

Proper 17 (22) - August 30, 2026

- Exodus 3:1-15 - Jeremiah 15:15-21 - Romans 12:9-21 - Matthew 16:21-28

“Didn’t get the memo?”

1. I am really impressed by a middle school kid who lives a few houses down from us.
 - a. He’s a quiet kid. I see him around now and then. I don’t even know his name.
 - i. I don’t know what kind of grades he gets in school.
 - ii. But what I can tell you about him is that he is a dedicated, disciplined and determined kid.
 - b. I know this because whenever I see him, he’s always running.
 - i. For the past several years I have seen him running up and down our alley.
 - ii. I’ve seen him run in the cool of the fall and in the heat of summer.
 - iii. He’s slow and steady.
 - iv. I imagine he runs past our house maybe on his way to the People Trail, but I only see him in our alley.
 - v. So I have formed my opinion of him based on what he does on a stretch of asphalt about two blocks long.
 - vi. I do know that he’s in his school’s cross country team (he flies that flag on the flag pole in front of his house and I spotted him one time with his jersey while he was out on a training run ... plus I asked him).
 - vii. Sometimes, as I’m walking our dog Bella and he runs by us, I cheer him on.
 - viii. Sometimes I ask him how far he’s running that afternoon.
 - ix. Last year he told me he was preparing for a cross country meet.
 - x. Mind you, he didn’t STOP to tell me any of that.
 - xi. He kinda says it as he runs past Bella and me.
 - xii. He’s got a task and he’s not going to stop to chitchat with this old neighbor.
 - c. Think how different it would have been if I had happened to first meet him and his dad downtown or as we walked our dogs or shoveled our driveways.
 - i. Imagine what it would have been like if, as he introduced himself, he remarked: I’m a runner.
 - ii. I would have surely encouraged him “Good for you!!” I would have said “I love to run too!”
 - iii. Maybe I would have asked him to tell me about it some, but that would have been the end of the conversation.

- iv. But when I SEE him running, I feel like I get more information about him than I would have in a brief conversation.
 - v. I am impressed by him. I am honestly inspired by him.
 - vi. And, fairly or unfairly, I make some assumptions about him, as I said: dedicated, disciplined and determined.
 - vii. He puts in the time to do something which he thinks is worthwhile, worth the training.
 - viii. I like that kid.
- 2. In our passage from the letter to the members of the church in Rome, we can tell that Paul liked these people he was writing to, though he had never met them.
 - a. In the very first chapter of the letter he wrote that he had heard about their faith— “Your faith is proclaimed throughout the world!”
 - b. He liked them, he was impressed by them, all because he had heard about the work they were doing as followers of Jesus.
 - c. Paul wrote this letter a few decades after Jesus was raised,
 - d. Paul is wrapping up a fairly deep theological discussion in the early chapters by just giving them encouragement and a straight forward set of instructions, how Paul expected followers of Jesus to live, to behave.
 - e. They seem to be given in two parts
 - i. First is how they were to treat each other. With love, hope, seeking what is good, giving hospitality to strangers
 - ii. Then, though, a harder instruction: Pray for, help and feed those who’re out to get you.
 - iii. Be present with people in their happiness and sadness
 - f. Now, remember that he hadn’t met them, and we don’t know if this is the first letter he had ever written them (seems like it was), so these instructions are both support and a reminder
 - i. It’s like me telling my neighbor: keep it up!
 - ii. Because, trust me, if Paul had heard they were messing up, he would have come right out and said it: you gotta get your act in gear here!
 - g. To be a follower of Jesus means to believe but also to do as Jesus did.
 - i. Probably none of the people had gotten to meet Jesus
 - ii. Even Paul never met Jesus
 - iii. So they only had the teachings of Jesus communicated by others to guide them
 - iv. And they had the actions of their teachers as a lesson to
 - v. It’s not enough to say “I am a Christian” but it is more important for that label to be clear based on how you live your lives.

- h. So, let me just remind you that the churches in the early decades after Jesus was raised were not buildings like this, prominently at the corner of a town.
 - i. No, the church people gathered in homes, where they would have a meal together, worship God, look after each other's needs.
 - j. They would NOT have wanted to draw attention to themselves wearing a sign that said "I'm Christian" because at that time it was something that the Roman empire persecuted.
 - k. So, it wasn't SAFE to be Christian in public, it was a RISK to live out as Jesus taught--- but it was still something which Paul emphasized: to ACT as Jesus did. To follow his example.
3. Jesus liked his disciples, he was patient with their hit-and-miss learning, but here's a time when his frustration boiled over because the message wasn't getting through
- a. Last week's reading had Peter on top of the world, number one student who answer correctly that Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed of God!
 - b. But as Jesus explains that would mean suffering (and death) were around the corner, Peter forgets Jesus is the leader he follows and instead takes him aside to correct him, or protect him
 - c. Peter, always Peter.
 - d. What I think Jesus was doing here was connecting the dots for the disciples about how his teachings (which were radically loving) and his healing actions (which rubbed the religious and civil authorities the wrong way) were of course naturally going to lead to a confrontation.
 - e. Maybe they knew that. They weren't expecting that it would get him killed.
 - f. And I imagine that made them think about their own personal safety.
 - g. But that's just it. It's not safe to follow Jesus. He names it by comparing it to carrying a cross on the way to being crucified.
 - h. In a society ...
 - i. Where the powerful wanted to crush the poor, it's not safe to love them
 - ii. Where the rich wanted to ignore the sick, it's not safe to heal them
 - iii. Where the religious wanted to keep a monopoly on interpreting God, it's not safe to have the Spirit open our eyes wide open
 - i. You really want to follow me? Jesus asks. Then live on the dangerous side of life:
 - i. Loving all, welcoming all, seeking justice, seeking God
 - ii. Putting your own life on the line for the sake of others
4. I will admit that in a country where it seems like there is a church in every corner, where we invoke God in official government documents, in a community which says its welcoming, getting this memo from Jesus or Paul shouldn't shock us or frighten us, but maybe it does.

- a. Because, maybe like in the time of Jesus and Paul, we again live in a society
 - i. Where the powerful want to crush the poor, so it's not safe to stand in solidarity with them
 - ii. Where the rich want to ignore the sick, so it's not safe to fight to get them healthcare
 - iii. Where the religious want a nationalistic God, it's not safe to say that following God is about seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.
 - b. If we imagine that today it's safe or acceptable to live as Jesus lived, maybe we need to re-read this memo and others
 - c. Or maybe we just need to look with renewed honesty at what Jesus did, so we can then ask ourselves how do we follow in his footsteps, in every way we can?
5. My little neighbor runs because he has to put in the training for when it's time to leave it all on the field running his very best. We keep practicing doing what Jesus showed us for when it's time, in big or small ways, to stand by his side when it counts.

Reflection questions

1. Share a story about someone you've admired from a distance, sharing what made you look up to them.
2. How do you understand Jesus' phrase: "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Matthew 16:24?
3. If Jesus were living among us today: what things would he do (similar to what he did in the Gospels) which would make it difficult for people to follow him?