

the eighth step

Take an active part in our local church, using our gifts, talents and resources to serve God and bless others

In our previous session, we embraced God's perspective of humanity - choosing to see people through the eyes of Christ. We looked at why that is so important, and we committed ourselves to those principles and practices through which his love will flow freely from us to others. Love, as we know, is both the divine nature *and* the hallmark of the Christian. It is meant to be enjoyed...and it is also meant to be *expressed*.

Step Seven gives us the 'big picture' about love. In this session, we will see how love is translated into action, specifically in the church setting. The church is where our faith is nurtured, where we are brought into Christian maturity... where we can begin to bless others, even as *we* are being blessed. It is here that we are likely to enjoy some of our most fulfilling and rewarding relationships, as we walk together on the path of discipleship. Let's take a few minutes to consider what the church really *is*, because that will tell us *why* such close relationships will flourish.

the church

The church, of course, is not just a building, though it usually meets in one. Nor is it really anything to do with *denominations*. It has never been God's plan to have denominations. Many have originated because groups of Christians wanted to follow Christ's teaching more closely, yet that very teaching stresses the importance of unity. No, the church is simply *God's family*... you, me and all of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

When we recognised God as our Heavenly Father, we became part of his family. Church is just a convenient way of describing the family relationship we have come to share in...though it *is* a very special family!

The church (as with a conventional family situation) is bound together by what it shares. In a typical family, this may include the bond of time spent living together (the shared history), love (mutual affection) and, of course, the blood-tie (common heritage).

So, what binds the church together - what do we share? Like our typical family, we spend time together and there is love, but even where there is little shared history, there is something far better. God's family has a shared *future*. We have an eternal place in *our* family - it is an everlasting relationship in which all brothers and sisters in Christ are included... and, if a 'blood-relationship' is considered an important link between people, how much stronger is the bond of unity between those who each share in the Spirit of God, and have been cleansed by the shedding of Christ's blood?

unity - God's plan for his family

This quality of unity, this '*oneness*' in Christ, is a major theme of the New Testament. Jesus, shortly before he faced the cross, took time to pray for all who would become disciples... "*that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*" (John 17:23-24)

Christ's prayer for the family of believers is that we will share the same quality of unity he

enjoys with the Father - that we may be 'one', even as *they* are one. Such closeness, such perfect harmony may be difficult to imagine - yet this is precisely what we are called to as the church.

The Apostle Paul made many references to the importance of unity among believers. His image of the "body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12-30) is a wonderful picture of the church as a living being - each part having a function, each part belonging to all the rest. Paul recognises that individuals in the Christian family are as diverse as the different senses and organs that make up a person, yet we all have a role to play for the good of the whole. We are *interdependent* - we *need* each other!

But there is more to Christian unity than even this: There is *love*. Taking Paul's idea of the 'body' a little further, perhaps love would be the bloodstream - touching all parts, nourishing all parts. It is love from which the 'body of Christ' draws its strength - love of God, and love of each other. We have embraced both the principles and the practices of love - we only need to see how they work in the special relationships we enjoy in the Christian family. But let's first be absolutely sure we understand in our hearts the *significance* of love, in this context of our church...

"We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers."
(1 John 3:14)

This is just one of several verses found in 1 John which emphasise the supreme importance of love in the Christian family. Here, as elsewhere, John is telling us that such love is the defining characteristic of those who have become children of God. On the same theme, 1 John 4:21 tells us, simply, that loving our brothers is a *command* from God. We will meet this requirement - *and* Christ's call to a supernatural quality of unity - in the same way we accomplish all he asks of us: Through developing and nurturing our relationship with him, through willingness, application and his transforming power.

service - the obligatory privilege!

That relationship, and the love that flows from it, most often find its expression in *service*. The verse we considered in the last session, "*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*" (Ephesians 2:10) is especially appropriate in the church. Mutual service is God's plan for his family. It is the principle underpinning the whole structure of his church - an integral part of the grand design.

Service to our brothers and sisters is a privilege, but more than that, it is both a *right* and an *obligation*. *Serving is a primary channel of God's blessing from which no Christian is excluded*. The church is full of opportunities to serve (great and small) because it is designed to function that way. It is often in service, in blessing others, that we experience God's great blessings in our own lives. We have a right to that, because God has given us that right, but it still an obligation. True love of God and his people *demand*s that we act upon it.

Among the main *purposes* of the church are to make disciples (the 'Great Commission', Matthew 28:16-20), to prepare God's people for works of service, and to help us mature as Christians (Ephesians 4:12-13). The quality of Christian maturity that Ephesians speaks of - "*attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ*" - is one of the most amazing concepts in the whole bible. That we, in our weakness, could aspire to such heights would be unbelievable if anyone but the Creator himself had authorised these words... yet the truth is, *we are designed with the capacity to become like Christ!*

the call to greatness

Each of us has enormous potential - the potential to reflect the very nature of Jesus himself. We are called to *greatness*, and this programme is designed to help us answer that call - to reject mediocrity and allow our heavenly Father to fulfill that potential in us. Jesus gives us the key to true greatness: "...*whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" (Matthew 20: 26-28) **The key to greatness is to have the heart of a servant - to see people through the eyes of The Servant King.**

Christ's ultimate act of service was to exchange his life for ours - to pay the price of our sin - but his whole ministry was devoted to the welfare of others. When God walked in human form he was the servant of all, and nobody - not the leper, not the adulteress nor any kind of social outcast was so low that he would ignore their needs. While doing all that, he nurtured, taught and encouraged a group of men that no other religious leader of the time would have even bothered with.... turning a collection of no-hopers into people who could take the world by storm with his gospel of grace. He even washed the feet of these disciples - but if it isn't clear from that what being the servant of *all* really means, this should tell us: One pair of the feet he washed belonged to a man *he knew* would betray him to the torture of the cross.

Christ's example raises an important point: Love (and the service which expresses it) is not dependent on what the other person is doing, has done or will do. Primarily, we are responding to God, so the merit (or otherwise) of individuals should never be an issue. If anything, though, we should be even *more* attentive towards those who struggle, taking every opportunity to show them Christ's love in action.

What's the connection between love in action, and the love we are commanded to have for each other? *Love in action is the love we are commanded to have for each other!*

Judgment Day!

When Jesus gave the 'two commandments' as the key to eternal life, the example he gave was of love in action - the Parable of the Good Samaritan. But Jesus makes it clear elsewhere that it is *only* love in action which counts: He tells us that there is an *eternal reward* for those who serve others, and *eternal consequences* for those that don't. The reward is so high, and the consequences so grave, that we should consider very carefully his words. Matthew 25:31-46 is a vision of judgment, *our* judgment, and Jesus is giving us advance notice of just how that will work.

"All the nations will be gathered before him (Jesus), and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'"

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

Then the King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' (Matthew 25: 32-40)

Jesus then turns his attention to those who didn't do these things, and the last verse tells us of their fate: *"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*

If there was any lingering doubt that *service is primarily a response to God*, this passage has removed it. Jesus identifies *himself* as the one we are serving, even when that kindness is shown to the least among his 'brothers'. Yet there is an even more important principle revealed in these verses. Jesus tells us obedience to the 'two commandments' (loving God and others) produces eternal life, but here he defines the *quality* of that love. It has to be *love in action*. Real love demands to be expressed... and if we really love God we will want to show it, just as we would want to show our love to a husband or a wife. Serving others is simply a loving response to God and, as we have seen, that's how *he* looks at it.

We are not, however, 'saved by our good works'. We cannot earn eternity with God - because *it is love in action which counts, and not just 'action'*. The value of our service (at least, to us) lies in the *motivation*. If we do it out of love for Jesus, then the smallest act of kindness really matters. We can see that in the examples from the passage we have just read: There is nothing remarkable about feeding or visiting someone, but there is something truly extraordinary about how Christ will respond, if we are doing it because we love *him*. If someone has actions *without* love, though, it counts for nothing... not even if they were to give away all their possessions and lay down their life - as we saw in the previous session! (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

We shouldn't have that problem. Our programme - from the 'first step' to the last - is geared to developing the quality of relationship with God through which genuine love will flow. Service is the natural channel for that love, and *we are more than ready* to bless others (and to be blessed) as we take a full part in God's plan for our church.

'general' service...

We are ready to serve our brothers and sisters, and perhaps this would be a good time to think about the different types of service we can become involved in. For convenience, we could perhaps divide service into two overall categories - *general* and *specific*. General service would be anything we can do to contribute to the well-being of God's family. This may include the kind of loving actions featured in our 'sheep and goats' reading, which (as we have already seen) bring blessings out of all proportion to the effort involved. On that subject of God's blessings for those who carry out small acts of kindness in the Christian family, the Bible has this to say: *"I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward."* (Mark 9:41) Yet all these things are only examples - what really matters is where the heart is. *As fully committed Christians we welcome every opportunity God gives us, whether it something explicitly mentioned in the bible or (equally important) anything implied by our principles of love, unity and service.*

Specific service in this context would be a particular 'calling' or 'ministry', and we'll be considering that in a later session. There is often a connection, however, between the two - *dynamic ministry is frequently God's reward to those who are faithful in the small matters of general service!* But more about that in 'step ten'...

In truth, both general and specific service are callings from God - though there are two main differences: First, we are *all* called to general service *now*, though we may not all have a

specific or dominant 'ministry' at this time. Secondly, whereas a 'ministry' often involves the use of a particular 'gifting', the practical expression of love through general service does not usually require special talents or abilities. For example, most of us could serve on a 'welcome team', befriend a new arrival or make the coffee. We can all pray for each other, encourage each other - and take each opportunity to show the love of Christ, as we are given it. The opportunities will keep coming, because God wants us to aspire to greatness - he wants us to become the servants of all.

Our heavenly Father invite *all* his children to become 'great' - to become the servants of all - and none of us are excluded. 'Worldly' greatness, by comparison, is both fleeting and meaningless - yet many people waste their lives pursuing it. Not knowing their creator - or what he offers - they strive for position and power as if their lives depended on it. They squander their time, talents and resources chasing after security and personal significance. We, too, have talents and resources, but our security and significance are eternally guaranteed, so we can use what we have in the way God intended - bringing *real* benefits to others, and to ourselves.

it's the motivation that matters!

We should certainly use what gifts we have, but even if we have few we can still make an impact. God doesn't expect us to use gifts we haven't got...though he reserves the right to give us more. He wants us to be willing, he wants us to serve because we love him, and he wants us to be humble enough to do whatever needs doing. Our capacity for 'greatness' has little to do with ability or resources - *but it has a lot to do with willingness and motivation!* Consider this incident from the gospels: *'As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts in the treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. "I tell you the truth", he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.'*" (Luke 2:1-4)

In Christ's opinion - the only opinion that ever matters - this poor woman gave more than all the rest. She gave sacrificially, and it wasn't the amount that mattered, it was the *motivation*. She wanted to give what she could, even if it meant going without her housekeeping. She won Christ's approval (and lasting renown) because she gave God 100%, and it didn't matter at all that it was 100% of next to nothing.

being a 'good steward'

Perhaps this would be a good time to think about financial resources and the church. Many Christians choose to *tithe*, which means they give 10% of their income to the church. Tithing was normal practice in the Jewish tradition, though its place in the early Christian family was less clear. It is hardly mentioned in the New Testament - and it has even been brought into a little disrepute by modern-day false teachers, who claim God is "obliged" to multiply a tithe and return it to the giver. But if financial giving is an area of confusion for some, we need not be in any doubt. The proper perspective of money is exactly the same as the proper perspective of everything else we have - whether that is a gift, an ability or even life itself. As Deuteronomy 8:18 reminds us, *"but remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth..."* Everything we have, and everything we are, comes from God. It's that simple. We are *stewards* of God's resources, and a wise steward will always put the interests of the real owner first!

The first church, which was based in Jerusalem, had the right attitude - Acts 4:32 tells us this: *"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his*

possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had". They were in complete unity, and where there is that quality of love, there is freedom from selfishness. They took the opportunity of needs in the church to put their love into action, and the church thrived. **For those who live by the Spirit, resources plus need always equals opportunity** - and even if there isn't real poverty in our church, the church itself is likely to need resources in order to function properly. We can play our part by regular giving. Tithing is a good, practical way of acknowledging what God has done for us *and* supporting our church at the same time. Being able to give is a privilege, and we may see tithing as a token recognition that all we have comes from God. But - whether tithing or helping individual Christians - we should always give with gratitude...enjoying each opportunity to bless others with the resources entrusted to us.

We should also enjoy our acts of service (whatever forms they take) because we are really doing them for Jesus. All service is honourable, and all is worthwhile, because we are being included in the divine plan. The call to service is the invitation to make a difference through love in action... yet it isn't *what* we do, but rather *why we do it* that matters.

As maturing Christians, some of us may already be on 'active service' and if so, that's fine - but we should always be looking for more opportunities. Our leaders will be able to tell us about particular needs in our church situation that we can address, and perhaps there will be openings for us *as a group*. Whatever they are, they will be ways for us to make our contribution to the life of the church - to become functioning parts of the 'body of Christ'.

Before we summarise, let's return to the concept of tithing for a moment. One of the most productive and rewarding things Christians can do is to *tithe their time* - to honour God with a fraction of that most valuable resource he has given to them. Those who have committed themselves to tithing their time will know it can make a powerful difference to their relationship with him - because it guarantees quality opportunities for prayer, worship, bible-reading and, of course, *service to others*. In fact, such a commitment is an invitation to God to draw close and make great use of people's lives - an invitation he is unlikely to ignore! Perhaps that is a course of action we could prayerfully consider...

Putting it all together

- 1. The church is God's family** - among the primary purposes of the church are to bring new 'brothers and sisters' into that family relationship, and to help them mature into the people they were designed to be... people who reflect the very nature of Christ himself!
- 2. Christians depend on each other** - we all have a part to play in the 'body of Christ', including helping each other reach our full potential. We are all called to **unity**, and to **love in action** - service. Real love, the kind that comes from a relationship with Christ (and the kind we are commanded to have), is always characterised by action. Often, our dependence on each other will be highlighted by the way we serve - working in partnership to achieve God's agenda. Complimentary abilities, to be used in team efforts, are the norm for those who follow the God of unity.
- 3. We are called to 'greatness'** - Jesus invites us to share with him the honour of being the 'servants of all'. The key to true greatness is to partake in the motivation, characteristics and actions of The Servant King. In embracing our Saviour's perspective of service, we reflect a wonderful and powerful aspect of the divine nature.
- 4. Service is God's plan to bless us as we bless others** - It is a God-given opportunity to make a difference and to express our love of Jesus and our Christian

family. Yet (as if that was not privilege enough of itself) God chooses to lavishly reward those who do even the simplest tasks out of love. And so, things like showing basic hospitality have eternal implications, and even the smallest kindness - such as giving a drink of water - is not forgotten by God. Because mutual blessing is God's plan, just being part of the local 'body' offers us a wide variety of opportunities to support our Christian brothers and sisters - both spiritually and practically. 'Resources, plus need, equals opportunity', but if church is where we honour God with our time and effort, it is also where **he** will meet many of **our** needs...we serve, but we are also served.

- 5. Tithing our time** - Everything we have - and everything we are - comes from God, and a practical way of acknowledging that is to set aside quality time for service and relationship building. Yet tithing should never be done out of a sense of religious duty but, rather, because we love the Lord. As ever, it is motivation that counts. If we set aside time to pray and to study his word because we love him, if we serve others because we love them, and if we financially support the church because we want God's work to flourish...we will be greatly blessed. We will enjoy the presence of God in our times with him, but we will also enjoy serving (whatever the task) and we will enjoy giving to the church (whatever the cost). We will give of ourselves and of our resources gratefully, enthusiastically and (when the opportunity arises) extravagantly, because of what Jesus means to us. The tithe that comes from the heart is never a matter of clock-watching or book-keeping. It is about practical gratitude, and the desire to do more - and be more - in Christ.

Our prayer of commitment does not bind us to giving specific amounts of time or service to the church, however, because there may be some of us who are not in a position to make such an undertaking to God at this time. But if we have understood and embraced the principles of step nine, then we will want to put them into practice - and we are ready to commit ourselves before God to following in the footsteps of the Servant King. Like our other prayers of commitment, it is another milestone on our path of discipleship, and another one we will never regret..

A Prayer of Commitment

Heavenly Father,

I thank you for my church family, and for the honour of being called to serve you by serving them. I thank you, too, for the example of Jesus - the Servant King - and I ask that you help me become more like him, in thought and word and deed. Father - today I commit myself to taking the opportunities to serve that you give me in the church, to actively seek more such opportunities, and to continue to pursue that closeness with you that will allow you to make great use of my life.

In Jesus' name...Amen

Step Eight commits us to:

Take an active part in our local church, using our gifts, talents and resources to serve God and bless others.

By taking that step, we are opening the door to God's blessing for all our Christian family, *including ourselves!*

comments and questions for the group meeting

the journal...continued

Morning Prayer

Before doing anything else, a short time of prayer containing the following elements: Thanks to God for who He is, what Jesus has done, and for His love and provision (including the new day). Commit the day to Him, asking for His protection and presence.

Through the day

Involve God in your daily life, seeking His guidance in situations as they arise, and endeavour to respond to people as you believe Jesus would.

In the evening

Set aside a little time, every evening, to pray, complete your journal and consider the readings. Prayer should include thanksgiving, repentance, prayer for others and for yourself - particularly that God's perfect will should be completely fulfilled in your life. Pray for each member of your group (by name). Matters arising through the day, personal situations or difficulties should also be brought before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide you in your prayers, and be open to His leading.

Day One

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - Ephesians 2:10

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *The church is where our faith is nurtured, where we are brought into Christian maturity.... where we can begin to bless others, even as we are being blessed.*

Day Two

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - Matthew 25:32-40

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *We all have a part to play in the 'body of Christ', including helping each other reach our full potential. We are all called to unity, and to love in action - service. Real love, the kind that comes from a relationship with Christ (and the kind we are commanded to have), is always characterised by action.*

Day Three

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible reading - Matthew 20:25 - 28

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *The key to 'greatness' - to being a person like Christ - is to have the heart of a servant!*

Day Four

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible reading - Mark 9:41

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *Everything we have - and everything we are - comes from God. A practical way of acknowledging that is to set aside quality time for service and relationship building... "tithing our time".*

Day Five

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible reading - Acts 4:32-35

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *For those who live by the Spirit, resources plus need always equals opportunity!*

Day Six - The weekly review

In your relationship with God, what has been the highlight of the week?

What have you found most challenging or difficult?

Have you been aware of God's care for you this week?

Has God intervened in your life - answers to prayer etc.?

Have you been able to pray consistently throughout the week?

Can you think of any areas in your relationship with God that could be improved and, if so, how are you going to tackle them?

In times of trouble or temptation, how easy is it for you to seek the help of

a) God

b) other Christians?

What has been the most encouraging aspect of this past week?

PREPARATION FOR THE NINTH SESSION

Please prepare for the ninth session by *prayerfully* reading the next chapter, noting down any comments or questions that you'd like to bring up in the group.