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We hope you take the opportunity to read through the downloaded sample of *A Way of Life*. We have included the introductory session of the process entitled “An Invitation to Discover,” as well as a session found in the second stage of the process entitled “Living Gratefully.”

*A Way of Life* picks up where *The Journey* left off. It invites us (again in community with fellow travelers) to:

- a fuller understanding and practice of a life attentive to God,
- a deeper and more confident sense of God’s unique calling in our lives, and
- a way of structuring and ordering our lives toward a lifelong apprenticeship with Jesus.

The VantagePoint3 Team

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SESSION ONE:

# An Invitation to Discover

## *Invitation & Prayer*

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow;  
they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you,  
even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

But if God so clothes the grass of the field,  
which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven,  
will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Therefore, do not worry, saying,  
“What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?”

For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things;  
and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,  
and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6:28b–33

The hearing ear and the seeing eye—  
the Lord has made them both.

Proverbs 20:12

The Christian life is the practice of living in what God has done and is doing.<sup>1</sup>

Eugene Peterson

The God who has always been a part of our stories  
invites us to become much more a part of God’s story, and to see what will happen.<sup>2</sup>

Tom Sine

## Overview

This session will introduce *A Way of Life* by (1) inviting reflection and conversation around some overarching themes and elements of the process, and (2) introducing the spiritual practice of prayerfully reviewing one's day or week.

- I. An Invitation to Discover
- II. The Structure: A Life of Discipleship
- III. Practice: Prayer of Examen

## Focusing Question

- Why did you say “yes” to *A Way of Life*? What are your hopes for the process?

## Instruction & Reflection

### I. An Invitation to Discover

There is a story of a five-year-old boy and his mother, who every night put him to bed. She came into his room to talk to him, and to tuck him in, and to pray with him. Some nights they sang together—“Jesus loves me, this I know ...” or “The B-I-B-L-E! Yes, that’s the book for me!” or “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine ...” or any other of those many early songs he never remembered actually learning, but always somehow seemed to know.

One night while they sang, Mother began to harmonize with the melody of the song. As the boy stuck to the familiar tune, he could hear and feel the movement of her notes weave beautifully with his. Her voice added depth and breadth and beauty to this simple song. The song felt larger, more beautiful.

“What are you doing?” he asked her.

“I am singing the harmony,” she replied.

Harmony. He had never heard that word before. They continued singing, Mother harmonizing, now deepening, now widening, now filling in, her voice dancing lovingly around his. It was beautiful.

Then she said, “Now you try! You be the harmony.”

So she sang the melody, and the boy tried with everything he had to respond, to meet her voice as she had met his. His child’s voice hunted for the harmony, but the boy found that his voice only collided and strained and clashed with hers. The resulting sound was many things, but not beautiful. How frustrating it was for the boy!

Still, his mother encouraged him over and again, “Keep trying,” until, seemingly by accident, his voice met hers. For a moment, just a moment, he added something very beautiful—and she was the melody, and he was the harmony. And it was wonderful.

For him, that night had been a beginning, an initiation. And night after night he would learn—through much frustration and disharmony, but sometimes with wonder, and always among song—to be the harmony.

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In so many ways we are like the boy of this story. In this life of faith, we are learning to harmonize. And it requires much persistence and thought and encouragement and practice. The Scriptures offer us quite a melody—of creation and redemption, of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, of love and truth and mercy—which runs through history. The Scriptures also provide us with quite a few lessons in harmonizing with this melody. The biblical witness of Israel and the Church portrays men and women who sought to align—and realign—their lives with God’s way in the world. They learned to “hear the melody” and to “be the harmony.”

But when one steps back from this witness of Scripture, and from the testimonies of church history, one has to wonder whether today, in North America especially, so much of our growth as individuals and as communities has been stunted by believing our part is melody, not harmony. Could it be that we have been offered too many models and admonitions to be solo artists while we have instead been invited and designed to join a harmonizing chorus? Have we insisted on singing the melody when we are created rather to sing the harmony?

Throughout *The Journey* we sought to discover more deeply what God is up to in the world, in our communities, and in our unique lives. We looked through the Scriptures; we explored our life stories and our many relationships for the shaping work of God’s Spirit—in us, with us, through us, among us. That is, in short, *The Journey* was an extended exercise in listening to the Melody and in learning our harmony.



In *A Way of Life*, this exercise continues. Such listening and learning must become *our way of life* if we hope to mature and sustain a harmonizing presence to God's melody in this world.

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Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann tells us that prophets in the Scriptures offered an alternative portrait of life—by both *critiquing* the way people were living as well as *energizing* them to a new way of living.<sup>3</sup> And in this regard, Jesus prophetically ministered in the first century: his vision of reality both *critiqued* the prevailing visions of the day and *energized* his followers toward a new way of life.

Surely, Jesus' life marked those who walked with him in Judea and Galilee. We know their stories from Scripture (Peter, John, and the rest of the twelve; Mary, Martha, Lazarus and the many other disciples like them; even Paul). Lives of compassion, service, humility, and sacrifice began covering the landscape wherever Jesus invested his attention.

But Jesus' prophetic presence was not limited to the first century. Many throughout the centuries have sought to walk with him, and many, by walking with him, have found something akin to "a family resemblance" to Jesus, since their way of living takes on the character of his way of life. By God's Spirit, Jesus' life of prayer and community and mission has spread throughout history.

Our sense, though, is that we need to be reminded again of Jesus' prophetic way. Too often, it seems, we have uncritically *settled* for "just enough Jesus" so that our lives do not become too affected, altered, or unsettled. So we wonder now, How well are we listening to the gospel, and how might the gospel be challenging our dominant understandings and practices of life in the twenty-first century? Even today, Jesus' way of life remains critical and energizing, but are we really awake and attuned to it?

Throughout *A Way of Life* we want to offer conversations and relationships and practices that thoughtfully encourage and frame Christian faithfulness. Our hope in all of this is that we might each (1) grow in our capacity to hear how Jesus continues to lovingly speak into our lives (*hear the melody*) and (2) grow in our capacity and courage to faithfully respond to and live out Jesus' way in the world (*sing our harmonizing part*). For out of a growing attentiveness to God's presence and activity we will always find ourselves being invited by the Spirit to cooperate and align our lives with God's work. This is who we are. "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be *our way of life*" (Ephesians 2:10, italics added). By Jesus' life and power, and by the Spirit's guidance, we will continue always to learn, to live—to sing—the harmony, even amidst a culture that demands we master our own melodies.

- What jumped out to you from this invitation to discover?

## **II. The Structure: A Life of Discipleship**

The Christian faith is a way of life lived in response to  
Jesus' invitation to "follow me" (Mark 8:34).<sup>4</sup>

Christian Scharen

Henri Nouwen began his 1995 *Leadership Journal* article "Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry" with the observation that the words "discipleship" and "discipline" come from the same root word. He writes,

Once you have made the choice to say, "Yes, I want to follow Jesus," the question is, "What disciplines will help me remain faithful to that choice?" If we want to be disciples of Jesus, we have to live a disciplined life.

By discipline I do not mean control. If I know the discipline of psychology or of economics, I have a certain control over a body of knowledge. If I discipline my children, I want to have a little control over them.

But in the spiritual life, the word discipline means "the effort to create some space in which God can act." Discipline means to prevent everything in your life from being filled up. Discipline means that somewhere you're not occupied, and certainly not preoccupied. In the spiritual life, discipline means to create that space in which something can happen that you hadn't planned or counted on.<sup>5</sup>



Nouwen is fundamentally concerned with the sort of life it will take to connect a good start on the journey with a good finish. How does one develop and sustain a way of life that is faithful to Jesus? Nouwen goes on to unpack three overarching disciplines of solitude, community, and ministry. He points out that the gospel writer records in Luke 6:12–19 (1) Jesus spending the night in prayer on the mountain (the discipline of solitude), (2) Jesus choosing at dawn the twelve apostles from among his many disciples (the discipline of community), and then (3) Jesus coming down with the twelve apostles to minister to the crowd (the discipline of ministry). He encourages the reader to take note of Jesus’ order here—from solitude to community to ministry. He underscores the significance of the order by way of confession:

So often in ministry, I have wanted to do it by myself. If it didn’t work, I went to others and said, “Please!” searching for a community to help me. If that didn’t work, maybe I’d start praying.

But the order that Jesus teaches us is the reverse. It begins by being with God in solitude; then it creates a fellowship, a community of people with whom the mission is being lived; and finally this community goes out together to heal and to proclaim good news.<sup>6</sup>

So many of us resonate with Nouwen’s confession. We know what it is like to become deeply concerned about some need we notice in our community. We know what it is like to attack that need with our strength and resources. We also know what it is like to feel “in over our head” in addressing the need and, consequently, through some sort of concerted effort, to rally others around our concern. And we know what it is like to become so frustrated and fatigued in our efforts that we are at our wit’s end, ready to throw in the towel. In the end, we remember what it is like to end up on our knees in these moments, really praying now as if for the first time—“God, help!” Too frequently we, like Nouwen, move from ministry to community to prayer. And most often this rhythm stems from an I’ll-do-it-by-myself, lone-ranger set of impulses that violate Jesus’ overall way of life.

Now we don’t want to impose this template too rigidly, but we do think that Jesus’ movement of solitude to community to ministry will provide a helpful framework for our learning this year. While we are going to slightly deviate from Nouwen’s naming of these three disciplines, their overarching concerns and flow will structure our reflections, practices, and conversations around Jesus’ way of life in the world. Stage 1: *Friendship with God* will invite us to pay attention to a life of growing intimacy or communion with God. Stage 2: *Community with Others* will invite us to pay attention to a life of being with others as God’s people. Stage 3: *Mission on the Way* will invite us to pay attention to a life of being sent by God into the world. Unfolded in these stages are sets of disciplines or practices by which we learn to turn toward God and others, and thereby participate with God’s compassionate and reconciling way in the world.

As Jesus’ disciple, I am his apprentice in kingdom living. I am learning from him how to lead my life in the Kingdom of the Heavens as he would lead my life if he were I. It is my faith in him that led me to become his disciple. My confidence in him simply means that I believe he is right about everything: that all that he is and says shows what life is at its best, what it was intended by God to be. “In him was life and the life was the light of men.” (John 1:4 NAS)<sup>7</sup>

Dallas Willard



### III. Practice: Prayer of Examen

O Lord, you have searched me and known me....

Search me, O God, and know my heart;

test me and know my thoughts.

See if there is any wicked way in me,

and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139: 1, 23–24

The practice of prayerfully reviewing one's day or week has been a prescription of development handed down to us throughout the centuries—and a good prescription at that. Ignatius of Loyola formalized the practice in his *Spiritual Exercises*—the prayer of examen. It involves a prayerful review of the events of the day in order to discern God's presence and leading in our lives, where the Spirit might be at work loving, affirming, convicting, revealing, instructing, nudging, and guiding amidst the ordinary stuff of our lives. In the book *Sleeping with Bread*, Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn underscore the importance of this prayerful review of the day by drawing a comparison.

During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow."<sup>8</sup>

The Linns suggest that this practice of examen can become the spiritual equivalent of the children holding the bread. They ask the reader to daily respond to two questions in prayerfully reviewing their day: (1) Where was I most grateful today? (What gave me life?) (2) Where was I least grateful today? (What drained me?). For some this is best done as one goes to bed; for others it is engaged in first thing in the morning as one looks back on yesterday before praying for grace and guidance for the day ahead. For many this practice is integrated with a regular reading of the Scriptures.

The practice of examen in its many different varieties is not intended to be some sort of inventory or checklist we legalistically work through, but rather an invitation to dialogue daily with God about the ordinary everydayness of our lives. The reflection and prayer associated with this practice are to be engaged in the spirit of Psalm 139's psalmist—*You who know me so well, God; search me yet again and lead me in your way.*

Throughout all three stages of *A Way of Life* we would like to adopt a regular prayerful review of our week. We will include a page in each session to help us keep track of what we are discovering week-to-week. Our hope is that through this practice we might become more intentional and more skilled in paying attention with God to the everydayness of our lives, and thereby submit our whole lives into the trustworthy hands of God. Here is a simple structure to guide us.

*Reviewing the week:*

- *Where were you most grateful? (What is giving you life?)*
- *Where were you least grateful? (What is draining you?)*
- *What might God be inviting you to notice?*
- *Convert your thoughts into a written prayer.*

Perhaps our daily recollections will lead to thankfulness or wonder; or to remorse or sorrow for something we did or didn't do—something we may need to confess to God; or to confusion or dilemmas we were not aware of, things that we seek God for, either for guidance or confirmation. A key in recollecting one's week is to bring all of it before God sincerely, courageously, patiently. Let us also be mindful of our kingdom responsibility as we prayerfully review our week—of the opportunity to bless others with what we are noticing about God or ourselves. Each session will provide opportunity for us to share some of what we are learning through this practice.

*Reflect & Pray* \_\_\_\_\_

*As we close this first session of A Way of Life spend some quiet time to prayerfully reflect upon these questions. Allow these questions to invite truthful conversation with God.*

- *What has been giving you life over the past month?*



I discovered that if you really keep your eye peeled to it and your ears open, if you really pay attention to it, even such a limited and limiting life as the one I was living ... opened up onto extraordinary vistas. Taking your children to school and kissing your wife goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly.... If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.<sup>9</sup>

Frederick Buechner

- *What has been draining life out of you over the past month?*

- *What is God inviting you to notice?*

- *Convert your thoughts into a written prayer.*

# *Prayer*

*Lord,  
I believe  
my life is touched by you,  
that you want something  
for me, and of me.  
Give me ears  
to hear you,  
eyes to see the tracing of your finger,  
and a heart quickened  
by the motions of your Spirit.<sup>10</sup>*

*Ted Loder*

## *In Preparation for Session 2*

### ***Part 1 – Praying for and Identifying a Mentor***

We want to encourage you to again link up with a spiritual mentor during *A Way of Life*. Spend the next week praying that God might guide you to someone who might be a good fit for your mentoring relationship. You may want to resume your mentoring relationship from *The Journey*; or you may want to find a new mentor. Come next week with some possible names of people who could offer you this relationship throughout *A Way of Life*.

### ***Part 2 – Read and Prepare for Session 2: Called to Friendship with God***

Read and complete the questions in Session 2. Be prepared to share your discoveries with your group.



SESSION TWO:

# Living Gratefully

## *Invitation & Prayer*

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.

And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly;

teach and admonish one another in all wisdom;

and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,  
giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:15–17

We are surrounded by God's benefits.

The best use of these benefits is an unceasing expression of gratitude.<sup>1</sup>

John Calvin

(1509–1564)

A thankful life is a response to seeing life as a gift from God  
and realizing that our lives belong to God.<sup>2</sup>

Don Postema

When we learn to read the story of Jesus and see it as the story of the love of God,  
doing for us what we could not do for ourselves—  
that insight produces, again and again,  
a sense of astonished gratitude  
which is very near the heart of authentic Christian experience.<sup>3</sup>

N.T. Wright



## *Prayer of Examen*

*You who know me so well, God; search me yet again and lead me in your way. Use the space on this page to respond to four parts of the examen:*

- *Where were you most grateful this week? (What gave you life?)*
- *Where were you least grateful this week? (What drained you?)*
- *What is God inviting you to notice?*
- *Convert your thoughts into a written prayer.*



## Overview

This session will explore the dynamics and practices of a community rooted in gratefulness.

I. A Story of Grace

II. Gratitude

## Focusing Question

- When was the last time you experienced a deep and overwhelming sense of gratitude?

## Instruction & Reflection

Do we find it difficult to imagine  
that gratefulness could ever become  
our basic attitude toward life?<sup>4</sup>

David Steindl-Rast

Many of us know that the best times of our lives have been times spilling with gratitude. Life just seems to make more sense when we are thankful. In those times, we hurry back like the healed leper to find Jesus (Luke 17)—we simply must give thanks to the one to whom we are indebted! A grateful heart seems to be a door that lets us in on a host of other human experiences: generosity and love and reconciliation and forgiveness and freedom and laughter. Gratitude bridges the distances within our hearts, releases its gears, and frees us to live. Gratitude makes our ears to hear, our eyes to see, and our hearts to understand. Gratitude makes us alive to God and to others.

Yet we must confess that too often we identify more with the nine lepers who did not return to Jesus with thanks (Luke 17). Our bad sight and poor hearing and hard heart frustrate and distract us. In such times, we know thankfulness only as a courtesy, an expression of good manners—a child's response to a parent's prompting, "Now what do you say?" Somewhere along the way, we lose a sense of surprise, of wonder, and

we replace these instead with entitlement, complaint, and insecurity. Living day after day and week after week with very little sense of gratitude can lead our spirits into dead-ends on the journey.

Our church communities so often fall short of embodying gratefulness as a basic attitude toward God and one another. And so we strain our relationships. And we become untrusting. And we allow ourselves to feel disappointed. And we even become idolatrous. Lack of gratitude certainly tells of a life that does not understand or experience God's grace. We preach it and teach it—but do we *know* it?

## I. A Story of Grace

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons."

Luke 15:11

### A. A younger son's experience

It is a long walk home. Desperate. Starving. Ashamed. Afraid. Exhausted. This is a dying man's journey.

He is a realist. He understands that, several years back when he demanded his share of the inheritance from his father, he had forfeited a great deal; in fact, he had in essence wished his father dead. So his departure had not just been a geographical move: he had left behind his role and responsibilities, his rightful and given place in the world.

Now, on his way home again, he passes the fields and hills and towns he walked by years earlier, his mind now tugging back and forth between despair and hope.

*His despair.* He dreads the likelihood of complete rejection by the community. His choices have dishonored his father, scandalized his brother, shocked the town. History tells us that when a wayward Jewish son returned home having squandered his property in Gentile lands, a community would gather and collectively turn their back on this boy—a shunning. The young man knows—he will not be welcome. More than a family's disgrace, this is a community's shame.

*His hope.* But this despair is held back by the desperate hope of his father's lenience—in the form perhaps of a work contract. "Hire me out as a workman," he will say. He may be scorned, even beaten, but he may also be able to negotiate a solution. He survives now by this thought, this *hope*, of an arrangement. He may



never work back what he's lost, but he is desperate—he has to try. What other hope is there? Perhaps, in this way, he might restore some honor to the damaged family, and in part maybe he can again be reconciled to them. This is his final strategy.

He makes the long walk home, tired, desperate, afraid.

But what is this? What is this reception? Father! The old man comes to him, runs to him. And Father's embrace. And Father's kiss. And here, a robe, a ring. Here, a feast, a celebration. Bring the fattened calf! Come!

And Father's words. "This son of mine was dead and is alive again."

And Father's compassion. It transforms this young man's whole vision of the world. Such a reception is *utterly unimaginable*, and yet here it is. It is happening. It has happened!

This is grace.

### **B. An older son's experience**

Such a reception is *utterly unimaginable*, yes—it is his worst nightmare coming true.

This man returns home from a day's work to discover that his scandalously arrogant younger brother has returned home—and, what is this, Father has inexplicably reconciled with him! Years earlier, this little brother shamefully demanded his inheritance—and while Father was still alive! Even worse, Father even agreed to the younger one's demand, and together this good son and Father watched while the younger one up and left.

And, while his family was mocked throughout the community, the good and righteous son remained. What father allows his son to behave so disrespectfully? It was a scandal. At the time, the good son thought Father should have refused the request. Further, the younger one should have been beaten. But the good son said nothing. Instead, in order to restore the family's honor, he worked dutifully for years and years.

So this honorable, this good, this righteous son arrives home—sweaty, exhausted, having finished his work in the field—and he is shocked and offended by the news: Father has received home—honorably, no less—the starving and barely recognizable younger brother who squandered all he had.

The good son can make no sense of Father's actions. Reconciliation should come only at a cost from the wayward son. Shame upon shame will be heaped onto their family! He is overwhelmed, confused, frustrated, ashamed—even lonely, and angry, and jealous.

He refuses the celebration. He won't go near their feast, even as a public refusal would deeply dishonor Father and family, and even as by all rights Father should have him beaten for refusing. Still, he cannot help himself!

He demands an explanation. He calls out to his father. "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed a command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

His speech is finished, fists clenched, body shaking. He has moved from confusion to shame to indignation. He stands tall, upright—but afraid before his father. He waits for Father's anger. He waits for rejection.

Instead, this father speaks tenderly.

"My son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

This, too, is grace.

### **C. Our response**

This story of grace asks of us more than just our thoughts, our conjectures, our insights, or our admiration. It reaches across 2,000 years to demand our response. Have we encountered God like this? If so, have we embraced our father's grace? Have we resisted it?

Some of us know the experience of the dying younger son. We walk toward horizons of lingering dread and small hopes. We resign ourselves to merely *surviving* in the world, our imaginations shrunken by the weight of life. We have lost hope along the way. Then God encounters us in one of his myriad forms, exposing our narrow vision of reality, ushering us into a new and wholly unexpected place in the world—a beautiful place, a wonderful place, which is grace. And, from the core of our being, gratitude spills out. We were dead and here we experience the gift of new life—a second start.

Others of us are more like the older son. We never leave “home.” We are very familiar with the landscape of the local church. We know its world of duty and loyalty, of respect and friendliness. We live “in the field,” working hard, building up the sometimes-damaged reputation of the family, the local church, the kingdom. We know kindness and conformity, keeping the peace and pleasing others. We recognize how to stay out of trouble and we help others do the same thing. This is our way in the world.

But, in truth, much of the time we struggle to recognize and receive grace in our own lives. While we know all the stories of mercy and forgiveness, we are nonetheless brutal with ourselves. We cannot accept our own failures. We feel anxiety and shame. Often, our self-condemnation motivates our fortitude; we act apparently courageous to somehow account for the disappointment we feel about ourselves. We would never dare verbalize the expectations and demands that our own conscience sometimes puts on us. And in all honesty, we wonder whether, apart from our goodness and our performance, we will ever really be loved. What do we really *know* of grace and gratefulness deep within our hearts?

Grace is *un-anticipate-able*—we are never ready for it. It surprises, scandalizes, disarms, blindsides, and embraces us. Anne Lamott writes, “It is unearned love—the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It’s the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there.”<sup>5</sup> This is the way of God’s gracious and creative presence in the world. In difficult and desperate circumstances, we puzzle and strategize, we offer our “best thinking and most charming charm”—all to few results and much frustration—then we are mercifully met in unimaginable ways.

So much of how we relate to one another depends upon whether we are open to this gracious and loving God who surprises us along the way. Is our life at its core filled with grace or un-grace? Now certainly there are shades in between these poles, for there is much of God’s abundant grace that we all have to grow into, but this basic understanding of life—grace or un-grace—is reflected in the way we live and walk together. Living gratefully with God and with others begins and is sustained by a consciousness of God’s gracious way with us and through us. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

## *Reflect & Respond*

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- To what degree do you identify with the younger son's story? The older son's story? How so?
- If one doesn't see grace as the primary storyline of one's life what are the alternatives for other storylines or themes?
- Recall an experience in your life when you were deeply grateful to someone or to God. Discuss the role of grace or gift in that moment.

## II. Gratitude

We are created and redeemed to give thanks. Throughout his letters Paul teaches that thanksgiving should characterize a Christian's life (Philippians 4:6; Colossians 2:7; 3:17; 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 5:18); and should be the mark of corporate worship (1 Corinthians 14:16f; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:1).<sup>6</sup>

Theologian Karl Barth wrote, "Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning.... [W]e are speaking of the grace of God who is God for [us], and of the gratitude of [humankind] as [our] response to this grace.... Radically and basically all sin is simply ingratitude—[human] refusal of the one but necessary thing which is proper to and is required of [those] with whom God has graciously entered into covenant."<sup>7</sup>

Gratitude is the hallmark of godly women and men. They are acutely aware of their own waywardness and consequent need for forgiveness, and they are ever mindful of the grace God has shown them. This is evident in a grateful spirit and a willingness to show forgiveness and grace to others. *Gratitude follows grace like thunder follows lightning....*

### A. Hindrances to gratitude

Gratitude moves powerfully to deepen our relationships, but living gratefully has never been easy—or why else would Paul continue to urge the church toward it? Here are just a few dynamics worth our consideration, hindrances to gratitude. Be open to discussing other hindrances to gratitude that come to your mind.

#### 1. A high sense of entitlement

We live amidst a society with an overly developed sense of entitlement. And our fixation on "our rights" clearly erodes the social fabric of our communities, particularly when paired with a declining sense of responsibility for the common good. Christine Pohl writes:

Years ago, Paul Tournier observed that "no gift can bring joy to the one who has a right to everything." While there is a healthy interpretation of entitlement that is tied to a sense of dignity and equality, when it is exaggerated, it brings continual dissatisfaction and an inability to be thankful for anything.<sup>8</sup>



So much of our current preoccupation with what we are entitled to undermines a life of gratitude, because entitlement displaces our generous and just God from the center of our storylines. When we exaggerate the importance of our rights, we lose the joy of gratitude. One social researcher has put it starkly: “A sense of entitlement is a cancerous thought process that is void of gratitude and can be deadly to relationships, businesses, and even nations.”<sup>9</sup> Jerry Bridges elaborates at length on the impact entitlement can have on our lives and communities. In his book *Transforming Grace* he writes,

There is a very high sense of entitlement within modern society. Older people feel entitled to certain benefits from the government. Middle-aged people feel entitled to generous health and retirement benefits from their employers. Younger adults feel entitled to immediately enjoy the same standard of living their parents took years to achieve. And young people feel entitled to whatever material luxuries they desire....

[F]or Christians, such a high sense of entitlement is especially detrimental to our spiritual lives. For one thing, God is the ultimate supplier of all our needs and desires. Every good gift is from Him, regardless of the intermediate means through which that gift is supplied. As James said, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). However, God, through His providential workings, almost always uses some person or institution or other human instrumentality to meet our needs. Ultimately, though, He is the One who provides or withholds what we desire or think we need.

Therefore, a high sense of entitlement and expectations, though seemingly directed toward some person or institution, is actually directed toward God and His providential dealings in our lives.... It is bad enough, and certainly not very Christian, to have the attitude “The world owes me something just because I am,” but to have the attitude that God owes me something is exceedingly dangerous to spiritual health.<sup>10</sup>

We must grow, then, in our awareness of how much this cultural value of entitlement has misshaped our way of relating to God and others. By contrast, coming to see and embrace life as *fundamentally a gift* frees us to be truly ourselves. One person has said, “All of life is a gift, and we grow to be like Jesus as we embrace this gift.”<sup>11</sup> A life grounded in gratitude to God allows us to move more freely and courageously in community.

## **2. Greed and the need for more**

Many of us fear scarcity: there is simply not enough to go around, we convince ourselves. So greed becomes our strategy. Our sense of self depends on what we can acquire, get, grab hold of. We value our desire for more and more, even as our other values diminish. Yet a biblical portrait of the universe tells a different



There is no neutrality between gratitude and ingratitude. Those who are not grateful soon begin to complain of everything. Those who do not love, hate. In the spiritual life there is no such thing as an indifference to love or hate. That is why tepidity (which seems to be indifferent) is so detestable. It is hate disguised as love.

Tepidity, in which the soul is neither “hot or cold”—neither frankly loves nor hates—is a state in which one rejects God and rejects the will of God while maintaining an exterior pretense of loving Him in order to keep out of trouble and save one’s supposed self-respect. It is the condition that is soon arrived at by those who are habitually ungrateful for the graces of God. A man who truly responds to the goodness of God, and acknowledges all that he has received, cannot possibly be a half-hearted Christian....<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Merton  
(1915–1968)

story: abundance, not scarcity, grounds reality. Both of the sons in Luke 15 live with a mindset of scarcity, but their father lives out of a mindset of abundance. A generous God, a loving God, *this* is the fundamental truth of reality. Admittedly, we sometimes fail to recognize this truth, but when we embrace God’s abundant presence and provision, gratitude becomes our defining characteristic. We need communities that reflect open and receptive hands rather than grabby and closed fists. Our preoccupation with more and more, even the greed for many good things, can sabotage our life together. Ingratitude—or gratitude—eventually becomes a way of life.

### 3. Hidden resentment

So many of us can carry within us a sense of resentment that marks our relatedness with others. When a person feels as if she hasn’t received what she deserves, bitterness can fester, grow, and dominate her—both her outlook and relationships. A popular 12-step recovery slogan puts it like this: “Resentment is like drinking the poison and waiting for the other person to die.” And when this dynamic of resentment remains unaddressed, a life rooted in gratitude becomes thoroughly frustrated. As we explored earlier in the Luke 15 story, the older son discovered—in perhaps the most honest moment of his life—the full force of his resentment when his younger brother returned home and he exploded at his father. But his father’s gracious reaction to both his embittered outburst and his runaway brother called into question his basic attitude toward life: is the father’s love something that can be actually earned? Henri Nouwen explores this contrast between life and love as things *earned* and things *given*. He writes,

My identification with the elder son has made me aware of the enormous spiritual difference between working my whole life long to earn the equality, love, and friendship that I need in my primary relationships and of living these relationships out of gratitude for the boundless, gratuitous gifts that shower down upon my life. In the former, my refusal to accept that I am already loved destroys trust and corrodes my heart, while in the latter, my difficulties become opportunities to trust even more that love will carry me toward my mature humanity. I have the ability to respond to my relational difficulties from two points of view and I must choose my direction. Either I say, “Watch me, God, and see how much I’m working for you. Don’t you think you should finally love me?” or I say, “Oh loving Creator, thank you for gifting me with life and with unconditional love. Help me to continuously be grateful for your generosity and trust that you are always with me to help me to love.”<sup>12</sup>

Life in community leaves so many of us feeling exhausted, overlooked, and disillusioned. We live self-protectively. Hidden deep within us is a persistent resentment, for how many have failed to really appreciate who we are and what we have done for them? This hidden resentment is the emotional residue seeking to earn what can only be given—the sort of loving acceptance that God freely and unconditionally

gives. Unless we get to the crux of the matter—life as gift or life as just desserts—we will continue to stymie and suffocate our communities with unrealistic expectations and controlling behavior. A deep sense of gratitude counters such hidden resentment.

#### **4. Envy**

Envy, and its insidious comparing, remains a critical barrier to the development of Christian community. Just as tensions arose 2,000 years ago when the disciples quarreled over who was greatest (Mark 10:35–45), so today such sentiments continue to remain just under the surface of our social contexts. In board meetings and around dinner tables, supermarkets and malls, sporting events and local neighborhoods, elementary schools and universities, we muscle through to get our way, a way most often determined by intense comparison with others. Basil the Great (4th century) described the plight of the envious person found in “the pain that arises from another’s good fortune. And because of this the envious man is never without pain, never without grief of mind.”<sup>14</sup> In so many ways we interpret what we have as never enough, as always lacking when compared to “So-and-so” over there. For such insecure attitudes torment the person who holds them. Envy is not a small thing and must not be treated as benign. By seeking out power over love, it celebrates weakness and vulnerability in others, and it persistently undermines trust, servant-hood, and gratitude—key elements envisioned in the biblical portraits of fellowship.

#### **5. Distraction**

Much has already been mentioned throughout *A Way of Life* about our need to live attentively in the world, but it bears repeating again: we can live such distracted lives. Sitcoms and baseball games, doctor’s appointments and beauty magazines, laptops and hurricane updates and piano recitals, beer ads, Bible studies—all of these clamor, crowd, and compete for our attention. “We are very distractible people in a very distracting world,” writes Leighton Ford.<sup>15</sup> We so rarely exercise an undivided attention. Our distracted minds seem to have little space for the things that matter most to us, the things that actually need our undivided attention. “Our capacity for gratitude is not connected with an abundance of resources but rather with a capacity to notice what it is that we do have,” writes Christine Pohl.<sup>16</sup> When we fail to regularly reflect upon what we are thankful for, we lose sight of both the gifts and the givers in our lives.



In normal life we hardly realize how much more we receive than we give, and life cannot be rich without such gratitude. It is so easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements compared with what we owe to the help of others.<sup>18</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer  
(1906–1945)

### *Reflect & Respond*

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- *What hindrances to gratitude might you add to these five (entitlement, resentment, envy, complaining, greed, and distraction)?*
- *How do you see these dynamics as impacting what you have experienced within a church community?*
- *How has someone with a critical spirit affected your basic outlook on life? How has someone with a grateful spirit affected your basic attitude toward life?*

### **B. Cultivating gratitude**

“When it comes to life the critical thing is whether you take things for granted or take them with gratitude,” writes G.K. Chesterton.<sup>17</sup> Because we have a natural tendency to take things for granted, cultivating gratitude requires developing mindsets and habits that challenge this tendency. The Apostle Paul implores the church in Thessalonica to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:17–18). Within the everydayness of our lives, how can we learn to approach life with gratefulness in all things?

## 1. Prayer of examen

Throughout *A Way of Life* we have been practicing the prayer of examen. Central to this practice is an intentional attentiveness to gratitude. We have structured our prayerful review in light of two questions: *For what moment this week was I most grateful? least grateful?* This practice of prayer allows us to get in touch with our sense of life-as-gift. Amidst the everydayness of our lives, we seek God's gracious presence and direction. For some of us who are more optimistic in temperament, we are invited to pay attention with God to those negative things in life we tend to habitually deny or ignore; for we who are more pessimistic, we need help noticing what has gone right. For both, the prayer of examen can instruct us in the practice of honestly welcoming feelings and experiences, both positive and negative, in the light of God's presence and activity. What might God be inviting us to pay attention to?

When this prayerful review leads us to negative emotions—whether they are associated with a consciousness of our sins, or with an awareness of the sinfulness of the world—we must be particularly attentive to how God might be inviting us to grow. We pray again, “You who know me so well, God; search me yet again and lead me in your way.” As Anthony de Mello writes, “Be grateful for your sins. They are carriers of grace.”<sup>19</sup> Or as John wrote, “Whenever our hearts condemn us” we must recognize that “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything” (1 John 3:20). One of the wonderful realities of God is that his love for us is realistic; he knows the condition of our hearts better than we do. So the prayer of examen nurtures a shared way of life with God; we learn to seek and find God in all things. God is utterly good, is *with* us in a way that creatively weaves and redeems, according to his purposes and our good (Romans 8: 26–29). So often we discover within the disruptions of our lives and communities—those confusing and sometimes painful moments of disorientation—invitations to know God more deeply and serve him and others more gracefully. We discover gratitude and praise where we thought there could only be misery, complaint, and despair.

Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn include in their book *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* other versions of the examen questions that they've found helpful:

When did I give and receive the most love today?

When did I give and receive the least love today?

When did I feel most alive today?

When did I most feel life draining out of me today?



When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging?

When did I have the least sense of belonging?

When was I happiest today?

When was I saddest today?

What was today's high point?

What was today's low point?<sup>20</sup>

If some of these other versions of examen questions resonate with you, then add or substitute them in your weekly review. Many have found it extremely helpful to practice this prayer every evening. Our prayer practice as *A Way of Life* group will remain a weekly review, but some of you may find it extremely beneficial to integrate this prayer of examen into an evening prayer each night, in order to cultivate a deeper gratefulness in your life.

*Reflect & Respond* \_\_\_\_\_

- What have you discovered about yourself through this prayer of examen practice in *A Way of Life*?

## 2. Resisting a culture of complaining

Now certainly there is a proper place for complaint that expresses truthful living. The psalms of lament reflect such honesty in the community and with God. However, what is concerning here, and what is perhaps symptomatic of elements we have already mentioned (e.g. entitlement and resentment), is when grumbling becomes a primary way of relating and communicating with others. There is a difference between someone voicing dissatisfaction and somebody who has taken on dissatisfaction as a way of life, murmuring that things are never good enough nor will ever be good enough. This second sort of person can become infectious in a community, paralyzing others efforts toward building a more trusting and loving culture.

Few things erode the spirit of a community like unchecked complaining. Grumbling and murmuring must be confronted and addressed so that they do not infect the entire character of our relational life together. Christine Pohl writes,

Communities in which grumbling has become a major issue may find it helpful to address the problem directly, and to set aside times in which people are invited to articulate their frustrations and suggest what would make things better. When people are challenged to be explicit about problems and to expose their complaints in the light of public discussion, all can see more clearly whether the complaining is justified.<sup>21</sup>

It is helpful to provide venues for the community to express their perspectives or frustrations. For in some cases there may be justification for the complaint, while in other cases, upon reflection and discussion, the complaint may not be justified. It is a generalized mood of complaining that becomes most tiresome, an obstacle to a spirit of thanksgiving. We must lovingly confront and resist this sort of mood both within our own hearts and with in our communities.

## 3. Nurturing a sense of wonder

Psychologist Dan Allender points out that our character grows to the degree that we nurture a sense of gratitude or awe in our lives. He elaborates on this point by way of a story.

To those who have eyes of gratitude, all senses are freed to take in and participate in the smallest and most obscure as well as the most panoramic displays of beauty. Gratitude also frees the heart to suffer fury against that which mars beauty. Gratitude brings an imminent passion to all endeavors of life.



### AN EXERCISE

Notice your tendency to make comparisons that result in feelings of dissatisfaction or entitlement. Practice abstaining from comparative statements about what you don't have. Instead give thanks for what you do have.<sup>22</sup>

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun



Worship with people in the church is one way we give public thanksgiving. The church is the place where we realize and celebrate that we belong to God, that God has acted redemptively for us. The church is the body of Christ, the place where the covenant is actualized, the covenant community. The church is also a place where gratitude can be encouraged and where gestures of thanks can be learned, nourished, and expressed.<sup>24</sup>

Don Postema

Consider this sharply contrasting picture: I recall being at a birthday party for a five-year-old terror who snatched his gifts from his mother and opened them with wanton disdain. He'd see what he had received, toss it down as if it were of no account, then move on to another present. His mother wanly tried to stop his juggernaut by saying, "Isn't that wonderful, honey? Why don't you say thank you to Uncle Joe and Aunt Susan?" The boy had no gratitude, in part because nothing brought him surprise and awe. His sense of being owed the good things in life prevented him from being delighted by the undeserved gifts he was receiving. It is impossible to be truly grateful without having some sense of awe.<sup>23</sup>

**How often we can we relate some aspect of our lives to this five-year-old boy's experience? How closed off we can become to being surprised by life in general and by God's gracious movement in particular!**

*How open are we to being surprised?*—this question may help us take inventory on our heart. Some of us, because we don't want to get hurt again, try to gain such firm control of our lives; in so doing, however, we muscle out any sense of anticipation or wonder. We stop asking, *What is God up to next?* Self-protection, not gratefulness, has become our primary orientation. Sadly, in our efforts to control we close ourselves off not just to possibilities of bad or evil in life, but also possibilities of the good and generous. We must learn, then, to pray, "Lord, help me release control of my life and be open to your surprises along the way." May we become freed up to be amazed by life and live a life of gratefulness.

#### **4. Writing notes of gratitude**

One simple practice that many have found beneficial to cultivating gratefulness in their lives is the simple practice of regularly writing small notes of thanks to people who come to mind. These are not long letters, but rather short notes of affirmation and gratitude that come from a sincere heart. Perhaps it is friend who we have taken for granted. Perhaps it is a business in your community that has consistently provided you and/or your family good service and you want to drop a short note of thanks to the business owner. Or it simply could be a teacher of one of your children or grandchildren to whom you simply want to say, "Thanks, I appreciate you and your work."

This practice requires attentiveness and intentionality to, as the old hymn puts it, "counting one's blessings." So often, opportunities to give thanks come to mind, but we hesitate or minimize the importance of saying so, and consequently we don't do anything. So we learn regularly to reflect upon our day or week, then drop a note to someone who comes across our radar. This discipline can move us beyond our many good intentions. Some attach this discipline to an evening meal in which a family may reflect together upon who and what they are thankful for; and then they compose a short and sincere note to that person. Such gratitude can inject life into both the receiver and the giver. Gratitude is contagious. Both kids

and adults can share in this practice. It is helpful to always have a set of cards or notes on hand for this purpose.

### *Reflect & Respond*

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- What gratitude do you hold onto that you have not expressed? Are there some people you need to say thanks to? Exercise: Get some stationary and write to two or three people a handwritten note expressing your gratitude before the next session.

## *Prayer*

Gracious God,  
Your love puts no condition and knows no limits.  
It embraces and envelops us totally,  
like the air we breathe.  
It is life-giving in the most profound sense of the word.  
Grant us grace to believe with all our hearts.  
May this faith shape and permeate our personalities  
and may it bear rich fruit in self-acceptance  
and love of our neighbor.  
Let us become living witnesses of your love and truth  
and give you honor and glory.  
We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord,  
In whom all your love was revealed.<sup>25</sup>

*Peter van Breeman*

## *In Preparation for Session 3*

### ***Part 1 – Bible Reading and Journaling: Gospel of John***

For next week, read and reflect upon John 9:1–10:42. In addition to simply paying attention to what grabs you within the passage, ask a couple focused questions: *What does this passage tell me about Jesus' relationship with the Father? What can I learn from Jesus' relationship with the Father, about living as a son or daughter in God's family?* Journal any insights you are gaining or questions that are surfacing or prayers that are stirring as a result of your reading. You will find pages for this journaling at the back of the manual. Be prepared to share your thoughts and discoveries with your group and/or mentor.

### ***Part 2 – Mutual Mentoring Groups***

Be sure to connect with your group about when you will be meeting next week. Some will meet prior to the normal session time to touch base with one another. Our purpose with these groups is simply to *care for one another* as companions on this journey: we will listen to one another, ask questions of one another, and pray for one another.

### ***Part 3 – Read and Prepare for Session 3: Living Truthfully***

Read and complete the questions in Session 3: *Living Truthfully*. Be prepared to share your discoveries with the group.



VANTAGEPOINT<sup>3</sup> is a ministry committed to fostering depth and empowerment in local churches through Christian leadership formation.

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*Helping you discover who God is, who you are,  
and what God wants to do through you.*