

Create that one space together.



a common compassion

Devotional Booklet

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Introduction

A COMMON COMPASSION:

Those experiencing homelessness in Seattle have become increasingly vulnerable through the pandemic. People are being displaced due to economic conditions, the ongoing effects of early childhood trauma, addiction, and other challenging circumstances. The housed community is presented with this troubling reality with an increasing number of tents in parks and on street corners. At the same time, BCC's long-time partners at The Commons, the "living room on Aurora" that provides a restorative community, trusted resources, and invaluable connection, is at risk of itself being displaced.

In this season we turn our attention to the displaced among us, to awaken the very same compassion that James 2:5 articulates; God has, "chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him." Each week, from Easter to Pentecost, you are invited to immerse yourself in unique practices and reflections from the book of James. These practices are designed to encourage a deepening awareness of yourself in relationship to your unhoused neighbors, and God's call to embody compassion evermore. While some of these practices are inspired by the challenging realities that face our unsheltered neighbors on a daily basis, they are not themselves intended to mimic the actual lived experience of the unsheltered. Rather, they are designed to disrupt the comfort of your everyday circumstances and stretch you to consider the plight of another, being transformed evermore in Spirit, Soul and Body.

Joining with folks from across all of Bethany's six locations, as well as other local churches along North Aurora, you are invited to help inspire the broader community of Seattle towards A Common Compassion for the unsheltered in our city. As James does in his address to diaspora Jewish Christians of the early church, the aim of this devotional booklet is to invite you into deeper levels of compassion for the displaced among us.

For Families

In this season, we invite you as individuals, families, roommates, coworkers, whatever your community context might be to journey together towards a deeper understanding and growing compassion for the unhoused. For specific resources designed to equip parents and offer guidance about how you can talk with your children about homelessness, follow the QR Code below:



To learn more about our unhoused neighbors and Christ's call towards deepening compassion, visit the "A Common Compassion" webpage. Here you'll have access to further educational and practical resources, as well as the opportunity to give financially to support the long-term home of Aurora Commons. Follow the QR Code below:



WEEK 1: *Growth Through Adversity***READ: JAMES 1:1-18****CONSIDER:**

From the outset, we learn that James' letter is addressed to the twelve tribes of Israel scattered throughout the nations. These early Jewish Christians endured persecution in Jerusalem and were displaced throughout the lands of Judea and Samaria. Trauma, loss, and a deep longing for home all characterized the plight of James' early listeners when he 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. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." (v. 17-18, NIV) For first century diaspora Jews, our displaced, unhoused neighbors today, and for each one of us we are told that we are more than our pain. We are more than our status as "sheltered" or "unhoused"; "clean" or "addict"; rich or poor. We are the firstfruits of all God created, to whom have been given good and perfect gifts.

As we begin a six week journey into a deeper understanding of God's heart for those experiencing homelessness in our midst, let us allow this lens to frame our self-perception and the way we view others—as God's beloved people who have been given life, gifted in many ways, and created for a purpose. It is from this common identity that we can begin to imagine a pathway forward, towards deeper compassion and shared flourishing.

PRACTICE:

This week, you're invited to **see** your neighbors experiencing homelessness with greater intentionality. For many, the experience of sitting on a street corner or under the protection of a tent or roof awning can lead to a feeling of being invisible to the world around them. Too often, when we do take notice of another, as passerbyers we can perpetuate the disempowering dynamic of the "haves" and "have nots" by addressing someone for what we perceive to be their need alone. As James reminds us, all people are gifted by God with fruit to bear!

This week, take notice of those standing at the street corner, outside your neighborhood grocery store, or within the walls of a tent in your local park. As you begin to notice those around you, do two things:

- Take note of how you feel, what you think, and your body language as you see them. (e.g. Are you afraid, sad, or unsure? Do you tend to look away, or divert your path?)
- Say this prayer as you pass by:

Lord, thank you for this person's life and the fruit they have to bear. Have mercy, and give me greater compassion for my neighbor. Amen.

REFLECT:

1. Who did you see that you may not have before? What did you notice that stuck out to you?
2. What biases or impacts from past experiences were brought up for you as you noticed your unhoused neighbors? What made you feel comfortable or uncomfortable as you began to notice your neighbors with greater intentionality?

WEEK 2: *Redefining Relationships***READ: JAMES 1:22-2:17****CONSIDER:**

In these verses, James is challenging his listeners to reconsider their biases and perceptions of the ‘other.’ Contrary to the ways of the world that would equate wealth, outward appearance, and status with wisdom, respectability, and value James says, “God chose those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith” (2:5) Unlike the status quo that rewards upward mobility at whatever the cost, we are warned “if you show favoritism, you sin” (2:9) and that the rich exploit, judge, and dishonor the poor (2:5-7). In a world organized by systems of privilege and dynamics of power, James reminds us that no one person is superior to another. In fact, any act that elevates one at the expense of another is sin.

James gives us a very practical example of how this can play out when he describes the scene of a meeting. When one person walks in wearing nice clothes and another filthy old clothes, he suggests that our inclination to offer a better seat to one over the other is telling of the condition of our heart. With the full measure of Christ’s grace for you, consider how often you have found yourself in the position of the one who’s meeting it is. How often have you judged someone or discriminated against them because of their appearance or status?

James concludes this text with his case for engaging the whole person in ministry. To address someone’s spiritual needs while ignoring their physical needs is like faith without action-- it is incomplete, lacking faith’s life giving qualities (2:16-17). Individually, we are called to love our neighbor in word and deed. Collectively, while no single person, church, or organization can have an entirely holistic approach in and of itself, in collaboration together we can more fully embody James’ notion of a holistic Gospel. But it starts with our foundational belief in the inherent, equally precious value of all God’s children. For all of us, this will require honest reflection about where we see ourselves in relationship to others.

PRACTICE:

Last week we focused on our emotions and experience of “the other.” This week, consider how “the other” experiences and is impacted by you.

Return to one of the places where you noticed folks, either “flying signs” (asking for support) on the street corner, outside your local grocery store, or on a park bench. Pass by as you would, but this time consider that in the same way you took notice of them, they are taking notice of you. Ask yourself, and then pause for a moment to write down your responses to these questions in a journal or on your phone:

- What is my body language communicating to this person? How do they receive my smile, nod, wave, or me diverting my eyes, looking down at my phone, or staring on ahead?
- What wisdom might this person have to share with me? From their vantage point, what might they see in me that I cannot see on my own?

Take this week’s practice a step further by safely approaching someone who appears open to an interaction. Say “hello” and introduce yourself by name. Then ask, “You probably see a lot of people going by. I’m curious, what do you see when you look at me?”

For an additional resource with “conversation starters” and guidance for safely and lovingly engaging in conversation with your unhoused neighbor, visit the following QR Code link:

**REFLECT:**

1. Who did you see that you may not have before? What did you notice that stuck out to you?
2. What biases or impacts from past experiences were brought up for you as you noticed your unhoused neighbors? What made you feel comfortable or uncomfortable as you began to notice your neighbors with greater intentionality?

WEEK 3: *The Practice of Faith***READ: JAMES 2:18-26****CONSIDER:**

What does faith look like? How is it practiced? For James, faith is expressed in the context of a community of Jesus followers who witness their faith through concrete deeds of love and justice. Following Jesus means doing what Jesus taught us to do.

James challenged the idea that faith is merely an inward acknowledgment of God's existence. So what? Even the demons believe that (2:19)! But authentic faith in Jesus is not abstract theological affirmations but rather, an embodied commitment to study, obey, and teach the deeds that Jesus taught and practiced.

Yet, authentic faith preceded the earthly ministry of Jesus. James describes how Abraham's faith and actions worked together. And Rahab, who wasn't even an Israelite, demonstrated authentic faith by sheltering and protecting the Israelite spies.

Rahab's authentic faith is especially relevant to our focus on nurturing compassion for our unhoused neighbors. She practiced her faith by providing refuge and safety to those who desperately needed it. In light of the thousands of individuals in our communities who live without safe shelter, how does Rahab inspire us to express a faith that is demonstrated through deeds of refuge and safety?

PRACTICE:

On January 24, 2020, of the 11,500+ people experiencing homelessness in Seattle, 5,578 were left unsheltered. This week's practice is intended to encourage reflection about the experience of living without shelter and develop a greater degree of solidarity with our neighbors.

One of the main challenges of being unsheltered is not just lacking the items you need, but also not having a safe place to store the items that you already have—this makes it challenging to do something as basic as going

to a doctor's appointment or job interview, out of fear that your possessions will be stolen.

- Make a list of your most valued possessions (e.g. phone, articles of clothing, charger, laptop, jewelry, car, coffee maker, bike, workout/sports equipment, video games, television, etc.).
- Now, go back and cross off anything that won't fit comfortably into a backpack along with the other items.
- Reflect on what it would feel like to live without the items you crossed off, or with the fear of losing the precious things that do fit. How would this affect your lifestyle?

This week, take this practice a step further by limiting yourself to wearing only the clothes that fit into your bag. Along the way, notice how this affects your own self-perception or the way others may perceive you.

REFLECT:

1. Describe the experience of making the list and crossing off the items. What surprised you?
2. The Bible often describes God as a "safe refuge". How have you experienced the refuge of God? What might God's "safe refuge" mean to someone who is living unsheltered, and what might it look like for you to be a part of that?

WEEK 4: *The Things That Make for Peace***READ: JAMES 3:1-18****CONSIDER:**

In this passage, James moves from asking what true faith looks like, to asking what does true wisdom look like? As it is with true faith, true wisdom is expressed in deeds. It is a wisdom that comes from heaven and loves peace (v. 17).

James' reflections on the power of our words can teach us what it looks like to demonstrate true, peace-loving wisdom. Our words, or our "tongues" as James puts it can corrupt the whole body (v. 6), be full of deadly poison (v. 7), and curse human beings made in God's likeness (v. 9).

People who display peace-loving wisdom recognize the destructive potential of their words and in humility, choose to practice truth-telling. They choose to see the image of God in all humans and affirm this divine image through their truth-telling deeds.

Our unhoused neighbors bear the image of God—but too often we have not affirmed this truth with our speech and have failed to uphold their humanity. Let's express our God-given wisdom by confessing the harm our words have caused, and speaking truth about God's deep love for them and how he made them in his image.

PRACTICE:

This week, find an opportunity to engage in dialogue with a friend or family member about those experiencing homelessness in our community. Maybe it's while you are driving with a friend, or walking in a park together and you pass by a homeless encampment. Whenever and however you choose to initiate the conversation, focus on asking questions, being quick to listen and slow to speak.

REFLECT:

1. What stood out to you from your conversation? How does James's teaching about wisdom and the power of our words apply to how we talk about homelessness?
2. How can practicing these kinds of conversations shape the way you talk about and respond to those experiencing homelessness? Maybe they challenge your assumptions, encourage you to seek a wider perspective and become more aware of your shared humanity. What other voices might broaden your understanding of homelessness and what is one step you could make to seek out those voices?

WEEK 5: *The Importance of Community***READ:** JAMES 4:1-17**CONSIDER:**

Earlier in James we encountered the word that those who are “poor in the eyes of the world” are, from God’s perspective, those who are “rich in faith” (2:5). The suggestion is that something about being located on the social edges gets a person closer to God’s kingdom. We see this idea brought again to the surface in chapter 4 where James reflects that “friendship with the world is enmity with God” (4:4). It’s a reiteration of that theme that the kingdom is centered not on worldly power and comfort but on the margins and in the struggle.

“God is near to the brokenhearted,” says the Psalmist (34:18).

This isn’t only a statement that God cares about people on the margins. It goes much further to suggest that these people have a unique experience of God and a unique kind of wisdom because of it. Maybe it’s because they have less unlearning to do. Maybe it’s because there’s a kind of vulnerability and openness inherent to life on the edges. Whatever the case, it seems unlikely, maybe even impossible, for any of us to have a full experience of the gospel without being exposed somehow to this wisdom of the poor.

It could be that we are ourselves marginalized in some way. It could be that we’re encountering this in our marginalized neighbors. It could even be that we’re learning to recognize it in the friction points of our spirituality. The persistent invitation of the gospel is to turn our attention to all of these different edges in order to find God’s nearness.

PRACTICE:

For many people living outside, maintaining one’s hygiene becomes extremely difficult. Without access to a shower or a regular place to wash and dry clothes, looking and feeling “your best” is a struggle that, over time, can impact one’s health, self-esteem, employability, and relationship with others.

This week you are invited to set aside a day(s) when you will only bathe using your sink. No shower and no bathtub. Setting aside this simple luxury can help us get in touch with our shared humanity. Housed or not, we all at some level share a common experience of being dirty and desiring to bathe. Whether you choose to do this for one day, or each day of the week ahead, consider how this practice can develop, in the place of pity, a greater empathy for the plight of your neighbor.

As you do your sink bath this week, say this prayer:

Thank you God that I am created in your image. Give me eyes to see my neighbor in the same way. Amen.

REFLECT:

1. Consider a time when you have encountered someone on the margins. Perhaps it has been a conversation with someone experiencing homelessness in the last few weeks. What impact did this interaction have on you? In what ways was the experience different from what you expected?
2. How does the foundational belief that the poor and marginalized have a unique wisdom to share change your approach to conversing with someone experiencing homelessness?

WEEK 6: *Some Habits for Suffering***READ: JAMES 5:1-18****CONSIDER:**

There is an unsettling contrast in this text between the anxious accumulation of resources and the patient openhandedness of faith. The contrast aligns with critiques of ancient prophets who warned about these same hazards with regard to riches - “The spoil of the poor is in your houses,” says Isaiah (3:14) - and is echoed by Jesus in his instruction against the accumulation of treasures on earth, “where moth and rust destroy” (Matt 6:19). Reading these words here in one of earth’s wealthiest corners stirs an unavoidable discomfort. What do we make of James’ critique and where do we find ourselves in it?

One thing that seems crucial from the biblical perspective is understanding how connected we are with one another. My behavior has a very real impact on the experience of my neighbor. We can recognize that in the negative but we can just as easily flip it around to imagine the possibility of a reverse. When the suffering ones are lifted up and when dignity is restored, this can bring about a more authentic restoration for everyone. Our healing comes in the healing of our neighbor.

As James reminds us, the prayers that ring most loudly in God’s ears are the prayers of those who suffer. So then may we align our hearts with our struggling brothers and sisters and together have our prayers heard.

PRACTICE:

For this practice, you are encouraged to talk with a neighbor who sleeps outside.

Remember that the heart of God resides in our unhoused neighbors. Allow that to sink in as you approach a moment of holy encounter. These precious neighbors are not something to be solved, they are each, someone to be in awe of.

Is there someone in your neighborhood who sleeps outside that you see often or is there someone you drive by or walk by regularly? If you’ve never said “hi” before. This is your time to do it. Tell them that you see

them all the time and so you wanted to introduce yourself- say your name and ask them theirs. Strike up a conversation from here.

In this first interaction you are allowing them to name themselves which serves as a kind touch-point for continued interactions. As the days of this week go by, pray for them by name and ask God to reveal to your heart your shared humanity with this particular person.

In the weeks ahead, make it a point to stop and say “hi” to them by name, and as trust is built over time, be intentional about nurturing a friendship of reciprocity by sharing parts of your life with this neighbor. When/if they ask how you are, answer honestly and allow them to care for you in their own way.

To hear first-hand about the impact that one conversation, and continued relationship, can have scan the following link:



As a reminder, here is a link to “conversation starters” and other helpful guidance for engaging your neighbor living outside:

**REFLECT:**

1. How was it for you to approach a neighbor as a neighbor and fellow human and not as a volunteer or representative of any organization/ church with any particular job?
2. Were you afraid to approach this person? If so, no shame, it’s ok. Please take a moment to wonder about what within you was afraid? Approach this fear with kindness and compassion so that you may understand the root of your fear more deeply.
3. As you prayed for your neighbor by name, what did God reveal to you about your shared humanity?

PENTECOST: *Conclusion*

Let us recall that miracle of Pentecost two thousand years ago when the Spirit of God came upon a gathered group of culturally assorted people in Jerusalem. “Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.”

The scene appears chaotic, conjuring up the ancient legend of Babel when confused communication drove the people apart. But this time is its opposite. Instead of the division there is a coming together. How? Because the Spirit enabled them to understand one another.

The church was born from a miracle of understanding.

Here is the beginning of compassion, being able to overcome the barriers of communication in order to truly understand and connect with the experience of our fellow human beings. May the Spirit give us once again this gift of understanding to align our hearts with those of our struggling brothers and sisters in order to bring us together into a full experience of God’s presence; God’s good reign here on earth.

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

JAMES 2:5



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