

Live in Reckless Love

Love like you've never been hurt

Dancing with Jesus isn't so hard, is it? He's a Partner who knows every move and can keep you in step with the music if only you'll allow Him to lead. It's those group line dances that are tough. At times, though, we are called out onto the floor to dance with our "neighbors." Some are so new to dancing that they step on your toes and others' around you. There are those who aren't new to dancing at all, but they insist on stepping outside of the choreography just to be a show off. They add extra steps and turns, which only messes up everyone. (If you've never line danced, I realize this imagery is probably lost on you. :)

The dance I'm referring to is symbolic of living in relationship with others: family, friends, and church family—our "neighbors" in proximity. Even when they get it wrong and crush our toes or break our hearts, we are called to love them still.

Loving God with our all is the first and greatest commandment, but we don't stop there.

"And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

(Matthew 22:39)

Neighbors

Our original concept from the *You. Are. Loved.* introduction and the basis for all of our "Live" titles is that when we know we are loved, we live life differently. So this month's chapter title means this: When we know God's intimate love, we are given the grace to love others even when they've hurt us. Lord knows, those closest to us are the ones who hurt us the most.

A reminder of what I mean when I say live in reckless love: reckless: *marked by lack of proper caution; careless of consequences.* It's about loving with abandon and no matter the consequences to your own heart. But that doesn't come naturally for sure. Once we're hurt our tendency is to shut down and build walls. I've done it. You've done it. Something happens to hurt your feelings or break your heart and next thing you know, you've shut that person out, closed the door to your heart so that they don't have the power to hurt you again. Only a reckless fool would allow themselves to be hurt again and again, right?

We have two choices when hurt: forgive and move forward or close off our heart and live in bitterness.

What if you're called to be a reckless, forgiving fool? Is there any certainty that you won't be hurt again? Oh, there's certainty alright. You'll very likely be hurt again. It's just what happens between humans who interact and allow themselves to care deeply.

I often say I'd be the best Christian in the world if only I could live on a desert island all alone with my Bible and praise and worship music. I'd just sit with the Lord and sing out loud. Actually, in the early morning hours, I'm a great Christian. Then I have to get out of bed and interact with the world around me. Neighbors are complicated. Neighbors are hurtful.

The neighbors we will view in this chapter are the neighbors we can't seem to get away from: family, friends, and church neighbors. Since our premise is to love like we've never been hurt, who better to start with than with those who have the power to hurt us most? The outside world can hurl insults at us and make our lives difficult, but those closest to us can downright damage us.

Family Neighbors

Nothing, absolutely nothing can hurt us like family, our parents, siblings, and extended family. I've been watching a show recently about a family of five siblings. The premise and focus of the show are their interactions with one another and their parents. Talk about complicated. Adult children who were raised in the same home all view their upbringing through their own skewed lens. Wounds from their parents' failures and divorce have molded each of them into broken-in-their-own-way adults.

That's not just a show. That's life. That's family. No parent is perfect. Siblings squabble. I sit and watch this wonderfully-written, true-to-life show and see elements of my own family there. Super sensitive feelings will set one person ablaze over something minor done now, when in reality the overreaction is based in history and unhealed hurts from a lifetime ago. I see something in these characters' lives that they don't: They need to allow God to heal their hurts, or they will never be whole. They will never stop exploding at the drop of a hat or blowing up their own personal lives due to their own dysfunction. At some point they have to learn to let it go and allow healing to reshape them, even if the person who wounded them never acknowledges their failures or chooses to change.

I have needed that same lesson, to keep loving my family even if they never change. I'm only now able to do that, at least to love fully.

I'm loving. That's my nature. So even when I don't "feel" like loving someone you wouldn't likely know it. I do it out of obligation and simply because it does come so naturally. Not only do I hate confrontation, I just prefer peace over conflict. Thing is, it's not real peace if there's no internal peace between myself and someone who's harmed or offended me. That's fake peace and, like the fictional family, only allows for an eruption over the least little thing.

I've told my Beloved story, how Jesus spoke that word to me over and over, convincing me of His deep and abiding love for me. That word was sparked through a novel I read, *Redeeming Love*. Another word from the same book prompted a surprising level of healing within me: *Marah*. The male character called his wife that name to symbolize her bitterness.

Months after reading that book, that word *Marah* began to come to mind. No word could better represent me at my deepest and most intimate level back then. I was bitter. I had allowed a long-ago hurt to remain. I didn't just allow it; I held onto it with a death-grip. As long as my secret bitterness was present and accounted for, I felt safe. Its occasional little prick of a reminder would never allow me to open my heart enough to ever be so hurt again by that person. Bitterness was my safety net.

Marah, the name spoken into my spirit, was what the Lord Jesus used to free me of hidden and debilitating bitterness. The name *Marah* may be familiar to you. It's from the biblical account of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness in Exodus 15. You will go more in depth in your Takeaway, but for now, I'll tell you that the body of water they encountered was called *Marah*, because the water was bitter.

Allow me to make an even longer-ago connection in my own life. Many years before meeting my husband, I dated a guy for a short time. It was not a big deal and the relationship eventually fizzled, but one thing has always stuck with me. After we stopped dating, a mutual friend told me what he once said to her. "She's just so bitter." Life, in many ways, had stirred up those bitter waters that fed the spring of my soul even from an early age.

The solution? The sweetness of "the Tree." In the wilderness account, the people desperately needed water but only had access to this bitter water. Moses cried out to the Lord who showed him a tree. When Moses cast the tree into the waters, they were made sweet. This tree was a foreshadowing of the cross and how the sacrifice of Jesus can turn our bitterest waters of sin and pain into the sweetest of victories. That sounds so churchy, but it's true. I've seen the proof in my own life.

My own bitter waters would have remained bitter had Jesus not called me *Marah* and brought to light my own need for healing. I had to let go of deep-seated hurts.

The same can be done for you. There's no family drama that can't be overcome by Jesus. You can hold onto the pain and bitterness as the building blocks for the walls that maintain what you believe give you safety, or you can allow Him to remove them so that your heart may have freedom to love again, no matter the cost.

Please know I'm not suggesting you should put yourself in harm's way with people from your past who have caused lasting physical or emotional damage. This body of water is one where only you and Jesus stand and observe. This is internal healing and spiritual wellness I'm talking about. Even for the one who has caused the greatest amount of trauma to your heart, God can allow the bitterness to fade and allow His love for them to eclipse the pain you feel. You don't have to live in relationship with an offender to benefit from allowing God's love for them to indwell your heart. There is freedom in that for you. Your soul longs for the sweetness that comes from forgiveness over the past.

Friend Neighbors

Friends are the family we wish we had. We usually choose those people as friends that we have the most in common with, and that makes sense. Since we get to choose, why not pick friends based on our own likes and dislikes? If we're really fortunate, we have a friend group comprised of those who will tell us what we need to hear as often as what we want to hear.

Wisdom tells us throughout the book of Proverbs how important our friend choices are. Our topic matter today challenges us in this way: to love our friends and not shut them out if they've hurt us. Different than our families, relationships that can never totally be undone, friendships can be. You can walk away when hurt. But should you?

Let's explore the following three verses in order to help you study your friendships.

- Proverbs 12:26 *"The righteous should choose his friends carefully, for the way of the wicked leads them astray."*
This makes sense, your friends should not just be people similar to you and ones you enjoy being around, but they should be people of integrity.
- Proverbs 27:17 *"As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend."*
Your friends should lift you up and help you become a better version of yourself along the journey.
- Proverbs 27:5 *"Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed."*
Friends should speak godly truth and wisdom into your life, even when it's not what you want to hear.

When wounded by a friend, you need to categorize the hurt. Were hurtful words intentional on their part, ones meant to belittle you, or were their words intended to urge you toward a higher goal? That determination will help you decide which of the above verses applies to the situation.

Iron-sharpening words:

Let's begin with good intentions. Sometimes we need to hear truth spoken. Just the mental image of iron sharpening iron brings to mind friction. I'm a truth-speaker and often do it the wrong way. I see things a friend can't or won't and spew out what I think they need to hear. I literally just hit send on a message doing that exact thing to someone I know won't listen. I mean well, but my delivery is often too abrupt. I'm getting better, but I'm still not there. Maybe it's the same with your friends. Look at the intention behind their words to you. Is their advice sound and biblical, even when the delivery is harsh? Do you need to glean from their words nuggets of truth?

Our pride is so easily wounded that our spirits don't get the intended message. We're so busy being offended that we refuse to become sharper from the experience. I can easily be that way. I've had more mature believers say needed things to me that pierced my inner being, beginning with my pride. It took time for the truth of their advice or admonition to grow into conviction.

Early in my walk with the Lord, I was talking to a man at a church picnic. We realized we knew someone in common. I started talking about him and his misadventures. What I said was public record, but it wasn't my story to tell. It wasn't just gossip. I was telling this man things he probably knew about the other guy, but nothing about what I said was necessary or beneficial. I can't remember the man's reply, but I remember his words shut me down. For a long time after that I felt uncomfortable and embarrassed when I was around that man. He was right. I was wrong. When I saw him, I was reminded of my own immaturity. I have never forgotten that lesson, and I can say for sure that it served to sharpen me.

Belittling words:

This is an entirely different category. There are some people who need to put you down to lift themselves up. You may have friends leftover from a different season of life. You love them and feel obligated to maintain friendships, especially if they aren't believers. But is it wise to remain in a toxic relationship when they say and do hurtful things? Do you keep loving? Yes. Do you keep yourself in the line of fire? Probably not.

If you are truly ministering to this person and know the Lord has you in their life for His eternal purpose, then He will give you the strength to forgive and move on in the friendship. If you are simply holding on to an unhealthy friendship out of misplaced obligation or loyalty, He will give you the strength to forgive and cut ties. There are times when that's the healthiest option. No matter what, we continue to love, but when you're in a harmful relationship with friends, reckless love is wise enough to listen when the Spirit leads us to place distance between ourselves and ungodly friendships. Sometimes loving from afar is what's necessary and beneficial for both parties.

If you allow someone to make you a doormat and you reward their bad behavior with your continued friendship, they will stand on your head indefinitely. If the consequence of their hurtfulness is the loss of your friendship, then the lesson they learn can follow them and teach them how to interact better with others. Loss can point the lonely heart to Jesus.

Church Neighbors

This could technically fall under the family category since we're talking about our spiritual brothers and sisters. When my husband and I were looking for a new church home, I saw something so clearly. We have annoying siblings everywhere. There were grown people having full-blown conversations once the service started. I guess to them that nice music served as the backdrop for their super-important conversation. It's called worship, people! I was fuming. It happened more than once with different couples.

It reminded me, that once I did find a new church home, I would have issues with people. If you've been more than a pew sitter, you have experienced differing opinions, full-on disagreements, and hurt feelings. You just can't throw that many people together from different backgrounds and walks of life and not have conflict. Sometimes you're in the right and sometimes they are. At the time you think you're right, but hindsight can often reframe your role in a conflict.

I look back now on my own actions in a particular situation and I feel differently. What I felt then was valid, but now I can see how hyper-sensitive I was due to the stress I was under at the time. My feelings and reactions were out of line with the actual situation. Nothing you said back then could have helped me see that. Now, these years later, the Spirit has shown me. I've learned from it. I've let go of what were once hard feelings. I loved still and I can't even say I harbored a grudge, but there was a distance I allowed to remain between myself

and that person. There was wrong on both sides, but not intentional wrong. We just both got it wrong.

One way we try and avoid church-family conflict is by not getting too deeply involved again once we've been hurt. That's not okay. Pew sitters are never utilized as they should be. God has a plan for every soul attending that church. There is some level of engagement you as a believer need to experience. For goodness sake don't go jump into everything. I've done that and nearly drowned in activities I wasn't called to participate in. Through prayer and the Spirit's leading, reengage if you've backed away. Might you get hurt again? Um, yes. You will. We're dealing with people. Will you learn from it? Yes, you will. That image of iron applies here too. Iron sharpening iron is likely to cause sparks. Let the sparks fly and then die out. You'll be better for it in the long run.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

These are red-letter words spoken by Jesus. “By this *all* will know...” The word *all* here reminds us that the unbelieving world is watching. If we're waging war within our own family, why would they ever want to be adopted into a war zone? Conflict is inevitable, but loving one another through the conflict is a command by Jesus Himself. It's not optional. Reckless love of our family is what will help the lost world to come to salvation. It's not easy, but it's necessary.

The Neighbor Within

Let's check back in with our anchor verse:

“And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
(Matthew 22:39)

To love your neighbor as yourself presupposes you love yourself. What about when you are the one who's hurt you? By my actions and choices over the years, I've hurt me more than most anyone. I have to live with the consequences of many mistakes, even if it's only a sense of internal regret. How do you love that person?

Self-hatred and debasement were the cause of my ongoing poor choices. I didn't expect good treatment for myself since I didn't believe I deserved it. My standards were pretty low in relationships. I allowed a lot of hurtful things to happen to me that reshaped me into an even worse version of myself—Marah. Then “the Tree” happened. Long after my actual salvation, my waters remained bitter. It was the continued dipping of the Tree into my life and spirit and mind and soul that brought forth sweet waters.

There's not enough room remaining for me to go as in-depth as I'd like. I will someday. But for now I can advise this: Continue along this journey and pursue knowing how loved you are by God the Father and Jesus the Son. His love for you is the pathway to loving yourself. “We love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19). That was the order for me to learn to love myself. He loved me so blatantly and openly that I was eventually able to see me how He sees me and learn to love that girl too.

Remember that you are your own internal neighbor, so His command is to love yourself as He loves you. This is an important point. If your reflection on all your neighbors above: your family, friends, and church family, reveals to you that you are allowing outright abuses to continue and harmful and toxic relationships to injure you, then this may be where you need to begin, by loving yourself enough to find health in this area. You. Are. Loved.—too loved by your Savior to be unloved by you.

Farther Away Neighbors

Closing thought: If you love God, your close others, and yourself, you will be more naturally inclined to love the lost.

LIVE IN RECKLESS LOVE TAKEAWAY

LOOK WITHIN:

Do you tend to shut down and back away when hurt or seek to restore the relationship?

List 1-2 hidden hurts that have their basis in old family wounds.

Recall a time when iron sharpening iron hurt your feelings or embarrassed you.

Have you ever left or backed away from a church due to conflict? Share the issue and your view of it now.

Do you find it difficult to love yourself because of who you've been?

KEY POINTS:

- We are commanded to love even those who hurt us.
- Bitterness comes with unresolved pain.
- God's love for us proves we are worth loving ourselves.

PRACTICE THE DANCE:

How can you apply the Key Points of this chapter to your day-to-day life and to your day today?

LEARN THE LYRICS:

- Read Exodus 15:22-26.

In verse 22, how long did the Israelites go in the wilderness with no water, and what might that number of days symbolize?

I stated in the content portion that the “tree” was a foreshadowing of the cross. It’s interesting how their time with no water (Living Water) is the same as the number of days Jesus’s spent in the tomb.

Underline in your Bible the final portion of this passage: “For I am the LORD who heals you.” All healing, bitterness, rescue from sin, or a broken heart, etc. is accomplished by the Christ who chose the cross.

- Luke 8:43-48

In verse 8:43 whom had the woman sought for healing and what was the result?

My version says, “...could not be healed by any.”

What finally gave her healing?

Was it the touch or her faith that healed her? What may be the difference?

Like an open wound, our inner hurts leave us weakened and desperate for healing. We may seek advice and help from others, but many hurts can only be healed by reaching for Jesus. Just one touch holds the power of your healing, no matter your issue of “bleeding,” but you must have faith in the One who can heal.

As a reminder, write the last phrase of Exodus 15:26 here:

For I ... _____

NEXT STEPS:

- You listed 1-2 hidden hurts in the Look Within section that have their basis in old family wounds. Pray and find one specific area to expand upon with

God. Begin a season of prayer for the one who hurt you. Use your journal to track specific prayers for that person. Ask God to give you empathy and a deeper understanding of the pain that might have driven their actions. You can link this with your prayer activity in the Sing Your Own Song portion. Don't say no to the above activity. Your healing begins when you hand your pain over to God in prayer.

- Search out your heart. If the bitter waters of "Marah" flood your life, start now to pray for the sweetness of the touch of Jesus. This will be an ongoing activity. Daily, meet with God in prayer over those things that make you bitter.

SING YOUR OWN SONG:

Use this prayer and expand in your journal:

Teach me, Father, to love with Your heart and not mine. I place these people and these specific hurts before You and ask You to heal my wounds and remove my bitterness:
