a sacrifice at times. The Holy Spirit is our guide. Why are we waiting? The Bible gives us a test in Philippians 4:8 to judge ourselves.

Philippians 4:8 says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things." The reason we are supposed to think about such things is because our thoughts drive our actions.

Let's do the *P – 48 Test*, as described in Mary A. Kassian's book *Conversation Peace*, to help prepare us to encourage one another and prepare us to encourage the world. The *P – 48* tests the goodness of thoughts, beliefs, and words, so we can determine if they will be encouraging to others.

Pure, Right, Excellent, Praiseworthy, Lovely, Admirable, Noble, True

After being shaken through this filter, the words and thoughts that remain are seeds we want to plant. The others are not from God and should be discarded. Put your thoughts and words to the test below:

Pure	Are my motives pure? Are my thoughts/words holy?
Right	Is this proper and appropriate? Is it in conformity with God's standards and principles? Does it build?
Excellent	Is this of highest quality? Is it the best or just adequate?
Praiseworthy	Is it commendable? Am I proud of the way I am thinking/speaking? Is God proud of me?
Lovely	Does it have a beauty that appeals to the heart? Does it mirror the beauty and gentleness of Jesus?
Admirable	Is it worthy of being respected and admired? Would others commend it?
Noble	Is it of the highest moral character, superior quality, great, and magnificent? Does it demonstrate my position as a child of the King?
True	Is it free of deceit? Does it agree with the Bible's evaluation of the situation? Does it submit to truth?

Ask Each Other

- What are some ways you have encouraged in the past?
- Now that you've taken the *P – 48 Test*, how will your actions be different?
- Do you have some adjusting to do, so you can encourage with pure motives? If so, what?
- Will you go about encouraging in a new way or with a new perspective? If so, how?
- How do you think your encouragement will be received?

Words of encouragement can be powerful. They can take you from sadness to happiness, brokenness to wholeness, and hopelessness to faith. Our acts of encouragement, whether it is through a card, phone call, or a helping hand, can be the most beautiful gift we give. Our acts or words of encouragement should be Pure, Right, Excellent, Praiseworthy, Lovely, Admirable, Noble, and True.

Hand-In-Hand Activities

1. Think of a time in your life when someone has encouraged you and this encouragement was helpful. Write on a note expressing to them how much their encouragement helped you. I know this will take some time. Remember the beginning of the Bible study, Jesus' hands, and the sacrifice He gave? I guarantee you will find fulfillment in this exercise.

The person receiving the letter will probably be encouraged also because you sent the note to them.

2. Look at the person to the right of you and give them some words of encouragement. Tell her she is a good mother, a great cook, or an encouragement by her faithfulness at church, etc. Do this one at a time and listen to each other as you encourage. *Remember, spirit led encouragement is always honest.*

Prayer

Dear heavenly father thank you for your example of pure encouragement through sacrifice. Help us seek to encourage one another in different ways and to be open to your Holy Spirit leading us everyday. Thank you for making us one in Christ through being your hands of encouragement. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Margie Vanderlaan lives in Bethany, IL where her husband, Kevin, serves as pastor of Bethany CP Church. They have served together there for almost three years and, as the song says, "it gets sweeter and sweeter as the days go by." Margie and Kevin have two children, Isaac who is 10 years old and Brianna who is 7. They love to play outside in God's creation whether it's sports or just the park. Margie enjoys singing, playing the piano, drinking a good cup of coffee, and shopping with her mother in her spare time!

Hands Together through Sisterhood

Ruth 2:1-21



Naomi and Ruth were more than mother-in-law and daughter-in-law; there was a love and devotion between them as mother and daughter that can inspire us to a loyal devotion to our sisters in Christ, but even greater than that inspire us to remain faithful to God, His truth and His Church.

As they lived in Moab, Naomi must have shared with her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, about God. Ruth's determination to stay with Naomi after she decided to return to her homeland, Bethlehem and was testimony to the sterling example Naomi must have set for her daughter-in-law.

As they traveled the dusty road maybe Naomi questioned herself, "What was I thinking to let Ruth come on the journey?" She tried to turn her back but it did no good. Ruth might have replied, "How often have I heard you say the Lord watches over those who love Him. If we dwell on all the things that could go wrong, we'll be afraid to take another step. Tell me about the Lord again, Mother. Tell me how He feed thousands of people in the desert; how He brought water from the rock." How can we reach out to someone who needs an encouraging word or just some one to be with them? Sometimes we forget and think about what we have lost, instead of thinking about what we have; first we have Jesus Christ, and next we have each other to rely on and depend upon to be loyal sisters and believers in Christ.

All that Ruth did was done in love for Naomi and her love for Naomi's God. She made a promise on a dusty road between Moab and Bethlehem that she was determined to keep. Ruth had no way of knowing that her way of blessing Naomi would eventually become a blessing in her own life. Ruth gave up everything, expecting nothing, and God honored her.

God delights in seeing us love and bless others. He turns that love and blessing back to us double measure. "Be generous, and you will be prosperous. Help others, and you will be helped." (Proverbs 11:25). "Happy are those who are merciful to others; God will be merciful to them! Happy are the pure in heart; they will see God!" (Matthew 5:7-8).

It was in faith that Naomi returned to Bethlehem with her Moabite daughter-in-law just as the barley harvest was in full swing. Although Ruth couldn't know it then, her future blessing would spring from these afflictions.

Ruth requested permission from Naomi to go into the fields to gather left over grain; "Please let me go to the field, and glean heads of grain after him in whose sight I may find, favor." Naomi replied to Ruth: "Go my daughter."

Ruth went and gleaned in the fields; and not just any field, though, but the one belonging to Boaz, kinsman to Naomi's late husband. Was this by accident? No, God had a plan. Ruth went forth with her mother's blessing, under the care of her Naomi's God. Her every step was guided by God. Little did she know that amid the sheaves she would find a husband; that he should

make her the joint owner of all those broad acres; and that she, a poor foreigner, should become one of the progenitors of the great Messiah.

Check out Matthew 1:5 and you will find that Boaz is the son of the prostitute Rahab. Ruth was a despised foreigner married to the son of a prostitute – but she was an ancestor of Jesus Christ. These kinds of things happen in the Bible. And we should be blessed that they do. We have the Master-weaver that has a place in His plan for each of us. God is very good to those who trust in him and He blesses us each and every day. Little do we know what may happen to us today or tomorrow, but as believers in Jesus Christ we can see His hand in everything. So don't let the trivial events in your life get you down; let them "roll off your back like water rolls off a duck's back." Be good to each other. Christ says we are to love everyone - share a smile, a kind word, a hug, a gentle touch, hold their hand.

Boaz reached out to Ruth giving her permission to glean in the field and protected her. Boaz was there and it was enough for Ruth. Ruth was humble gleaner. This story teaches us to be spiritual gleaners; with our Heavenly Father as the great Husbandman. What kind of gleaner are we? Are we among the sheaves and the bushes? Are we working together hand in hand? As we plough the soil and sow the seeds, do we remember that God alone gives the increase? It is God who sends the clouds and the sunshine, directs the winds and the rain. Therefore, God is to receive our praise and all the glory. God, as the great spiritual Husbandman, has many fields and they are all fertile. There is always an abundant harvest to be reaped in them. Ruth was a gleaner, and she serves as an illustration of what every believer needs to be about in the fields of God.

Ruth had no right to go among the sheaves to glean, but Boaz gave her the right to go there by saying, "Let her do it." For her to be allowed to go among the sheaves, in that part of the field where the wheat was not already carted, was a special favor; but to go among the sheaves, and to have handfuls of grain dropped on purpose for her, was a further proof of the kindness of Boaz. Why you may ask? One reason Boaz allowed Ruth to go and glean among the sheaves because of his love to her; and so it is with God's free grace that lets us go among his sheaves.

Go a-gleaning, spiritually. Never lose an opportunity of getting a blessing. Glean at the mercy-seat; glean in the house of God; glean in private meditation; glean in reading books; glean in associating with people; glean with your family; glean everywhere and wherever you go.

Whenever we are privileged to eat of the bread which Jesus gives, we are, like Ruth, satisfied with the full and sweet repast. When Jesus is the host, no guest goes empty from the table. Our head is satisfied with the precious truth which Christ reveals; our heart is content with Jesus, as the altogether lovely object of affection; our hope is satisfied, for whom have we in heaven but Jesus? And our desire is satiated, for what can we wish for more than to know Christ and to be found in Him?"

I will close with one last comment - we are not promised tomorrow or the next moment, so enjoy every moment. My mother spent 12 weeks in the hospital before she died and during her illness my sister and I became even closer, not knowing that in 18 months our mother would be with the Lord. After our mother died Christmas approached and my sister asked me to come and spend the holiday with her and her family, which I did. The day after Christmas we went shopping and

Hands Together through Reconciliation 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 (NIV)



A Glimpse through the Fence

17Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 18All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20We 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. 21God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Allen's Story

Allen sits on his bunk reading a CMA (Christian Motor Cycle Association) magazine. He remembers when he had a bike of his own. He begins to doze off, dreaming of riding through the mountains and looking at the foliage. There are so many leaves; red, orange, yellow, and some that are a blending of colors. Allen wakes with a start when someone bumps his bed. He awakens back to the reality that he shares a room with one hundred and twenty five other guys. Allen is incarcerated.

Allen hasn't always been in prison. In fact, he was once a successful teacher, devoted husband, and loving father. Now he spends most of his days reading, working as an office clerk, or writing letters to his family. He is told when to go to bed, when to get up, and has no choice as to when or what he will get for the three meals he is served. Allen's story is not that different from that of other offenders when asked how he ended up in prison. Yet his story is drastically different when you ask him what he has learned from this experience or when asked about his relationship with God. Allen's is a story of reconciliation.

Allen was not born into a terrible family, nor was he abused as a child. Actually, Allen grew up in a typical American town with a typical American family. He prides himself on his mother's values, values for which he now has a greater respect. Allen graduated college and immediately began teaching and coaching. He had a love for the game of football that he passed on to his students. He eventually married, and soon they were expecting their first of two children, both girls. They would eventually be "daddy's girls", or so he thought. Everyone was excited when he got the opportunity to try out for an arena football league. He was offered a contract and chose to give up coaching to move from the sidelines to the fifty yard line. Things seemed to be going great, and the money allowed him to buy the girls, his wife included, things a teacher's salary could not afford. Everything changed in the blink of an eye. One direct hit to the left side of his knee brought his world crashing down around him. Allen was left angry, hurt, and lashing out at those around him as months of rehab, mounting medical bills, and mountains of pain continued. He had never been much for God, and when his wife informed him that the church was praying for him, he wanted nothing to do with this God his wife served. Pain killers became his escape until one day they had no effect. He began taking twice the dosage and then triple. Then he experimented with other drugs, eventually purchasing Methamphetamines. He

was one day on top of the world, and the next day he was spiraling into a black pit. His relationship with his wife became distant, and out of fear for the children she sought a separation. He was still trying to figure out how things had gone so wrong when he decided that he could buy back his family's love. Having no money and in a rash of clouded judgment, he decided that a coworker who was wealthy would not need one of her credit cards. It was only a matter of days before his conscience led him to confide in a friend; who convinced him to turn himself in to the authorities. He was sentenced to five years in prison and every day is a different struggle, a struggle, that after a few months of Bible studies led by prison volunteers, he looks upon as a lesson he was supposed to learn. He wishes he was not in prison; he wishes his wife would visit him, and he wishes he could see the girls instead of their pictures his mother brings.

He has been up for modification twice now, and the judgment is that he must remain behind the fence instead of on the outside on parole. When asked about not getting parole, he just exclaims, "It hurts, but there must be something God thinks I need to learn and I can only learn that lesson inside the fence." Allen struggles daily with the issue of reconciliation. He reconciled a lost relationship with a God he had known as a child but turned his back on as an adult. He wants to reconcile with his family, but the wounds run deep for both his wife and his daughters. He hopes one day they will be able to seek counseling together and he will at least get to visit his daughters. He cries as he is reminded of the hurt he caused his wife and wonders if there is a chance for them. He proclaims, "I have given it to God, and I will do whatever I must, even if I am told to let her go." His hardest decision is that he wants to write the woman he stole from and express his sincerest apologize, but he is not sure if he should write. He doesn't want his letter to sound false, leaving his victim thinking he is trying this to have a better shot at parole. So he prays to God and lays his burdens at the foot of the cross. He knows God's timing is not his own so he tries to make the best of it. He has almost read the entire Bible, which is one thing that he is thankful for and explains he might not have taken the time had he not been in prison. He finds as much joy and thanksgiving in his situation as he can and sees all events as God's plan for his life. He tells others about God and God's plans to prosper and not harm him but is quick to tell them that his trying to be the god in his own life is what got him locked up.

Allen settles down on his bunk and picks up his Bible. As he drifts off, he imagines the day when he is reconciled with the world and is on the outside looking through the fence.

Discussion Questions

- What is the "ministry of reconciliation"?
- How would you describe your relationship with God? (Close, friendly, distant, strained, nonexistent)
- Who in your life do you need to reconcile with? (Friends, parents, spouse, child, co-worker, neighbor)
- How will you go about trying to reconcile with this person or persons?
- Why is reconciliation important?
- As ambassadors of Christ, for what are we being called?

Conclusion

Allen's story is not unique. You may know someone like Allen, or you may have been an Allen yourself. We all are simply one bad choice away from possibly looking through the fence. Prison Chaplains and volunteers bring programs inside, allowing the offenders to meet God

where they are. Many people either knew God but chose to turn away, or they are just discovering God. We also find ourselves in that same place. Some of us knew God as children but were not faithful followers, or we are just discovering the mystery today. Whatever place you find yourself seeking God, know that reconciliation is the reason Christ was a sin offering on the cross. Christ gave up life so that we would know and be reunited with God because with our sin, the relationship would not be complete. You might think that you have too much sin in your life for God to ever want a relationship with you, but Allen would be the first to tell you; God takes all kinds! The door is open; God is waiting; come on in and chat awhile. Thank God for reconciliation.

Prayer

Dear God, your love and mercy never ceases to amaze me. I turn away from you, and you appear around each corner. I try to run away, and you chase after me. I hide, and you seek me out. I don't want to be found. I don't want you to see my sin, yet there you are with your arms outstretched, welcoming me home. Why do you love me so? You gave up your child to let me know that I am also your child. Christ gave his life for me, and now I want to give my life to Him. I am ready. I don't promise that I won't mess up, but I will promise to try and follow your will as best I can. Help me, Lord! I am yours if you will have me. I am humbled by your spirit. Fill me, use me, I want to be your new creation. Amen.

Melissa Reid Goodloe, her husband Tim and their faithful dog Trinity reside in Evansville, Indiana. Melissa is a graduate of Memphis Theological Seminary and is currently serving as a Prison Chaplain and an active member of the Morningside CP Church. Melissa's husband Tim is a truck driver, who team drives with his brother, and also currently seeking ordination through the Program of Alternate Studies. Melissa hopes that one day she and Tim will be able to pursue ministry together, since they share different gifts that complement each other's ministries. The whole family enjoys camping and visiting family and friends.

had the time of our lives. We didn't buy a thing, but it was a wonderful time of laughing and sharing. After we returned to her home we both said we need to do this again, but not wait until Christmas. We never got that chance. Don't put things off until tomorrow because there may not be tomorrow. Love each other and be good to each other as Ruth loved her mother Naomi.

There is a story about sisters that went around on the internet awhile back. It is located on the last page of this devotion. After you finish reading it, share with the group a special sister in your life (or husband, child, friend).

Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to be better gleaners for you and to love and be kind to each other. We give you the glory and praise. In your name we pray. Amen.

Carolyn Knight is from Union, Mississippi, and a member of Steam Mill CP Church. She has served 33 years with the Department of Defense/United States Navy at the Naval Air Station Health Clinic, Meridian, Mississippi as Materials Management/Budget Analyzer.

Sisters

A young wife sat on a sofa on a hot humid day, drinking iced tea and visiting with her Mother. As they talked about life, about marriage, about the responsibilities of life and the obligations of adulthood, the mother clinked the ice cubes in her glass thoughtfully and turned a clear, sober glance upon her daughter. "Don't forget your Sisters," she advised, swirling the tea leaves to the bottom of her glass.

"They'll be more important as you get older. No matter how much you love your husband, no matter how much you love the children you may have, you are still going to need sisters." Remember that 'sisters' means ALL the women... your girlfriends, your daughters, and all the other women relatives, too. "You'll need other women. Women always do."

'What a funny piece of advice!' the young women thought. 'Haven't I just gotten married? Haven't I just joined the couple-world? I'm now a married woman, for goodness sake! A grownup! Surely my husband and the family we may start will be all I need to make my life worthwhile!'

But she listened to her Mother. She kept contact with her sisters and made more women friends each year. As the years tumbled by, one after another, she gradually came to understand that her Mom really know what she was talking about. As time and nature work their changes and their mysteries upon a woman, sisters are the mainstays of her life.

After more the 50 years of living in the world, here is what I've learned:

Time passes. Life happens. Distance separates. Children grow up. Jobs come and go. Love waxes and wanes. Men don't do what they're supposed to do. Hearts break. Parents die. Colleagues forget favors. Careers end. BUT.....

Sisters are there, no matter how much time and how many miles are between you. A girl friend is never farther away than needing her can reach. When you have to walk that lonesome valley and you have to walk it by yourself, the women in your life will be on the valley's rim, cheering you on, praying for you, pulling for you, intervening on your behalf, and waiting with open arms at the valley's end. Sometimes, they will even break the rules and walk beside you... Or come in and carry you out.

Girlfriends, daughters, granddaughters, daughters-in-law, sisters, sisters-in-law, mothers, grandmothers, aunties, nieces, cousins, and extended family, all bless our life! The world wouldn't be the same without women, and neither would I.

When we began this adventure called womanhood, we had no idea of the incredible joys or sorrows that lay ahead. Nor did we know how much we would need each other. Every day, we need each other still.