



Great 50 Days

DISTRICT INITIATIVE



The Kindness Course

The Great 50 Days of Easter run from Easter Sunday (17th April) to Pentecost Sunday (5th June) and this year we're offering an opportunity to explore more urgently and more deeply than perhaps we have for some time, just how we're called to be 'Easter People', filled with the hope of Christ alive within us; ready to experience more of God's spirit in us and through us, transforming the world.

Find out more here:

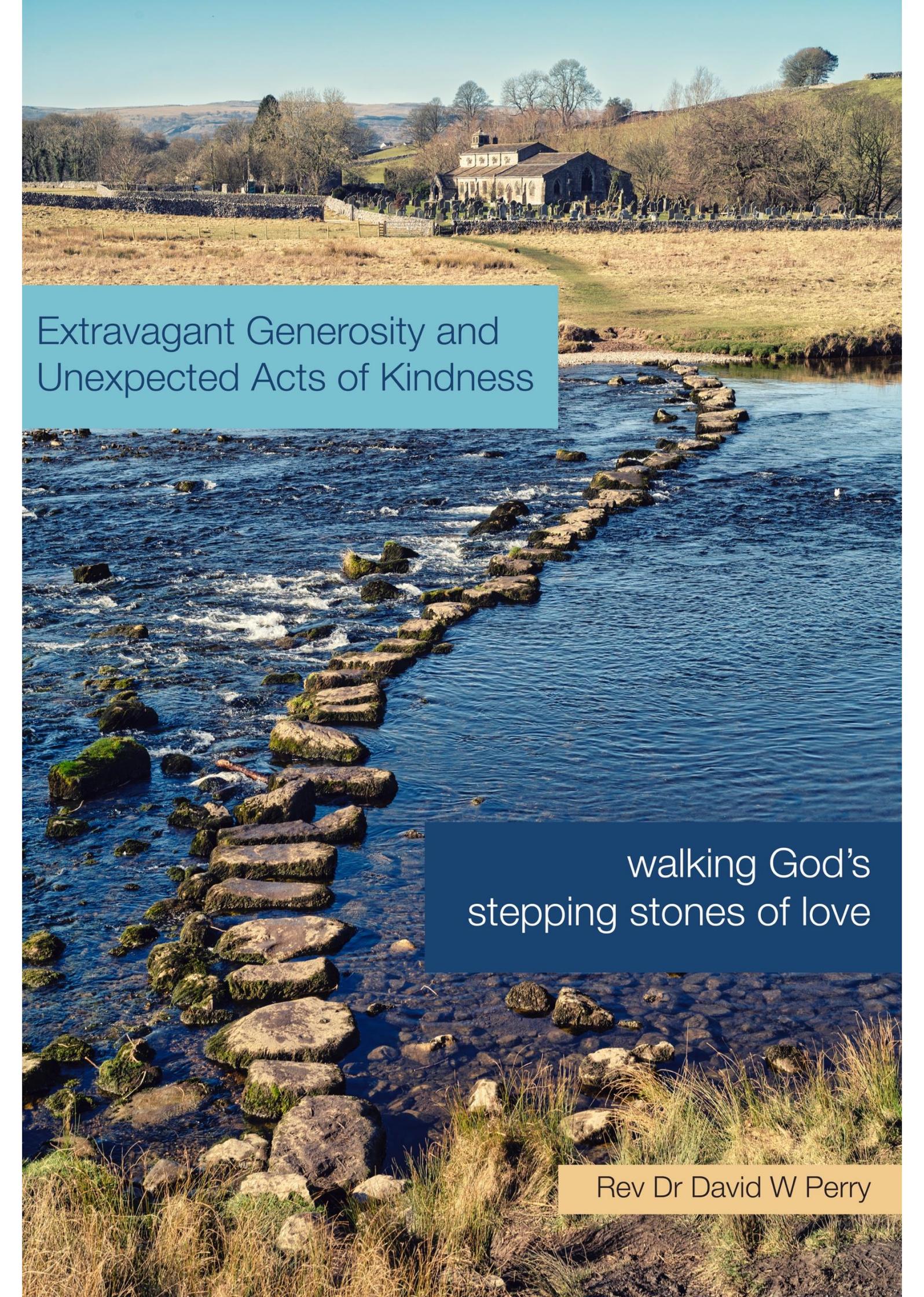
www.yorkshirenethodist.org/great50

Revd Leslie Newton

Chair of Yorkshire North and East Methodist District



The **Methodist** Church 

A scenic landscape featuring a river with stepping stones, a church, and a cemetery in the background. The river flows through the foreground, with a series of large, mossy rocks forming a path across it. In the background, a church with a steeple and a cemetery are visible, surrounded by trees and rolling hills under a clear blue sky.

Extravagant Generosity and Unexpected Acts of Kindness

walking God's
stepping stones of love

Rev Dr David W Perry

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REFLECTION

On a wintry morning with snow showers regularly coming in from the North Sea, blown inland on a bitterly cold easterly wind, we were out walking our dogs when this sight caught my attention. Once home, I picked up my camera and ventured out again in the showers of hail, sleet and snow, to take these pictures.



The contrast between the green grassy expanses on which the snow was melting on contact, and the hard artificial surfaces of the play areas rendered white by accumulations of snow, was striking. How had this come about?

The natural living landscape was clearly that bit warmer than the built substrate and top dressing of the play areas. Not by much perhaps, but enough to make a visible difference.

The thought came to me that being generous and kind has just such an impact upon the relational landscapes within which we live. The warmth of human love engenders a very different outlook compared to the cold, icy realities of pandemic life that beset us and which have, by degrees, chilled the hope out of so many people.



Which is why God always chooses love, expressed through generosity and kindness, as the stepping stones we are to traverse as we seek to connect with the people and communities that God is calling us to serve.

As I walked home the hailstones and snow under my feet crunched with every step. The sound set up a regular three-step rhythm which was like a mantra: loving – generous – kind, loving – generous – kind, loving – generous – kind... Each step was a reminder of who God is calling me to be.

This course is written to encourage the church to intentionally make this traverse of God's stepping stones of generosity and kindness our regular rhythm as we move forward together.

USING THIS GUIDE

Please take the time to read through the material before each session and afterwards to reflect upon the question or activity in the final box in preparation for the next session.

You are encouraged to begin each session with a time of sharing followed by open prayer, and to end with a time of open prayer. The sharing of our experiences of receiving and giving generosity and kindness is particularly important, as that way we can get an overall picture of God's love at work and respond to divine promptings, as well as bringing specific concerns arising out of our conversations to God in prayer

Please encourage everyone in your group to contribute to the discussions and ensure that all voices are heard. It is vital that the group is a safe and kind space, so you will need to ensure that appropriate confidentiality is negotiated, agreed and respected.

Each session is designed to last about an hour



Above all please use the opportunity of being together to remind one another of the invaluable heart of our faith and of the riches God delights in sharing with us. Our faith is not empty and we are not devoid of hope. The loving presence of the God, known in Jesus and experienced through the life-bringing touch of the Holy Spirit, is extravagantly generous and unexpectedly kind. It is the priceless gift that we are all called to unreservedly welcome and share.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this six week bible study on the theme of generosity and kindness, which helps us explore and practice generosity and kindness as disciples of Jesus.

The restrictions on how we do church, which have necessarily been imposed upon us in response to the Covid-19 pandemic over the last year, leave us in a very uncertain place. It is clear that the whole country is living through a national trauma which affects every community. Grief, loss and anguish are all around. Each of us has our own story to tell of how Covid-19 has impacted our lives and those of our families and friends and of the personal struggles that have ensued.

It is also true that many of us have the sense that church will never be the same again. We are undoubtedly living through a time of accelerated transformation; of profound challenges to what was and of great opportunities for that which is yet to be. The image of stepping stones provides a helpful analogy for what lies ahead. As we pray, study and reflect together, this course of shared bible study encourages us to look at generosity and kindness as being two crucial and timely stepping stones which God is offering to the church as collectively we begin to consider what our next steps are to be. The course encourages us to share our own experiences of generosity and kindness and to consider how by being kind and generous we can reach out to our communities in new ways in this time of great need.

Some excerpts from the exceptional poem 'The Hill We Climb', written for President Joe Biden's inauguration by Amanda Gorman, the National Youth Poet Laureate of the USA, frame the task to which God is calling us:

"When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade? The loss we carry...

Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:

That even as we grieved, we grew.

That even as we hurt, we hoped.

That even as we tired, we tried.

That we'll forever be tied together, victorious...

We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be:

A country that is bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, fierce and free...

We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover in every known nook of our nation in every corner called our country our people diverse and beautiful will emerge battered and beautiful, when the day comes we step out of the shade aflame and unafraid, the new dawn blooms as we free it, for there is always light if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it."

Let this be our truth as we allow ourselves to be transformed afresh by God's extravagant generosity and unexpected kindness.

Wishing you every blessing
Love and peace

David

Rev Dr David W Perry
District Mission Consultant
Yorkshire North & East Methodist District

SESSION 1

THE THEOLOGY BEHIND EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY AND UNEXPECTED ACTS OF KINDNESS

SHARING AND PRAYING TOGETHER

10 mins

How have you experienced generosity and kindness in the last week?
What prayer concerns do you bring today?

GOD IS GENEROUS AND KIND

This is the fundamental truth which the Bible proclaims. It is vital that we get this right, not least as this is most likely not how God is thought of in the general population

Q. If you were asked to describe how non-Christians view God, what words come to mind?

Q. Why is that?

Let's look at some key biblical texts which help us to address this challenge

First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don't see
Genesis 1:1

This is the ultimate act of generosity as God births the Universe. The same generosity and unexpected kindness is seen in God's love-gift of Jesus

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life **John 3:16**

God's passion and purpose is to transform humanity that all shall have life in its fullness

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full **John 10:10**

God's vision is all-embracing and inclusive. God's generosity and kindness know no limits

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken
Isaiah 25:6-8

This is the kingdom of God as understood by Jesus. His rising from the dead invites us to own it as our eternal truth. His life exemplified the power of God's unconditional generosity and kindness to bring healing and wholeness to our troubled world and peace to our restless souls

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light
Matthew 11:28-30

Which brings us to perhaps the most important declaration in scripture, the one from which all of our theology flows in a never-ending stream of grace, bringing hope to a desperate world

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us...God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them **1 John 4:7-12; 16**

God is love. These three words frame our believing and our belonging. We experience this truth not as an abstract concept but as an intimate relationship with God and in God, in whom, as Paul memorably puts it, “*we live and move and have our being*” **Acts 17:28**

As Christians, love is our nature and our purpose. Jesus gets to the heart of the matter with an imperative that puts no limits on how generous and kind we should be

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ **John 13:34-35**

Q. Describe the love that Jesus has for you?

If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? **1 John 3:17**

Good question! And one which challenges the iniquitous disparities between the wealthiest and the poorest which so blight our world. Which leads us to ask this simple question

Q. Why then do we find it so difficult to love others like Jesus loves us?

Q. So in summary, what picture of God do these texts give us that we can easily share with others?

SHARING AND PRAYING TOGETHER

10 mins

How has God blessed you in this session?
What do you need to pray for now?

For session 2: over the next week notice the ways in which you are intentionally generous and kind to yourself and to others

SESSION 2

EXPLORING EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY AND UNEXPECTED ACTS OF KINDNESS : GETTING THE FUNDAMENTALS RIGHT

SHARING AND PRAYING TOGETHER

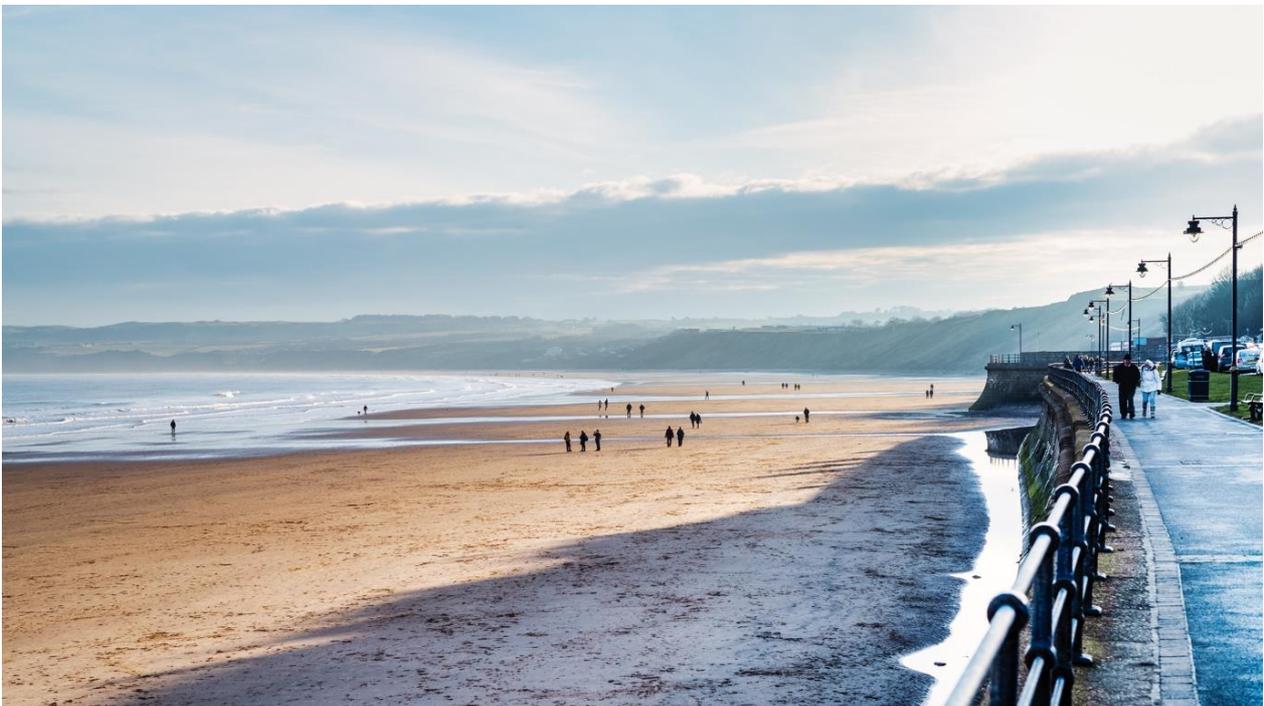
10 mins

How were you intentionally generous and kind last week?
What prayer concerns do you bring today?

In session 1 we saw how generosity and kindness are a natural response to the presence and nature of God. Yet so many people's lives are blighted by mean-spirited attitudes and unkind behaviour. We live in a 'now and not yet' world, in which the love of God in Jesus is unceasingly trying to make all things new through the Spirit's creative promptings in human hearts and minds. We live out our faith in a perpetual in-between time; a liminal space caught between what is and what God yearns to bring into being

We are called to express God's mission in this liminal space. As we read our bibles we see that it has always been thus. God's people inevitably find themselves living between the polarities of struggle, oppression, sickness, injustice, conflict and death on the one hand, and God's kingdom of love vision of tranquility, freedom, wellbeing, justice, shalom and eternal life on the other

Q. What does this photograph say to you about where we find ourselves as church?



So how does scripture encourage us to navigate this space?

IT'S ALL ABOUT HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

The Great commandment and the golden rule of reciprocity are absolutely central pillars of the Christian Faith, and the golden rule is at the heart of many of the world's religions

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Matthew 22:36-40

Do to others as you would have them do to you **Luke 6:31**

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets **Matthew 7:12**

Love God, love you neighbour and love yourself. In the great commandment there is an exquisite balance between these three interlinked and interdependent imperatives. If you get one of them out of kilter the other two are necessarily diminished, as only when they are all in balance can each of them be maximised.

Q. In what various ways might we fulfil these three imperatives?

Q. Which one of the three do you find most challenging and why is that?

Furthermore, the golden rule establishes generosity and kindness as being central to how we understand our faith commitment, because as God is to us so we are to be to others.

Q. How do you want people to treat you?

As we reflect upon our answers to these questions God invites us to own a startling and life-giving truth

AS WE ARE GENEROUS AND KIND TO OTHERS WE ARE BEING SO TO GOD

When it comes to generosity and kindness one text above all challenges us to see and act differently. It combines the imperatives to love God, neighbour and oneself into the logical ethical outcome as seen from the divine perspective. By loving our neighbour we are loving God and loving ourselves into the fullness of a life blessed by God. By being self-centred and selfish we cut ourselves off from this divine flow of loving relationships and, paradoxically, curse ourselves to be cut off from the very life in its fullness that we crave

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and

welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Matthew 25:31-46

Crucially, in his understanding of God's kingdom, Jesus self-identifies with the poor, needy and outcast and makes them his priority for extravagant generosity and unexpected kindness

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour

Luke 4:18-19

Now he declares that he is present in them. When we meet them we meet him face to face. This changes everything. It upends politics and economics and roots our ethics in the nature of God, who is closer to us than our own breath. It gives ultimate value to each and every life and commits us to being as generous and kind to others as God is to us.

Q. How might this understanding change our priorities as church?

Which leads us to a final piece of New Testament wisdom which exhibits the same outlook

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it **Hebrews 13:2**

Notice how this instruction opens up our horizons way beyond church and the activities and behaviours with which we are comfortable and familiar as followers of Jesus. It nudges us out of our comfort zones. It encourages us to connect with a purpose and to bless all parts of our communities with generosity and kindness

SHARING AND PRAYING TOGETHER

10 mins

How has God blessed you in this session?
What do you need to pray for now?

For session 3: over the next week try to keep a balance between intentionally loving God, loving your neighbour and loving yourself

SESSION 3

EXPLORING EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY AND UNEXPECTED ACTS OF KINDNESS : THE WITNESS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

SHARING AND PRAYING TOGETHER

10 mins

What balance did you achieve last week between loving God, loving your neighbour and loving yourself?

What prayer concerns do you bring today?

With everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,' says the Lord your Redeemer
Isaiah 54:8

A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. **Proverbs 11:25**

I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us— yes, the many good things he has done for Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. **Isaiah 63:7**

You might not think it but generosity and kindness are woven into the fabric of the Old Testament. Consider this intriguing text in which Abraham offers hospitality to God

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.'¹⁰ Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?"¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.' But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'

Genesis 18:1-15

Q. What evidence of generosity and kindness do you see in this story?

This is a wonderfully relational, deeply mystical yet and down to earth story. God in all God's mystery appears to Abraham in human form as a Trinity of persons.

The key points are these:

- This theophany (appearance of God) elicits a powerful and immediate response from Abraham. In this 'God moment' he does not hesitate, he does not delay.
- He clearly feels the deep need to find favour with God and is vulnerable enough and brave enough to seize the moment, speak it and make it his heartfelt petition
- Abraham addresses the presenting needs of these strangers who are God with him. He is generous and kind, offering water, shade and rest
- He is even more generous and kind by offering not simply a quick snack but a feast
- In a beautiful moment of reciprocity God speaks into the unspoken need of this couple with the extravagant and unexpectedly kind promise of a son.
- Sarah finds this too good to be true and literally and metaphorically cannot conceive how it can become her truth
- God's generosity and kindness achieves its aim despite Sarah's doubt
- Abraham now knows that God looks upon him favourably

At its heart this narrative teaches us two precious lessons:

IF WE ARE WILLING AND RECEPTIVE THE PRESENCE OF GOD BRINGS OUT THE BEST IN US

BEING GENEROUS AND KIND IS A SOURCE OF DEEP BLESSING

We see these same characteristics in the story of Elijah and the Widow at Zarephath

Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah: "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food." So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." "As surely as the Lord your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die." Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.'" She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah

1 Kings 17:7-16

Q. What does God do in this story?

Q. What role do Elijah and the widow have in making God's intentions happen?

Finally let's consider briefly the story of Boaz and Ruth, King David's great-grandmother. This is also set against a time of famine which saw Ruth's in-law's family uprooted from Bethlehem to Moab, her country. After tragedy strikes, Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi return to Bethlehem, but not before Naomi has invited Ruth and her sister-in-law Orpah to return to their own families with this blessing

May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me **Ruth 1:8**

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favour.' She said to her, 'Go, my daughter.' So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, 'The Lord be with you.' They answered, 'The Lord bless you.' Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, 'To whom does this young woman belong?' The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, 'She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, "Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers." So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment. 'Then Boaz said to Ruth, 'Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn.' Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, 'Why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?' But Boaz answered her, 'All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!' Then she said, 'May I continue to find favour in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants.' At mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine.' So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, 'Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.'

Ruth 2:1-16

Q. In what ways is Boaz generous and kind?

Q. What effect do you think this has upon Ruth?

SHARING AND PRAYING TOGETHER

10 mins

How has God blessed you in this session?
What do you need to pray for now?

For session 4: over the next week make the most of any opportunities you have to be intentionally generous and kind to others

SESSION 4

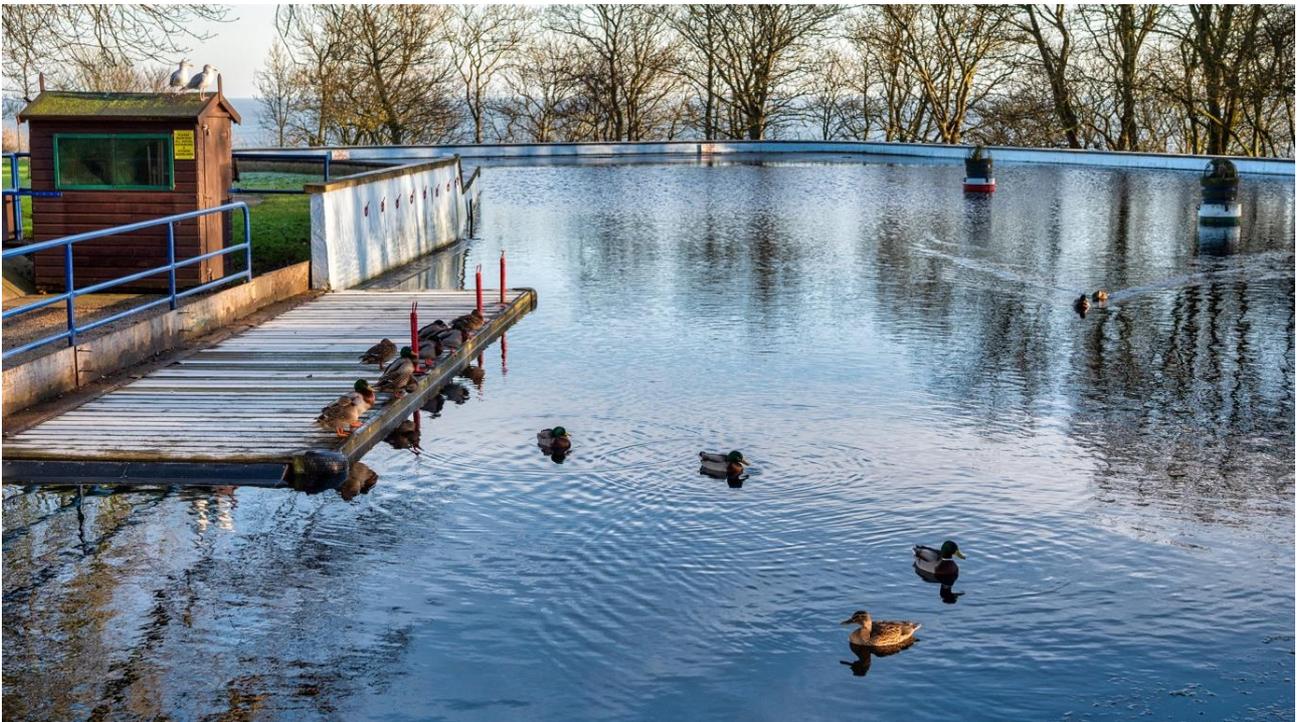
EXPLORING EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY AND UNEXPECTED ACTS OF KINDNESS : ENCOUNTERING JESUS

SHARING AND PRAYING TOGETHER

10 mins

How did you make the most of any opportunities you had to be intentionally generous and kind to others?

What prayer concerns do you bring today?



In the photograph you see some ducks all lined up in a row on the decking, watching others who have flown down into the water. When it comes to being followers of Jesus the following question puts us as church into the picture by questioning our hesitancy and reluctance to go where he leads and our timidity when it comes to leaving what we know and taking risks

Q. what stops the church from being truly who Jesus calls us to be?

In the following encounters notice how Jesus thinks and acts ‘outside the box’ and is prepared to leave convention and tradition behind to bring God’s extravagantly generous and unexpectedly kind love to those who most need it. None of these encounters happens in ‘church’. Love is manifest at the point of need

Consider the story of Jesus and the Widow of Nain. Jesus is at the heart of a throng of people clamouring for his attention. No doubt the disciples are asking questions as they walk alongside him, whilst some members of the crowd call out to him and make their own heartfelt

entreaties for help and attention to their specific needs. For Jesus it's all very busy, very noisy and very demanding. And yet...

Soon afterwards, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out – the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, 'Don't cry.' Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, 'Young man, I say to you, get up!' The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. 'A great prophet has appeared among us,' they said. 'God has come to help his people.' This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country
Luke 7:11-17

Q. How is Jesus extravagantly generous and unexpectedly kind?

Turning to Zacchaeus we see a very similar pattern. Once again Jesus is passing through on his way to somewhere else. Acutely aware of his surroundings Jesus offers an object lesson in mission

FOCUS ON THE PERSON / SITUATION WITH THE GREATEST NEED AND REACH OUT WITH GENEROSITY AND KINDNESS

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.' So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'
But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.'
Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'
Luke 19:1-10

Q. How does Jesus respond to the deepest needs of Zacchaeus?

Q. If the church exists to 'seek and to save the lost', what must change?

The next story exemplifies just how radical God's extravagant generosity and unexpected kindness is in a world like ours. If Jesus is habitually on the lookout for those most in need and unconditionally gives them his whole attention when he encounters them, regardless of convention, he also attracts the attention of outcasts and those on the margins of society. In desperation these people call out to him

So in this narrative Jesus has deliberately chosen to journey along the border, across the hinterland and right on the margin of who is acceptable to his society and religion and who isn't. Here he is encountered by ten men with Leprosy

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

Luke 17:11-19

Q. What does Jesus' generosity and kindness to these outcasts say to you about how the church should respond to society's marginalised 'hinterland people' today ?

Finally we come to the story of the healing of Blind Bartimaeus. It follows the pattern with which we are by now familiar. Jesus is leaving town and on his way to the next important thing. Once again we see that to Jesus priorities of time and attention are provisional and that he will interrupt and disrupt expectations in order to seek and save the lost. His generosity and kindness are fast moving, flexible, and responsive, just as he is always and everywhere alert to pressing need

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way

Mark 10:46-52

Rather than treating Bartimaeus as those around he think he deserves, Jesus is extravagantly generous and extraordinarily kind. And at the centre of this encounter is a question which demonstrates how Jesus respects the personhood of the enquirer. Jesus does not force, coerce or offer a pre-packaged solution to Bartimaeus. He does not pre-judge what this blind man needs. Bartimaeus is encouraged to name it and ask for it himself. In his kindness and generosity Jesus respects Bartimaeus and creates a space of dignity, affirmation and self-worth in which he can be treated as an equal and know that he is of inestimable value to God *'What do you want me to do for you?'* In the week ahead you are encouraged to think about what this means for you, your church and your community and what your answer might be

SHARING AND PRAYING TOGETHER

10 mins

How has God blessed you in this session?
What do you need to pray for now?

For session 5: 'What do you want me to do for you?' Privately reflect on what you want Jesus to do for you and bring it to him in prayer. You will not be asked to share this.

What do you want Jesus to do for your church?

What do you want Jesus to do for your community?

SESSION 5

EXPLORING EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY AND UNEXPECTED ACTS OF KINDNESS : THE WITNESS OF JESUS

SHARING AND PRAYING TOGETHER

10 mins

What do you want Jesus to do for your church?
What do you want Jesus to do for your community?

What prayer concerns do you bring today?



The photograph shows a way through that is completely blocked by a chaos of brambles and vegetation. In the face of this obstacle our only option seems to be to turn back. Time and again in the gospels the extravagant generosity and unexpected kindness of God in Jesus goes right through the barriers that would prevent God's kingdom from being real for those who most need it. Let's look at three key examples which make the same point

GOD'S GENEROSITY AND KINDNESS KNOW NO LIMITS

The story of Jesus changing water into wine is as dramatic a statement of intent as one could wish to find at the beginning of his ministry. It demonstrates God's unwillingness to be limited by our habitually myopic approach to seeing our way through those barriers to mission and discipleship that often appear to be insurmountable

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of

purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

John 2:1-11

Q. What barriers are overcome here?

Q. How does this story inform our approach to doing God's mission?

Now we turn to another set of barriers that Jesus is determined to overcome. In this episode Jesus allows generosity and kindness to do God's heavy lifting work of grace and renewal

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Luke 7:36-50

Q. What norms and barriers do generosity and kindness subvert in this story?

Lastly we consider the story of the Labourers in the Vineyard. In this parable Jesus is once again breaking down barriers and, as before, it is the extravagant generosity and unexpected kindness of God that completely reframes our perception of one another. Jesus wants his disciples to grasp the enormity of just how subversive God's love is in practice.

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you

whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

Matthew 20:1-16

Q. In what ways does this story really challenge us?

And a final image as food for thought to reinforce Jesus' teaching. Why accept or ask for a tiny teaspoon when this scale of extravagant generosity and kindness is on offer!



SHARING AND PRAYING TOGETHER

10 mins

How has God blessed you in this session?
What do you need to pray for now?

**For session 6: What barriers is God wanting you to challenge?
How might you do this?**

SESSION 6

FOR FOLLOWERS OF JESUS EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY AND UNEXPECTED ACTS OF KINDNESS ARE NORMATIVE

SHARING AND PRAYING TOGETHER

10 mins

What barriers is God wanting you to challenge?
How might you do this?

What prayer concerns do you bring today?



I will hang a rainbow among the clouds. It will serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. And from now on, whenever a cloud rises over the earth and a rainbow appears in the sky, I will remember My covenant—My promise I have made between Me and you and all living creatures **Genesis 9:13-15 (The Voice)**

As followers of Jesus we are the means God chooses to make that promise real and transformative for others. A quote attributed to Teresa of Avila, but not found in her writings, wonderfully describes our common calling:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

Certainly this is how the nascent Jesus movement understood their calling, because generosity and kindness was to become their hallmark

Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give. **Matthew 10:8**

With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.
Acts 4:33-35

Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality. **Romans 12:13**

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. **2 Corinthians 9:6-8**

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. **Ephesians 4:32**

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.
Hebrews 13:16

Q. Why do you think the early church was so markedly generous and kind?

Perhaps one of the most pivotal factors in the behaviour of Jesus' followers and new converts after his resurrection is to be discovered in the encounter that the disciples have with the risen Jesus. In many ways this experience is the tipping point for a paradigm shift in outlook and attitudes which persists to this day.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. **John 21:4-13**

After this encounter everything changes. From being fearful the disciples become fearless. From being hidden away from sight they become visible and present in their communities. From being riddled with doubt they become confident in God's presence and purpose. All of this occurs because in the risen Jesus they are given a window onto eternity and the living truth of God's ever present loving, generous kindness for all humanity. And all of this is sustained and nurtured by the generous and kind presence of Jesus, who knows their needs before they ask and who gives them nourishment for the task.

FROM A DESPAIRING 'NO FISH' MENTALITY THEY GO TO AN 'EVERY FISH' PASSION

In our final story we see how all of our reflections during this course come together in one beautiful exemplar of extravagant generosity and unexpected kindness. Reassuringly it is

simple and straightforward and is in no way off-putting as a role model for our contemporary practice. There is nothing grand or complex here to deter us from thinking it is within our grasp.

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. Acts 3:1-8

So how does this encounter inform our mission today? What object lessons can we learn from these two disciples?

- They have confidence in God
- They are proud and visible as followers of Jesus
- They believe Jesus can transform people’s lives
- They instinctively put this belief into practice when they encounter someone in need
- They hold nothing back
- They are extravagantly generous and unexpectedly kind
- God’s generosity and kindness are for everyone

From the perspective of the lame beggar we see that

- God’s intention and purpose exceeds our expectations

Q. How do you react to this story?

The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: “By what power or what name did you do this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is “the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humanity by which we must be saved.” When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. Acts 4:5-13

Q. Timid or terrific; if we follow this example what is the future for the church?

SHARING AND PRAYING TOGETHER

10 mins

How has God blessed you in this session?

As a result of your experience on this course what do you need to pray for now?



Great 50 Days

DISTRICT INITIATIVE



ALL WE CAN

We are pleased to be in partnership with All We Can over this season as we reflect on the role of kindness in our lives, our churches, and communities, and seek to play our part in God's mission.

During these Great 50 Days, All We Can is encouraging you to get 'out and about' - engaging in mission and seeking justice in the whole world, as well as in our own local communities and neighbourhoods: and that includes us in the Yorkshire North and East District. Find out how your support for All We Can's work, including in places like Zimbabwe, could help people fulfil their potential and overcome poverty and injustice at allwecan.org.uk/great50

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