



## **Theme: B.L.E.S.S.- Loving Others to Change the World** **“The Power of Story”**

### **Weekly Memory Verse:**

**<sup>5</sup> Jesus replied, “I assure you; no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.”** – John 3:5

For this series of sermons, we invite you to read the book, ***B.L.E.S.S. – 5 Everyday Practices to Love Your Neighbor and Change the World*** by Dave and Jon Ferguson. We encourage you to pick up a copy, or download one, and **read chapter 7 this week**. The readings below will complement this chapter, focusing on the moments when Jesus invited others to his table.

**Monday, October 31** – Read [John 3:1-10 and 16-17](#). Most of us struggle with asking for help or asking questions that it seems we should know the answer to. Nicodemus, a Hebrew leader, faced the same struggle. He saw Jesus’ obvious power and wanted to talk to this new teacher. But he came at night, not ready to risk his status as a leader. Jesus spoke of being “born again,” a phrase that was also a pun as the Greek word *anōthen* rendered “again” also meant “from above.” It led to a key verse as John 3:16 contains a succinct summary of Christian theology.

With keen irony, John wrote that Jesus went on to tell Nicodemus (who came “at night”), “This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil” (John 3:19). That must have jolted the cautious, secure Pharisee. When has someone or something brought you up short, and given you reason to think hard about your values and priorities? How has God brought you from darkness into the light? How is that part of your story?

Jesus invited Nicodemus to live in the light of God’s kingdom. Their talk seems to have gradually changed Nicodemus as we read about him again in [John 7:45-52; John 19:38-42](#). How did Jesus connect the ideas of “birth” and “new life” as he spoke with Nicodemus? In what ways (if at all) do you believe your eternal life has begun due to the impact of God’s love on your life?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, keep breaking me free from any ways in which I love darkness. Keep drawing me to your loving, light-giving, new life-giving presence. Amen.

**Tuesday, November 1** – Read [Hebrews 10:24-25](#) and [Hebrews 12:1-3](#). Our story did not just appear out of thin air. We each are a product of the saints who have gone before, those who have touched our lives and been witnesses to us, both in big and small ways. On this All-Saints Day, we are invited to think about those who have left a legacy for us, whether they are friends, family, or historical figures. Our story also joins with others who follow Jesus in our lives today. Our story is impacted by those daily saints as well. We have the privilege of encouraging each other, bringing out the best in one another.

☛ In Hebrews 12:1 we read that “a great cloud of witnesses” surrounds us. This crowd is much more than just spectators making noise. Some consider this a reference to saints and angels observing us, as the crowd in a great stadium cheer on those on the playing field. Others see us observing the saints of ages past, taking heart from their consistent witness to God’s faithfulness. How does the image of this great crowd of witnesses shape your daily behavior and speech? How are they part of your story today?

☛ Hebrews said it is our responsibility to “...throw off extra baggage, get rid of sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus.” Our broken places are part of our story that can shape us for good and for bad, depending on what we do with those experiences. What are some types of “extra baggage” we can pick up during our Christian journey? What are some practical steps that help you fix your eyes on Jesus? How has that extra baggage shaped your story?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, I’m thankful I don’t have to do this “faith” thing all alone. Thank you for the people, in history and in my day-to-day life, who encourage and cheer me on. Amen.*

**Wednesday, November 1** – Read [James 1:19-25](#) and [Proverbs 3:5-6](#). James’ style was similar to what Bible scholars call, “wisdom literature.” The book of Proverbs was a striking example of that type of writing. It didn’t lay out long, connected arguments, but strung wise ideas together without trying to make smooth transitions. In today’s passage, James switched quite abruptly to two of his other major themes: the power of speech and the importance of living out what God teaches us. The Proverbs speak about these ideas as well.

☛ James clearly warned against angry speech in verse 20, as it can push people away from God. The fury that triggered the tragic Jewish rebellion against Rome in 66 A.D. was already deeply rooted in James’ day. That anger and rebellion ended with Rome killing more than 1 million Jews, many of them women and children. Jesus lamented this loss which was to come in [Luke 19:41-44](#). We always imagine that when the world is out of joint, a little bit of our own anger will fix things. How did Paul’s godly counsel in [Romans 12:18-21](#) do more to defeat Rome than all the angry speech that led to violent rebellion?

☛ James used a startling phrase to describe “the word,” the message of Jesus. He called it “the perfect law, the law of freedom.” We often see “law” as opposed to “freedom.” N. T. Wright cited laws that tell you which side of the road you must drive on as an example. In the same way, he said, “By restricting your ‘freedom’ in some ways, [God’s law] opens up far greater, genuine freedoms in all other ways.” How has following God’s ways created more freedom in your life and been part of your story with Jesus at the center of your life? When has that “freedom” let to life for you?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, you famously said that we will know the truth, and the truth will set us free (see [John 8:31-32](#)). Keep leading me into the vast freedom you offer me as I follow you. Amen*

**Thursday, November 3** – Read [1 Timothy 1:12-16](#) and [2 Timothy 2:23-25](#). The apostle Paul looked back on his story when, as an angry young Pharisee named Saul, he proudly persecuted

and killed Christians ([Acts 7:57-8:1, 9:1-2](#)). Despite that, he said, Christ's favor, love and faithfulness had "poured all over me." He maintained a lifelong sense of wonder and gratitude for the way God's kindness had reshaped his life focus at a time when he was fighting against God. And one way he expressed that was urging everyone he worked with to show kindness.

☛ The letters to Timothy echoed Jesus' teaching in [Luke 6:27-28](#), "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you." Acting like that is not natural to any of us. In what ways can you allow the Holy Spirit to reshape your natural impulses to grow the fruit of kindness toward all people in your life so that your story is aligned with Jesus' and Paul's stories?

☛ Jesus asked in [Matthew 5:46-47](#), "If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don't even the Gentiles do the same?" Kindness to people who are kind to you is just good manners. But "kind toward all people"? That only grows, over time, as the Holy Spirit's godly presence shapes you. In what ways has Jesus made you kinder than you used to be?

**Prayer:** *Come, Holy Spirit! Grow kindness in me, not as wimpy emotionalism to please those I like, but as hard-edged, practical determination to live a life that reflects my Lord Jesus' way of treating people even as he worked to defeat evil with good. Amen.*

**Friday, November 4** – Read [Matthew 8:5-17](#). A Roman centurion, part of a foreign occupying force, commanded 100 soldiers. He understood and practiced authority. This officer obviously accepted Jesus as an authority in the matter of healing. He sensed that Jesus' power reached beyond all boundaries and could heal all hurts. Peter's mother-in-law, with whom Peter and his wife lived, was in bed with a fever which was common, and in the case of malaria, often severe and recurrent. Jesus' healing power worked simply and quickly: "He touched her hand."

☛ When we, or people we care about, are in danger, we look at once for the most powerful authority available, such as a manager, a teacher, the police, a doctor. The centurion did that. When you are struggling, to whom do you turn? God often works through people. What does, or would, it be like for you to trust Jesus as your supreme authority for healing and help, even when Jesus sends that help through doctors, researchers, counselors, pastors and the like? How can that, or has that, been part of your story?

☛ Followers of Jesus can either focus on God's world exclusively, on spiritual reordering and eternal salvation through Jesus; or else exclusively on social reordering, making the broken conditions of life in our world better. Jesus clearly did both. How can studying Jesus' pattern of ministry help you to avoid trying to make a false choice between spiritual and social action? How have both the power of Jesus and the power of others caring for you come together to be part of your story?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, you were a healer whether the illness and its healing were physical or spiritual. I sometimes need both, and so does the world around me. Grow me into a servant who lives out your holistic mission. Amen.*

**Saturday, November 5** – Read [Luke 13:1-9](#) and [John 9:1-3](#). In John's gospel, people asked Jesus to explain the "why" of a man born blind. In Luke, they asked about Galileans who were randomly killed by Roman soldiers. Jesus' reply in both instances showed that he knew evil often strikes at random and is part of each of our stories. God did not "single out" those who'd suffered to endure pain or loss. The open-ended parable Jesus told in Luke 13:6-9 pointed to human responsibility to "bear fruit," not passive acceptance of anything that happens as "God's will."

☞ In John 9, Jesus was less concerned with trying to sort out who or what was to blame for the man's blindness than he was with looking forward to how God's power could work in the man's life. What difficulties and challenges are you facing? How can you open "the eyes of your heart" to recognize and respond to God's power at work in and through you?

☞ We could call Jesus' story in Luke 13:6-9, "The Unfinished Parable." The gardener asked for one more year to help the tree bear good fruit—but Jesus never said if the tree did or didn't bear fruit. In verse 5 he challenged his hearers to "change your hearts and lives," so it was clear what type of "fruit-bearing" was on his mind. So, what about you—instead of blaming God for troubles, how will you grow to finish Jesus' unfinished parable in your life and share that as part of your story?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, I want my life to bear the kind of good fruit you desire and are willing to grow in me. Keep me responsive to your guiding voice in my heart. Amen.*