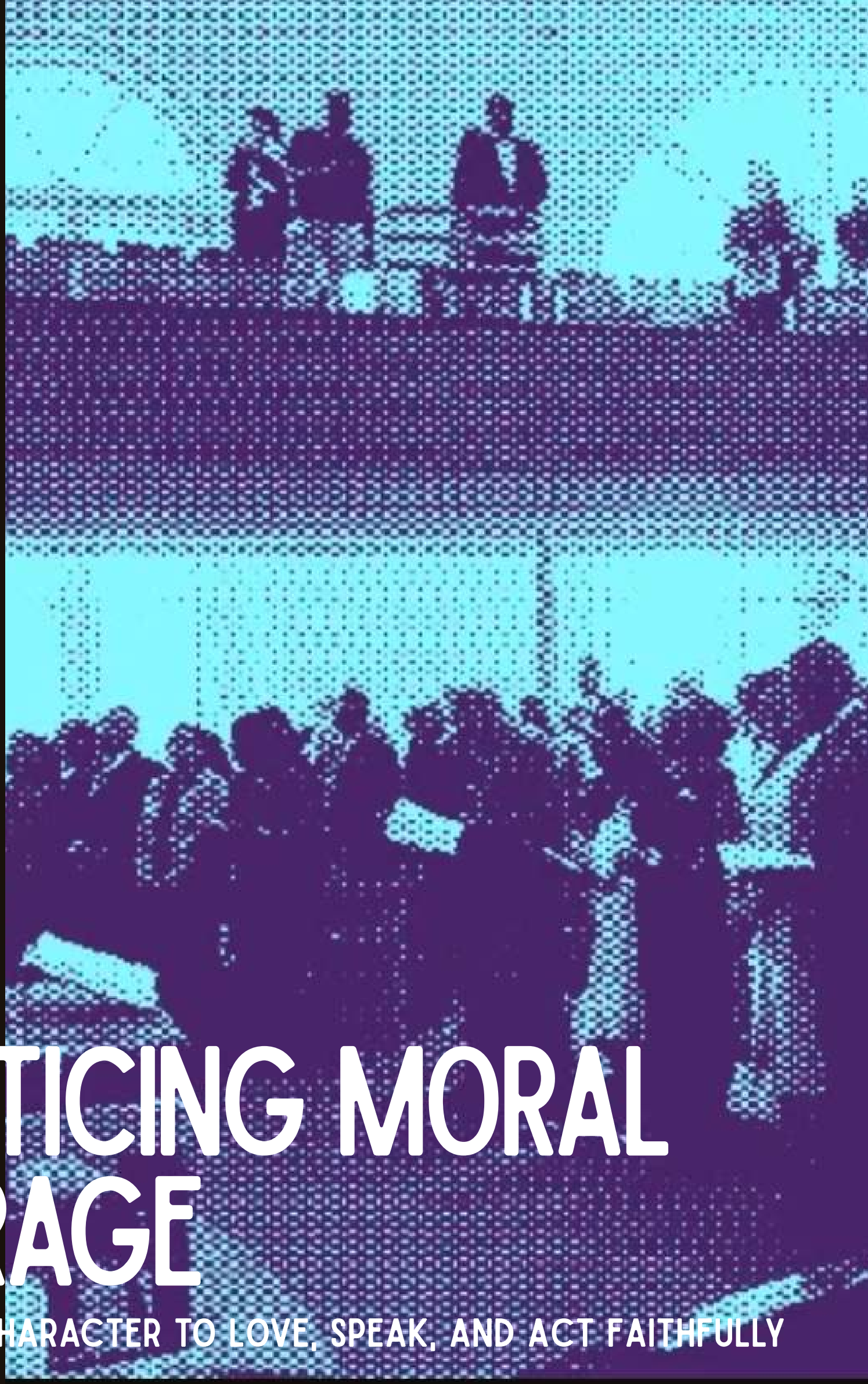
CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION



PRACTICING MORAL COURAGE

FORMING THE CHARACTER TO LOVE, SPEAK, AND ACT FAITHFULLY

A FOUR-PART SERIES + REFLECTION GUIDE

ARTICLES AUTHORED BY DR. TERENCE LESTER & DR. EMIOLA ORIOLA JR.

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be courageous as a follower of Jesus?

We often associate courage with extraordinary moments: speaking up, standing against injustice, or making difficult choices. But courage is also shaped by our everyday decisions, relationships, and spiritual practices.

In a culture marked by division, fear, and injustice, how do we resist seeing people primarily through their politics or identities? How do we move beyond compassion toward solidarity? And how do we remain faithful when change is slow?

In this four-part series, Dr. Terence Lester and Dr. Emiola Oriola Jr. explore moral courage as a practice of Christian discipleship, examining how our character shapes our relationships, public witness, and commitment to justice.

Here, we'll consider:

- How are we being formed to respond to fear and injustice?
- How do we recognize another person's humanity, especially when we disagree?
- How can compassion move us toward advocacy and solidarity?
- What sustains our faithfulness when change is slow?

Designed for individuals, churches, classrooms, and small groups, this guide offers reflection questions and practical ways to put these ideas into practice.

Our hope is that this series helps us live courageously through how we love our neighbors, confront injustice, and remain faithful for the long haul.

CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION

KEY THEMES

1. MORAL COURAGE IS FORMED BEFORE IT IS REQUIRED.

Courage develops through repeated choices, relationships, spiritual practices, and the communities that shape us. Christian formation prepares us to respond faithfully even when doing what is right carries a cost.

2. FEAR AND OTHERING DISTORT HOW WE SEE OUR NEIGHBORS.

Political, cultural, and religious divisions can teach us to regard others as threats or outsiders. Moral courage refuses to let fear determine whose dignity, suffering, or humanity matters.

3. COMPASSION, HOSPITALITY, AND TRUTH SHOULD INTERRUPT US.

We can hold strong convictions while remaining open to learning from others. Compassion challenges our indifference, hospitality challenges our boundaries, and truth challenges our certainty, helping us see people beyond their positions.

4. CHRISTIAN LOVE MOVES BEYOND CHARITY TOWARD JUSTICE.

Meeting immediate needs matters, but love also asks why those needs persist. Moral courage addresses the policies and systems contributing to suffering, recognizing advocacy as an expression of neighbor-love.

5. SOLIDARITY BEGINS WITH LISTENING.

Standing with people is different from speaking for them. Genuine solidarity values the knowledge and leadership of those closest to injustice, calling us to listen, build relationships, and share influence.

6. HOPE IS NOT THE SAME AS OPTIMISM.

Christian hope does not require pretending everything will work out as expected. Scripture makes room for disappointment, unanswered prayer, and exhaustion without allowing despair or cynicism to define us.

7. FAITHFULNESS IS MEASURED BY MORE THAN VISIBLE RESULTS.

Not everyone who works for justice will see the change they hope for. Remaining faithful means continuing to love, pray, and pursue what is good without controlling outcomes, sustained by spiritual practices and trust in God.



PART 1

THE COURAGE TO BE FORMED

WHY MORAL COURAGE MATTERS NOW

CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION

In Part 1, Dr. Terence Lester examines how fear, othering, and political division shape our public life and Christian witness. He argues that moral courage is cultivated long before we face defining moments, through the daily practices and relationships that form our character.

On September 30, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth[1] (since rebranded as Secretary of War) stood before military leaders gathered at Marine Corps Base Quantico and said these words: “No fatties,” followed by a slur for transgender people, then “no beardos, no weirdos. No wimps, no radicals. Just warriors.”[2] He went on to promise “no more diversity quotas. No more gender pronouns. No more identity months.”[3]

While some who align themselves with a form of patriarchal authoritarianism might see that as a sign of strength, many others who experience harm from this kind of rhetoric and practice see it as a sign of something becoming more pervasive in our society: violence and fear. Fear of people who come from different social locations. Fear of people who look, live, love, worship, or vote differently than those in power. Fear of losing power. Fear of losing a place at the center.

I have spent most of my adult life alongside people our society has learned to look past. Neighbors without an address. Children whose families are one missed paycheck away from losing their housing. Elders who outlived their savings. I have watched people walk past them on the sidewalk as if they were part of the scenery. That kind of invisibility is its own form of violence. Nobody asks their name. Nobody makes eye contact. Benches get armrests so no one can lie down, and cities pass laws that make it a crime to sleep outside even when there is nowhere else to go. None of that happens by accident. Somebody decided these neighbors were a problem to be managed instead of people to be seen.

So when I heard one of the most powerful people in our government mock whole groups of human beings from a podium, I did not hear anything new. I heard an old message delivered more loudly. The peace scholar Johan Galtung called this cultural violence: the parts of a culture, including its language, religion, and ideology, that can be used to justify or legitimize direct and structural harm.[4]

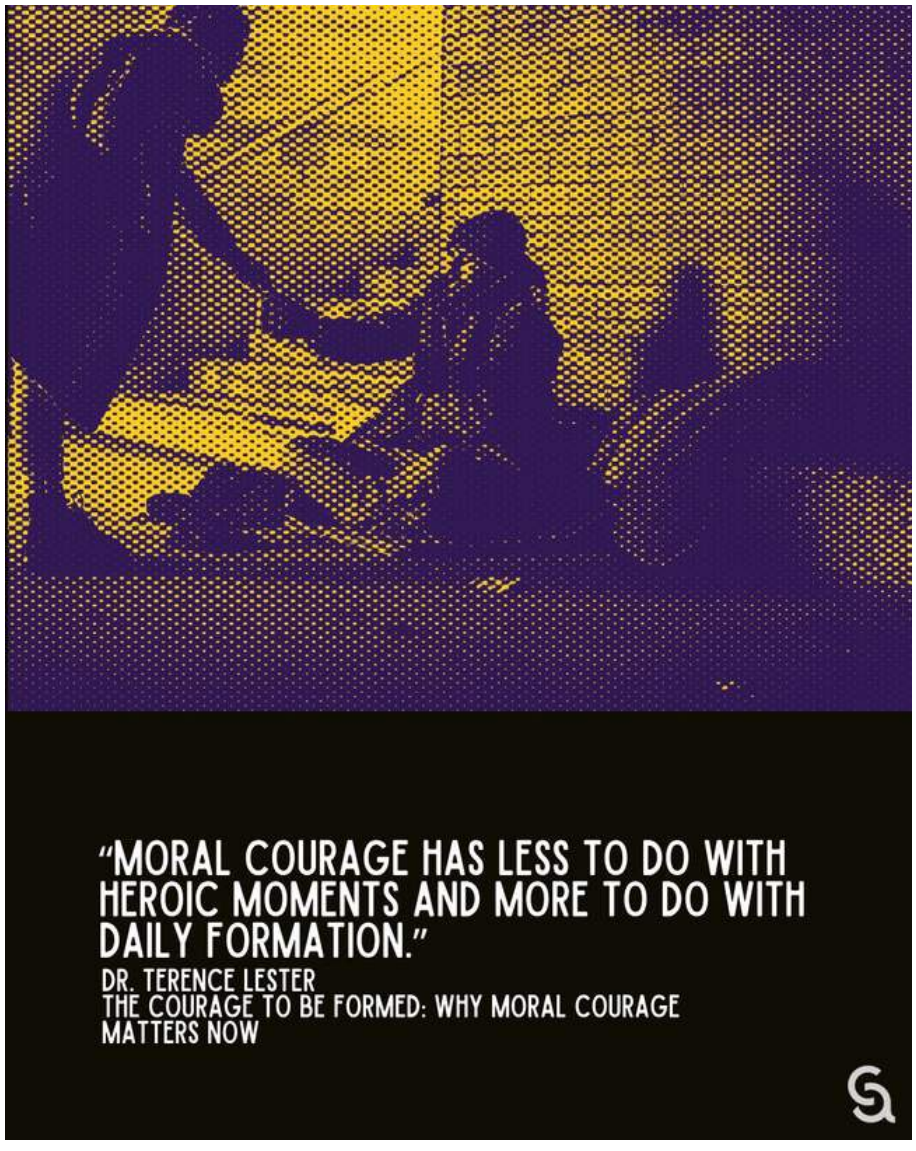
Rhetoric of this kind falls first on the people it names, including service members and anyone whose body or identity departs from a narrow ideal of strength. It signals that those in power regard them as less welcome and less worthy. It also teaches everyone else that looking away is acceptable. I heard othering.
And I heard a question every follower of Jesus has to answer right now. What will we do with our fear? Will we let it shape us, or will we let God form something stronger in us? That something is moral courage.

Moral courage requires that we first name clearly what we are facing. So before going further, it is worth understanding what othering is and how it moves from rhetoric into public policy.

WHAT OTHERING IS

Othering is what happens when we take a difference between people and turn it into a line between who counts and who does not. Othering and Belonging Institute leaders john a. powell and Stephen Menendian describe it as:

"A SET OF DYNAMICS, PROCESSES, AND STRUCTURES THAT ENGENDER MARGINALITY AND PERSISTENT INEQUALITY ACROSS ANY OF THE FULL RANGE OF HUMAN DIFFERENCES BASED ON GROUP IDENTITIES."[5]



In plain words, othering says: You are not one of us.

And it never stays in speeches. In 1993, political scientists Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram showed that public policy tends to follow the stories we tell about people. Groups described as deserving receive benefits. Groups described as undeserving or dangerous receive burdens.[6]

Later, researchers found that punishing policies are most politically feasible when the people targeted lack the power to push back and the rest of the public believes they deserve harsh treatment.[7]

We can see it right now. This year, gas has climbed above $4.40 a gallon, and over $6 for deisel gas, pushed up by the war with Iran.[8] This summer, Grad PLUS loans ended and parents were limited to borrowing $20,000 a year per student, narrowing the door to a degree for first-generation students.[9] And since the summer of 2025, about 5.2 million people have lost SNAP benefits under new work requirements. Lori Covelli, an unemployed social worker in Kenosha, Wisconsin, told CBS News,

"IT FEELS AS THOUGH PEOPLE ARE BEING PUNISHED."[10]

She is right. Somebody decided ahead of time who was worthy and who was not, and then wrote it into law. Isaiah saw the same thing in his day: "Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice" (Isa. 10:1-2).[11]

And I would argue that this moment is calling those who believe to act and respond with moral courage.

WHAT IS MORAL COURAGE?

Moral courage is doing what is right when doing right will cost you something. It can risk your comfort, your reputation, and your standing with people whose approval you worked hard to earn. Courageous people still feel fear. They just refuse to let fear have the last word over their conscience.

What we heard at Quantico was a celebration of toughness. But toughness and courage are two different things. It takes no courage to mock people who have less power than you. Moral courage moves in the opposite direction. It moves toward the people being pushed out, and it tells the truth to the people doing the pushing.

Howard Thurman understood this. In Jesus and the Disinherited, he named fear as one of the forces that hound the lives of people living with their backs against the wall.[12] He also pointed to who can stand against it: A person who knows they are a child of God carries a sense of worth that no one in power can take from them. That knowledge loosens fear's grip.

WHY JESUS CALLS US TO IT

Jesus embodied this kind of courage from the beginning. When he returned to Nazareth and stood in the synagogue where he was raised, he unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and announced the agenda of his ministry:

> "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED ME TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE, TO PROCLAIM THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR" (LUKE 4:18-19).

Every person named in that passage lived under the weight of someone else's power (Roman oppression): the poor, the imprisoned, those living without sight, the oppressed. In a world that was designed to define human worth by wealth, health, and lineage, Jesus began by naming the very people that order had been built to ignore or make invisible.

The crowd loved it until Jesus made it clear that God's love was bigger than their boundaries. Jesus never backed away from that message. He spent the rest of his life proving it with his presence, sitting with people others avoided, being proximate to and touching people others feared, and calling people beloved whom others called social outcasts and problems. That is moral courage. And it cost him everything, even his life.

But I have seen that same spirit in the church. It rarely shows up as rage. It shows up as silence. "I don't want to be divisive." "That's not my issue." "Now is not the right time." But silence in the face of injustice is still a choice. When the church says nothing, people in power are empowered to abuse that power.

FORMED FOR THIS MOMENT

We often hear the story of Rosa Parks told as if a tired seamstress sat down one afternoon and accidentally changed history.

But Mrs. Parks had served for years as secretary of the Montgomery NAACP. In the summer of 1955, she attended a workshop at the Highlander Folk School. When she kept her seat that December, she was acting out of who she had already become. She later said,

"The only tired I was, was tired of giving in."[13]

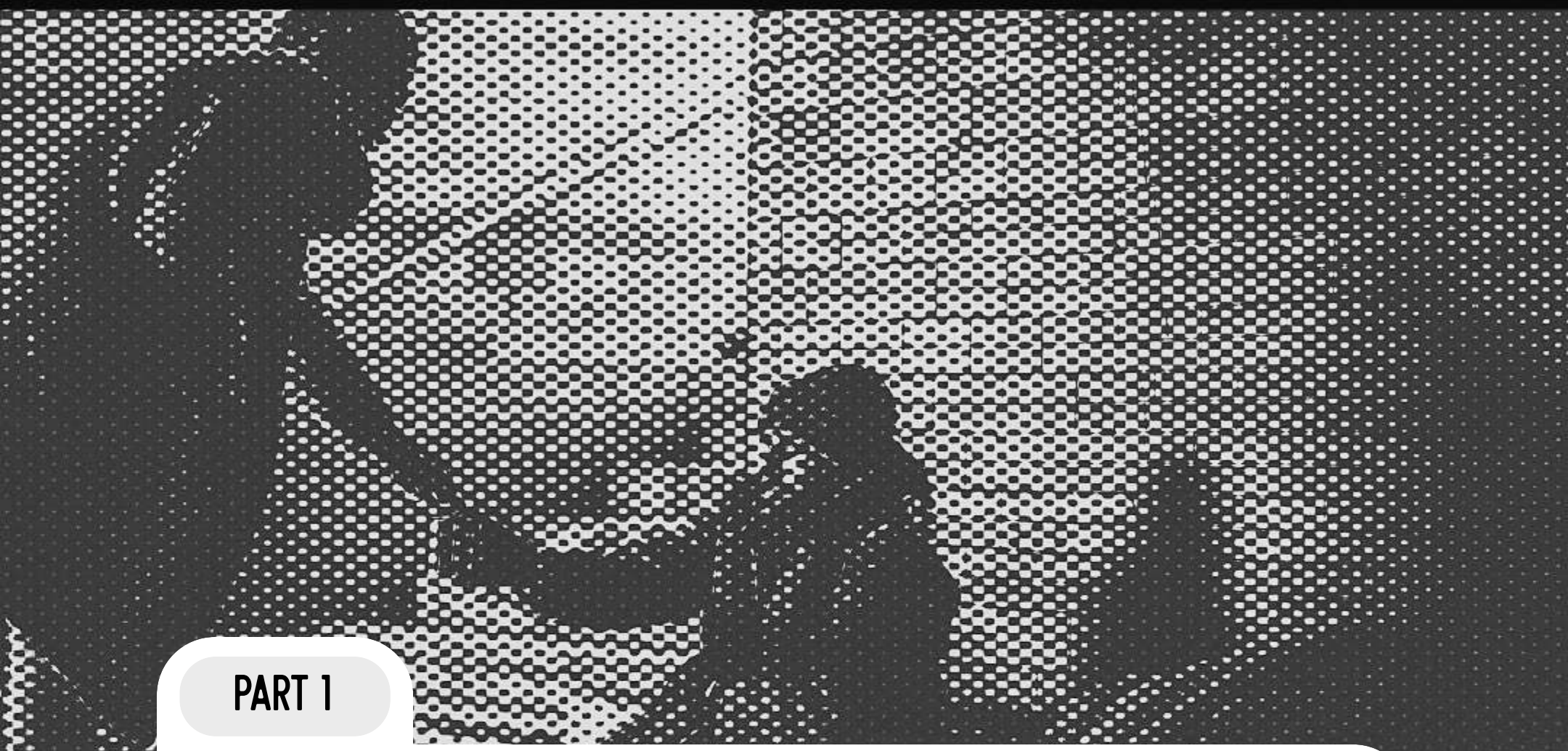
The world saw one afternoon on a bus. It did not see the years that prepared her for it.

That is what this series is about. Moral courage has less to do with heroic moments and more to do with daily formation. And formation like that rarely happens alone. It happens in community, which is why the church has to consider its own role in this moment.

Are our congregations forming people who can see the neighbors our society has learned to look past? Are our pulpits naming harm when it happens, or only after it becomes safe to do so? Are our buildings, budgets, and relationships being used on behalf of people who have been pushed to the margins of society?

A church that forms people only for comfort should not be surprised when its people stay silent.

The parts that follow explore how moral courage is formed in us: compassion, hospitality, and truth that keep us human; justice, advocacy, and solidarity that move us toward our neighbors; and hope that keeps us faithful for the long haul. None of this requires us to be perfect. It requires us to be faithful. To pray. To draw near. To tell the whole truth with love.



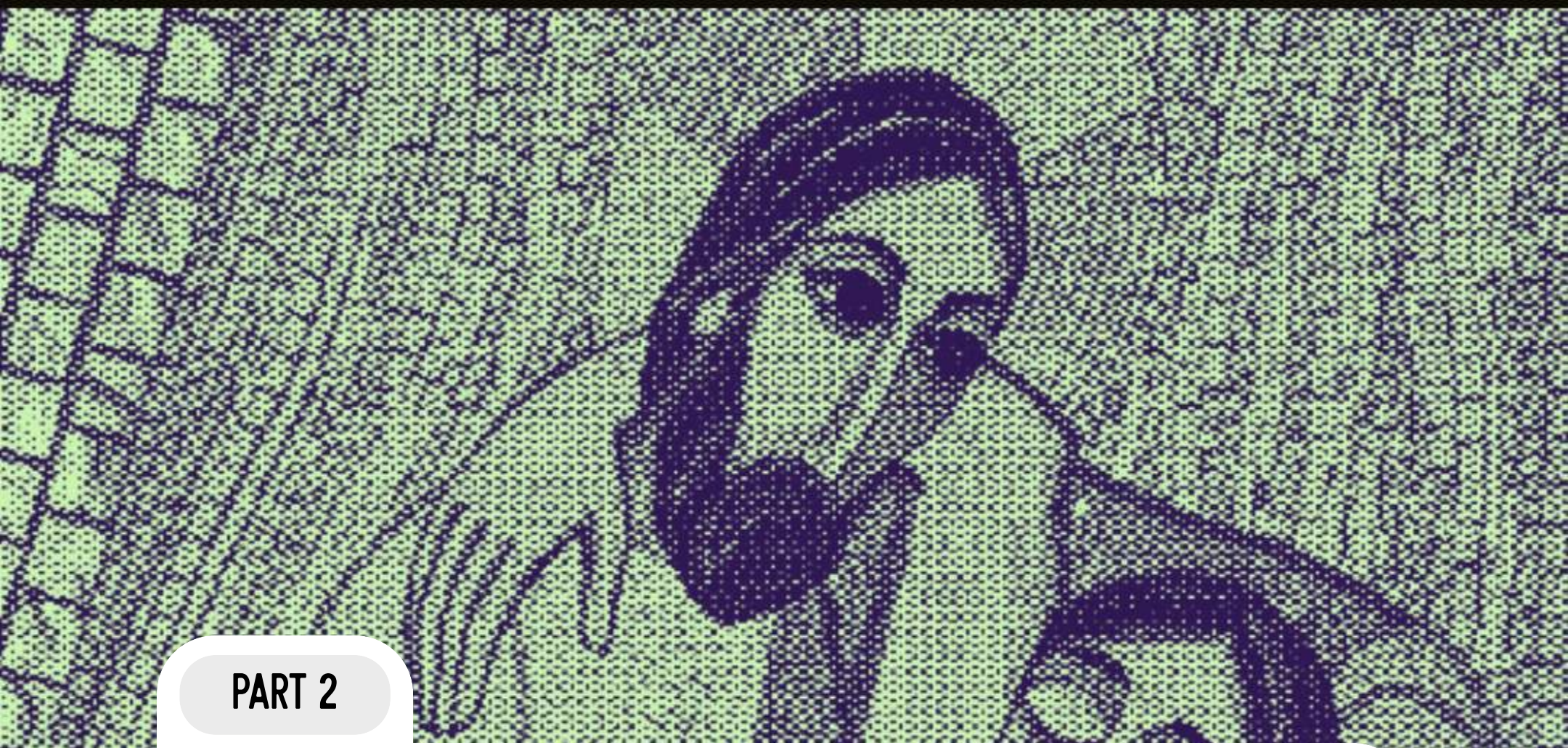
PART 1

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What people, experiences, or spiritual practices have most shaped your understanding of courage? Are there influences in your life that may be forming you toward fear or silence instead?

- Think about a time when you witnessed someone being dismissed, stereotyped, or treated as an outsider. How did you respond? What made it easier or harder to speak up, and what might you do differently today?

- Consider the Christian communities you belong to. How do they prepare people to respond when doing what is right comes with a cost? Where might they unintentionally encourage comfort, conformity, or silence instead?



PART 2

THE COURAGE TO STAY HUMAN

LETTING COMPASSION, HOSPITALITY, AND TRUTH INTERRUPT US

CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION

In Part 2, Dr. Emiola Oriola Jr. challenges us to consider what happens when we begin seeing people primarily through their beliefs, identities, or positions. Drawing on the example of Jesus, he explores how compassion, hospitality, and truth can interrupt our assumptions and make room for genuine encounters with others.

Proximity has never been easier, yet encounter has never been harder.

We live in a time when we are encouraged to see faces without knowing names. We can know what people believe before we know their stories, judge their decisions without understanding their options, and recognize their political affiliations, religious convictions, immigration status, sexuality, neighborhood, or voting record without ever being curious about what they are afraid of, what they've lost or even what they actually love.

Maybe this is one of the unique ways fear has formed us: convincing us that distance is discernment, suspicion is wisdom, and keeping people in their proper categories is simply knowing the difference between right and wrong.
However, the Bible illustrates a very different way of being human.

Hospitality, compassion, and truth were not merely private virtues in the world of Scripture. They were practices that shaped how people related to one another in a culture structured by kinship, status, honor, shame, responsibility, and boundaries. The stranger was not simply an anonymous person passing by. Their very presence could create an obligation to respond.

Now, I am not suggesting that we recreate 1st-century cultural norms. I am suggesting that we recover something that the ancient world understood that ours has easily forgotten: another person's presence can and should ask something of us.

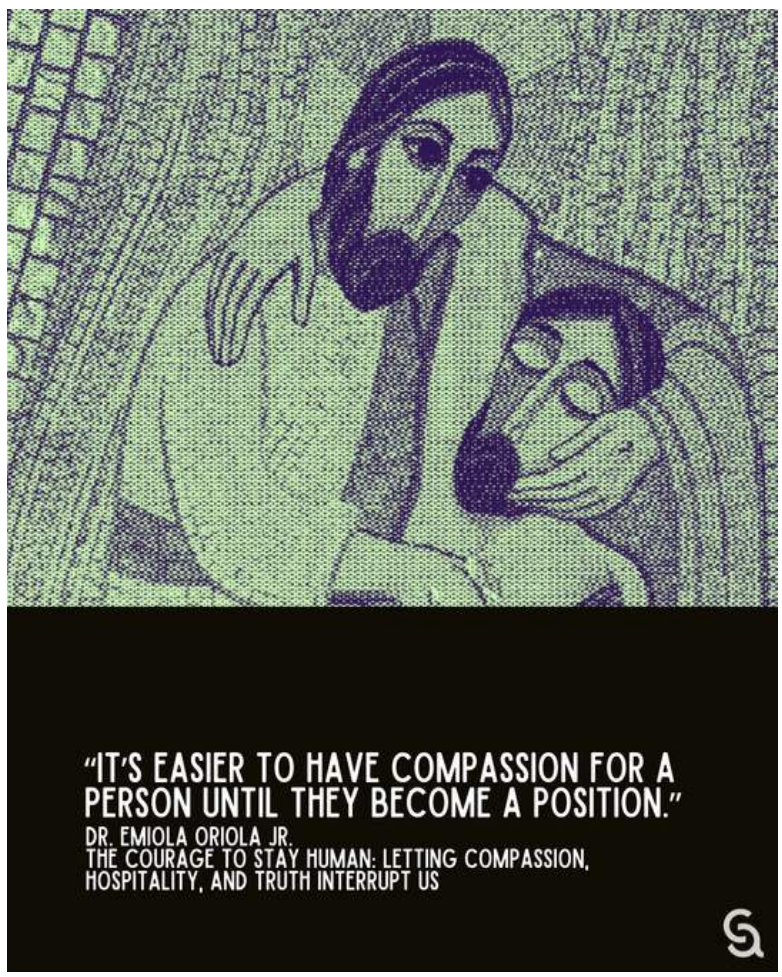
Somewhere along the way, hospitality became something we do when it is convenient, compassion became something we feel when the "right kind" of people are hurting, and truth became something we hurl at others when we think they need our corrections.

I wonder, though: What if the deeper invitation is a bit more disruptive, maybe even subversive? What if compassion asks us to let another person's humanity interrupt our indifference? What if hospitality asks us to let another person's presence interrupt our boundaries? What if truth asks us to let reality interrupt our certainty, not just others?

That kind of life requires a unique kind of courage, one that is committed to staying human when fear would rather make us demonize others and deify ourselves.

Following a "not-my-will-but-yours-be-done" Messiah doesn't simply invite us onto the narrow path, but into encounters where we may have to listen longer, make room wider, see more clearly, and remain open to being interrupted. The question isn't whether many of us have convictions; that's easy to see if you look online. The question is whether our convictions have left us any room to encounter and be interrupted by another complicated, but fellow image bearer who is just like us.

In the biblical imagination, people in vulnerable situations were not simply neighbors to be generously accommodated when convenient. Their presence could interrupt plans, resources, schedules, boundaries, and, most importantly, assumptions about who deserved help and who didn't.



Jesus illustrates this kind of disruptive neighborliness in Luke 10:25–37. The Samaritan does not encounter the wounded man as a category and move on. He sees him, draws near, tends his wounds, uses his own resources, and rearranges his plans, knowing full well the risk. The shock of the story is not simply that a Samaritan becomes the hero. It is that Jesus makes the person whom the hearers might have been conditioned to categorize and distrust the one who embodies this courageous neighborly love. The Samaritan is human enough to allow another person's vulnerability to interrupt him.

Hospitality becomes courageous when welcome costs us something.

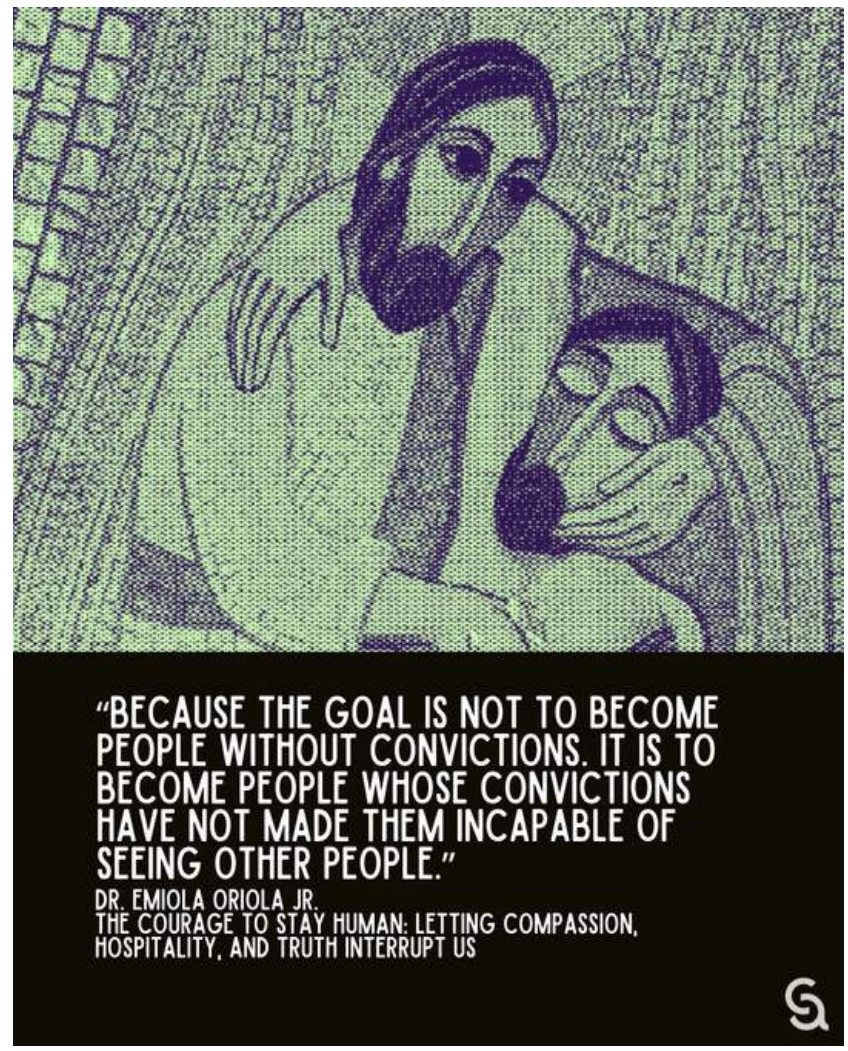
It is more than making room for people; it is allowing people to make room in you. And that is only possible when hospitality is connected to compassion.

Now, most of us don’t wake up intending to become less compassionate. It happens, little by little, until our default response to another person’s suffering can become a sympathetic phrase, a sad-face emoji, or thoughts and prayers that never quite make it into our hands.

The New Testament uses a wonderfully peculiar image for the compassion Jesus often shows. It is related to the inward parts or bowels of a person, the place the ancients associated with deep emotion. The point isn’t that Jesus merely noticed suffering; it is that he was deeply moved by it. That is very different from our culture in which suffering can remain safely on a screen. We can witness enormous amounts of pain without ever allowing it to rearrange us.

And that may be the larger problem. Compassion that never internally rearranges us can become little more than sentiment.

We see something similar in John 8, where a woman is brought before Jesus not simply as a person, but as a test, a case, and a useful tool in a premeditated argument against a secret enemy. Jesus refuses to let the Pharisees’ certainty about her recent acts become the whole story about her humanity. He slows the entire encounter down, exposes the accusers’ own blind spots, and eventually, the stones fall not because truth no longer matters — quite the opposite.



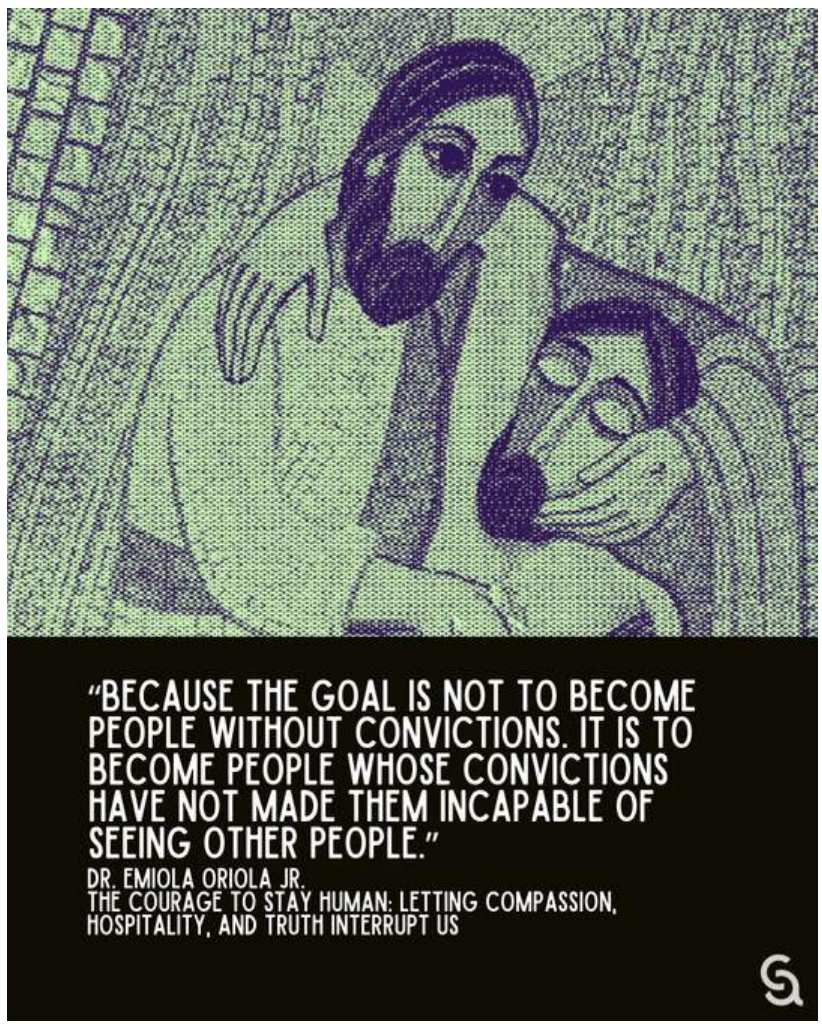
TTruth matters so much that it should be handled with clean hands and a pure heart, not with a hard heart and a handful of stones.

It's easier to have compassion for a person until they become a position. Once that happens, their pain becomes evidence in an argument. True compassion says, Before you tell me what this person represents, can you see the person? Can you even see yourself?

We often think courage means having the guts to tell the truth, but sometimes the greater courage is having the humility to let the truth tell us something.

In Matthew 7, Jesus gives us a picture of truth that first turns toward the person holding it. Before removing the tiny speck from another person's eye, we are invited to confront the enormous plank obstructing our own sight. What is this parable telling us? Jesus isn't dismissing discernment; he's questioning the person who is so certain about someone else's blindness that they cannot see their own.

And that takes real courage.



This is part of what moral courage asks of us: not simply the courage to stand for something (absolutely needed), but the courage to remain open enough to be changed by what we encounter without surrendering our convictions.

Because the goal is not to become people without convictions. It is to become people whose convictions have not made them incapable of seeing other people.



PART 2

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Can you think of someone whose humanity has become harder for you to see because of their politics, beliefs, or actions? What might help you approach that person differently?

- Compassion, hospitality, and truth each ask something of us. Which of these practices comes most naturally to you? Which is most challenging? Think of a recent conversation or encounter when one of these practices might have changed your response.

- Where in your life do you have proximity without meaningful relationship? What would it take to move beyond assumptions and become more open to another person's experience?



PART 3

THE COURAGE TO STAND WITH

COURAGE THAT MOVES TOWARD JUSTICE

CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION

In Part 3, Dr. Terence Lester explores the difference between charity and justice and the courage required to move from compassion toward advocacy. Drawing on his work with Love Beyond Walls and the examples of historic justice advocates, he calls Christians to listen to those most affected by injustice and stand alongside them rather than speaking over them.

In 2011, a team of researchers at the University of Michigan led by psychologist Sara Konrath published a widely cited study on empathy in America. They examined data from nearly 14,000 college students across three decades and found that empathic concern, the capacity to feel for people who are suffering, dropped by 48 percent between 1979 and 2009. Perspective taking, the ability to imagine how the world looks from someone else's position, dropped by 34 percent.[1]

The steepest decline came after 2000.

Other research complicates that picture in a way that helps explain our political moment. Political scientists Elizabeth Simas, Scott Clifford, and Justin Kirkland found that people who score high in empathy are not necessarily more generous toward their opponents. Their empathy tends to stay inside their own group, and the more of it they have, the more hostile they can feel toward the other side.[2]

In plain terms, many of us have not lost compassion altogether. We have learned to ration it. We give it to people who vote like us, worship like us, and live like us, and we withhold it from everyone else.

That rationing has a religious face. Historian Anthea Butler, in White Evangelical Racism, traces how race has shaped White evangelical political activism from slavery to the present.[3]

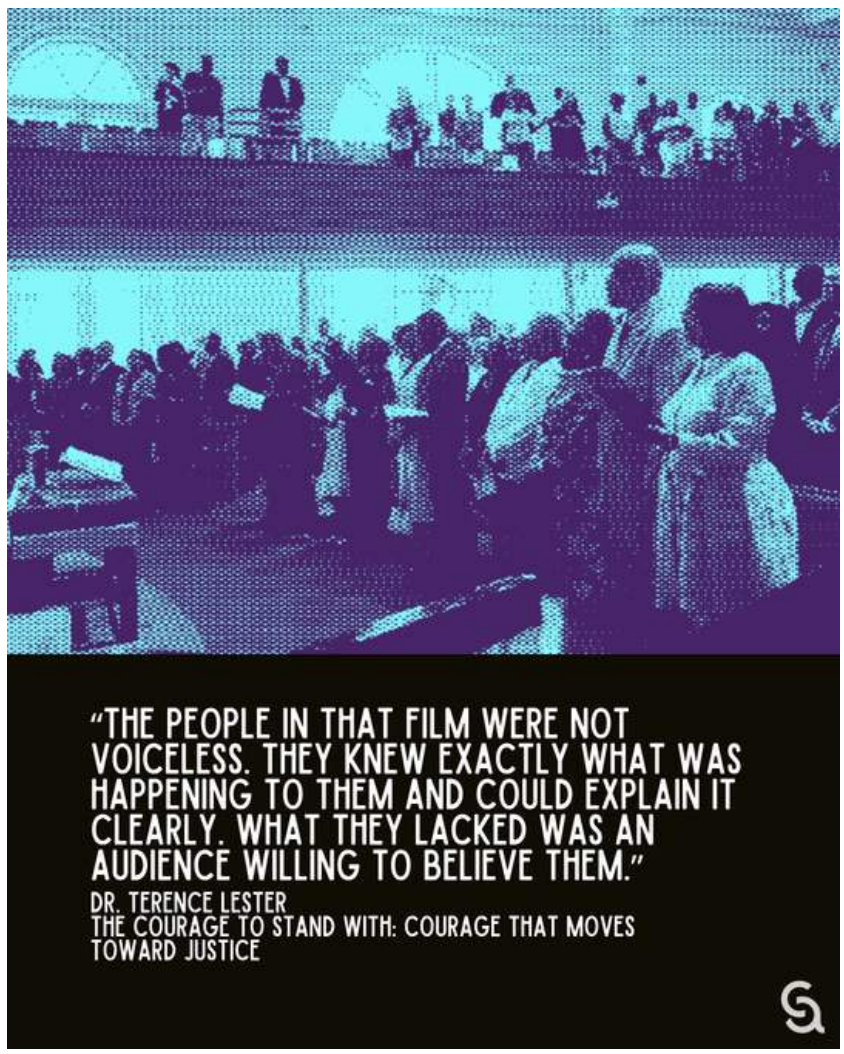
Today some of the loudest voices claiming the name of Christ have aligned themselves with White Christian nationalism, the belief that this country belongs to a certain kind of Christian and that government power should be used to keep it that way. But most Americans are not following them.

In September, PRRI reported that 64 percent of Americans either reject or are skeptical of Christian nationalism, including most Hispanic Catholics, most White mainline Protestants, and a majority of Black Protestants. Large majorities of those who resist it say they want a country made up of people from a wide variety of religions.[4]

Others are walking away from church altogether. Sociologists Michael Hout and Claude Fischer found that much of the rise in Americans claiming no religion during the 1990s was “a symbolic statement against the Religious Right.”[5]

When faith gets tied to one political agenda, the people harmed by that agenda stop expecting anything good from the church. I understand why. If you are an immigrant or refugee, unhoused, food insecure, impoverished, or LGBTQIA+, and the loudest Christian voices you hear are cheering while your family is targeted, it makes sense to stop trusting the church altogether. Those voices do not speak for every Christian, but too often they are the only ones people hear.

Historian Dr. Jemar Tisby points to another way: “If we want to know how to fight racism and white Christian nationalism today, we need look no further than the expansive Black Christian tradition.”[6]



That tradition has always followed a Jesus who stood with the oppressed rather than with the powerful.

The Jesus I read about in the Gospels knew what it was like to live under someone else’s power. As a child, his family fled to Egypt as refugees (Matt. 2:13-15). As an adult, he told a would-be follower that he had nowhere to lay his head (Luke 9:58). The empire that ruled his homeland eventually executed him. Yet when he saw the crowds, Matthew writes, “…he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matt. 9:36, NRSV).

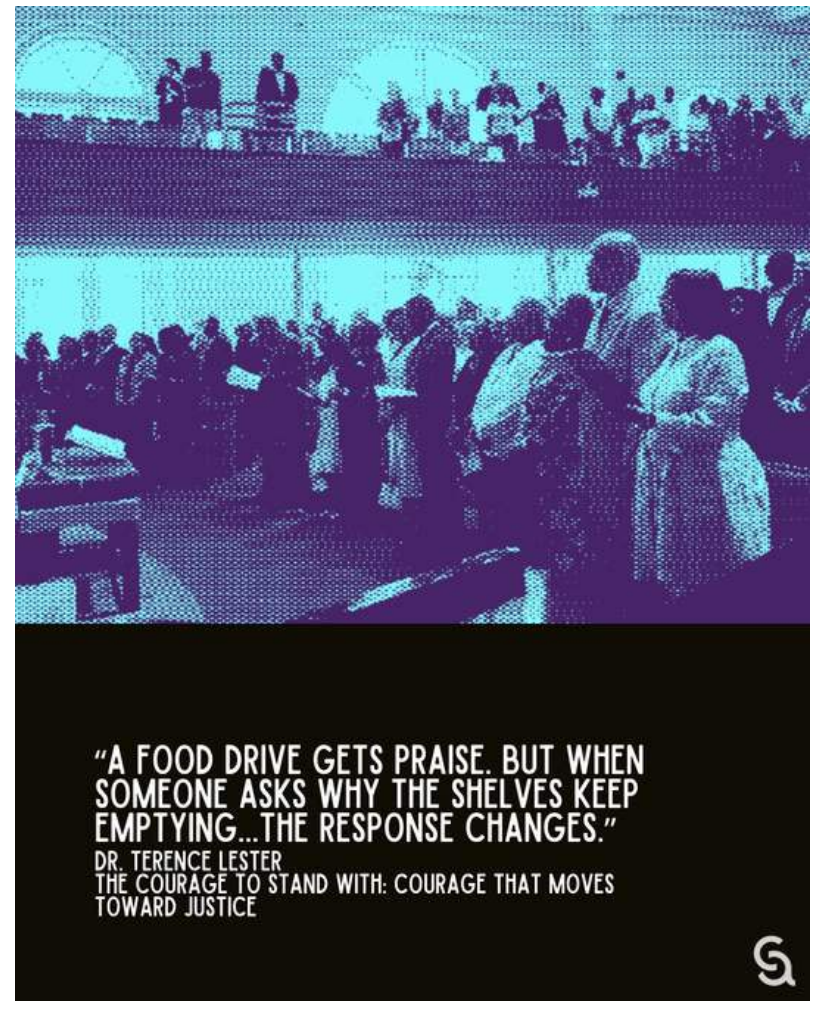
Jesus chose compassion for the very people the powerful had learned to ignore. So the question in front of us goes deeper than whether we feel compassion. It is whose suffering we are willing to feel, and whether we will stand beside those neighbors when it costs us something.

FROM CHARITY TO JUSTICE

At Love Beyond Walls, the nonprofit organization I cofounded with my wife, Cecilia, we advocate for neighbors who are unhoused and impoverished. Our work has always included both immediate relief and community development. Through Love Feeds, we share meals with neighbors who do not know where their next one will come from. Our shower units exist because a shower is not a luxury when you have no home. Without one, it is harder to sit for a job interview, keep an appointment, or move through a public space without being judged.

Zion's Closet serves students in Title I schools, which receive federal support because so many of their children come from low-income families. Some of those children are unhoused. In the 2022-2023 school year, public schools identified 1,374,537 students experiencing homelessness, a 25 percent increase in just two years.[7]

Those children are sleeping in shelters, motels, cars, or on a relative's couch, and still showing up to class. Zion's Closet provides clothing so a child can walk into school without being singled out for what they lack. We help families who have been separated find each other again. And through the Dignity Museum and our films, we tell the truth about why so many neighbors go unseen.



In my book *All God's Children*, I described the difference this way: Charity is making sure people in a food desert have a meal for the night, but justice is understanding why the neighborhood is a food desert in the first place.[8]

What happened economically that caused one side of town to receive investment while the other side did not? Who made those decisions, and who was left out when they were made?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pressed the same point at Riverside Church in 1967. He said that “true compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar” and that it “comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”[9] King was saying that when the same needs keep showing up year after year, something in the structure is producing them, and love has to deal with that structure, too.

Most people agree with King in principle. In practice, I have watched how quickly that agreement fades. A food drive gets praise. But when someone asks why the shelves keep emptying, why a full-time wage does not cover rent, or why so many families are losing food assistance, the response changes. Some people go quiet. Some tell you to stay out of politics. That is usually the point where courage is required.

Isaiah 58:6-7 holds both together. The same passage that calls God’s people to “share your bread with the hungry” also calls them to “loose the bonds of injustice.” That is what advocacy is: Loving our neighbors enough to pay attention to the policies that shape their lives.

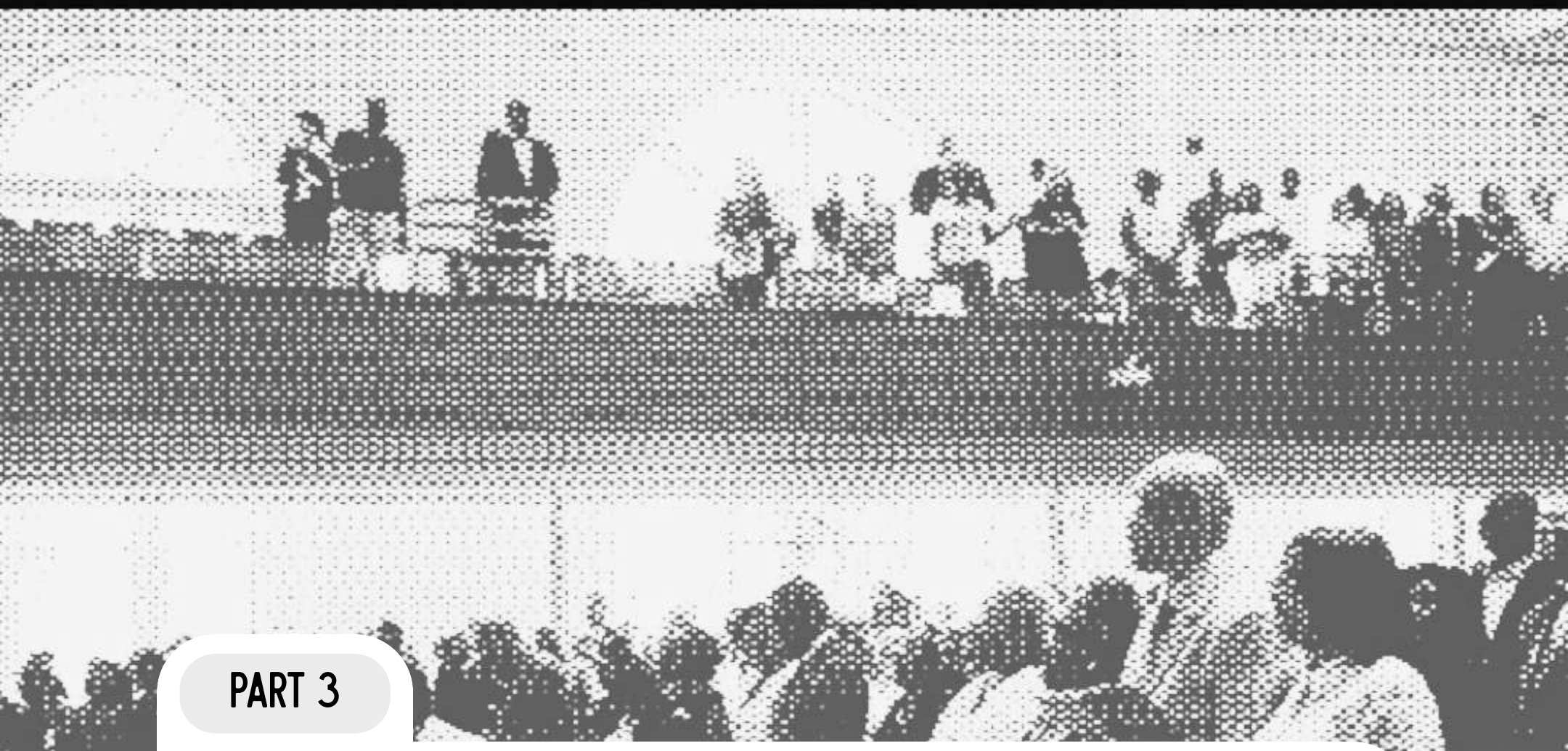
SPEAKING WHEN SILENCE IS EASIER

Some years ago, Love Beyond Walls produced a documentary called Voiceless: A Documentary on Systemic Poverty that shares the stories of people living in poverty across the country. But the more time I spend with our neighbors, the more I realize that title was not quite right. The people in that film were not voiceless. They knew exactly what was happening to them and could explain it clearly. What they lacked was an audience willing to believe them.

The philosopher Miranda Fricker has a name for this. In Epistemic Injustice, she describes testimonial injustice, which happens when prejudice causes a listener to give someone’s word less credibility than it deserves.[10] In plain terms, a person can tell the truth about their own life and still be doubted because of who they are. This is one reason neighbors experiencing homelessness are so often disbelieved when they report being mistreated. Their word gets weighed against their housing status before it gets weighed against the facts.

Ida B. Wells knew this problem well. In 1892, after her close friend Thomas Moss and two other Black men were lynched in Memphis, she began documenting lynching across the South. That spring, while she was in New York, her newspaper, Free Speech, was destroyed, and she was warned that she would be harmed if she came home.

She never returned to Memphis.[11] She kept writing anyway, guided by her belief that “the way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.”[12] Wells used the access she had, a printing press and a readership, to make the country look at what it wanted to ignore. Most of us have some form of access too: a pulpit, a classroom, a vote, a dinner table, a following online, a relationship with someone who makes decisions. The question is what we will do with ours.



PART 3

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Think about a justice issue you care about, such as poverty, homelessness, racial injustice, or food insecurity. How might your response change if you paid greater attention to the systems contributing to the problem?

- Whose voices are most readily believed in your church or community? Whose experiences might receive less credibility, and what would it take to change that?

- What is the difference between helping someone and standing with them? Think about the ways you use your time, resources, relationships, or influence. Where might you need to listen more carefully, share power, or allow someone closer to the issue to lead?



PART 4

THE COURAGE TO REMAIN

LIVING FAITHFULLY FOR THE LONG HAUL

CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION

In the final article, Dr. Emiola Oriola Jr. explores the exhaustion of deferred hope and what it means to remain faithful when outcomes are uncertain. Through the examples of Simeon and Anna, Hebrews 11, and Psalm 1, he reflects on the practices that sustain us when the work is unfinished and the answers we long for have not come.

We don't like unfinished stories. Cliffhangers may entertain us in movies or books, but there is a particular kind of exhaustion that comes from waiting for something we believe should have happened by now.

When we've waited, done all we can do, but the diagnosis still isn't resolved, the relationship isn't restored, the healing hasn't come, the injustice isn't corrected, and the prayer hasn't been answered, waiting eventually stops feeling like patience and starts feeling like a test.

When prayers begin to feel like nonstop boomerangs hurling back to us, something slowly begins to happen in us. We begin to become cynical, controlling, and numb. Sometimes, we even perform hope, because we're too afraid to admit we're disappointed.

WHEN HOPE IS DEFERRED

What does deferred hope do to a person? Thankfully, the Scriptures are less sentimental about this than we are sometimes. The beginning of Proverbs 13:12 tells us that

> "HOPE DEFERRED MAKES THE HEART SICK..."

The author doesn't ask us to romanticize the waiting or pretend disappointment doesn't hurt. There are seasons when we believe God is faithful and still feel disappointed. We can long for justice and grow tired of having to hope for it. This is especially highlighted in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:6.

Jesus calls those who are still hungry and thirsty for righteousness "blessed," before they are filled. Hunger hasn't disappeared, injustice hasn't been resolved, and the kingdom has not arrived in its fullness. Yet, Jesus calls people who continue in this path of wanting and waiting "blessed." Why?

They do not respond to deferred hope with optimism that says, “It will probably work out,” or despair that says, “It won’t, so why bother?” Instead, they take that gnawing ache in their stomach and throat and hold onto a far stranger yet honest biblical truth:

> **“I DON’T KNOW WHEN OR HOW THIS WILL BE FULFILLED, BUT I WON’T ALLOW ABSENCE TO DETERMINE WHO I BECOME.”**

Living faithfully for the long haul is less about trying to control the outcomes. It begins by acknowledging that this is not yet what it should be without sanitizing or over-spiritualizing our feelings about it. Then, with the mustard seed of faith we have left, we choose again to continue to hunger and thirst for what is good without allowing the delay to deform us. And that takes courage.

FAITHFULNESS IN THE WAITING

It is neither pretty nor easy, but it is tested and proven, not only by the life of Jesus, but in the stories of two biblical figures whose lives embody what it means to remain. Luke 2 highlights the peculiar yet steadfast lives of Simeon and Anna. The former, a righteous and devout man who was waiting for the promised consolation of Israel, the Messiah. And the latter, an elderly widow who had been married for seven years before her husband died, and who remained a widow, waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.



While many read their stories and leave satisfied by the fact that both got to see the Messiah, we often miss out on the subtle fact that their faith never atrophied all of those years. While they didn’t know when the Messiah would show up, they remained hopeful, expectant, and, most importantly, capable of spotting, engaging, and embracing what their heart once grew sick of hoping for.

As their hearts wanted and waited over the years, they planted their lives in environments that could refresh their hearts before it got too brittle because of disappointment.

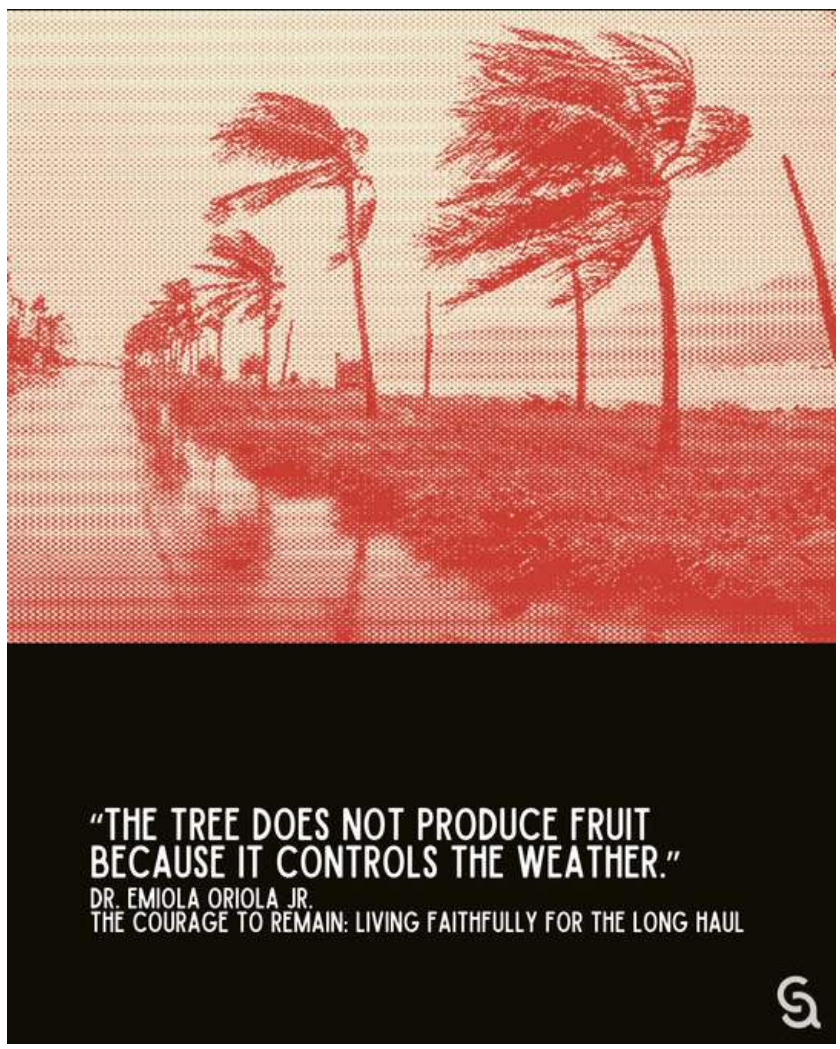
They had practices and people built into their lives to help them retain an expectant posture. They remained connected to the temple, fasted, prayed, worshiped, grieved, and embedded themselves in community doing life with other faith-filled people. They kept showing up, bringing their hunger and thirst to the right place.

While none of these practices made God move faster, they helped Simeon and Anna remain faithful as they waited. They didn't manufacture the promise. They cultivated the kind of lives that could recognize it when it arrived.

But not everyone gets to see what they have been praying for. Hebrews 11:39, near the end of what is often called the "hall of faith," reminds us that even those commended for their faith did not receive everything they had been promised: "And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised."

Mic drop.

Some people remain faithful, hungry, thirsty for what is good, and never see the thing they hoped for. Which means, the fulfillment of the promise cannot be the ultimate measure of the faithfulness of the person who waited for it.



The person who had faith, and whose mother still died. The person whose marriage doesn't reconcile. The advocate for justice who never got to see justice roll down like waters in their generation. The parent who never sees their child return. The person who spends decades building something and never sees its fruit.

THE COURAGE TO REMAIN

To remain isn't simply to push through, refuse to quit, dig deeper, or try harder. It is about staying present no matter what. It isn't passive resignation, "whatever will be will be."

Nor is it spiritual manipulation, “if I pray, attend, and believe hard enough, I can force the outcome.” It is something more subversive: continuing with God when you cannot control what comes next.

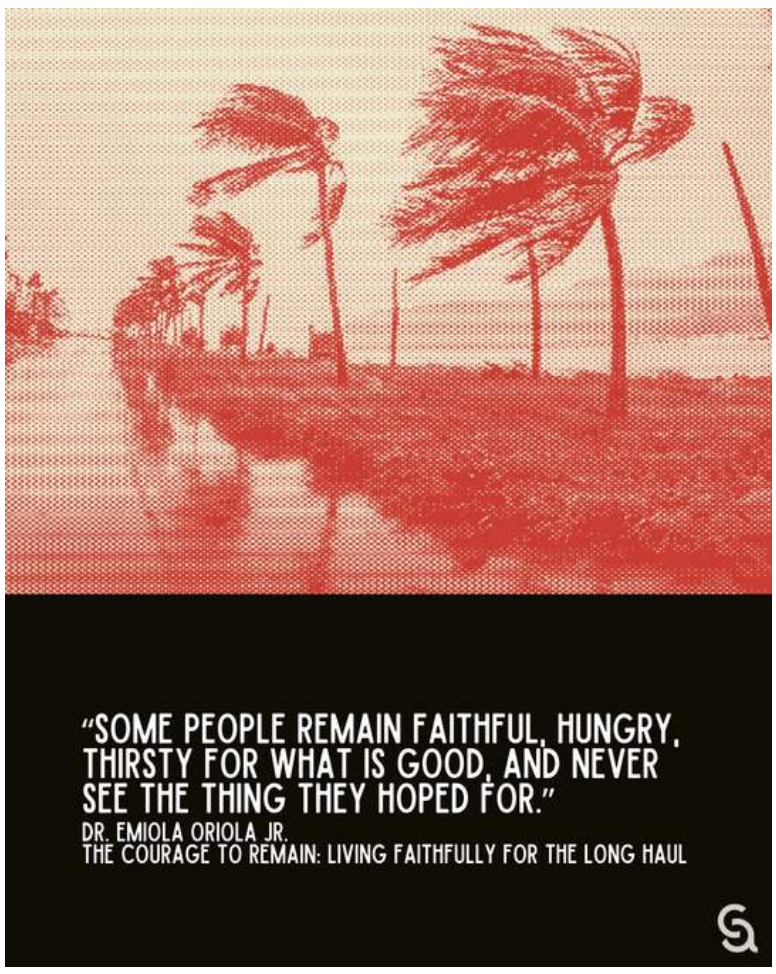
Proverbs 13:12 gave us the honest reality at the beginning: hope deferred can make the heart sick. But it also gives us another image:

“...A DESIRE FULFILLED IS A TREE OF LIFE.”

Perhaps that is part of what we are being formed for, not simply to get what we want, but to become people whose lives are rooted deeply enough in God that we can endure the space between desire and fulfillment.

Psalm 1 gives us another picture: a tree planted by streams of water, yielding fruit in its season, its leaves not withering. Notice the language: in its season.

The tree does not produce fruit because it controls the weather. It does not panic because winter has come. It remains planted, receiving what it needs, and bears fruit when its season comes. The fruit belongs to the Lord of the harvest. The outcome belongs to the Beginning and the End. The power belongs to God. And our faith belongs to the Author and Finisher of it.



We may not control when the promise comes. We may not live long enough to see everything we hoped for. We may never know why some prayers seem to take so long, but we can remain. We can keep hungering, praying, showing up, loving, telling the truth, and doing what is ours to do. Not because we know exactly how the story will end, but because we know who holds the story.

The courage to remain is the courage to keep becoming faithful people in the space between promise and fulfillment. And maybe that is the long work of hope: not learning to stop wanting but learning to remain with the One we trust while we wait for what we cannot yet see.



PART 4

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Have you ever felt pressure to appear hopeful when you were actually discouraged or exhausted? What would it look like to acknowledge those feelings honestly before God and others?

- Simeon and Anna remained faithful through years of waiting. What relationships, spiritual practices, or communities help you remain grounded when progress is slow? Are there practices you have neglected that might help sustain you now?

- How do you tend to measure success in your faith, ministry, or work for justice? What might change if you understood faithfulness as continuing to love and do what is right, even without a guaranteed outcome?

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WAYS TO TAKE ACTION

Moral courage grows through practice. These are some ways to begin putting the themes of this series into action in your relationships, church, workplace, and community.
Examine What Is Forming You

EXAMINE WHAT IS FORMING YOU

Pay attention to the voices, media, relationships, and spiritual practices influencing how you see the world. Ask whether they are making you more fearful, suspicious, and defensive, or more compassionate, truthful, and willing to act.

Consider making time each week to reflect on a difficult encounter or decision. Where did fear shape your response? Where did you practice courage? What might you learn from that experience?

PRACTICE SEEING PEOPLE BEYOND THEIR POSITIONS

Identify someone whose experiences or beliefs differ significantly from your own. Rather than beginning with an argument or an attempt to change their mind, make room for conversation and genuine curiosity.

Ask questions. Listen without preparing your rebuttal. Pay attention to the assumptions you bring into the encounter. Consider what it might mean to recognize another person's dignity without abandoning your own convictions.

MOVE FROM CHARITY TOWARD JUSTICE

Think about a need your church or community regularly responds to, such as hunger, housing insecurity, or financial hardship.

Continue meeting immediate needs, but also ask why those needs persist. Learn about the policies, economic conditions, and community decisions contributing to the problem.

WAYS TO TAKE ACTION, CONT.

Consider whether your congregation could devote time to learning about one underlying issue and identifying a constructive way to respond.

LISTEN TO PEOPLE CLOSEST TO THE HARM

Before speaking publicly about a justice issue or developing a program intended to help others, seek out people directly affected by it.
Ask what they want others to understand. Learn from their experiences and leadership. Where possible, support organizations led by people from the communities they serve.

Practice using your voice and influence to amplify others rather than assuming you must speak on their behalf.

USE THE ACCESS YOU ALREADY HAVE

You may not have a large platform or a position of public authority, but you likely have opportunities to make a difference.

Think about the spaces where your voice carries weight: your workplace, church, neighborhood, school, family, or online community. Where could you challenge a harmful assumption, ask a difficult question, advocate for a policy change, or help someone else's concerns receive attention?

Choose one specific opportunity to practice courage rather than waiting for a more significant moment.

WAYS TO TAKE ACTION, CONT.

BUILD PRACTICES THAT SUSTAIN HOPE

Pay attention to what happens when your efforts do not produce the results you hoped for. Are you becoming discouraged, cynical, controlling, or numb?

Make room for honest prayer, lament, rest, worship, and relationships that help you remain connected to God and others.

Find people with whom you can speak openly about disappointment without feeling pressured to offer easy answers. Remember that faithfulness does not require pretending that the waiting is painless.

CHOOSE ONE PLACE TO BEGIN

As an individual or group, return to the four movements of this series:

- Be formed: What habit or influence do we need to examine?
- Stay human: Whose humanity do we need to see more fully?
- Stand with: Where are we being called to move from concern toward solidarity?
- Remain: What will help us sustain this commitment over time?

Choose one concrete action to take in the next 30 days. Decide what you will do, who will be involved, and when you will return to reflect on what you have learned.

Moral courage is not something we practice once and then possess forever. It is cultivated through repeated choices to love our neighbors, tell the truth, pursue justice, and remain faithful.

A PRAYER FOR MORAL COURAGE

GOD OF JUSTICE, MERCY, AND STEADFAST LOVE,

YOU KNOW THE WORLD WE LIVE IN,
THE DIVISIONS THAT SEPARATE US,
THE SUFFERING WE SOMETIMES OVERLOOK,
AND THE FEARS THAT KEEP US FROM DOING WHAT IS RIGHT.

FORM IN US THE COURAGE TO FOLLOW JESUS FAITHFULLY,
NOT ONLY WHEN THE PATH IS CLEAR,
BUT WHEN OBEDIENCE IS DIFFICULT
AND LOVE ASKS SOMETHING OF US.

WHERE FEAR HAS SHAPED OUR CHOICES,
TEACH US TO TRUST YOU MORE DEEPLY.

WHERE WE HAVE ALLOWED PREJUDICE OR CERTAINTY
TO KEEP US FROM SEEING ANOTHER PERSON'S HUMANITY,
INTERRUPT US WITH COMPASSION.

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN QUICK TO SPEAK
AND SLOW TO LISTEN,
GIVE US HUMILITY.

WHERE WE HAVE OFFERED CHARITY
WITHOUT QUESTIONING THE INJUSTICE THAT MAKES IT NECESSARY,
OPEN OUR EYES TO THE SYSTEMS THAT NEED TO CHANGE.

TEACH US TO STAND WITH OUR NEIGHBORS,
ESPECIALLY THOSE WHOSE VOICES HAVE BEEN DISMISSED,
WHOSE SUFFERING HAS BEEN IGNORED,
AND WHOSE DIGNITY HAS BEEN DENIED.

A PRAYER FOR MORAL COURAGE, CONT.

GIVE US COURAGE TO TELL THE TRUTH,
TO CHALLENGE INJUSTICE,
AND TO USE WHATEVER INFLUENCE WE HAVE
IN SERVICE OF THOSE WHO NEED IT MOST.

AND WHEN THE WORK BECOMES EXHAUSTING,
WHEN PRAYERS SEEM UNANSWERED,
WHEN CHANGE COMES MORE SLOWLY THAN WE HOPED,
HELP US REMAIN.

KEEP OUR HEARTS TENDER WHEN DISAPPOINTMENT TEMPTS US TOWARD CYNICISM.
KEEP US ATTENTIVE WHEN EXHAUSTION MAKES IT EASIER TO TURN AWAY.
KEEP US ROOTED IN YOU WHEN WE CANNOT SEE WHAT COMES NEXT.

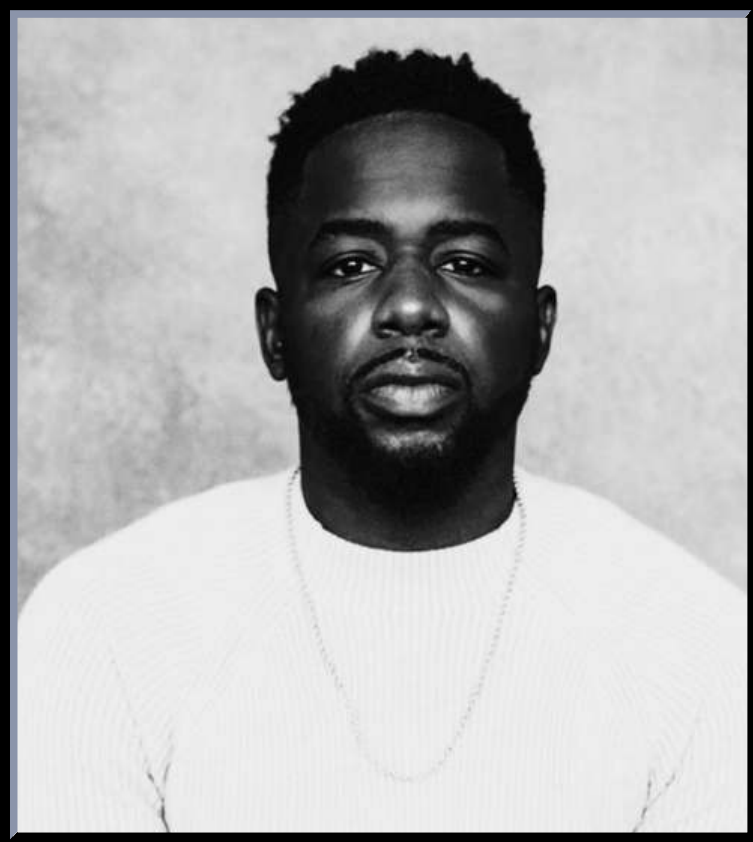
LIKE TREES PLANTED BY STREAMS OF WATER,
MAY OUR LIVES DRAW STRENGTH FROM YOUR PRESENCE.
MAY WE BEAR FRUIT IN THE SEASONS GIVEN TO US,
WITHOUT BELIEVING WE CAN CONTROL THE HARVEST.

REMIND US THAT WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR FINISHING EVERY STORY,
BUT WE ARE CALLED TO BE FAITHFUL IN THE PART ENTRUSTED TO US.

FORM US INTO PEOPLE WHO LOVE COURAGEOUSLY,
SPEAK TRUTHFULLY,
ACT JUSTLY,
AND REMAIN HOPEFUL FOR THE LONG HAUL.

AMEN.





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WHERE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION MEETS FAITHFUL ACTION.

STAY CONNECTED WITH US.

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