



## ***GROWING IN CHRIST: Daily Devotions***

**This week: *Malice Toward None, Charity for All***

### **MONDAY, 08/26/24 – Listening: Essential for living with humility – James 1:19-22; 4:11-12**

Today's action suggestion: Be generous

Author Stephen Covey said, "The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply." (Diane Grande, "Active Listening Skills," <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-it-together/202006/active-listening-skills>) That's not a recent issue. Romans, Jews, and Samaritans blamed each other for conflict without trying to understand, and we still do today. But James called Christ-followers to "be quick to listen." He asked, bluntly, "You who judge your neighbor, who are you?" Only God (not us), he said, "is able to save and to destroy."

- Political foes said Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt were horrible, evil people. Rev. Adam Hamilton said, "Does the Lord give us an exemption from practicing the Scriptures when it comes to our political leaders ...and others with whom we disagree?... This does not mean we are not to practice discernment, nor...remain silent in the face of wrongdoing. Yet we can make known our disagreements with others while doing so in love and with respect for the other" (*Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, p. 22). Can you disagree in loving, respectful ways? Why or why not?
- When you find yourself with sharply negative feelings about a political candidate or elected winner, do you ever look inside and ask, "Have I tried to listen to understand that person's position? What inside me feels threatened or frightened by this person?" In what ways can James encourage you to show more Christ-like justice, kindness, and humility toward those with different views?

**Prayer:** Lord of life, help me tame my tongue, and the inner insecurities that so often set my tongue off. Help me to respond to the grace you give me by living ever more faithfully. Amen.

### **TUESDAY, 08/27/24 – Avoid words that can kill – Matthew 5:21-22, 43-48**

Today's action suggestion: Speak a word of kindness to someone with whom you disagree

Election Day is fast approaching. Emotions are already running high. Our ***Do Unto Others*** series urges all candidates, causes, and voters to be kind, respectful, compassionate, and loving. Jesus showed the spiritual danger of despising other people and holding them in contempt rather than loving them. The Bible did not say "hate your enemy," but some rabbis thought it did: "A command to hate enemies, while taught by some contemporary Jewish sects, was not explicit in Scripture, but extrapolated from pious examples there ([Psalm 31:6; 119:113; 139:21](#))." But Jesus stressed God's love to both "the evil and the good."

- Jesus saw “Romans insulting Jews, Samaritans attacking Jews, Jews fighting back, different Jewish parties insulting and attacking each other.... Jesus...shows...a blueprint for a way of being fully, genuinely, gloriously human.... Every time you decide to let your anger smolder on inside you, you are becoming a little less than fully human.” (N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15*) When have you seen deep inner anger reduce someone’s ability (even yours) to be fully human?
- We might call a friend “idiot” or “fool” when we’re just kidding. But not in Jesus’ day (and at times today, our “kidding” can turn hurtful). The Aramaic and Greek words Jesus cited could destroy a person’s reputation and label them as subhuman. What kinds of words and ideas do we use today (in politics, but not only there) to create the same effect? How is that kind of thinking and speech the direct opposite of just, kind, and humble?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, teach me how to love all the people you love, as hard as that feels. Help me to love because your love has changed me inwardly. Amen.

### **WEDNESDAY, 08/28/24 – Use discernment, but don’t “judge” – Matthew 7:1-6**

Today’s action suggestion: Volunteer for a good cause

Jesus knew we humans are quick to judge others. He also knew we tend to overlook or excuse similar (or even worse) things in ourselves or people we support. That pattern is destructive and hurtful in workplaces or families. When taken into the realm of politics, it often seems to go on steroids. Has there ever been a time when a political figure you disagree with came under fire, and you sadly realized, “The side I favor has done similar (or even worse) things”?

- “Don’t judge” did not mean “Don’t have opinions,” much less “don’t vote.” It did mean “Don’t hold those who reach different conclusions in contempt.” In 2020, the two main Utah candidates for governor filmed a TV ad together, modeling respect and unity regardless of the outcome. If candidates can do that, how can their backers (including you) follow suit, and love even your neighbor who votes differently?
- Of course, Jesus’ words applied not just to politics but to all relationships. Think about all the family or friend relationships you have. Is it possible for two people to care deeply about each other’s well-being, and yet come to different conclusions about the best way to address issues that arise? Can they work together toward solutions without doubting each other’s honesty or motives?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as our nation prepares to vote, please rid my spirit of contempt and judgment. Remind me that people, in my nation or my family circle, who disagree with me aren’t necessarily dishonest, and are always worthy of love. Amen.

## THURSDAY, 08/29/24 – Cursing others “just shouldn’t be” – James 3:4-10

Today’s action suggestion: Make someone laugh

James saw the bad effect of certain types of speech as directly opposite to the saving effect of the Spirit-inspired speech on the day of Pentecost (cf. [Acts 2](#)). “There are two kinds of fire: one is the fire that is from above, namely the Holy Spirit that purifies and illuminates (Acts 2:2, 3); the other fire comes from below, namely from the devil, and it sets human passions on fire.” (I-Jin Loh and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on the Letter from James*). “Hell” was literally “Gehenna,” Jerusalem’s ever-burning garbage dump.

- “Let slip the wrong word at the wrong moment and a precious relationship can be spoilt forever. A promise can be broken. A bad impression can be given which can never be repaired. No wonder the Psalmist prayed that God would place a sentry in front of his mouth, to check on everything that was coming out (Psalm 141.3).” (N.T. Wright, *Early Christian Letters for Everyone*) When have you seen or felt careless (or malicious) words damaging a valued relationship?
- But, Wright noted, “it is more serious even than that [and especially in an election season] .... We know only too well, from the way the media eagerly trip up politicians and other public figures, that one word out of place can ruin a career or bring down a government. One unwise remark, reported and circulated on the Internet, can cause riots on the other side of the world.” How can James’ words help you think twice before hitting send on that text message?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, sometimes those who disagree with me bug me so much that I wonder “where they came from.” Remind me that they, like me, ultimately came from your creative heart, and help me to see them (and treat them) as you do. Amen.

## FRIDAY, 08/30/24 – Truth-telling “for building up the community” – Ephesians 4:25-32

Today’s action suggestion: Take donuts to work

We’ve seen, in personal and public life, what happens when people use words to tear down community and set people against one another. Ephesians 4 made it clear that we cannot possibly think God enjoys such words and thoughts. As both this election campaign and the focused part of our “Do Unto Others” campaign move toward their end, fix firmly in your mind and heart a resolve to “only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community,” not just politically but in all ways.

- Pastor Adam Hamilton used an ironic but truthful chapter title to name a sad fact we all know happens: “When Christians are Unchristian.” (*When Christians Get It Wrong*) Ephesians 4:32 said our ideal is to treat one another “in the same way God forgave you in Christ.” Have you learned ways to “be angry without sinning” (verse 26)? What steps can help you grow a character strong enough to treat others as God treats you?
- Scholar William Barclay wrote, “Paul...tells us to be kind (*chrēstos*). The Greeks defined this quality as the disposition of mind which thinks as much of its neighbor’s affairs as it does of its own. He tells us to forgive others as God forgave us. In one sentence, Paul lays down the law of personal relationships—that we should treat others as Jesus Christ has treated us.” (*Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*) In which areas are you closest to living out that standard? In which do you see the most room for growth?

**Prayer:** King Jesus, give me the courage to speak truth in love, the humility to say I'm sorry when I'm wrong and the heart to forgive others who admit a wrong. Amen.

**SATURDAY, 08/31/24 – Agape – even (maybe especially) in politics! – Ephesians 4:25-32**

Today's action suggestion: Smile and wave at someone

Imagine reading these verses at the start of every political rally or commercial. (That's not possible, of course, in our religiously diverse country, but for a moment imagine we could do it without implicitly favoring any one faith.) How might it change the tone of our politics? Duke professor E. P. Sanders wrote, "The Corinthians fell short with respect to love of one another, as his discussion of their meetings indicates. There were factions.... Paul rose to the occasion by writing 1 Corinthians 13. If he had written nothing else, his fame would be deserved." (*Paul: A Very Short Introduction*, 122) Scholar N. T. Wright clarified the depth of Paul's thought. "The description Paul gives in verses 4–7 is not an account of what Hollywood means by 'love'.... Paul has in mind something which, though like our other loves in some ways, goes as far beyond them as sunlight goes beyond candles or electric light. Look closely for a moment at the type of person he describes in verses 4–7. This passage describes someone doing and being things which in the eyes of the world would be rubbish." (*Paul for Everyone*, 172)

- Follow Wright's suggestion as to how to best weave the principle of *agape* into all of your life, including your politics: "Perhaps the best thing to do with a passage like this is to take it slowly, a line at a time, and to reflect on at least three things: first, ways in which we see this quality in Jesus himself; second, ways in which we see it (or more likely, alas, don't see it) in ourselves; and third, ways in which, if we were like that, it would work out in practice.... It should always be done in prayer.... this life is within reach of each one of us; because it is the life of Jesus, the life inspired by the spirit, the life which is our birthright within the Messiah's body." (*Paul for Everyone*, 174-175).

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I want to be the kind of person you call me to be—and I'm not, not yet, not fully. I open my heart and invite your Spirit to continue changing me from the inside out. Amen.

**Did You Know?** This congregation has never told our members whom to vote for. (In fact, our congregation includes people from across the political spectrum.) We do encourage our members to exercise their privilege and responsibility to vote.

To find out more about voting, registering to vote, voting early or by mail, where to vote, or to see a sample ballot:

**Butler County:** Visit <https://elections.bcoho.gov/>. Or call the Board of Elections at 513.887.3700.

**Warren County:** Visit <https://vote.warrencountyohio.gov/>. Or call the Board of Elections at 513.695.1358.

**To vote in the November 5, 2024, national election, you must be registered by October 7, 2024.**