







## Love Unconditionally

*We love because he first loved us. —1 John 4:19, NIV*

Read: Luke 2:1-20 and Matthew 5:43-48

What makes the spirit of Christmas so wonderful? I've seen it in the twinkling lights, the greeting cards, and gifts under the tree. I've tasted it in sugar cookies, candy canes, and hot chocolate by the fire. I've smelled it in the scent of warm cinnamon and my mom's traditional stuffing. I've felt it in the presence of family and friends, and I've heard it in the jingle of bells and the melody of carolers at my door. Yes, the spirit of Christmas can be found all around us, but the true heartbeat of this season comes from something far greater. It flows from a vessel of love wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger—Jesus Christ. His love and gift of grace are what make this season truly meaningful. It's about the Savior who came to be with us, offering hope, peace, and the promise of eternal life.

The Bible tells us, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Isn't that amazing? Dying for the sinner? I can imagine giving my life for my husband or children, but for someone who hurt me or turned their back on me? That's a love so deep and sacrificial, it's beyond comprehension. Yet, that's what Jesus did. He didn't wait for us to earn His love. He reached out to us at our lowest, offering grace when we least deserved it.

The other day, I was having coffee with a friend, and she shared some struggles she was facing with a relative. Because of the hurtful behavior, she had decided to cut ties. "Do you think I made the right decision?" she asked.

It wasn't my place to make that call, but I offered a few thoughts from a Christian perspective.

First, I reminded her that there are times we need boundaries to protect ourselves and our loved ones, especially our children. We can be kind while still keeping a healthy distance. Sometimes, stepping back is necessary.

Then I reminded her of something else: it's easy to love those who love us back. The real challenge is loving those who are difficult to love—the ones who have hurt us. That's where we reflect the heart of Christ, who walked in sacrificial love. True love isn't about what we get in return. It's rooted in the love God has already shown us, a love that seeks no reward. As James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father."

The reason Jesus came wasn't for applause or recognition—it was love, pure and simple. He clothed Himself in humanity and was born in one of the humblest places—a stable. Not an ideal birthplace for anyone, let alone a king. But it was deliberate. Jesus came humbly to meet us exactly where we are.

This Christmas, as we enjoy all the special moments, let's remember where the real spirit of the season begins—with a Savior who came to be with us, to love us fully, even when we didn't deserve it. That's what makes this season truly wonderful.

## Today's Challenge:

Find one person in your life today who might be difficult to love or someone you may have distanced yourself from. Reach out to them in a kind way, whether it's with a simple text, a prayer, or a thoughtful gesture. This small act of grace reflects the spirit of Christ's sacrificial love—loving others because He first loved us. Remember, it's easy to love those who love us, but the real challenge lies in loving those who are harder to love.

❓ What does Matthew 5:43-48 teach us about the way we should respond to those who have hurt us?

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❓ What kind of love does God call us to show others, according to this passage? How can you apply this in your relationships?

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## Forgive Freely

*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

—Colossians 3:13, NIV

Read: Matthew 18:21-35 and Acts 7:54-60

Every year, around the third week of November, my kids come home to help decorate the tree. The night always starts with Chinese food and wraps up with hot cocoa. But it's not just these bookends that make the night special—it's everything in between. The memories we share while unpacking those dusty boxes and carefully unwrapping each ornament take us back to days gone by. And now, with grandchildren joining in, there's a whole new layer of joy. Their excitement lights up the room as they hang each ornament. Watching them feels like seeing the beauty and sparkle of Christmas for the very first time.

You know, we can be a lot like those dusty boxes sometimes. Just like we pack away the ornaments, we also pack away our emotions—our hurts, disappointments, and even resentments. We push the pain aside, thinking that if we box it up tightly enough, it'll stay out of sight and out of mind. But here's the truth: the real burden isn't just what others have done to us; it's what we carry when we refuse to let go and forgive.

Do you remember Jesus's words on the cross? Even in His greatest suffering, He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). And then there's Stephen in Acts chapter 7. As the stones rained down on him, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Falling to his knees, he cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:59-60). This was Stephen’s heart, full of grace, choosing to live like Christ even in his final moments.

That’s the kind of tender-heartedness we’re called to show. But let’s be honest—how many of us are willing to do that? To forgive before the sting of pain even begins to fade? And if we’ve held on to resentment for days, weeks, or even years, are we finally ready to let it go?

It’s important to remember that forgiving someone doesn’t mean we’re excusing their behavior. Forgiveness is not saying that what happened was okay. Instead, it’s about releasing the burden to God, trusting that He sees every wound and knows every injustice. When we forgive, we hand over our pain to the only One who can truly heal it. We’re trusting God to be the just and righteous judge that He is. He sees the hurt and knows the heart, and He is faithful to fight for those He loves. Our part is to let go and trust Him to do what only He can do.

And here’s something else—letting go doesn’t just set others free; it sets us free too. When we decide to forgive, it’s like opening a window in a room that’s been shut up for too long. Fresh air flows in, and suddenly, the weight that once pressed down on us seems to lift. That’s the beauty of God’s grace: it doesn’t just transform our circumstances; it transforms our hearts.

Today is a good day to dust off those old boxes, unpack the pain, and let the light of Christ shine in once again. Because I promise you, when you release the burden and let God take it, you’ll find the peace and joy that’s been hidden away for too long. And isn’t that what we all truly long for? To live freely, to love deeply, and to let the grace of God shine through every part of our lives—just like the twinkling lights on our Christmas tree.

## Today’s Challenge:

Pray and ask God for the strength to forgive those who have wronged you, just as Jesus forgave from the cross. Then, take a tangible step toward letting go—whether it’s a phone call, a prayer, or simply releasing it to the Lord.

What does Jesus' prayer for forgiveness on the cross (Luke 23:33-34) teach us about forgiving?

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What two instructions does Romans 12:19 gives us for handling situations when we are wronged?

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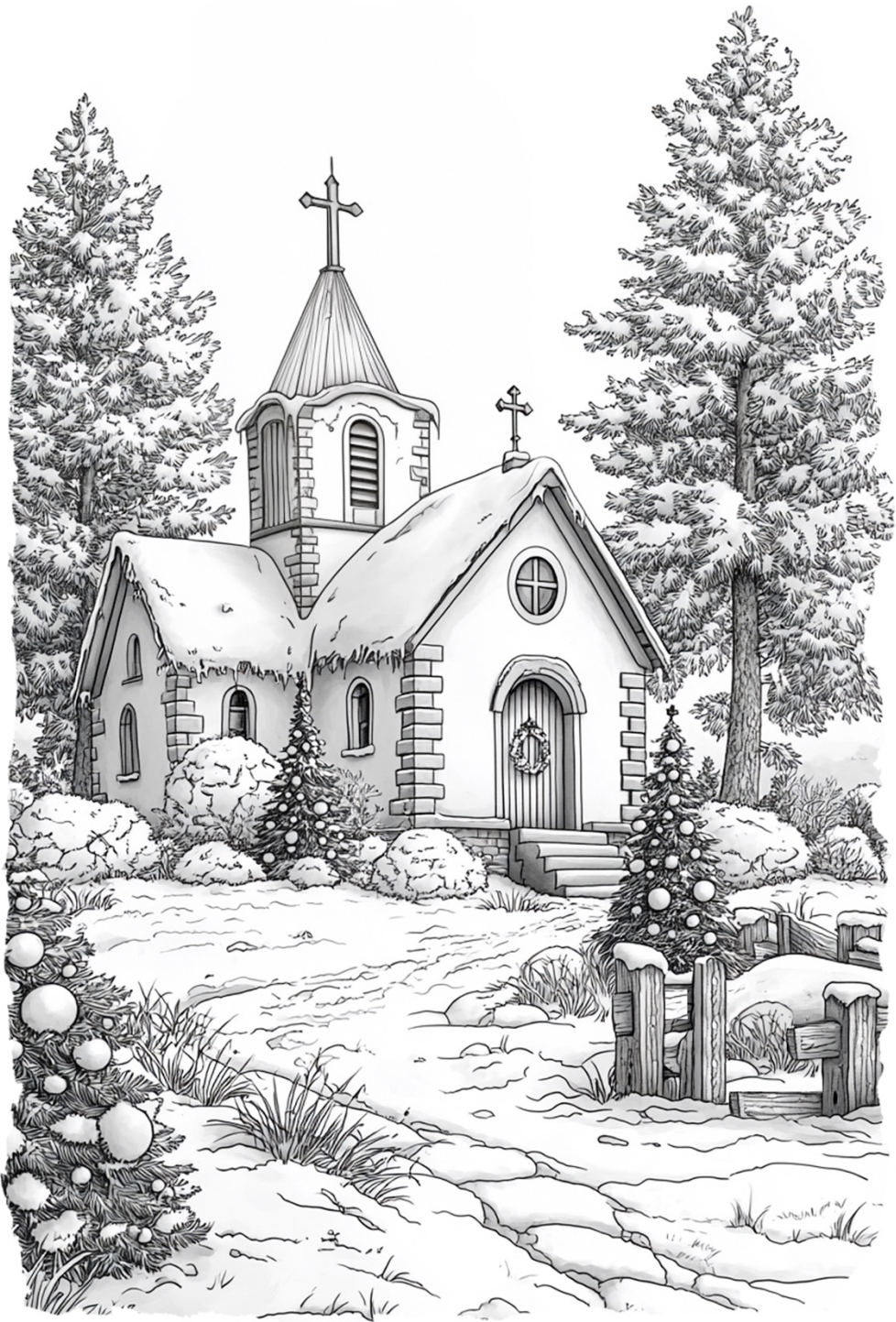
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## Show Compassion

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*

—Colossians 3:12, NIV

Read: Luke 10:25-37 and Matthew 25:31-40 (NIV)

“C’mon,” Michael will say, reaching over to grab a quilt from the living room basket, “put up your feet, and I’ll tuck you in.”

I’m a grandmother now, and I still love being tucked in by Michael while we watch TV together. There’s just something about it—the feeling of a warm blanket, a cup of hot cocoa, and a good Christmas movie. Especially one like *The Christmas Shoes*. Have you seen it? If not, let me give you some advice: grab a cozy blanket, a box of tissues, and settle in for a heartfelt story.

I won’t give away too much, but let me tell you, this one pulls at your heartstrings in all the best ways. It’s the kind of story that reminds us how small acts of kindness can have a huge impact, especially during the holidays. Trust me, you’re going to need those tissues!

Watching that little boy with his tender heart got me thinking about compassion. Isn’t that what the spirit of Christmas is all about? It’s through selfless love and care that we reflect what Jesus has done for us. He came to us, not just as a symbol of love, but as an example of how to live with open, giving hearts—always ready to extend a hand.

In Matthew 22:37-39, Jesus tells us, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and

greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Now, being friendly and kind is one thing, but truly loving your neighbor goes deeper than "nice." It's more than a kind word or polite gesture; it's stepping into someone's story and caring from the heart.

Jesus gave us a powerful example in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In Luke 10:33, it says, "But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him." The word translated as "pity" here is from the Greek *splagchnizomai*, which means to be moved from the deepest part of yourself—an emotion that compels you to act. True compassion isn't just feeling sorry; it's letting that feeling lead you to act.

The word "compassion" comes from two Latin words: *com*, meaning "with," and *pati*, meaning "to suffer." To have compassion isn't just to observe someone's pain from afar—it's about coming alongside them, feeling their struggle, and choosing to be present. It's stepping into their shoes, much like that little boy did in *The Christmas Shoes*.

Isaiah 53:4 tells us that Jesus "bore our griefs and carried our sorrows." Jesus didn't see our suffering from afar; He entered into it fully. When we share in someone else's burdens, we reflect His love. This season, don't underestimate the power of small acts of kindness—a smile, a listening ear, or a helping hand. These moments can make a lasting impact, more than we realize.

As we celebrate Christmas, let's remember that compassion is at the heart of the season. Let's embrace the spirit of Christmas by walking alongside others, sharing in their joys, and carrying their burdens as He did for us. After all, the greatest gift we can give is to love others the way Christ first loved us.

## Today's Challenge:

Look for ways to show compassion today—whether it's helping a neighbor, offering a word of encouragement, or simply listening to someone who needs to talk. Let your actions reflect the compassion of Christ and remember that even the smallest gesture can make a lasting impact on someone's day. Keep in mind Matthew 22:39—love your neighbor as yourself.

❓ What does it mean to "love your neighbor as yourself" in the context of Luke 10:25-37?

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❓ What are some specific ways (big or small) you can show compassion and kindness to others this Christmas season?

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## Offer Kindness

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*

—Colossians 3:12, NIV

Read: Ruth 1&2 and Colossians 3:12-17

I read a quote the other day that said, “Being a family means you are a part of something wonderful. It means you will love and be loved for the rest of your life, no matter what.” —Lisa Weed.

I don't know about you, but that's certainly been true in my life. Friends have come and gone over the years. Neighbors have moved here and there. Coworkers I once shared so much with have long forgotten my name. But through it all, family has remained the one constant—especially my sisters.

These are the girls I spent countless Christmases with, celebrated birthdays, and ate the same meals around the kitchen table. We shared the same parents, and sometimes, we even shared the same bed. We drank cherry Kool-Aid while watching *The Brady Bunch* and *Columbo* together. We played endless rounds of Monopoly, baked cakes in our Easy Bake Ovens, and dreamed of one day finishing our Doodle Art. Family is special like that. It's a bond that's unique and unlike any other.

As I thought about this today, I noticed something interesting—“kindness” and “kin” share the same root word. I never really thought about that before, but they do. And maybe it's because real kindness is about treating people like family.

Think back to Ruth and Naomi for a moment. Remember what Ruth said to her mother-in-law? “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16, NIV). Ruth’s kindness wasn’t driven by duty. It came from a place of deep love and loyalty. She could have chosen the easier path and returned to her own family, but instead, she chose the sacrificial one. Ruth’s story shows us that kindness is more than just being nice; it’s about stepping into someone else’s life with a heart ready to love and support, no matter the cost.

Paul paints a beautiful picture of what kindness looks like in Colossians 3:12: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” Family teaches us so much about these qualities, doesn’t it? It’s where we first learn how to forgive, how to show patience, and how to extend grace. These are reflections of Christ that make family bonds so strong, but they aren’t meant to be kept within our families—they’re meant to be shared with everyone around us.

Anyone can wrap a gift and put it under the tree. But if we really want to embrace the spirit of kindness this Christmas, our gifts need to come from the heart. So this year, let’s give in a way that reflects the sacrificial love of Jesus—gifts of kindness, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and grace. These are the kinds of gifts that go beyond the wrapping paper and bows—they touch hearts, they make an impact, and they remind us of the love we’ve already received from our Savior.

Let’s make it our mission this season to be “kin” to everyone around us—treating them with the same love, patience, and kindness that we give to our families. That’s the spirit of Christmas.

## Today’s Challenge:

Focus on practicing kindness in small, intentional ways today. Whether it’s sending an encouraging note, giving someone extra patience, or doing something thoughtful without being asked, let kindness lead your actions. Remember, kindness often goes unnoticed, but its impact is felt deeply.

⓪ What are some specific ways you can show sacrificial kindness, like Ruth did with Naomi, to others this Christmas?

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⓪ What does Paul mean in Colossians 3:10 when he says we have “put on the new self?” And how is this “new self” being renewed?

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## Nurture Relationships

*Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another  
above yourselves. —Romans 12:10, NIV*

Read: 1 Samuel 18-20

A few years back, I bought some cream-colored shag carpets—the perfect fit for our dining and living room areas. They looked beautiful, soft, and cozy, especially with the warm glow of the Christmas tree lights. I wanted an elegant touch, something that would make our home feel festive yet peaceful during the holidays. Since we didn't spend much time in those rooms, I hoped they might stay that way for years. And for the most part, they did. With the kids grown, we spent most of our time in the family room, and the cream shag remained pristine.

But I didn't anticipate the damage one little dog could do—especially one sick little dog who had gotten into some food he shouldn't have. One afternoon, I came home after picking up the kids from school. After carrying in the groceries and slipping off my shoes, I was shocked by what I found. Our pug had been sick, and if you know anything about dogs, you know they're always drawn to the carpet when they're not feeling well. The mess was everywhere—from the living room sofa to the dining room table, with several stops in between. Any other type of carpet might have survived, but white shag didn't. Looking back, I can admit that maybe choosing white shag wasn't the best idea.

Michael, on the other hand, has always been wiser than me when it comes to practical choices. Ten years later, the braided rug in his office still

looks just as good as the day he bought it. The classic style of a braided rug has grown on me over the years. They add warmth to a room, but more importantly, they're built to last—they can handle the wear and tear of life.

Thinking about those braided rugs reminds me of what it means to have strong, lasting relationships. Ecclesiastes 4:12 tells us, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” What holds true for a strong braided cord also holds true for our lives. Our connections—whether with family, friends, or God—are stronger when they are intertwined, when there are multiple strands holding us up.

As we approach Christmas, I'm reminded that nurturing relationships is one of the ways we truly embrace the spirit of the season. Like the braided rug, the bonds we share with those around us—family, friends, and most importantly, God—are what keep us grounded. Woven together, these bonds form a strength that no single strand could achieve alone.

Whether it's in our marriage, friendships, or the love we have for our families, when God is at the center, He is the strand that holds us together and sustains us through the ups and downs of life. This holiday season, as we gather around the tree, exchange gifts, and share meals, let's nurture these bonds. Let's be intentional about weaving God into every relationship, knowing that with Him in the mix, our connections endure.

When we invest in these relationships, we reflect the true spirit of Christmas. It's not about having perfect decorations or spotless cream carpets—it's about letting love grow, embracing the mess, and holding tight to the people woven into our lives.

## Today's Challenge:

Take a moment today to nurture one of your important relationships. It could be as simple as sharing a kind word, sending an encouraging message, or spending uninterrupted time with a loved one. Reflect on how God strengthens our connections when we make Him the center. Let's be intentional about weaving His love into every bond, allowing our relationships to reflect His grace, especially during this Christmas season.

❓ Speaking metaphorically, why is a strand of three cords stronger than one?

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❓ What are some ways you can nurture the bonds of your relationships to make them stronger this holiday season?

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## Focus on Others

*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. —Colossians 3:23-24, NIV*

Read: Isaiah 58:6-10, Philippians 2:1-8

One of our favorite Christmas traditions is something we call "Serve in Secret." Michael and I have been doing this for years, and it has always been a highlight of our holiday season. Anytime we thought we couldn't afford it or got too busy to make it happen, we ended up wishing we could start the season over and do it anyway. So we commit each year to quietly bless someone God has placed on our hearts.

One year, we surprised a family with a Christmas tree and ornaments. Another time, we bought groceries for someone going through a rough patch. And one year, Michael went above and beyond to pick out beautiful gifts for a young girl and her mom. I was ready to settle on practical clothes, but Michael insisted on the prettiest dress in the store—and, of course, a stuffed animal to go with it too.

I feel like I've let you in on a little secret here, but the real joy isn't in the recognition. It's knowing that, in some small way, we've brought a little light into someone's life. This tradition is close to our hearts because of Jesus' words in Matthew 6:3-4: "But when you give to the needy, do not let your

left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Serving in secret lets us be humble vessels of God's love, without any expectation of praise. The reward is in the giving itself—in knowing that we're sharing His love, one act of kindness at a time.

Jesus gave us the perfect example of focusing on others. Though He was King, He came to earth and took on the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7). He knelt to wash the disciples' feet (John 13:4-8) and said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). If Jesus humbled Himself in service, how much more should we follow His lead?

In a season that so easily becomes focused on ourselves—with gifts, food, and the comforts of the holiday—let's take time to focus on others. Maybe that means helping with dishes, bringing a meal to someone, offering a ride to church, baking treats for a neighbor, shoveling a sidewalk, or volunteering at a local shelter. These small, simple acts can make a big difference.

As Paul writes in Colossians, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23-24).

So this Christmas, let's choose to focus on others, following the example of our Savior—giving from the heart and trusting that God will use even our smallest acts of kindness for His glory. That's where the true joy of the season is found.

## Today's Challenge:

Choose one person—a family member, friend, or neighbor—and do something kind for them without expecting anything in return, and without revealing who did it. It could be something simple like shoveling snow off their driveway, dropping off some baking, or writing an anonymous note of encouragement. The idea is to focus on others without recognition, knowing your reward comes from God.

❓ How does the idea of “serving in secret” resonate with you? Can you think of an opportunity to serve someone this week without expecting recognition?

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❓ When you think about Jesus serving others, how does that shape the way you want to serve those around you this Christmas?

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## Be Mindful of Others

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. —Philippians 2:3-4, NIV*

Read: Luke 10:38-42 and Galatians 6

So, we went camping with the family last summer... but I have to admit, one of my friends would call it "cheating" if I used the word "camping." The cabins we stayed in had all the amenities—showers, television, internet, and even comfy beds. I know, I know... How did I manage to make it through the weekend, right?

While we may not be by an ocean here in Manitoba, we're blessed with two large lakes. Nestled along one of them is a special place for our family—the beautiful Hecla Island. We used to take our kids there when they were little, and now we get the joy of bringing our grandkids. It's become a tradition—having lunch at the Little Viking Restaurant before climbing the steps of the Gull Harbor Lighthouse. The lighthouse isn't in use anymore, but at one time, it guided boats safely through the rough waters of Lake Winnipeg.

The beautiful thing about a lighthouse is that it doesn't shine to get noticed; it shines to guide boats safely home. Its light keeps them from danger and offers a sense of security in the midst of a storm.

In the same way, we're called to stand firm and be mindful of others. Hearts can be heavy at Christmas, and let's face it—the hustle and bustle of the season comes with its fair share of stress. While it's a season that should

be joyful and bright, it often illuminates darkness and sorrow for some. But here's the thing: mindfulness isn't just about seeing a need; it's about stepping in and acting with love, just like Jesus did when He touched the sick, fed the hungry, and welcomed the outcasts. He didn't simply notice a need—He moved toward people with compassion, offering healing and hope.

If we hope to be mindful, we have to be present. That means putting our phones aside, turning off the TV, and slowing down long enough to sit with others. It's about pausing our own agenda for the sake of someone else. We see this beautifully illustrated in the story of Mary and Martha in Luke chapter 10. The Bible tells us that Martha was "distracted" with all of the preparations she had to tend to. Unlike her sister, Mary sat at Jesus' feet, fully present and listening. When Martha asked Jesus, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" He gently pointed out that Mary had chosen what was better—she was mindful of Christ.

This year, as we're preparing for Christmas, let's remember the gift that's been given to us. Mindful of our deepest need for salvation, Jesus left the comforts of heaven behind and chose the way of the cross. By following His example of mindfulness, we're not just embracing the spirit of Christmas—we're living it out in a way that brings glory to Him.

## Today's Challenge:

Choose one moment today to be fully present with someone. Whether it's a family member, a friend, or even a stranger, set aside distractions like your phone or other tasks. Listen intently, offer a kind word, or simply sit with someone. Carry this practice into the rest of the Christmas season.

① Throughout His ministry, Jesus was mindful of those in need, stepping in with love and compassion. What are some specific ways you can act on the needs of those around you this Christmas?

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② How can we, like Mary, “choose what is better” this Christmas?

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