

NEIGHBOROLOGY

PRACTICING COMPASSION
AS A WAY OF LIFE

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Neighborology

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO

all the men and women who have heard the call of God
to love their neighbor.

To those who are ordained, “Thank you.”

To those who are commissioned, “Thank you.”

To those who are anointed, “Thank you.”

I also thank my colleagues at Tenth Presbyterian Church
who encouraged me and prayed for the fruits of this book.

And, most of all, I thank my dear wife and friend, Kate,
for her sacrificial love during the writing of this book.

To all those capital “D” and lowercase “d” deacons,
“I praise God for you.”

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be
blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

Revelation 5:13

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INTRODUCTION

Soon after I received the contract for this book, a book that was supposed to be about “developing the heart of a servant,” I had a week filled with stress. Many extremely needy people came in to see me or called me on the phone. Some were emotionally challenged or had some type of mental illness. The bulk of them were people who had no appointments. Yet it was important that I see them all, and it was important to them that they see me. Most who phoned were locals, but a few were from distant states. (I still wonder: Why do they call me?) When I came home from serving at Tenth Presbyterian on the last workday of that week, I announced to my wife, “I no longer want to be a mercy minister. I want to be a ship builder!” I wanted to bang things, make lots of noise, and, for a change, have a finished product as a result.

I knew from experience that there would be what I call the “satanic attacks” of interruptions, disruptions and discouragements. But I suppose that I didn’t expect attacks like these. Oy vey! Welcome to the world of mercy ministry!

Full-time mercy ministry is sacrificial. The essence of the ministry is listening to Christ’s call to “follow Me.” My needs

are secondary. As a mercy minister, I have said to God, “Not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42, *KJV*). I have picked up my cross and followed Him (see Mark 8:34). I have sought to crucify the flesh daily (see Gal. 5:24). None of these acts have come easy. I do not like being submissive. I do not like giving up the right to have my own way. But the good news about these particular weaknesses of mine is that they bring me to the foot of the cross on a daily basis.

One of the things I’ve learned in over twenty-five years of directing Tenth Presbyterian Church’s mercy ministry is something I call “prayerful patience.” In my early years there, I was impatient to start ministries, and I sometimes used the Bible to bludgeon people with ideas about what needed to happen now. I was in the fast lane looking for even more speed, but I was dealing with a three-miles-an-hour God. I gradually learned the discipline of “active waiting” and came to put my trust in the transforming power of the Holy Spirit instead. In time, God rose up other mercy-minded leaders, and Tenth Church now supports a spectrum of fruitful mercy ministries and mercy ministers. In time, Scripture states, you will “bear fruit—fruit that will last” (John 15:16, *NIV*). This promise sustained us all in its show of mercy and compassion.

The relational approach to evangelism is rooted in Christ’s model of incarnational love and sacrificial servanthood. Jesus became a servant of others, washing their feet and not being afraid to be vulnerable with them. He came alongside people who were hurting, those who may have smelled or otherwise made others uncomfortable.

We are also called to be advocates, to come alongside people and be available to them. Serving is a means for us to

be available to people, knowing that God is in charge of the timetable.

Evangelism and discipleship are central to mercy ministry. If someone has no friends, has no support, he or she is likely to feel abandoned and hopeless. They might feel alienated from themselves, others and God. They might even say to themselves: Why bother? But when we peel away the layers of need, the greatest craving is spiritual, so there must be a spiritual solution. The starting point for renewal is spiritual. It's only with Christ that people possess the freedom to finally look beyond themselves for a source of healing.

Decades ago, when Tenth Church faced the decision of whether or not to sell its property and move to the suburbs (where there was lots of grass and parking), we could have followed the trail of so many other urban churches. However, the congregation decided to remain. We stayed, not to keep our beautiful building, but to be Christian witnesses in serving our neighbors. The church website proclaims, "This church opens wide her doors and offers her welcome in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ."¹

Here's the bottom line: Our goal in welcoming is not to "win converts," but to make disciples. When Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations," (Matt. 28:19, NIV) He meant that His followers' lives would be totally, unconditionally submitted to Him. This submitting is a lifelong process—a once-in-a-lifetime choice that takes a lifetime to accomplish. It is one thing to say that Jesus saved us from our sins. It's another thing to say that He is our Lord and owns everything that we have. Mercy ministry is as much about bringing Christians to a deeper commitment of discipleship as it is about serving

those outside of the church. Part of mercy ministry is converting uncaring church members into church members who have compassion for the unwanted and unlovely—the widow, the orphan, the beggar and the addicted. God desperately wants these church members to share His concern for the broken and brokenhearted.

This book follows my book *Not Just a Soup Kitchen: How Mercy Ministry in the Local Church Transforms Us All*.² It provides a further blueprint for how the church—the people of God—can be the neighborly helpers God intended and, especially, how we, as helpers, can serve smarter and more effectively. I desire for church leaders to envision the future: What do we want our churches to look like in five or ten or twenty-five years? Do we want the next generation of our congregations to act and look the same as we do today? What transformation is needed and what will it take to achieve it? What differences do we want to make in the lives of those who sit in our pews? What differences do we want to make in the lives of those who live in and around our neighborhoods? What trainings do we want for our deacons and members?

Neighborology, as a book and a concept, considers the following themes: the development of servant hearts, every-member ministry, the ministry of hospitality, and volunteerism. It also describes how to set safe boundaries so we do not become rescuers, that is, how to deal with difficult people and how to prevent “compassion fatigue” and burnout. These are areas of concern that most pastors never learn in seminary and that deacons and other church members are rarely taught.

Through this book, I hope to encourage churches to shift or tweak their ministry paradigms in order to raise up future

generations of servant-leaders. I hope to help deacons work “outside the box” instead of in the “we’ve always done it this way” mode of operation. And I will share various stories, pilgrimages, trials and other experiences that will benefit readers and their churches. By the end of this book, my hope is that each reader will have developed a servant’s heart and a new understanding of “neighborology.”

1

A THEOLOGY OF CARING

I call her Mary. I've never met her and I don't know her real identity. She has left me over fifty voice mail messages in the last year. She usually calls in the middle of the night when I'm not in my office. Each time she does, she shares her difficulties with life—how no one cares about her, and how she does not like one particular neighbor who is a church member. I would really love to speak with “Mary,” but her phone number comes up as anonymous. I have yet to be able to track her down, speak to her and tell her I care.

BEING MADE NEW

Really caring about other people is hard work. It is beyond challenging. This is true for me and, I believe, for all of us. That is, until we become more like Jesus through spiritual regeneration and transformation. Regeneration, or being made new, means that we turn over to God all dependence or allegiance we have to people, places or things. We submit to God

all addictions, habits or attempts to please people instead of Him. This process of transformation is God leading a holy war in our lives, as He did in Deuteronomy 7, where anything belonging to the opposing gods must be totally destroyed. Regeneration, transformation and renewal, then, have to do with who is in charge of our lives. It means that we must please God above all others.

Personally, I have a prideful hunger to be appreciated. I have been a people pleaser most of my life. As a result, I am in a continual process of allowing God to be the focus of who I am and what I do—moving beyond just knowing about Christ to knowing Him personally and knowing that I am loved by Him unconditionally. It is also important for people pleasers like me to spend quality time with God.

Jesus often took time out to spend time with His Father, and He often retreated to a quiet place (see Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). What set Jesus apart was His intimacy with God, which denoted a close, loving and trusting relationship with the one he called “Abba.” Jesus was a person of prayer. The busier He got, the more He turned to God in prayer. Why? Because He knew God! He understood God as a loving Father whose main interest was to love, teach and heal His people.¹

To know God is to have the same relationship with Him as Christ does. The difference is that we are sinful and need forgiveness. Biblical counselor Larry Crabb states in his book *Encouragement* that sometimes he is afraid of God and expects anger. “As I await the pronouncement of my well-deserved rejection, I hear his loving words and see his loving smile. And I am eternally encouraged for he has spoken from his love to my fear.”² The biblical truth is that God loves us; and

although we—in our sinful nature—are worthy of rejection, He has forgiven us and adopted us as His children.

FINDING SOLITUDE

Our relationship with Christ comes from His journey with us and our pilgrimage in life's wilderness—climbing proverbial mountains and learning to find joy and contentment as God transforms our lives. Even though God's love for us has remained unchanged, our love for God often runs hot and cold and lukewarm.

This is certainly true for me. Like the apostle Paul, I often don't do the things I know I should be doing and do the things I should not be doing (see Rom. 7:15–20). At times I have been fearful and frightened, feeling worthless or without value. I have felt alienated from people and from God: afraid to reach out and distrustful of those reaching in. This is why I must find more and more solitude with God—and also why I am so afraid of it.

In his book *Reaching Out*, the late Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen describes how most of us fear being alone and, therefore, fear solitude.

Our lifestyles are vehicles for anesthesia. Panic occurs when we have run out of distractions and are brought close to aloneness. The lonely, hurting, suffering people reach out to momentary, illusory experiences, self-deceits that say “now everything will be better.” People desire more and more receive less and less. We need a journey of the spiritual life.

We must find the courage to enter into the desert of our own loneliness and by gentle and persistent efforts change it into a garden of solitude, from restless energies to a restful spirit, from outward cravings to inward searching.³

Yes, the process of discovering what Nouwen calls “entering the desert” is a risky one. It requires that we commit ourselves to that solitude where spiritual lives are formed. Out of this solitude, we find a new calmness of spirit, a freedom from old, negative and locked-into patterns of feeling, thought and action. This process uncovers the very being of our souls. It exposes us and makes us vulnerable to God Almighty. It makes us participate in becoming known by God. Acknowledging our sin, pain and brokenness is part of true repentance and confession. Yet, as difficult as this process is, we don’t go through it alone; the Holy Spirit empowers us step-by-step to place our burdens on Him (see Matt. 11:28). And as we learn to care for ourselves, we are more able to care for and be good neighbors to others.

Solitude also makes intimacy possible. We must, through solitude, empty ourselves of self and listen to what God is saying to us about making room for others. Yes, solitude is very much connected to our work as ministers of mercy! It deepens our affection for one another: we are free to love one another because God first loved us. In moving from loneliness to solitude, we are able to move from anxious reactions to loving responses as we are transformed by Christ and His forgiveness. True repentance comes from a Spirit-led desire to change. It sets us free and leads us to worship and service.

This new freedom leads us from a lifestyle of caring less to a lifestyle of caring more, from hostility to hospitality.

HOSTING

Our freedom in Christ's love is a commitment to serving others. While loneliness promotes hostility, anger and fear, solitude makes us good hosts. According to theologian Henri Nouwen, "A good host is one who believes his guest is carrying a gift he wants to reveal to anyone who shows genuine interest. A good host shows encouragement, affirmation and support and welcomes the contributions of others."⁴ We are called upon to be hosts, providing hospitality and creating space for others. As followers of Christ, we offer safe places where we can welcome strangers and where healing and growth can take place.

I love the example of hospitality that Jesus provided us: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Hospitality allows us, as Romans 13:14 says, to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ," meaning that we have the mind of our Savior. We then turn our *hostis* into *hospis*,⁵ as Nouwen says, putting away all hostility and bitterness, and making others better than ourselves (see Phil. 2:3). This change in attitude draws us away from old selfish patterns and leads us to imitate Christ. With this change, we are then aware of our neighbor's needs and begin to love them as Christ loves us. Before my Christian conversion, if someone on the streets came up to me and asked for something to eat, I would reply, "Get out of here you bum." Now if a homeless person says they are hungry, I might offer my sandwich or a piece of fruit and, if I have time,

will sit and talk with him. When we imitate Christ, we model His humility, submission and service (see Phil. 2:1–12). The power of the Holy Spirit enables us to take action for God’s sake. Humility frees us to do the will of God. We become free from serving ourselves to serving others. In humility, we submit ourselves to serve God and neighbor without demanding anything in return. Submission allows us to value those whom God brings to us. Nouwen calls these people God’s gifts.⁶

I’m reminded of a church member who had plans to go out with some of his buddies. On his way to meet them, he came across a neighbor who was “down and out” and in need of help. The church member immediately contacted his friends to cancel and took his neighbor to the nearest Christian rescue mission. In the name of Jesus, he gave up the right to have his own way for the sake of someone else.

SERVING OTHERS

In serving others, we again seek to follow Christ’s example. He came not to be served but to serve (see Matt. 20:28). If you’re like me, saying “No” to helping others is easy. Learning to say “Yes” is a discipline that must be exercised.

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Christian philosopher Dallas Willard states:

We engage our goods and strengths in the active promotion of the good of others and the causes of God in our world. [We] may also serve others to train ourselves away from arrogance, possessiveness, envy, resentment or covetousness. In that case

service is undertaken as a discipline for the spiritual life. Service is the high road to freedom from bondage to other people. We cease to be “manpleasers,” for we are acting unto God in our lowliest deeds.⁷

That kind of attitude comes from a relationship with Christ. “We serve out of whispered promptings, divine urges” of the Spirit,⁸ says spiritual director Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline*. All service is important. There is no measurement that distinguishes between small and large service. Those with servant hearts are content to serve in “hidden” ways, with no need for recognition. They serve for God’s honor and glory. Foster continues:

True service is indiscriminate in its ministry. It has heard the call of Jesus to be “servant of all.” True service ministers simply and faithfully because there is need. It refuses to allow feelings to control service, but rather the service disciplines the feelings. True service is a life-style. It acts from ingrained patterns of godly living. True service can withhold the service as freely as perform it. It can listen with tenderness and patience before acting. It can serve by waiting in silence. True service builds community. It puts no one under obligation to return the service. It draws, binds, heals and builds.⁹

Service to others requires a need for constant renewal. As God transforms us to become more like Jesus, we learn what it means to be clay in the hands of the Potter.

We learn the meaning of the hymn, “Have Thine Own Way, Lord.”

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Thou art the potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.¹⁰

An auto accident in 1982 put my life on hold. I was in constant pain, unable to work, with no income and no idea what the future looked like. Suddenly, I was in the hands of the Potter, trusting, waiting, “yielded and still.”

FURTHER GROWTH

The spiritual growth I found in being yielded and still was not through the performance of religious rituals, but by developing a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ. In the four years I was unable to work, I sought to strengthen that relationship through daily Scripture reading and prayer. The fruits of that experience were enormous. Before my accident, I had posted “no trespassing signs,” thinking I could prevent God from molding and shaping me according to His will. But this was foolish. The best action I could take was to willingly surrender to God. Looking back, I can see that God used this experience to mold me into His image.

Around the same time, I began to have flashbacks of being sexually molested as a child—a memory I had unconsciously buried to protect myself. Each time the flashbacks occurred, I attempted to bury the memories once again, but

they continued to resurrect themselves. I felt so broken and I could not fix myself. My brokenness was all for good. God was at work. By understanding God's love and sovereignty and the limitations of my own timetable and agenda, I gained peace. But change took time and the power of the Holy Spirit. It required patient waiting. Similarly, God was waiting for me to pray for the work of the Spirit, to fill me with His presence, His thoughts and His words.

Speaking on this type of spiritual renewal, God's love in us must be visible. If people don't see in us a walk and a talk that reflects holiness, that is a good indication of where we are spiritually. God's love is seen as we live it out. Our relationship with Christ must have an impact on all our other relationships: spouse, children, friends, employees, employers. There is no relationship that you and I can enter into that is not directly affected by our spiritual life in Christ. Servant hearts are shaped by our spiritual lives in Christ, and the result is our serving the world around us. When we study the Bible, we should have ears to hear what God is saying to us—words that mold us to be good neighbors.

Spiritual renewal should make us more conscious of our relationship with God: how he cares for us and how we must care for others because of this loving relationship. This is what I call a "theology of caring." This theological mind-set is born from our personal pilgrimage involving a search for identity and the development of a healthy relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ, His Son.

It also involves developing a godly, obedient understanding of service and caring. Having this biblical theology of caring empowers us to live out the great command to love the

Lord with all our hearts and to love our neighbors as ourselves (see Matt. 22:37–39). We who have servant hearts are molded and perfected as God changes us over time.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2–4, NIV)

This character building is essential for those whom God uses as His compassionate servants and good neighbors.

BECOMING PEOPLE OF COMPASSION

The character we need for caring is found in Jesus and the power of our resurrected Savior. We are then able to consciously and consistently model His love and do what does not come naturally, that is, minister selflessly, serve with compassion, seek the welfare of others and love our enemies.

Only by personally knowing Christ's love and concern are we able to care for others. It is by His "breathing" in us that we are once and forever changed. We move higher and deeper into meaningful relationship with Him, with His help.¹¹ In this relationship we know and enter into His care and compassion and become part of His incarnated ministry through us on Earth. His heart of compassion asks us to come alongside those in need. In his book *The Search for Compassion*, theologian Andrew Purves says, "Compassion asks us to go where

it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears.”¹² He says that we need to be people of compassion who will not be too quick to take away pain, but will have the spiritual and mental toughness to walk alongside another, sharing in their journey to the point where woundedness can be confronted.¹³

Compassion is hands-on ministry that requires servant hearts. It demands love. Compassion is ministry without limits. It is evangelical, bringing persons to a place where they may “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps. 34:8). Purves writes:

Compassion is the ministry of Jesus Christ by which he enters into another’s brokenness. Compassion is situational. It cannot be pre-packaged. Compassion is vicarious. It means suffering with another. Compassion bridges the gap between social and pastoral ministry. Compassion demands a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ. This final descriptor is the most vital element in that it makes compassion possible and is found whenever people are being liberated to serve, where they search after a faithful and obedient walk.¹⁴

Our faith and our compassion is a biblical demonstration that Jesus is the Lord of our lives.

Questions to Consider

1. What role has solitude played in your spiritual growth?
How have you watered the “desert” of your soul?
2. How has God transformed your character? What was the experience like?
3. Describe an experience where God changed hostility into hospitality.

2

DEVELOPING THE HEART OF A SERVANT

What is the process for developing the heart of a servant? Jesus is very clear: “Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39). “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

Having the heart of a servant lies in the concept of victory through loss, a commitment to following Jesus. If we will not do things the way Jesus says, He tells us we are not worthy of Him (see Matt. 10:37). Our Lord requires us to ask, “What can we give?” This is in stark contrast to postmodern Christianity, which asks, “What do we get?” His requirements for us are costly.

One illustration of this occurred years ago when I worked for government as a social worker. I kept a Bible on my desk when meeting with a client. It was my practice in many cases to ask if I could read Scripture and pray for them. If the client gave me permission, I would read and pray. If not, I would not.

Over the years, my atheist supervisor warned me to stop this practice because it violated “church and state.” My response was always, “As a Christian, I can’t *not* do it” because it would violate my Christian beliefs. Finally, after repeated “offenses,” I was told that I should quit or be fired. I quit. Being a faithful servant and disciple of Christ cost me my job.

The cost of discipleship is seen many times throughout the Gospels. Luke 14:25–27 states that we must hate our father, mother and our own lives to serve Jesus Christ. The meaning here is that if we say Jesus is Lord and is first in our lives, then we must love everyone close to us less than we love Him—not to hate per se, but to rank second, third, etc. When Jesus begins Matthew 16:24 with the words, “If anyone would come after me,” He is speaking about a complete and total surrender. In Luke 9:23, Jesus adds the word “daily” to emphasize that He is calling us to an everyday lifestyle of obedience to Him. Jesus’ utterances remind us of the three attitudes we must have when we come to Him: self-denial, cross bearing and Jesus following.

DENYING OURSELVES

What is self-denial? It means that we decide to leave self behind and that in every moment of life we say no to ourselves and yes to God. Church of Scotland minister William Barclay (1907–1978) said:

To deny oneself means once, finally and for all, to dethrone self and to enthrone God. To deny oneself means to obliterate self as the dominant principle

of life, and to make God the ruling principle, more, the ruling passion, of life.

To deny ourselves is . . . to ignore the very existence of oneself. It is to treat the self as if it did not exist. Usually we treat ourselves as if our self was far and away the most important thing in the world. If we are to follow Jesus, we must forget that self exists.¹

In his *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, eighteenth-century pastor Matthew Henry says that self-denial is no more than what Jesus practiced to redeem and instruct us and is, also, the fundamental spirit required for admission into Christ's school.² It is the sum and substance of Christ's call to true discipleship, coupled with daily taking up the cross and following Him.³ But we Christians struggle as we attempt to deny ourselves. Living godly lives in service to the church and our neighbors is difficult and troublesome. It is also thoroughly and completely opposed to the practice of our secular society. Who in his or her right mind would want to live a life of self-denial?

After my conversion, I transferred from a junior college to attend Calvin College. My proposed roommate decided at the last minute to attend a different school, and I was alone in my dorm room. Sometime afterward, I noticed another student, Albert, who roomed by himself. No one wanted to room with him or even be with him because he was such a difficult person. No one wanted to come alongside of him and be a good neighbor either. Because of this, I met with the dean of students and asked for permission to room with Albert.

Permission was granted, and I learned firsthand how difficult and troublesome he was. Yet God provided sufficient grace for the both of us, and each of us grew spiritually.

SELF-DENIAL TO MOST IS DEVIANT BEHAVIOR

To most of the world, my actions would be labeled “deviant” behavior. Yet in Jesus’ kingdom, the King acts as a servant, and He makes his kingdom known by serving those who suffer. Values that are considered normal (i.e., paying little attention to those with great need) are changed to show that the law of God is to love one’s neighbor. The meaning of life is no longer centered on self-interest. The law of Christ motivates us to give our lives to Him and to others. This new law on our hearts encourages us to ask what we can do to help others. Unfortunately, according to Gerald Schlabach in *And Who Is My Neighbor?*, “we have been trained to believe that fulfillment comes to those who make their lives an endless round of party going with plenty of laughs. But Jesus tells us that people who cry because their hearts are broken over the things that break the heart of God are the fulfilled people in this world.”⁴ To the world, that is certainly deviant behavior.

Deviance implies that there is some action that goes against cultural norms and expectations. But, there are sociological distinctions. A behavior or condition may be normal or abnormal, moral or amoral, depending on the culture. What is normal in one culture may be deviant in another and vice versa.

Christians represent a self-denying culture. In Christ, selflessness is a badge of identity. Those who are in Christ, and

who have become disciples of Christ, show by their actions that they are following Him.

A volunteer on our staff befriended a homeless drug addict and, over time, spent many hours speaking with him and counseling him. The volunteer continued his contact and visitation even after the addict was convicted of a crime and sent to a distant prison. When the ex-convict returned to Philadelphia several years later, our volunteer was there to help him again.

SELF-DENIAL IS COSTLY

Jesus' teachings present the world with a new model for living: self-denial. The road to joy is found in compassionate living for others. Can you imagine Jesus saying to His disciples, "Take up your cross and follow me—it'll make you feel good"? Of course not. But to some people, the idea of denying self is absurd. When our ministry staff goes on an outing, they invite our poor and homeless neighbors and spend the day strengthening relationships and caring for some of their needs. This has included trips to the National Aquarium in Baltimore, Phillies baseball games, the Jersey Shore and elsewhere. Many times we have had to pray for wisdom when responding to specific needs, but self-denial is not easy. It is neighborly, loving and the right thing to do.

Jesus showed us that love can be painful and costly. His service on our behalf certainly was not cheap. He gave His life! Therefore, our service in Christ for others must cost us something as well. Having servant hearts requires a great investment on our part.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran minister who died at the hands of the Nazis in 1945, challenges us to embrace a costly grace.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. . . . Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: “You were bought with a price,” and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.⁵

To embrace this costly grace is essentially a conversion to and an invitation to follow Jesus. This conversion to self-denial begins first in the mind. We cannot serve others until our minds are freed from the world’s influence and then transformed by the Lord’s power. Conversion is an invitation to develop servant hearts and, through that process, be used by God for the sake of others. God converts us to His love not only as a means in itself, but also to the end that we will offer His love to others. I mentioned earlier in this chapter how I was led at Calvin College to room with Albert, a very unlikely person. In the two semesters we shared the dorm room, we also played ball and did many other things together, apart

from others. I know looking back, that this sacrificial service greatly benefited Albert and glorified God.

SELF-DENIAL REQUIRES A RESURRECTED MIND

“When Jesus calls a man,” according to Bonhoeffer, “he bids him come and die.”⁶ Those who have a heart for God—servant hearts—must go by a way that is sacrificial. For Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama, to have a heart for God is to “read the scriptures with [others’] needs in mind.”⁷ He says that the essence of having a heart for God is having the mind of Christ. It is allowing Emmanuel, God with us, to influence our lives today through the salvific work He accomplished. The mind of Christ is therefore “the resurrected mind.” His victory over the grave guaranteed our salvation. His resurrection made it possible for us to have a resurrection mind-set and a biblical worldview. The servant heart begins with the nurture of the resurrected mind. According to Koyama, “There is no way to domesticate Jesus Christ.”⁸ Doing so would distort the image and power of God. Too many times we give God our intellectual compliance while refusing to turn over our wills and agendas to Him. Jesus surrendered His entire will to do the will of His heavenly Father.

In Christ we have been called to surrender and summoned to lay down the burden of self-will. We can then fall freely and totally into the arms of Jesus, trusting Him completely for all things for all time. This is part of what the apostle Paul speaks about when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20, NIV). We need to be crucified—purged of everything that cannot

be used by God—so God can raise us up for use in the world. God attached Himself to the world in order to produce the crucified and resurrected Savior and, in the Savior's followers, a resurrection mind-set. This means that, as Christians, we attach ourselves to the needs of others. Many cultures would oppose this belief system. For example, in Thailand, being detached represents the idea of good. It is portrayed for Thai people as “clothing washed, neatly ironed and placed in a closed, undisturbed drawer. Don't wear it! It will get dirty! The clothing must stay detached from the dirty world.”⁹ This detachment is a commitment to noninvolvement.

Similarly, many Christians neatly store biblical teachings on helping the poor and needy in their own tightly sealed boxes. They do not practically apply the parable of the good Samaritan (see Luke 10:25–37) or Jesus' teaching that we love Him when we show mercy to others (see Matt. 25:35–40). I see this lack of mercy ministry in churches all over the United States.

Too many Christians want to keep their Bible teaching undisturbed in a drawer, neatly ironed, always clean and untouched. But Jesus calls us to be committed and attached to our neighbors and their suffering.

A few years after I began serving at Tenth Church, and as our mercy ministry grew, more and more of our homeless neighbors began coming to Tenth not only for meals, clothing, counseling and fellowship, but also for worship and Bible study. I remember one member saying, “You should do this ministry in North Philly or Kensington. This is a church, not a mission.” In spite of such attitudes, we continued. Over the years, lives have been changed, and captives have been

set free—those on the street and those in the church pews. In my estimation, very few Christians truly follow Jesus in ministry to the poor, to the outcast and to other vulnerable people. They don't seem to be interested in outreach, only in becoming more learned. They seem to be content sitting in the church pew, unscrewing the tops of their heads to have Bible information put in, and then screwing the tops back on tightly so the information does not leak out.

But our neighbors are not interested in our Christology. They are most interested in our being . . . well . . . neighbors. They are not concerned with whether or not we love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (see Matt. 22:37). They are concerned with our self-denial and whether we love our neighbor as ourselves (see 22:39). Our neighbors can very easily explain the passage, “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). I am reminded about a friend's story concerning a needy woman. She frequently stood on a street corner near his church singing the song, “Do not pass me by.” Yet, all those who saw her did pass her by. They enjoyed her singing, but did not see her neediness. Jesus was not like this. Christ, facing the reality of his neighbors' needs, accepted the claims His neighbors made on Him. Our attitude toward our neighbor, modeled after the likeness of Jesus, carries with it a unique responsibility for theological and practical obedience to Jesus. The only way we can be authentic in our lives and lifestyles is by imitating Christ in our personal relationships like a friend of mine. He did not pass the woman by, but again and again returned to her and established a relationship. He invited her to the evening church fellowship dinner; and when she finally accepted

the invitation, he introduced her to a female staff member who became a friend. Over time, the woman received the help she needed, joined the church and sang in the choir.

WHAT WE NEED TO SEE

How sad it is when the church fails to show it cares. In *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, church planter and pastor Jack Miller says, “I was standing in the midst of the Great American Church Tragedy. That tragedy is the local church with an abundance of resources and spiritual gifts held back by unbelieving apathy.”¹⁰ The chief reason for this apathy is that “needy” people—the sick, the dying, the poor and the despairing—are usually not attractive, and sometimes they have fallen into their problems through their own efforts. It is easy for Christians to start looking for the noble, deserving poor and to discover that such people are in very short supply.¹¹ We are all undeserving. We need to educate ourselves about those to whom many basic needs are denied. This is not the kind of learning that is done for its own sake, as if it were enough to know about poverty and be against it. Rather, it is a kind of education that serves as a catalyst. It is intended to lead to other kinds of activity and to give meaning and purpose to those actions. Learning about poverty is one thing. It certainly helps us to understand the nuances and complexities of those who are living in those situations. But establishing relationships with people who live in poverty is an entirely different level of engagement. Being involved in and with the poor is a prerequisite to caring for and helping them in many ways. The Bible calls us to learn about and care about others (see Matt.

25:40; 1 John 3:17; Phil. 2:4). Former Congressman Ernest Hollings tells what this kind of learning meant to him.

I was a victim of hunger myopia. I didn't really see hunger until I visited some families in a Charleston, South Carolina slum. Before we had gone a block, I was miserable. I began to understand that hunger is real, that it exists in hundreds of humans in my own home city. I saw what all America needs to see. The hungry are not able-bodied men, sitting around drunk and lazy on welfare. They are children. They are abandoned women, or the crippled, or the aged. Bridging the barrier of economic segregation and becoming acquainted with the poor near our own homes might do more to help us understand what Jesus and the prophets were talking about than anything else we could do.¹²

At Tenth Presbyterian Church, we seek to establish relationships with our neighbors, particularly those who are poor or homeless, through thrice-weekly meals and small-group Bible studies. In addition, we continue to call on our church members to develop servant hearts, as we lead them to serve in these ministries and establish relationships with their neighbors.

These relationships establish opportunities for greater ministry and help our neighbors grow in Christ and gain skills for independent living. Here, neighbors and church members grow spiritually as the Scriptures are read, explained, understood and put into practice. Here, Christians are growing,

joyful in giving of themselves for the benefit of others. Here, people are learning to follow Jesus.

TAKING UP OUR CROSSES

In early first-century Rome, each condemned criminal was forced to carry his own cross-piece to the place of crucifixions. Condemned men hanging on their crosses was not an uncommon sight. After the revolt following the death of Herod the Great, the historian Josephus recorded that two thousand Jews were crucified by the Roman proconsul Varus.¹³ Jesus' disciples understood the full meaning of the cross.

By taking up our crosses, we are committed to killing off our old selves. The *Word Biblical Commentary* says, "To take up one's cross means a deliberate dying to oneself, modeling a lifestyle patterned after the example of the Master."¹⁴ We can no longer place any hope in ourselves, or in anyone or anything else. The apostle Paul says that we cannot belong to Christ Jesus unless we crucify all self-indulgent passions and desires (see Gal. 5:24). We are called to accept our deaths—that in the cross, the "self" of us has been brought to an end. When we understand this fact, we are ready to follow Jesus.

A personal, consistent self-denial is part of the Christian walk. The way of the cross is Christian discipleship. We say to God, "We will do it your way." Real crosses involve surrendering our will and our use of time and money for the benefit of others. For example, some of us would do anything else rather than spend time studying Scripture and praying. Others of us might find taking opportunities to share our faith burdensome and so avoid them. Bearing real crosses means saying yes

to some important things for Jesus' sake.¹⁵ Bearing real crosses means all the things mentioned in Matthew 25:35-36—feeding the hungry, satisfying those who thirst, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick and visiting the prisoner—and feeding, satisfying and caring for our own spiritual needs as well.

Every week, Tenth Church volunteers meet with homeless neighbors, welcoming them into the church building for Bible study followed by a meal. These volunteers could be doing anything, but they sacrifice their time for our guests. One volunteer established a friendship with a guest and provided him much help, including temporary residence in his own home.

Essentially, taking up our crosses means accepting whatever God has given us or made us and then in priestly fashion offering it to Him as our “reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1, KJV).¹⁶ This is the cross of the Christian life: Having received from God, we gladly offer everything back to Him.

WE ARE PRIESTS

Our priesthood is rooted and grounded in Jesus alone. He is the Great High Priest whose priesthood was not ordained by man but, rather, was ordained by God. The author of the letter to the Hebrews says about Jesus, “You are a priest forever” (Heb. 5:6). He continues in chapter 7:

Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day,

first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. (7:26–27, NIV)

The apostle Peter compares us to our High Priest when he writes, “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5, NIV). He also says, “And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Heb. 13:16, NIV). We are called to build one another up by giving and living for others as Jesus did.

As our eternal High Priest, Jesus offered Himself on the cross once and for all time. As the only sacrifice acceptable to God the Father, Jesus cleansed us from sins, freed us from guilt, restored our relationship with God and redeemed us as His people. But Scripture does not simply teach us that our High Priest died on our behalf; it also teaches us that, because of His death, we have been made priests in Him. The same Priest “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,” also “made us [to be] a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (Rev. 1:5–6). Thus, our benefit from Christ’s priestly office is to be a royal priesthood. God proclaimed that those who walked in obedience to His covenant would be His “own possession,” a “holy nation” and a “royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9). The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers made it possible for Christians to reclaim a characteristic that previously had been given only to ordained priests. This doctrine teaches that all Christians are priests and that as priests, we serve God—no matter what vocation we pursue.

An article by David Hagopian says this about the priesthood of all believers:

There is no vocation that is more “sacred” than any other. Because Christ is Lord over all areas of life, and because His Word applies to all areas of life, nowhere does His Word even remotely suggest that the ministry is “sacred” while all other vocations are “secular.” Scripture knows no sacred–secular distinction. All of life belongs to God. All of life is sacred. All believers are priests.¹⁷

According to Martin Luther, priesthood has its privileges, but these are of task, not of rank. Luther says, “All believers have equally received the treasures which God has given, from the shoemaker to the farmer to the smith. No vocation stands over and above the rest. God has called all believers, without exception, to be His royal priests.”¹⁸ There is no legitimate vocation too low to be the vehicle through which God will do His work. In his “Treatise on Good Works,” Luther also said that the most important of all good works is faith in Christ. To the question asked in John 6:28 (NIV), “What must we do to do the works God requires?” Luther answers, ““This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him Whom He hath sent.’ . . . For in this work all good works must be done.”¹⁹

Similarly, the *Belgic Confession of 1561* states that Christians cannot help but do good works.

We believe that this true faith, produced in us by the hearing of God’s Word and by the work of the

Holy Spirit, regenerates us and makes us new creatures, causing us to live a new life and freeing us from the slavery of sin. . . . So then, it is impossible for this holy faith to be unfruitful in a human being, seeing that we do not speak of an empty faith but of what Scripture calls “faith working through love,” which leads people to do . . . the works that God has commanded in the Word.²⁰

Thus, because Christian priests are this new creation, they do good works through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel of Luke tells us, “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (17:10). Martin Luther concludes, “So a Christian . . . does everything cheerfully and freely; not that he may gather many merits . . . but because it is a pleasure for him to please God thereby.”²¹ I am reminded of an early job opportunity I had in my hometown of Paterson, New Jersey. Because of my mother’s political connections, I was offered the position of welfare department director, a position that would have brought much prestige and income. At the same time, a caseworker position was available that would allow me to experience every possibility of coming alongside people, spending time with them and providing both help and hope in Christ. I happily took the caseworker position.

WE ARE PART OF A NEW REFORMATION

Out of our gratitude then, we participate in God’s mission: He has told us to take up our crosses and to “go therefore and

make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Christianity is a movement of the laity, that is, the people of God. Jesus’ missionary calling was given to all who believed. Mission belongs to the entire church and those men and women who both believe and practice that principle. The greatest need in churches today is that church leaders train, motivate and mobilize the people of God for ministry. Every member is valuable. No member is useless. Every member has received talents to be used in the service of others.

Our gifts and our service are to be used for the benefit of others and not to serve ourselves. In his book *The New Reformation*, Greg Ogden states that our royal priesthood “seeks nothing less than the radical transformation of the self-perception of all believers so that we see ourselves as vital channels through whom God mediates his life to other members of the body of Christ and to the world.”²² The church is God’s reconciling presence in the world. We are a community of gifted and talented priests who have denied ourselves and have taken up our crosses. It is in this new identity as crossbearers that we are able to imitate Christ in the world. God enables all Christians to serve Him as royal priests who follow Him, serving others. I see this in so many of our mercy ministry staff but especially in one woman who retired several years ago. She retired from forty years of paid employment, but she volunteered to service of others. Every Tuesday she takes the bus to the local prison to serve those “serving time.”

The apostle Paul says in Romans 12:10 (NIV), “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.” And in Philippians 2:4 (BSB), “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests

of others.” Putting others first is a cross we must bear. Jesus Himself is the model we must follow.

FOLLOWING JESUS

Both the Old and New Testaments contain the idea that believers are those who follow God in trust and obedience. For the Hebrew nation, it meant obeying the law and the prophets. New Testament believers were commanded and encouraged to follow the Lord’s commandments and the principles of faith that came from the apostles and from Christ Himself.

Jesus still speaks the same two words, “Follow Me.” For us, following Jesus still means leaving everything behind. Following Christ is becoming united with Christ, and in doing so, we repeat the marriage vow, “Forsaking all others, as long as we live.” In Him, we have a new identification and a command to act as He did. The apostle whom Jesus loved wrote, “Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6). As Jesus’ disciples, we follow Him by living lives of active obedience. When we were children, we played a game called “Follow the Leader.”

No matter what the leader did, we had to follow his or her steps. Now that we are adults and have put away childish things, our Christian walk consists of following—in thoughtful, loving, obedient steps—our divine leader Jesus Christ, who modeled for us self-denial, cross bearing and following in a continual awareness of the demands of God and the needs of others. Since 1988, Tenth Church has had many ministry interns who have chosen to work in the area of mercy. Their hope has been to achieve knowledge and wisdom for a

life committed to ministry to, for and with hurting men and women. Each of them has shadowed me and others and has followed our lead as we seek to reproduce ministers of mercy. Following Christ implies learning how He loved. Following Christ means being neighbors.

WHO IS OUR NEIGHBOR?

As our minds become more and more like the mind of Christ, we become increasingly sensitive to the needs of those around us. Whether we agree or disagree, God's truth is that anyone in need is our neighbor. We must replace the question "Who is my neighbor?" (which restricts our response) with "Whose neighbor am I?" (which liberates our response). Theologian Kosuke Koyama says, "One cannot know beforehand whom he will meet. The immediate sight of a neighbor demands a spontaneous answer. One becomes a neighbor, also, to people outside one's group, nation, or race."²³

Similarly, Calvin College's Lester DeKoster says in *The Deacons Handbook*:

Why waste time discussing how we will know who our neighbor is? Just go and be "neighbor" to someone, to anyone, in need. Let the needy find his neighbor in you. Drop the talk. Cut the chatter. Take God's gifts of time, money, goods, talents, counsel, a listening ear, a helping hand . . . out there where someone can use them. To love your neighbor as yourself means simply to be a neighbor whenever and wherever you can.²⁴

The person in need is the one whom God places in our path. His or her need may be big or small, physical, emotional or spiritual. It may be obvious to all, or obvious only to those who can see through the person's mask or cover-up.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the good Samaritan to make clear to His listeners who their neighbor is. The familiar story tells of a Jewish man who was beaten, robbed and left for dead. Those who passed by were aware of his injuries and need but ignored them. The Jewish priest had religious reasons: If the body had been a corpse, and he touched it, he would be unclean for seven days (see Num. 19:11). The Levite, a temple worker, would not take any risks to help either. To these religious officials, law and ceremony were more important than love and the suffering of others.

The Samaritan, however, the one Jewish people despised, was prepared to help—he risked his safety and altered his schedule to become involved with a needy person of another race and social class. I often tell the story of how a group of black teenagers befriended me. I was a high school student who, because of childhood injuries and abuse, was emotionally and physically crippled and without hope. They made it their business to come alongside me for the long run and to minister to my needs. The result, three years later, was my coming to faith in Christ. Like the Good Samaritan, they understood how to be good neighbors.

WELCOMING AND FORGIVING

Jesus lived a life of submission to the Father. He gave up the right to have His own way. He surrendered the right

to retaliate and gave up the right of having “sweet revenge” against His enemies. His submission was seen in His ability to forgive His oppressor-neighbors: As He was being crucified, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Jesus’ submissive attitude allowed Him to love others unconditionally. Neighbors were a reality for Him. He saw worth and value in the needy people He encountered, which is the opposite of what most people—even Christians—do. In our own minds, we keep “those people” at arm’s length, making them peripheral beings, sometimes even worse. We often speak as if such people do not exist as humans. Our perception is that people only have worth if they possess what the world values: money, property and fame. I have heard people say, “I am not my brother’s keeper” when given some responsibility to help others. Their body language—a shrug or a frown—indicates to me that, to them, “those people” are not worth it.

In spite of whether or not people have possessions, Jesus knows the worth of all humankind, and He demonstrated a unique self-denial to His neighbors by bearing His cross and walking obediently before His Father.

For Jesus, service was not merely performing service tasks or giving money, but being a servant. It was a deliberate, conscious statement of who He was and who we should be as we follow Him. Jesus showed us that life is a gift that is not to be possessed, but shared. He showed us that hospitality involves receptivity. We must gladly welcome the stranger in. Jesus’ love of His neighbors flowed out of an inward sense of love, joy, peace and obedience. Our motive for loving our neighbors is gratitude to God for His eternal, unchanging love for us.

The heir of the Borden Dairy Corporation, William Borden, was considered “royalty” as his family had wealth. For his high school graduation, they gave him a trip. While on the trip, he began to feel a burden for those less fortunate. He returned to America and enrolled at Yale University where he started a Bible study; founded a mission for those who were on the streets of New Haven; and shared the gospel with orphans, widows, the homeless and the hungry, offering them hope and refuge.

When Borden graduated from Yale, he entered Princeton Seminary and, upon graduation, set sail for China intending to serve Christ there. Along the way, however, he contracted spinal meningitis and died soon after. When his Bible was discovered after his death, six words were found written on the inside page: “No reserve, no retreat, no regrets.”²⁵ Denying self, he gave up his earthly wealth to follow Jesus and serve those in need.

Denying self, taking up the cross, and following Christ describe three different ways of living for God and others. As a community of people who deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Christ, we are called to live in radical opposition to the powers of evil, showing forth a new way of living. Tenth’s mercy ministry is made up of many, many people who sacrifice their time, talent and resources to love their neighbors. These neighbors live on the street, in shelters, in “abandominiums,” in nursing homes and in prisons. They are all either brokenhearted or broken down from experiencing much hardship in their lives.

A recent phone call from one of my ministry coordinators reminded me of the powers of evil that are against us.

Commenting on a Sunday Bible study with our homeless neighbors, he listed three times in ninety minutes where there were spiritual attacks. These disruptions from just one guest included false gossip about a leader, a physical threat against another guest and a personal threat against the coordinator himself. How should the coordinator respond? It is our calling to live out the communal life in radical obedience to the One who is our model.²⁶ Our modeling Christ is evidence that as good neighbors we have the hearts of servants.

Questions to Consider

1. What “cost of discipleship” have you incurred?
2. Describe an experience where you gave up the right to have your own way? What caused your response? How did that make you feel?
3. Comment on the quote, “Let the needy find his neighbor in you.” What goes through your head?