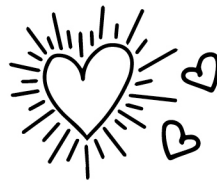


40-DAY "LOVE BUILDS UP" FAMILY CHALLENGE



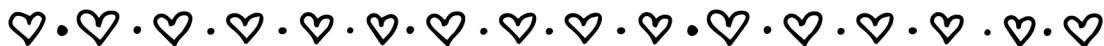
INTRODUCTION



Askesis (pronounced "uh-SKEE-sis"). That's the ancient Greek word for "training" or "exercise," the strengthening and beautifying of the human body. It's come down to modern English hidden in the word "asceticism," which probably doesn't get you very excited, since it means giving up physical pleasures or comforts for the sake of spiritual benefits.

Lent is the period of 40 days (plus Sundays) leading up to the Christian festival of Easter, which celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his promise to bring the world to fulfillment. If you know anything about Lent, you probably know about its historically ascetic character: people give stuff up for it.

Which is fine, we guess, but this Lent, we'd like to invite you into a different kind of "asceticism." We want you to take on a different kind of *askesis*, one designed to train your family's spiritual muscles, not to get you ready for the Olympics but to get you ready for the realm of God. See, we believe that when Easter fills the world to overflowing, we will all finally see and treat each other - and ourselves - as God sees and treats us. Meanwhile, though, it's hard down here and we could all use a little practice. So to get our spiritual muscles and emotional health good and strong, beautiful and ready to participate in the Easter that's already creeping through the land, we're going to do a little training!



THE CHALLENGE

For each of the six weeks of Lent, spend some time at the beginning of the week (Sunday night, maybe?) reading the Bible passage together. Talk as a family about that week's topic, using the enclosed conversation prompts if that helps. Commit to taking on an action or practice from that week, then just watch as the Realm of God fills, strengthens, and beautifies your house and the world!



WE, THE _____ FAMILY,
commit to becoming more generous, forgiving, supportive,
faithful, grateful, and loving with each other, and through each
other (and the world!) this Lent.

Signature _____

Doing this because ☐ I believe in it ☐ they're making me

Signature _____

Doing this because ☐ I believe in it ☐ they're making me

Signature _____

Doing this because ☐ I believe in it ☐ they're making me

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Signature _____

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WEEK ONE: SELF-CONFIDENCE



READ:

Matthew 4:1-11

DISCUSS: ♡♡♡

The word “confidence” comes from the Latin words for “with faith.” So having self-confidence means keeping faith with yourself, with the person that God made and loves. It means seeing yourself as God sees you - and demanding that others do the same.

- For many of us, living in the extremes of self-doubt or self-centeredness are easier than the sweet spot of honest self-confidence. Where do you usually live?
- Where did Jesus live?
- How is keeping faith with yourself related to keeping faith with God?

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE:

Many of us spend a lot of time on our weak spots. This week, ignore them for once and exult in living into your strong spots! What virtues do you have in abundance? The church parents listed seven virtues as especially important: prudence, justice, temperance, courage, faith, hope, and charity. But there are plenty of others, as well - and you can make some up, too!

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

• **CONFIDENTIAL TO KIDS:** •

• They may not show it, but •

• your parents care what you •

• think about them, too! This •

• week, try to tell your parents •

• what you think is cool about •

• them or what you think •

• they're good at. •

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

Write down at least two virtues (from the list above, or others) that you already have in abundance. Show your virtues to your family and listen to what they have to say.

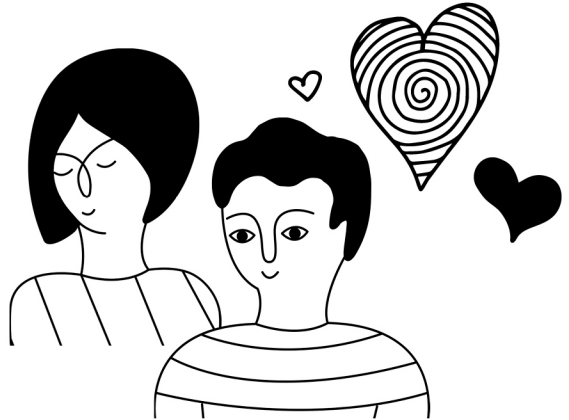


Together, write down the virtues you think your family **as a whole** possesses.

Post these lists somewhere visible, and each day this week, do something that lets one of your virtues shine. Check in throughout the week to see how it's going.

CONFIDENTIAL TO PARENTS:

We know you're trying to mold your kids' characters well. This week, practice the virtue of charity in your parenting: as much as you can, skip commenting on their weak spots, and praise your kids' virtuous behaviors lavishly!



WEEK TWO: TRANSFIGURATION

READ:

Matthew 17:1-9



DISCUSS: ♥♥♥

What if Peter, James, and John hadn't noticed Jesus' shining? What if they'd only seen what they expected to see: regular old dirty-footed Jesus? It's easy to get used to what you think you know about people: how they've always (re)acted, what they've always done, who they've always been. When someone changes, or reveals new depths to their personality, it can be hard for those close to them to see a transfiguration has taken place.

- Has there ever been a time you revealed a new part of your personality or behavior? Did people notice?
- Have you ever failed to see someone else's transfiguration?
- Go around your circle, and everybody tell each member of the family about a transfiguration, a revelation, a change, a surprise, a growth that you've seen in them.
- Why does it matter that we notice and name these changes in each other?

CONFIDENTIAL TO PARENTS:

Your kids are growing so fast. You have to try especially hard to not trap them in the littler person they used to be, but notice and name them growing and glowing!

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE:

We all fall into patterns of behavior and ways of reacting to the people around us. This week, choose a pattern you'd like to change. Tell your family what you're planning; ask them to hold you to it AND to notice and name your transfiguration, however temporary, when you manage it.

CONFIDENTIAL TO KIDS:

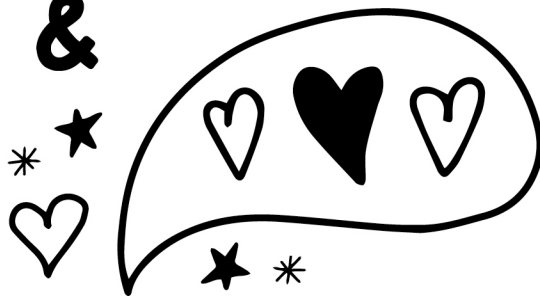
Your parents are probably starving for more affection from you! Try telling them you love them twice as much as normal, and offer at least 3 unasked-for hugs this week.



HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS:

- **PARENTS**, when your kid annoys you, try reacting with patience instead of anger
- **KIDS**, when your parent(s) annoy you, try reacting with patience instead of anger
- If there's a task you're supposed to do but always avoid, just do it without being reminded
- If there's something everybody else wishes you wouldn't do, try not doing it for just this one week and see what happens
- Do you have a go-to way of responding to stuff (impatience, sarcasm, over-earnestness, jokiness...)? Try responding in the exact opposite way this week.

WEEK THREE: COMPLAINING & STANDING UP



READ:

Exodus 17:1-7

DISCUSS: ♡♡♡

In this story, Moses accuses the Israelites of quarreling and testing; he basically accuses them of being whiny. But the people actually have a point: they need water to survive, and so do their dependents, and Moses is the one who's led them to a waterless place. Were they just being quarrelsome, or were they advocating for justice (God seems to have thought it was the latter!)?

CONFIDENTIAL TO KIDS:

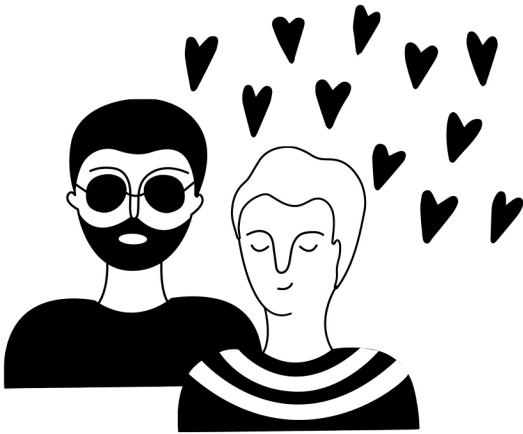
Stop whining. Really. Just stop. If you think there's a real justice issue at hand, then state your case clearly and calmly. See if that gets better results than hitting the roof.

- What's the difference between whining and advocating for a just world? What do they have in common? How do you know which one you're doing?
- Think about the last time you raised your voice in protest at home, at work, at school, or in the world. Were you truly building the world God longs for, or were you just whining?
- Does whining have a place in the life of faith? Can you think of a character who whined or complained, or a story where whining or complaining plays a role?

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE:

This week, pay attention to when you're tempted to whine - and then ask yourself if the whining energy can be redirected into something more constructive: standing up for a solution, or advocating for justice. Tempted to complain about what's for dinner? Try redirecting that energy toward discussing food insecurity in your area, and

brainstorming together about what you might do about it. Tempted to grumble about something small at work? Try redirecting that energy toward a constructive solution, or even toward supporting legislation to fight workplace discrimination. As you tackle this challenge, be as creative as you can, and check in with each other about how it's going. Don't complain - stand up!



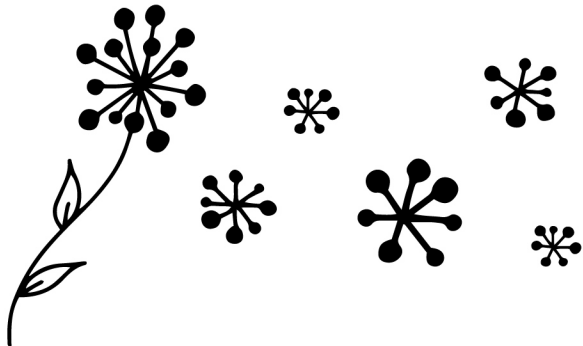
CONFIDENTIAL TO PARENTS:

Kids can be whiny. We know. They also tend to have finely honed senses of (in)justice (at least when it comes to their own interests!). This week, when the whining ramps up, listen deeply and see if there isn't a justice issue buried somewhere deep in what they're saying.

WEEK FOUR: GRATITUDE

READ:

Psalm 23

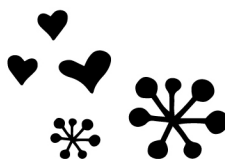


DISCUSS: ♡♡♡

Gratitude is one of the foundations of the life of faith. This is not only because it's good manners to thank somebody who's done something nice for you; it's because gratitude can actually rewire your brain. Over time, focusing on what's good in your life and offering gratitude for it has been shown to improve sleep quality, fight depression, and provide a whole host of mental and physical health benefits (plus that note you wrote might just finally make you Grandma's favorite!).



- In general, how does your family do at expressing gratitude? How does that affect your family life?
- Is gratitude to God always the right move? What about for trivial things? Or, if you don't believe that God causes or cures diseases, does it make sense to thank God when a tumor turns out to be benign? Why or why not (there are good arguments on both sides!)?



• • • • •
• **CONFIDENTIAL TO KIDS:** •
• Your parents are working •
• hard. Like, really hard. Would •
• it kill you to say thank you •
• for all they do once in a •
• while? •
• • • • •

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE:

This week, keep a gratitude journal. You can each keep your own, in which you write an agreed-upon number of things (5? 10?) before bedtime and spend a certain number of minutes (5? 10?) giving thanks. Or, maybe you can put up a family whiteboard or piece of paper, and each day contribute to a master gratitude list for that day. Bonus points if you give thanks for other members of the family, and tell them about it!

CONFIDENTIAL TO PARENTS:

We know it seems like nothing compared to the worries and work you have every day, but try to remember that one way or another your kids are working hard. Like, really hard. Would it kill you to say thank you once in a while?



WEEK FIVE: DWELLING IN MYSTERY

READ:

John 11:30-45



DISCUSS: ♡♡♡

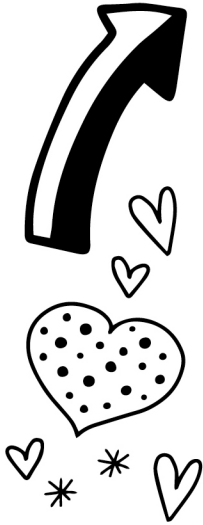
Almost everybody has experienced impossible or unexplainable things. Most of us haven't witnessed the resurrection of the dead, but even the most prosaic-minded have surely beheld a mystery or two at some point in their lives.

- Have each member of the family tell the story, if they can, of a thing they have experienced that they cannot explain (please resist the temptation to explain the mystery away, to "solve" your or others' stories!).
- Many Christians, and members of other faiths too, believe that there will come a time when people will be resurrected from the dead like Lazarus, even if decay has set in, even if we're long past the stench stage. What do you believe?
- How important is mystery in your faith? If every single story in the Bible and in your life had a rational explanation, would that change your faith? Why or why not?

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE:

We live in a world where information, where knowing "objectively," is highly prized. All the accumulated knowledge of the ages is accessible from devices that fit in our pockets. We're expected to hide our ignorance and to have takes and opinions on everything. This week, practice the virtue of curiosity and sink into the wisdom of unknowing.





- Research an unsolved cosmic mystery or unexplained phenomenon. For example, research an astrophysicist and figure out what keeps her up at night wondering. Listen to an evolutionary biologist wonder about who's related to whom. Read someone's account of hearing from a dead loved one. And OK, fine, ONE person can look up UFO sightings, but that's it! Then share what you've learned with your family.
- Spend some time sitting in the relief of not knowing everything, the delight of being surprised again by wonder.
- Ultimately, everyone is a mystery, and thinking that we have another person all figured out is a terrible form of belittlement. During your daily prayers this week, think about the things you can't figure out about each member of your family (whether you like those things or not), and give thanks for the fearful and wonderful mystery of that person, a child of God.

WEEK SIX: PURPOSE

READ:

Matthew 21:1-11

DISCUSS: ♥♥♥

Much of Jesus' ministry up to this point has been leading to these final days in Jerusalem. Even his entry into the city evokes the words of ancient prophets. Jesus seems very clear about his purpose - though he does seem to waver at least once, in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. Purpose can give our lives meaning...but it can also be heavy.



CONFIDENTIAL TO KIDS:

There are probably lots of things you like doing and are good at. You might even be able to make a career out of some of them. But if they're not helping other people or addressing the deep needs of somebody outside yourself, those things aren't your purpose. Look deeper!



Purpose can give our lives meaning...but it can also be heavy.

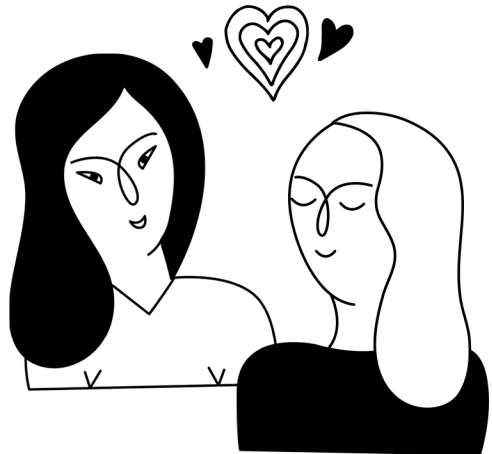
- What was Jesus' purpose? In what ways, if any, does it overlap with the purpose(s) that all humans share?
- Where did his purpose come from? Himself? God? Others?
- What would your parents say your purpose is? What would YOU say your purpose is (it's totally OK if you don't have an answer to these questions yet!)?

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE:

- Spend some time this week thinking about what your particular purpose or calling might be. Write down your answers to these questions: What am I particularly good at? What makes me feel most like myself when I'm doing it? What needs in the world might these things address?
- Sometime this week, ask two trusted people what they think your purpose might be.
- Each night this week, ask God to somehow reveal to you your purpose or calling. Spend some time in silence, listening and thinking.

CONFIDENTIAL TO PARENTS:

It's easy to confuse "purpose" with "career." Help your kids steer clear of this confusion. Their purpose might be to become a doctor...but it also might be to volunteer for a cat rescue. Try to keep your muddy expectations off their calling!

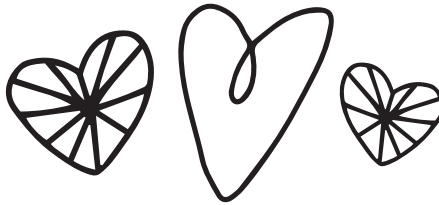


MAUNDY THURSDAY:

SERVICE

READ:

John 13:12-17



TODAY'S CHALLENGE:

- If your church has a Maundy Thursday service or event (in person or online), plan to attend. If you skip straight from Palm Sunday to Easter, you might miss the whole point!
- What's a modern-day equivalent of washing someone's feet? Make a plan to go do a version of that thing together...

GOOD FRIDAY: SUFFERING

READ:

John 18 and 19



TODAY'S CHALLENGE:

- If your church has a Good Friday service or event, plan to participate. If you skip straight from Palm Sunday to Easter, you might miss the whole point!
- Spend some time, each of you, thinking about the ways that you have suffered in your life. If you have instincts to say to yourself, "Oh, it's not that bad," ignore them. Your suffering is your suffering, and even if others have suffered more, or less, or differently, still your suffering is real. What has it taught you?
- Now turn outward. Who's being crucified in the world today? Why? What can you or your family do about it?

EASTER: CELEBRATION & COMMITMENT

READ:

John 20:1-18



DISCUSS: ♡♡♡

- This story is the center of the center of everything for most Christians. Is it for you? If not, what's more central?
- Do you believe this story? Whatever your answer is, what do you mean by that?
- Look back over all the *askesis* you've done together over the past 40 days. What muscles got stronger? What about your family is more beautiful? What part of Easter's celebration are you ready to participate in?

TODAY'S CHALLENGE:

- Go to church (in person or online - whatever feels right!) and celebrate, even if you never go again all year long!
- Make a plan to resurrect something over the coming weeks and months. Resurrect your spirit by going (back) to therapy. Resurrect your family by continuing to meet on Sunday nights for "Love Builds Up" check ins. Resurrect the earth by volunteering for an environmental organization. Resurrect your old ukulele skills and flood the earth with the beauty of music. Resurrect family game night - or parents' date night! Resurrect hope by volunteering at a local shelter, for a political candidate, or a program that welcomes refugees and immigrants. And remember: the act of volunteering can take many forms, including volunteering from home!





love

Your 40 days of training are over - now comes Easter's 50 days of celebration, commitment, and action, flexing your spiritual muscles, putting all those skills into practice. Taking part in God's resurrection takes strength and agility - and you're ready!

HALLELUJAH!

♥ SPECIAL EVENTS THIS SEASON

♥ WE ARE ♥
STRONG
TOGETHER