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activated

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alternative

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE CHARACTER BUILDER

The great American evangelist Dwight L. Moody had a pithy phrase to describe character: Character is what you are in the dark.

As Christians, we all want to grow in spiritual maturity and Christlikeness. We want to become all we can be with Christ's help, to put aside sin and who we are in our worst moments, and replace that with behavior that demonstrates the fruits of the spirit—love, kindness, gentleness, self-control, and so on.¹

Ultimately, we want to become like Jesus, to think how He thought and behave how He behaved. The Bible encourages us to aspire to follow in Christ's footsteps: "Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did."² We want our character to be a testimony of God's truth, regardless of whether anyone is watching, and even during our darkest, most trying times.

Building and developing virtuous characteristics can't just be learned from a book or a sermon. It doesn't come upon us in the night or sneak up during the day. It doesn't happen automatically, accidentally, or suddenly. As Peter writes in his article on pages 4–6, "there's some work to be done for us to grow in Christlikeness."

The apostle Paul took it a step further when he wrote that God can even use trials to strengthen our faith. It can be comforting to bear his triumphant statement in mind when going through the fire of difficulties: "We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope."³

This issue of *Activated* explores the topic of Christian virtues and challenges each of us to do our best every day to grow in them.

—The Editor

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1. See Galatians 5:22–23.

2. 1 John 2:6 NLT. See also 1 Peter 2:21.

3. Romans 5:3–4 CEB



THE DANCING TRAFFIC CONTROLLER

BY LI LIAN



ON A LATE SATURDAY AFTERNOON, traffic crawled towards the congested, narrow intersection in the large metropolis. Pedestrians zigzagged through the lanes. Lines of cars were pulling out of one of the busiest shopping malls, adding a strain to the already overcrowded junction. With no traffic lights or traffic controllers around, the traffic quickly became deadlocked.

Seeing the problematic situation, an unemployed youth in a faded, dark blue sweater, ripped jeans, and well-worn tennis shoes weaved his way between the rows of cars, nodding his head to the beat of a catchy hip-hop song playing through his large, over-ear headphones as he sauntered over to the middle of the jammed intersection.

With a clap of his hands and several exaggerated arm motions,

he signaled one lane forward while swaying his body to the rhythm of the music. No stiff hand signals or blank expressions like regular traffic controllers. This fellow danced with his heart and soul as he directed the swarming mass of traffic. Although he owned no special traffic control equipment, his whole expression beamed with joy and the satisfaction of knowing that he was doing something for the benefit of others around him.

First one lane, then another. Slowly the traffic began to move forward as he hopped, shuffled, bounced, jumped and twirled, clicking his fingers to the beat as he directed the lines of cars. Beads of sweat dripped down his forehead, but his whole face grinned as he continued his routine.

No one was expecting this kind of performance. Some drivers gave him a thumbs-up as they drove by; others passed him a tip for his effort

and fantastic performance. Thereafter, the same young man showed up daily at the same intersection during the peak rush hour to help clear the jams. And every day, he danced his dance, beaming with pride at the job he did. He saw what needed to be done and he did it.

It wasn't long before road safety officials noticed him and hired him as an official traffic controller. Now he not only had a paying job but a gold and blue uniform to match his beaming smile.

An ancient proverb says, "Whatever you do, do well."¹ In this young man's case, his enthusiasm for the task at hand took him from being an unemployed youth to a new career—one that he could literally dance to.

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1. Ecclesiastes 9:10 NLT

BY PETER AMSTERDAM

CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

A KEY FACTOR IN BECOMING LIKE JESUS is developing godly character. This article will focus on character traits that Scripture identifies as those that Christians should emulate and that lead us to Christlikeness. These Christian character traits can be differentiated from other character traits that, while good, don't necessarily make one more Christlike. For example, creativity, flexibility, alertness, and decisiveness are good attributes to have, but they

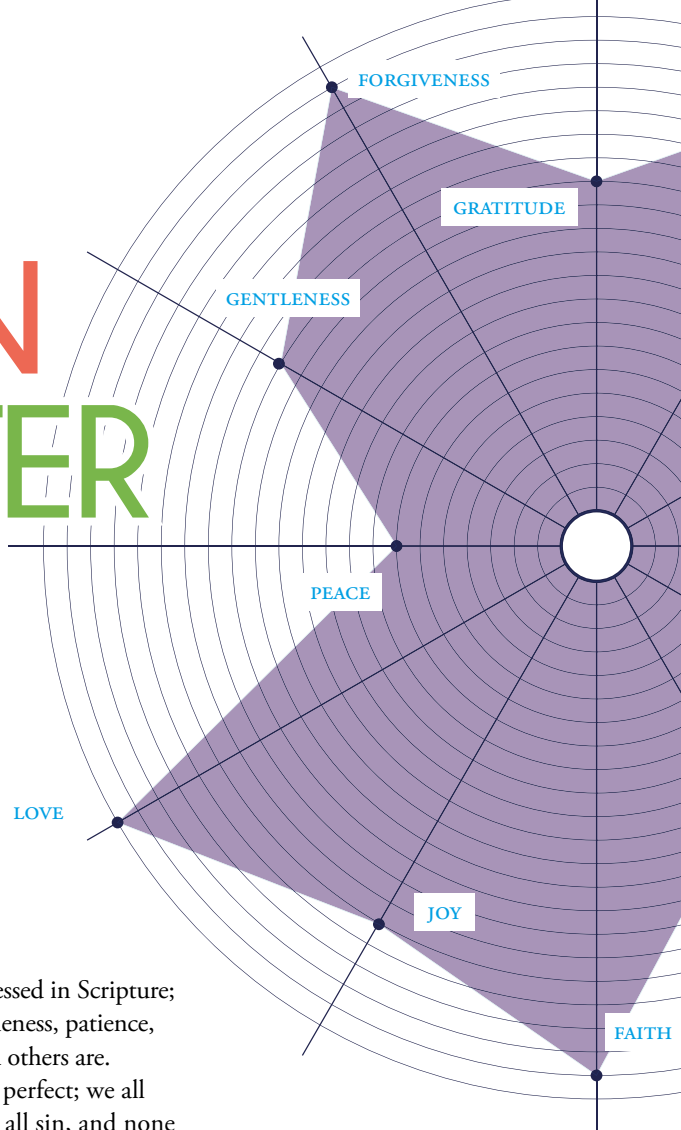
1. See 2 Corinthians 5:17.
2. Galatians 5:22–23 NIV
3. See Colossians 3:12–14.
4. See Philippians 4:8–9.
5. See Acts 20:35.
6. See Matthew 7:12.
7. See 1 Timothy 6:11.
8. See Matthew 5:36–37.
9. See Titus 2:2–8.
10. See Psalm 15.
11. See 1 Timothy 4:12.
12. See James 1:19.
13. See 1 Timothy 1:5.
14. See Titus 1:8.
15. See 1 Timothy 6:18.
16. Colossians 3:9–10 CEB

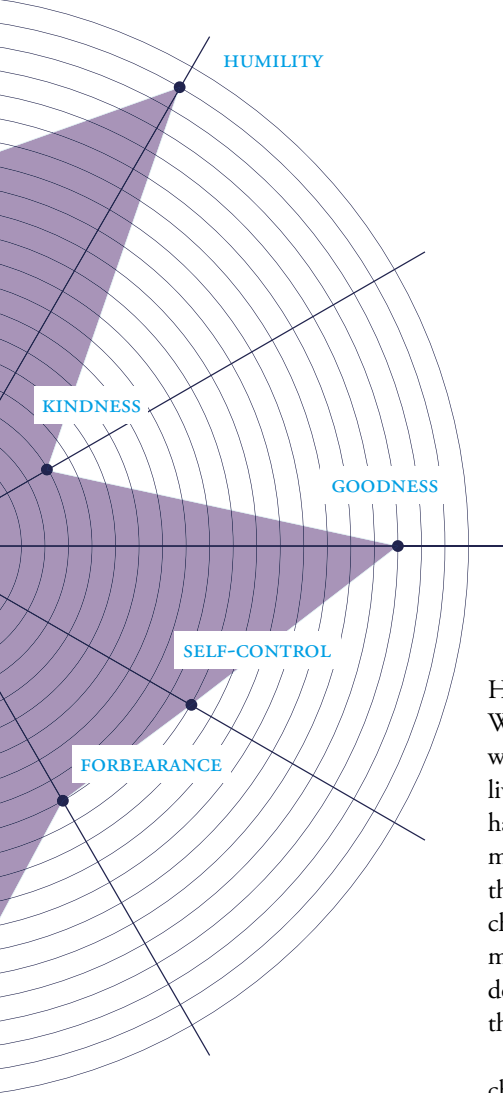
aren't directly addressed in Scripture; whereas faith, gentleness, patience, love, gratitude, and others are.

No Christian is perfect; we all make mistakes, we all sin, and none of us has complete Christlikeness, nor will we attain it in this life. Developing godly character can't be achieved by "keeping rules" out of a sense of duty, or feeling that if we systematically do all the right things, we will be living in a Christlike manner. While there are specific things to do and rules to keep, it's not the rote keeping of them that develops godliness; rather it's doing so in response to our love for God, who dwells within us. The actions that reflect godliness come from within us, from our relationship with God

and our becoming new creations.¹ It's by the work of the Holy Spirit that our character is transformed.

Of course, there's some work to be done for us to grow in Christlikeness. There are moral decisions we individually need to make on a regular basis to bring our lives, thoughts, and actions into alignment with the teachings of the Bible. But all of this must be seen within the framework of God's grace. It's the Holy Spirit that brings about the changes in our





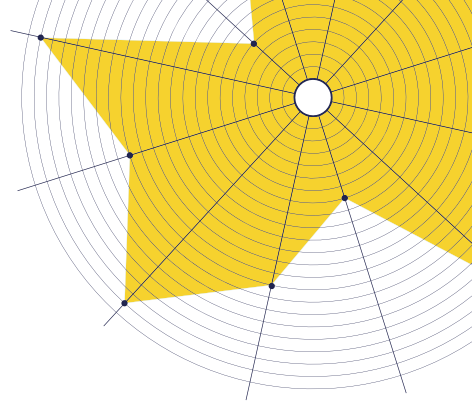
lives that move us in the direction of Christlikeness. We have a part to play as well, but the actual transformation comes through the Holy Spirit. Like when sailing a boat, we have to put our sails in the right position in order to catch the wind. It's the wind that moves the boat, but the sails have to be raised. The Holy Spirit's transforming power is able to change us; but if we want to be moved, we must make the effort needed so the sails can catch the wind.

Christian character is rooted in our belief about who God is—that

He has spoken to us through His Word, that we are in relationship with Him, and that we desire to live our lives according to what He has revealed in the Bible. It calls for making conscious choices to allow the Holy Spirit to transform our character. It entails making right moral decisions over and over until doing the right thing, the godly thing, becomes second nature.

Having formed Christian character day by day, year by year, when you're suddenly faced with a major moral challenge, you're able to overcome it because you've trained yourself in godliness or Christlikeness. Becoming more Christlike also means developing attributes such as forgiveness, generosity, humility, and gratitude. As you regularly choose to be forgiving, generous, humble, and grateful, these qualities become part of who you are.

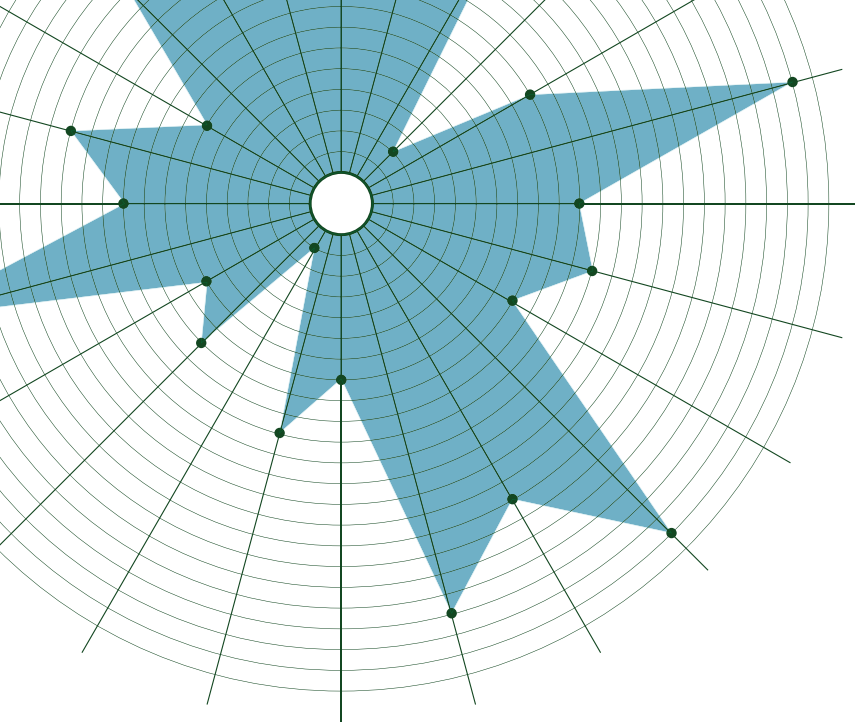
Throughout Scripture we find what are seen as Christian characteristics, most notably in the list of the fruit of the Spirit: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance,



kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."²

But there are numerous other godly traits spoken of throughout Scripture. We're told to have compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, gentleness, patience, and forgiveness;³ to think on whatever is pure, lovely, commendable, admirable, excellent, and worthy of praise;⁴ to help the weak, as it's more blessed to give than to receive;⁵ to do to others as we'd have them do to us;⁶ to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, gentleness;⁷ to honor our word;⁸ to be temperate, dignified, sensible, kind, to have integrity;⁹ to live honestly, speak the truth, and keep our promises even when it hurts;¹⁰ to set an example in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity;¹¹ to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry;¹² to love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith;¹³ to be hospitable, to love what is good, to be sensible, just, holy, and disciplined;¹⁴ to be generous and willing to share with others.¹⁵

These and other characteristics are found in Scripture, and when we put effort into developing them in



We must stop behaving as people do in the dark and be ready to live in the light.

—Romans 13:12 CEV

Once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light!

—Ephesians 5:8 NLT

Be imitators of God, as dear children.

—Ephesians 5:1

ourselves, we raise our sails so that the Holy Spirit can work in our heart, mind, and spirit to transform us. Some or many of these traits may not come naturally, and in fact, at first we will need to work diligently to adopt them. The goal is to develop a Christlike character, and in order to do this we need to “take off the old human nature with its practices and put on the new nature, which is renewed ... by conforming to ... the one who created it.”¹⁶

Christlikeness calls for deliberate change. It won't come naturally at the beginning, and the steps you take to get to that point require difficult decisions and actions that run contrary to instinct. Breaking bad habits and replacing them with good ones is no easy task, and neither is replacing sinful attitudes, conduct, and actions with godly ones. There are habits of mind, body, imagination, speech,

17. Ephesians 4:23–24 ESV

and more that we'll need to unlearn in order to make way for new habits which need to be learned.

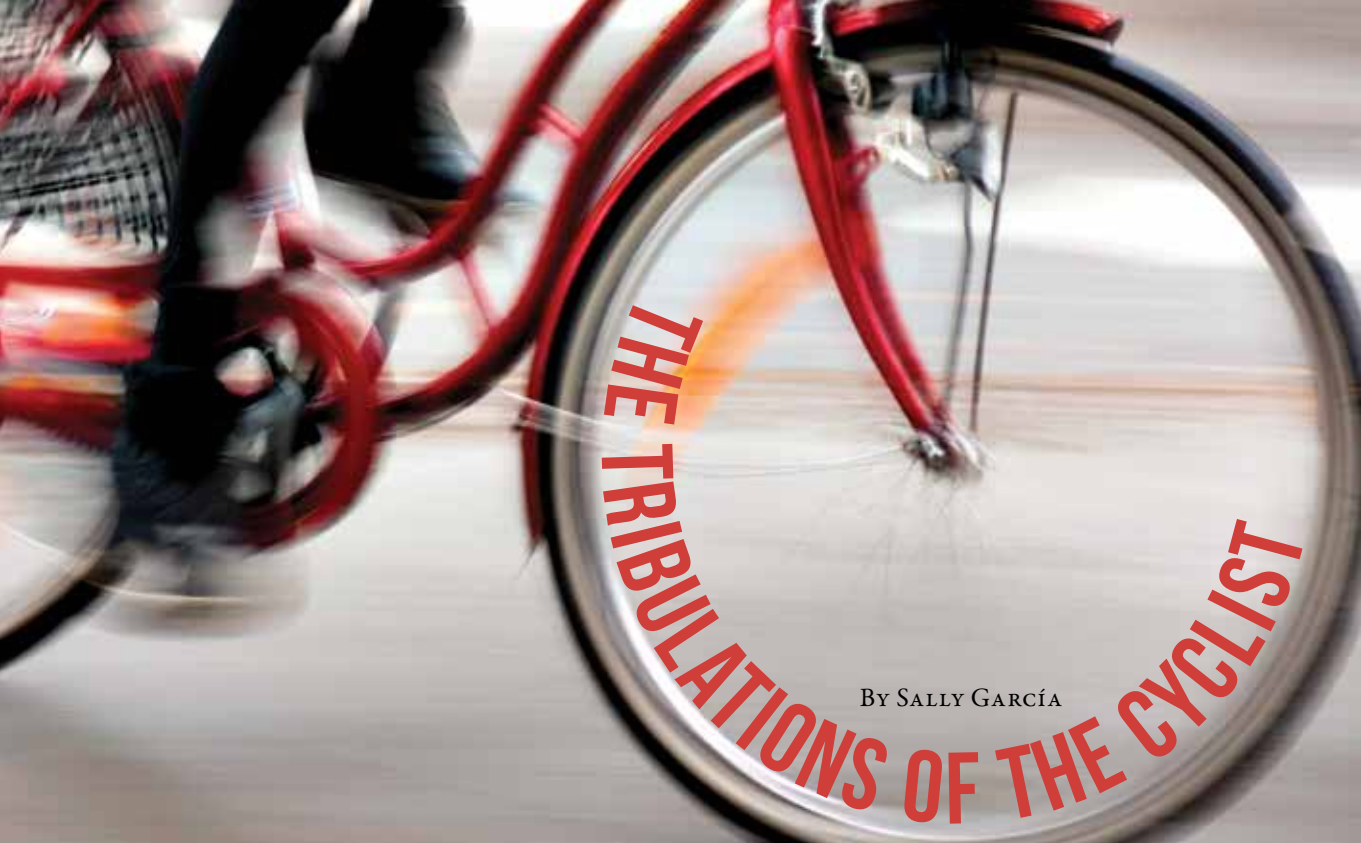
For example, if we've been naturally selfish, breaking the habit of this character trait requires a change in the way we are. We have to fight against our natural selfish attitudes by making conscious decisions to be generous, to not demand that things go our way, to in fact go out of our way to let others have their way. Such a change requires deliberate, intentional action, but over time, our tendency to think only of ourselves and what we want will diminish, and we will become more sensitive to and aware of the needs of others. We will become more Christlike in this area.

It's important to note that Christlikeness calls for both putting off and putting on character traits. Often, believers focus on *taking off* traits of a sinful nature. We see stopping sin as the goal, believing that we will be closer to God, better

people, more godly if we overcome this or that sin or bad habit. While this is true, fighting against our sinful nature is only part of the battle. We are instructed to “be renewed in the spirit of [our] minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”¹⁷ We must develop godly characteristics in addition to putting off ungodly ones. Just as we are called to put off the traits of our old selves, we are called to put on the traits of the new. We can't neglect either.

The challenge is consciously taking off sin and putting on godliness, making it possible for the wind of God's Spirit to move us toward Christlikeness.

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WE LIVE ON A COUNTRY ROAD ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF A SMALL TOWN. There are two ways to enter our village from our side of town, but both present several obstacles for cyclists like my husband and me.

One entrance has a STOP sign that is habitually ignored by the motorists, many of whom pay no attention whatsoever to the right-of-way rules. Many folks use this road as a shortcut and don't realize that there are narrow stretches, pedestrians shopping at roadside stalls, and lowly cyclists on our way to town.

The other entrance is a narrow country road that enters the village right in front of a busy school. During school hours, many parents seem to forget that this is a public road and pull over to park in any which way—then sit there talking

on their cell phones. Across from the school is a construction site, so there are large trucks trying to squeeze their way through all this. Once again, it seems like the lowly cyclist is the least of everyone's concerns.

So what happened to this supposedly defenseless cyclist? I began looking at these two entrances as “war zones,” and I was ready for the fight! As I cycled into town almost daily, I would mentally review the scene of whatever “injustice” had been done to me, so that when I reached home I could relive the details. “You won't believe what happened *this time!*” I'd announce to my husband. Each incident would be reinforced in my mind as I replayed the event. *What did the crazy driver do? And how did I respond?*

Until I stopped doing that.

It was simple. I realized that

there were other, more important things going on in my life than getting through these two narrow lanes each day! I just needed to be conscious that I may face a couple of complicated maneuvers on my way to town, that's all. Doesn't every road in life present some obstacles? And if every fellow driver is fighting his or her own battles, would it hurt me to be a bit more patient? Or courteous?

At the time, trying to overcome the aggravation and let it pass seemed like a big resolution. Now it seems like the only logical thing to do. As we journey down life's road together, I'm sure my fellow drivers sometimes also need to have patience with me.

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THE STORY TO END THE EXCUSES

BY MARIE STORY

JESUS GAVE A SIMPLE COMMAND: “Love your neighbor.”¹ However, “neighbor” is pretty vague, and some wise guy asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?”² Jesus answered with the story about a traveler on the way to Jericho who was ambushed by thieves, beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Two people passed him by but didn’t stop to help.³

I can speculate on what each might have been thinking as he passed that poor guy on the side of the road.

The first is a priest. Dressed in his finest synagogue robes, perhaps he’s working on a sermon he plans to give later in the day. His mind is full of his own importance, he meditates on the law, and congratulates himself on following it to the letter.

Perhaps the priest is taken aback when he sees the bleeding man on the road. The man’s clothes are torn and dirty, so it’s hard to determine his social standing. The priest takes a step closer, but doesn’t recognize him. Maybe he tells himself he can’t

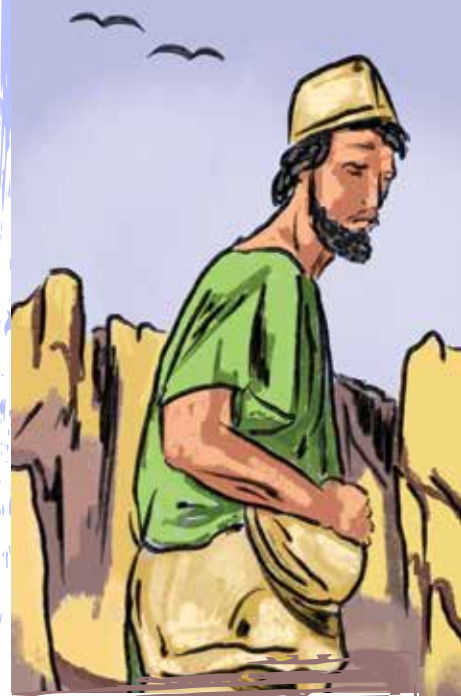
afford to be late, he can’t afford to get his good clothes dirty, and with that, his mind is made up. He averts his eyes and passes by on the other side of the road.

The sun climbs higher in the sky, and buzzards begin to circle overhead. In the heat of the day, a Levite comes along. He too is hurrying along, his mind racing as he plans out his day in Jericho. Then he stumbles upon the beaten traveler, not looking any better for the high-noon heat.

Immediately the Levite starts worrying about the thieves returning; maybe he fears being robbed as well. So he passes on by.

The poor traveler, weak and dying, is ready to give up hope. Another hour passes before the next person comes along. This time, however, the wounded man doesn’t even have hope that he will stop. You see, the man coming along the road is a Samaritan.

There was no love lost between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Jews despised the Samaritans, and had cursed and maligned them for centuries. Though their cultures were similar, and the Samaritans professed the same faith, they were considered second-rate believers, unworthy to be part of the Jewish nation. Samaritans were cursed in Jewish synagogues, they couldn’t serve as witnesses in



court, and Jews believed they were excluded from the afterlife.

When you think about it, the Samaritan had the best excuse for not stopping. And yet he did. He stopped, tended to the wounded man, and carried him on his own donkey to the nearest inn where he could be cared for until he recovered. But he went even further than that. He took two silver coins from his own purse and paid the innkeeper for the wounded man’s care, then

1. Matthew 19:19

2. Luke 10:29

3. See Luke 10:25–37.

4. See Luke 6:35; Matthew 5:44.

5. See Luke 6:28.

6. See Matthew 5:44.

7. See Matthew 10:8.

said, “If that’s not enough, I’ll pay the rest on my way back.”

The Samaritan didn’t stop “loving his neighbor” when it got difficult, or when it was inconvenient, or when it cost him something personally.

He “loved his enemy.”⁴ He looked past the years of bickering and reached out to help a man in need. He loved anyway.

He “blessed those that cursed him.”⁵ He chose to ignore the offenses and unkind words and loved anyway.

He “did good to those who had mistreated him.”⁶ Despite being treated badly, despite being looked down on, he loved anyway.

It’s often easy to feel justified in not caring. We can tend to feel that we only have so much love to give, and when we’re reaching our limit

we’re only able to dispense a little bit of love. That’s human love. We just don’t have enough love on our own.

In telling this story, Jesus basically took away any excuses we might make for not loving and caring for others. He was telling us that our neighbor isn’t just someone who lives next door to us, but it’s anyone we encounter who is in need. Jesus didn’t say, “Love your neighbor, but only if he’s not too weird.” He didn’t say, “Love your neighbor, but only until she gossips about you.” He didn’t say, “Love your neighbors, but only if you like how they look, or if you’d like to have them in your circle of friends.”

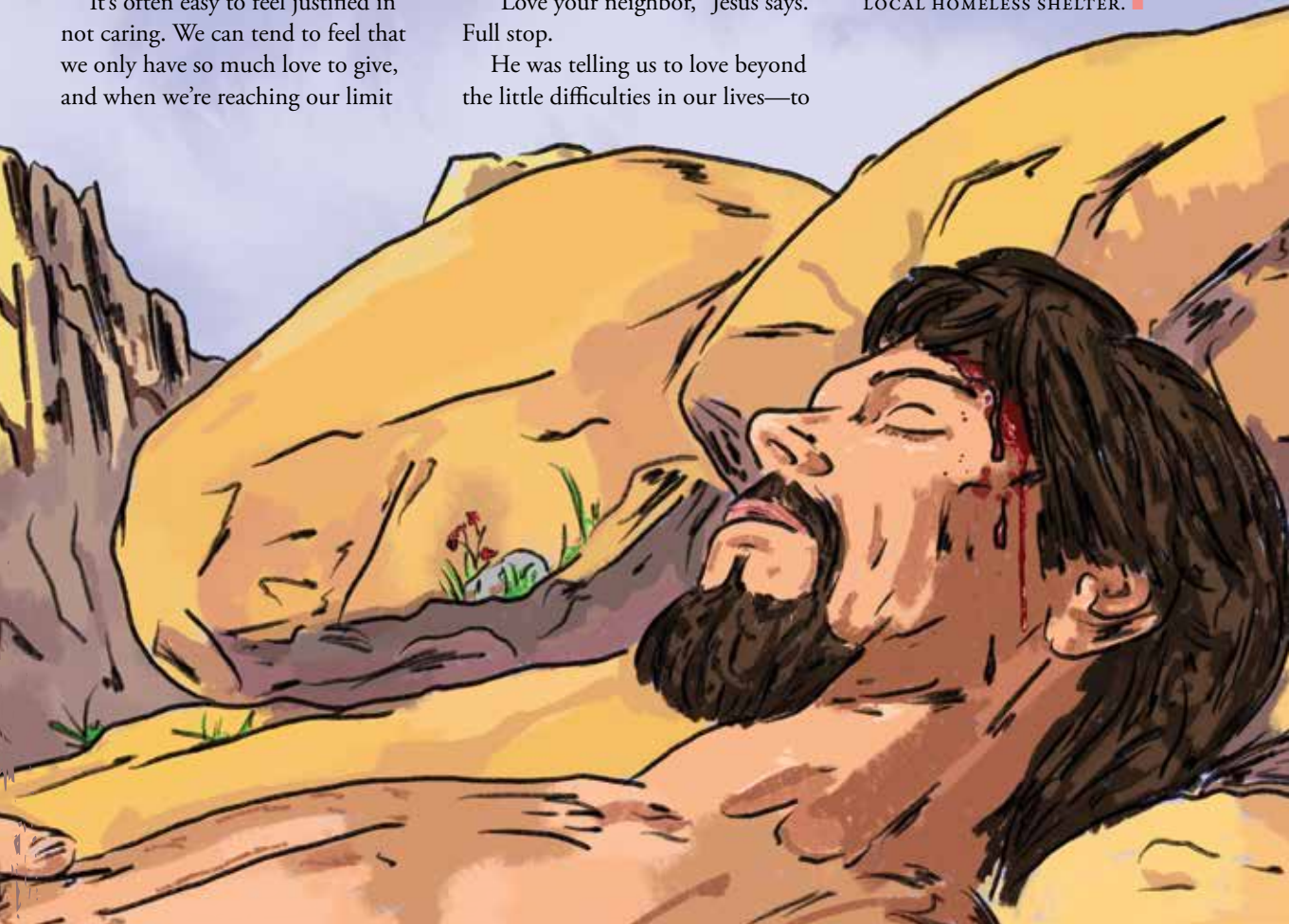
“Love your neighbor,” Jesus says. Full stop.

He was telling us to love beyond the little difficulties in our lives—to

love and not be choosy or partial. To love even if we’ve been hurt or mistreated—because that’s the way *He* loves. We can all be difficult at times, yet He forgives us each time and keeps loving us regardless. He doesn’t expect perfection, and He doesn’t withhold His love when we don’t deserve it.

Jesus gives us His love freely. Just as we freely receive Jesus’ love, we should freely give it.⁷

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BY STEVE HEARTS

SPIRITUAL WEIGHTLIFTING

ONE OF MY FAVORITE FORMS OF EXERCISE IS WEIGHTLIFTING. I'm no bodybuilder; I just do it to stay toned and keep in shape. I also find it interesting how akin weightlifting can be to our spiritual growth.

In our “spiritual weightlifting,” we have a truly awesome trainer. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus tells us, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me.” To me, the “yoke” is symbolic of anything that strengthens and exercises our faith and Christian walk. Jesus goes on to promise right after that, “My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”¹

In my spiritual life, some forms of weightlifting aren't healthy—carrying loads and burdens that are unnecessary, that weigh me down instead of strengthening me. These can take the form of needless demands I place on

myself or worries and anxieties that I fail to give over to God. These burdens can affect me not only spiritually, but also physically if given the chance.

I was 18 when my mother was first diagnosed with cancer. Nothing like that had ever happened in our family, and we were all deeply affected by it. Despite my best efforts to remain strong on the outside, I was a mess of worry on the inside. I constantly played the “what if” game. *What if complications arise and Mom doesn't survive? How will we go on if she leaves us?* On and on it went.

I worried so much that it wasn't long before I got sick myself. I caught the flu, and my temperature went up and down for several days. Eventually, I had a febrile seizure. I fell down, hit my head, and passed out for several minutes. Fortunately, besides a big bruise on my head, I wasn't seriously injured, though I did spend one night in the hospital under observation.

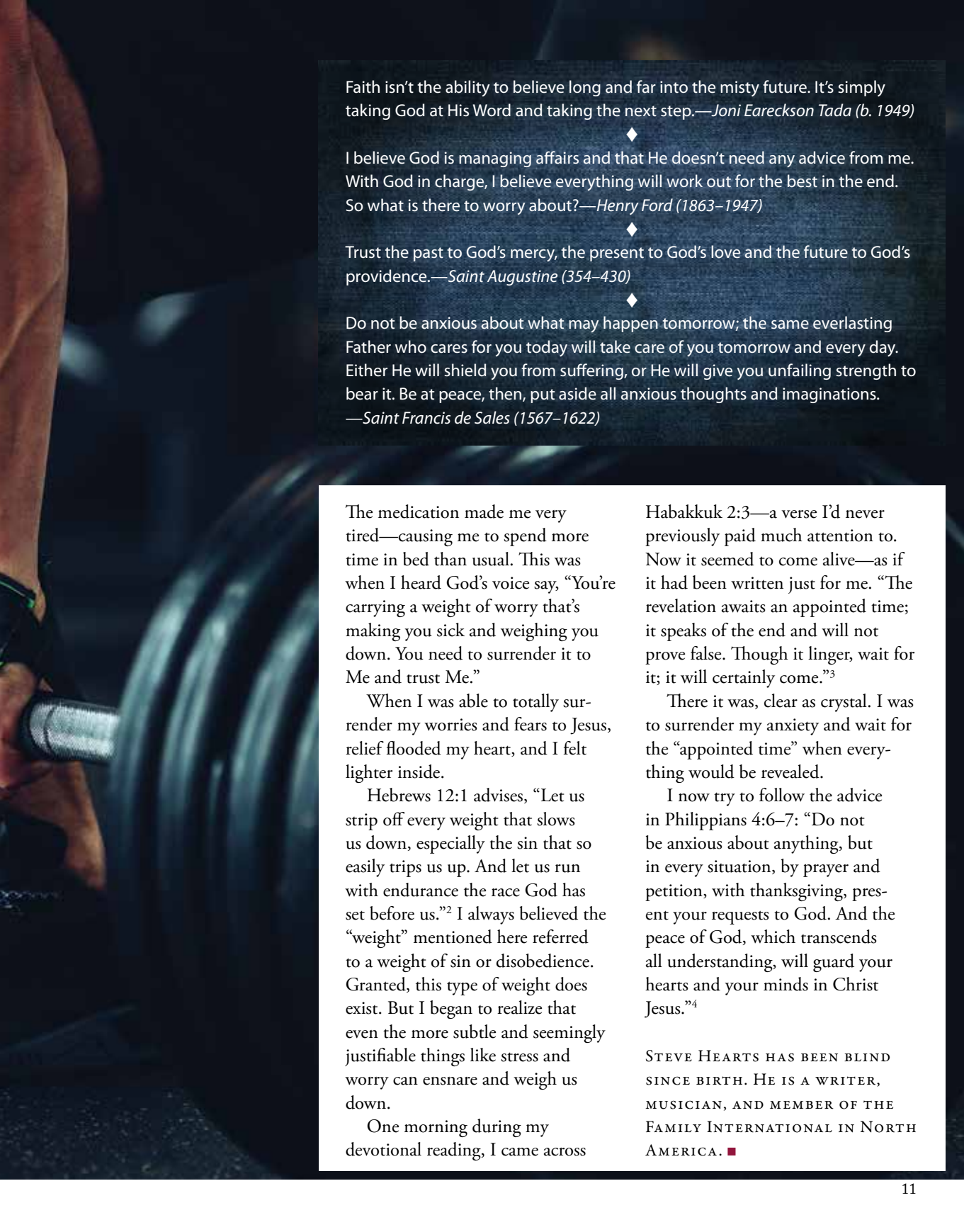
Before I was released, I was told to take seizure medicine for a time.

1. Matthew 11:30

2. NLT

3. NIV

4. NIV



Faith isn't the ability to believe long and far into the misty future. It's simply taking God at His Word and taking the next step.—*Joni Eareckson Tada (b. 1949)*

I believe God is managing affairs and that He doesn't need any advice from me. With God in charge, I believe everything will work out for the best in the end. So what is there to worry about?—*Henry Ford (1863–1947)*

Trust the past to God's mercy, the present to God's love and the future to God's providence.—*Saint Augustine (354–430)*

Do not be anxious about what may happen tomorrow; the same everlasting Father who cares for you today will take care of you tomorrow and every day. Either He will shield you from suffering, or He will give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace, then, put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations.—*Saint Francis de Sales (1567–1622)*

The medication made me very tired—causing me to spend more time in bed than usual. This was when I heard God's voice say, "You're carrying a weight of worry that's making you sick and weighing you down. You need to surrender it to Me and trust Me."

When I was able to totally surrender my worries and fears to Jesus, relief flooded my heart, and I felt lighter inside.

Hebrews 12:1 advises, "Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us."² I always believed the "weight" mentioned here referred to a weight of sin or disobedience. Granted, this type of weight does exist. But I began to realize that even the more subtle and seemingly justifiable things like stress and worry can ensnare and weigh us down.

One morning during my devotional reading, I came across

Habakkuk 2:3—a verse I'd never previously paid much attention to. Now it seemed to come alive—as if it had been written just for me. "The revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come."³

There it was, clear as crystal. I was to surrender my anxiety and wait for the "appointed time" when everything would be revealed.

I now try to follow the advice in Philippians 4:6–7: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."⁴

STEVE HEARTS HAS BEEN BLIND SINCE BIRTH. HE IS A WRITER, MUSICIAN, AND MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN NORTH AMERICA. ■



BY IRIS RICHARD

THE POWER OF GRATITUDE

IN A VIDEO CLIP I WATCHED ON YOUTUBE SOME TIME AGO,

one of the participants in a panel was talking about a trying time in her life that had led to serious depression. A friend advised her to put together a list of 1,000 reasons for gratitude, so she started keeping track of the good things that came across her path each day, and slowly the tide of negativity turned.

I often thought of this video clip but never ventured into the task of keeping such a complex gratitude list myself until recently, when a personal loss was followed by poor health and a big unwelcome change in my work environment.

These setbacks caught me by surprise, and as I stood in front of the proverbial overturned apple cart, watching my carefully collected apples roll all over the place, I couldn't help but feel utterly dismayed. Like dark clouds forecasting an approaching

storm, I soon felt the wind of depression blowing about me.

I knew that I had to do something about this negative force that was entering my life. That's when I remembered the 1,000 reasons for gratitude and how rediscovering the power of positivity had pulled this person out of depression. I figured it was worth the effort to see if I could get the same benefits for myself.

The next day, with pen in hand, I sat in front of an empty page of my brand-new journal. Soon, a number of simple reasons for gratitude popped into my mind:

1. **Sunshine when the weather forecast promised rain**
2. **A night of undisturbed sleep**
3. **Half an hour of early-morning prayer time**
4. **An email with good news from a friend...**

As I continued writing, I realized that there was a lot of gratitude to

be found in the little things that could easily be taken for granted or go unnoticed. Like diamonds in the rough, they had to be dug out of the mud of my negative mindset.

I did manage to keep up my list, and now, 1,000 reasons for gratitude later, I can truly say that this short daily exercise helped me to look up when feeling down and focus more on what does work out instead of quickly putting a negative spin on any situation.

As I look back over the pages of my journal, I see it as a treasure chest full of God's gifts, answers to prayers, and proofs of His love and care for me. Even better, I'm sure there will continue to be many reasons for future journals to be filled.

IRIS RICHARD IS A COUNSELOR IN KENYA, WHERE SHE HAS BEEN ACTIVE IN COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTEER WORK SINCE 1995. ■

Why not invite Jesus to accompany you through life? Simply pray:

Dear Jesus, please come in to my heart, forgive me for the wrong things I've done, and give me eternal life. Help me find the good in what comes my way. Help me learn more about You and Your plan for me and how to be kind and loving to those I meet on my path.

BY ROSANE PEREIRA

IT'S GOOD TO BE ALIVE!

WHEN I WAS 17, I went with friends to spend carnival in the city of Salvador. We rented a very cheap house and slept on the floor like most of the locals. Even though our neighbors were very poor, they were exceptionally nice to us. The simple life they lived and the love and friendship they gave freely were the secret to the happiness and laughter they shared. It dawned on me, for the first time, that love was the answer for many of the problems of humankind.

This year, I had a similar experience. I'd begun writing down all the things I'm grateful for during my morning devotions, and by the end

of February I'd listed 180 items and was quite pleased with myself. Then March came along with a long series of difficulties and trials, and I wondered, *What is there to be thankful for now?* I looked around, desperate to find something positive to write, when that sweet small voice spoke softly: *Be thankful that you are alive!*

At first it sounded like some kind of a joke. *Is that all?* I asked back in disbelief.

Think again, He answered. *If you were dead, you couldn't do anything to solve these problems, so it is a blessing to be alive! Where there's life, there's hope that all these problems can be resolved with My help!*

Jesus didn't promise us that He would spare us from troubles, but

that He would be with us through these difficulties. John 16:33 says: "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."¹

If we know God is with us in every tribulation, we can have peace, regardless of what is happening around us. That's the peace that passes all understanding that Paul talks about in Philippians 4:7—that feeling of gratefulness that God is in control even when we can't see the solution.

ROSANE PEREIRA IS AN ENGLISH TEACHER AND WRITER IN RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL, AND A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL. ■

1. NLT

LIVE WITH JOY

BY ELSA SICHROVSKY

AS I WAS SKIMMING HEADLINES ON AN ONLINE NEWS WEBSITE, I SAW THIS HEADLINE: “He’s a Fighter: Guo Youming Won’t Succumb to Rare Disease.” Intrigued, I clicked on the article and started reading Guo Youming’s incredible story.

As a child, his mother noticed that he walked unsteadily and had frequent falls. His condition worsened until he was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy at age seven. The diagnosis was crushing for Youming’s parents, who struggled with guilt and grief as they learned that there was no cure. Youming said that he also wanted to despair, but he realized that he would only be making life harder for his parents. Instead, he refused to let his condition limit him and determined, he says, to “do my best and smile bravely.” At nine years



old, he became unable to walk and was confined to a wheelchair. As his muscles atrophied, his limbs lost all function. Today, his indefatigable mother assists him with eating, using the bathroom, taking a shower, and other basic tasks.

Although Youming had to rely on his mother to wheel him into class, he insisted on never being absent. His positive and buoyant attitude made him a favorite among classmates and teachers, who admired his victorious outlook on life while living with a steadily worsening condition.

At age 26, Youming can only ingest liquids and relies on a respirator to make it through each day. His rapidly declining physical strength didn’t even last through his own graduation ceremony. Yet he passed his oral exam with outstanding

marks and earned a master’s degree in Chinese literature. Literature is Youming’s passion, and his thesis is a collection of his poems and other works. It is 100,000 words long, a monumental achievement for Youming, who is only able to type ten words per minute for ten minutes each day, lying on his back and using a mouse to tap on a special keyboard. Youming hopes to pass the civil servant exam in the future.

“We cannot choose our fate,” says Youming, “but we can choose how we face our fate. If life seems meaningless, then we must give it meaning. Whether we pass a day in sorrow or in joy, we still have to live through the day. Why not live it with joy? As long as I don’t give up on myself, God and others won’t give up on me.”¹

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1. Guo Youming’s story (in Chinese) can be found here:
<https://www.nownews.com/news/20170714/2588753>



BY MARIE ALVERO

THE TREE

I LIVED IN A VILLAGE IN TANZANIA THAT HAD A BIG, old avocado tree that was a local treasure. The tree grew in the middle of town, and its fruit was available to anyone in the village. The tree was cherished and protected by the villagers—for some of whom an avocado might comprise most of the food they'd get in a day.

An avocado tree can take up to 15 years to produce fruit. It also requires careful attention throughout those years. To the village, the tree represented a labor of love and patience, rewards slow in coming but appreciated for decades.

My old backyard boasted a giant oak tree, its branches fanning out over our backyard, providing shade, and the perfect branch for a swing. When we sold our home, this tree was one of the selling features. My new home

is in a recently developed community, and all the trees are saplings, providing neither shade nor beauty. It will be decades before these trees have earned their keep.

I got to thinking about trees when I was reading about the fruit of the Spirit.¹ The list names a lot of virtues I want to have more of in my life, but what struck me is that fruit grows on trees, and trees take time to produce fruit.

I think that's why we can appreciate mature trees so much. We know that it takes decades for a tree to grow that big or be able to produce fruit. We know we must be patient with the trees, but often forget that we must be patient with ourselves and others as we mature to the point that we can produce the fruits of the Spirit.

There might be many years where we don't see much of anything. And

in these quiet years we can trust that, as long as our roots are growing deep in Jesus, we will eventually produce the fruits of the Spirit. God doesn't rush us. He says "let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing."²

This is a truth I've only begun to understand. Don't rush the fruit. Learning this for myself and those in my care, both personally and professionally, is changing my thinking. I'm not as rushed for results as I'm interested in growth. I can help produce the environment needed for thriving and trust that God will bring about the fruit.

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1. See Galatians 5:22–23.

2. James 1:4

FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

MULTIPLIED POWER

It is a common reaction for people, when faced with a negative situation, to feel justified in complaining and dwelling on the negative. Others have discovered the power of positive thinking and find it beneficial. The power of positive thinking is multiplied when your thoughts are turned into praise for My goodness, protection, supply, and the many blessings in your life.

Your bodies are built to respond vibrantly to positive thinking, and praise is the ultimate form of positive thinking. When you praise Me, even in the midst of seemingly dark circumstances, you're initiating a reaction that will actually make you feel better physically and will give you extra strength to persevere. But that's just the beginning, because at the same time, you're pleasing Me by telling Me that you appreciate My blessings in spite of the negative; that you have faith that I'll work things out and continue to take care of you.

