



GROW

IT'S TIME FOR US TO GROW

A note from Pastor Jon



“As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Acts 4:20

I am giving thanks for all God has been doing in and among you during the past few years. Week in and week out, we worshipped and deepened in our walk with Jesus, even expanding to draw in people participating online. After a couple years of looking, we have a new Children's & Family Ministries director. We welcomed 41 new covenant partners into our family of faith in 2022. We have seen you get more engaged in serving and giving.

In so many ways, we are living out our mission of **loving Christ Jesus, boldly proclaiming Truth, serving our neighbors and growing God's kingdom**. It's a mission that I continue to be eager for us to follow.

That's why I've been excited to work alongside your elders on the Session to pray and discern how we can best live into that mission in the next few years. During the past few years, Session has adopted a number of strategic priorities we believe will move us into greater obedience to the Great Commission to make disciples and the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor.

Those priorities include discipleship and evangelism, as well as effectively stewarding our strategically located facility to those ends. Now, it's time to take concrete steps to live out these priorities.

Our first step is launching the **Grow** initiative. Why **Grow**? Over and over, throughout Scripture, we see that to be a follower of Jesus is to grow: We grow individually and we grow corporately; we grow in depth of faith and we grow in number by calling others to faith in Jesus.

The goal of the **Grow** initiative: to stir our hearts to invest in the lives of people who don't know Jesus and to provide the tools we need within our facility to be a welcoming place where people can encounter Jesus. **Grow** will call us to commit to reaching those around us by giving of ourselves and giving of our resources.

During the **Grow** initiative, during Lent and concluding on Easter Sunday, you will hear more about how you can be part of it. This booklet is also a way for you to engage in the initiative by reading more about our hopes and dreams, and by studying along with us as we seek to grow.

Grow is going to challenge you and deepen your commitment to following Jesus. It's also a significant moment in our life together. I want to encourage you to commit to being in worship each Sunday of the initiative, attend one of the Vision Gatherings we will be hosting and attend a prayer and worship night in March.

I am grateful for your engagement in what God is doing here at First Pres. We couldn't do what we do without you.

Anticipating what the Lord will do,



GROW

The initiative to mobilize First Pres for discipleship and evangelism.

In 1789, just a decade after Harrisonburg was founded, a group of people (in what was then the frontier of Rockingham County) decided that Harrisonburg needed a church of its own to reach its 11,000 residents.

With that one step of faith, those who founded First Presbyterian Church set into motion generations of impact in the heart of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County. Because of them, we are here today. And it all started with their obedience to Jesus' command to make disciples.

Those who founded First Pres lived in to what William Temple once said: "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members." That includes us!

All these decades later, we have the same mission: to follow Jesus' Great Commission of making disciples and His Great

Commandment of loving God and neighbor. We have summarized this mission in recent years by saying we exist to **love Christ Jesus, boldly proclaim Truth, serve our neighbors and grow God's kingdom.**

How are we doing with it?

In John 15, Jesus tells us He is the vine, we are the branches and God the Father is the vine grower. Thus, God grows us. Sometimes, like with vines, He grows us by pruning. In recent years with staff transitions, a change in our denomination, plus COVID, we were pruned as a congregation. Now in, His time and through His grace, we are experiencing a season of growth. Consider:

- Our worship attendance is growing and so is our mem-



THE GROW GUIDE

bership with 41 new Covenant Partners in 2022 and people already signing up for our next connections class in April.

■ Our August 2022 Summer JAM Camp for children reached full capacity and we had to close registrations.

■ We are now averaging over 40 college students engaged in worship and a brunch Sunday school class.

■ We are seeing a growing number of post-college Young Adults in worship and a new small group started for them.

■ After a few years of staff transitions and vacancies, we are now fully staffed, and what a staff team God has blessed us with!

■ Finally, we have seen the Lord grow us in and around our strategically located church building. A long vacant and unusable building is now an amazing courtyard funded entirely from private gifts.

God is growing us now, and yet because God's kingdom is a living organism, there is always more growth to come.

The poet Walt Whitman gets at this in "O Me! O Life," where he writes, "The Powerful Play goes on and you can contribute a verse." Put another way, God is going to grow His Church, and we can be part of that.

To continue to grow, we need to reach those who don't yet know Jesus. That's what the **Grow** initiative is all about.

It's time to grow.

Let's get at it.

HOW TO PRAY

Prayer is the greatest work we can do as we seek to live out Jesus' mission.

For specific prayer points, see page 6.

HAVE A "ONE"

During this initiative, we want to grow our relationships with people who don't know Jesus. By deepening these friendships, we pray God opens opportunities to share Jesus. On Commitment Sunday (March 26), we will each commit to our "One."

Find out more, page 7.

CONTRIBUTE

Corporately, we want to begin some specific projects that can help us grow in our mission. We'll need your help to get it done. We will commit to this on Commitment Sunday (March 26).

See the projects, page 8.

STUDY WITH US

These daily reflections will help you find the places where you need to grow and will help you dig deeper in the themes we will be studying during the **Grow** initiative.

Start now, page 19.



HOW YOU CAN PRAY

As we grow, we need to pray. It's what will fuel your growth in Jesus. So, we want you to pray each day of the **Grow** initiative. Below is a daily guide that will help you pray for God's kingdom to grow in us, our community and the world. In addition to these prayer prompts, **spend each day praying for your "One,"** that friend that you want to develop a relationship with. If you have not figured out who that person is, pray that God would show you. If you have a "One," then spend each day praying for opportunities to deepen your relationship and for moments when you can share the reason for the hope you have in Jesus.

First Pres Family	Our Community	Our Neighbors	The World	The Church	My Network	First Pres Leaders
Feb 26 Children and families	Feb 27 Local political leaders	Feb 28 My next-door neighbors	Mar 1 Missionaries from First Pres	Mar 2 First Pres church planting	Mar 3 My immediate family	Mar 4 Pastors
Mar 5 Youth and parents	Mar 6 First responders	Mar 7 Local schools and leaders	Mar 8 Unreached nations	Mar 9 Churches in our presbytery	Mar 10 My extended family	Mar 11 Elders
Mar 12 College students	Mar 13 The court system	Mar 14 Downtown	Mar 15 Persecuted Christians	Mar 16 Churches in ECO	Mar 17 My coworkers	Mar 18 Deacons
Mar 19 Young adults	Mar 20 Social services	Mar 21 Neighborhood other than yours	Mar 22 Mission organizations we support	Mar 23 Our sister church in Ethiopia	Mar 24 My closest friends	Mar 25 Committee leaders
Mar 26 Single adults	Mar 27 Businesses	Mar 28 Local colleges & universities	Mar 29 Bible translators	Mar 30 Small, rural churches	Mar 31 My church family	Apr 1 Commissioned Lay Pastors
Apr 2 Senior Adults	Apr 3 Nonprofits	Apr 4 Local retirement communities	Apr 5 Local Christ-followers	Apr 6 Other churches in our area	Apr 7 My doctors or other service professionals	Apr 8 Church staff

A photograph of a man with glasses and a dark jacket talking to a woman with grey hair. The man is on the left, looking towards the woman on the right. They are outdoors, with a stone wall and a wooden door in the background.

WHO IS YOUR “ONE”?

We tend to make it harder than it really is. When Jesus says to go into the world to make disciples, and when He says to love our neighbor, we feel inadequate for the task, or we make the call seem more complicated than it is.

But Jesus' call is actually straightforward: He is saying we need to have relationships with people who are outside His church.

We need to build friendships and make relational investments with people who aren't walking with Jesus.

That's why we are asking everyone to commit to identifying a “One,” someone you're purposefully going to build a friendship with.

Pray for the Holy Spirit to show you who this person is. Likely, it's someone you already know, someone who is already in your life. And while we hope that at some point you'll be able

to share Jesus with this person, that's going to come after you build a relationship. The first step is simply being a friend, someone who cares.

Identifying someone in your life who isn't actively walking with Jesus is meant to be about a relationship, not an obligation or about fixing someone. This is not a project. It's meant to be as simple as getting to know someone better.

Also, to consistently build a relationship, you have to be able to spend time with someone, so your “One” should be someone you can meet and talk with regularly.

Again, this person is likely someone you already know. Some of us may simply need to take the first step toward identifying this person by asking God who it is and then listening and watching as He answers.

Rest assured, as you seek God in this and as you aim to be a caring friend, Jesus will be delighted to meet you there!

CONTRIBUTE

In addition to praying and identifying people we want to build relationships with, we are embarking on **three major initiatives** as a community. These initiatives are the direct result of a years-long look at First Pres' mission, vision and priorities. They will require us all to financially contribute above and beyond our annual giving.

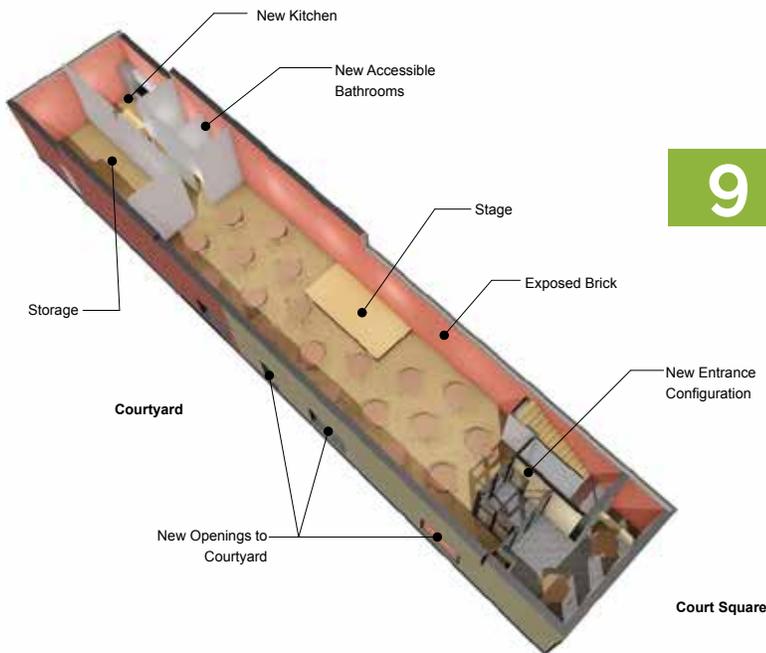
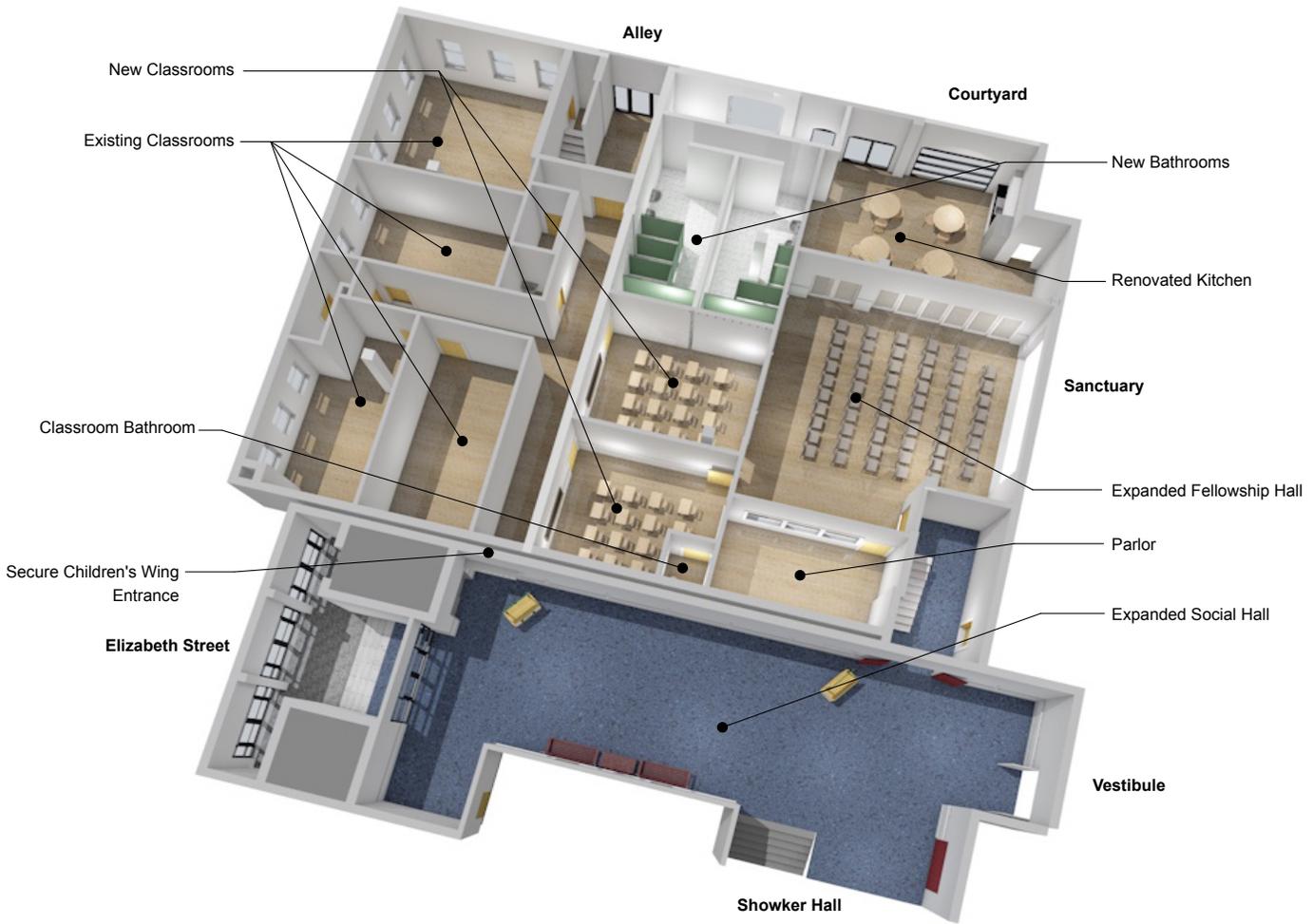
Together, these initiatives will help us grow.

We are seeking to raise \$1.5 million to fund these initiatives:

- Create a church-planting incubator at 9 Court Square and connecting it to our newly created Courtyard and the historic part of our facility
- Strengthen our children's and family ministries by creating a consolidated and more secure area for these ministries and connecting the area with the Courtyard and 9 Court Square
- Reimagine our welcome area to create more hospitality for guests and better flow to our children's wing, the Courtyard and 9 Court Square

An overview of what we're doing is on the next page. Read about each project in the pages that follow. We will each make financial commitments toward the projects on Commitment Sunday, March 26.

CHILDREN'S WING & WELCOME AREA



9 COURT SQUARE

**Costs are based on a May 2022 estimate*

GROW

BY PLANTING CHURCHES

First Pres began as a church plant.

More than two centuries later, the church has been a vital part of our community and is still in the heart of our city and county.

Church planting is in First Pres' founding, and it is part of our DNA, as, in past decades, the church has planted other churches.

While it's been some time since we've planted a church, we are ready to reactivate this part of our identity by creating a church-planting incubator at 9 Court Square, the building next to our newly created Courtyard.

The vision is for a space on the first floor where a church plant could start, grow and be launched. We are aiming for a

flexible space that could also be used for regularly for evangelism. The second floor could be leased out or could be a space for other ministries' offices.

Already, Session has established and is providing annual funding to a church-planting committee with the goal of participating in some kind of church plant every five years. We know that far too many of our friends and neighbors, not to mention people throughout the world are, in the words of Ephesians 2:12 "without hope and without God in the world." We also know, from various studies, that planting churches is the most effective way to change this.

Creating a church-planting incubator at 9 Court Square will be a key part of our work.





9 Court Square's first floor will be used as a church-planting incubator and will be designed to have the ability to be used in a flexible way. You can see the Courtyard through the windows at the right. You can see what the space looks like now on the opposite page.



GROW

THE NEXT GENERATION

More than two-thirds of children who grow up in churches like ours will walk away from faith for a season, and many never return.

This is simply not acceptable.

So we are renewing our commitment to disciple families and children so that our children are disciples for life. That commitment is as important as it ever has been, especially as the world and our culture discipled our kids and families in all kinds of ways that do not align with the truth of God's Word.

Each one of us, when a child is baptized, vows to help families raise their children to know and follow Jesus. We want to fulfill those vows, and part of that means creating a consolidated, welcoming, secure space for our discipleship efforts.

Renovating the first-floor children's wing and nursery area, adding classrooms and creating a connection to the Courtyard through the Old Fellowship Hall and unused kitchen will help create a space where we can invite friends and neighbors to be part of these discipleship efforts.



Conceptual Drawing



GROW

IN OUR HOSPITALITY

First Pres is in the heart of Harrisonburg. It has been since our founding. It was strategic then and is strategic now.

Our current facility on Court Square, built in 1908, gives us a unique opportunity to grow God's kingdom in the central Shenandoah Valley.

To maximize our location, we need to make our facility more welcoming by creating a more open space for fellowship and

greeting guests. We also need to create better access and flow to our newly constructed Courtyard. We can do that by reimagining our existing lobby area and creating a natural flow from the oldest part of First Pres to the newest, the Courtyard on Court Square.

Creating the welcoming space will also create a straightforward link to our newly envisioned children's wing.



A reimagined welcome space would increase the space for greeting and fellowship and would create a secure children's wing.



Renovating the Old Fellowship Hall and adjacent kitchen will create a pathway to get to the newly constructed Courtyard. Below, you can see how the courtyard would be accessible from what is now the old, unused kitchen.



YOUR PART

As a church, we are asking you to prayerfully make these two specific commitments as part of the **Grow Initiative**.

1

Commit to your “One.” If haven’t yet identified who this person is, commit to prayer as you ask God to show you. Remember, it’s probably someone you already know. Once you know, begin building your relationship in simple ways, and pray for this person. Reaching our community won’t happen just through what we do at the church building; it happens through our personal and intentional relationships. On **Commitment Sunday, March 26**, we will make a commitment to pursue these relationships.

2

Give sacrificially to these projects by making a 3-year commitment (above and beyond your regular giving) to First Pres. As you discern what your part in this may be, join us in praying, “Father, show me what step of faith I can take in order to join with others to meet this need.” On **Commitment Sunday, March 26**, we will come together to declare our financial support.

Monthly	Annually	Total
\$100	\$1,200	\$3,600
\$200	\$2,400	\$7,200
\$300	\$3,600	\$10,800
\$400	\$4,800	\$14,400
\$500	\$6,000	\$18,000
\$750	\$9,000	\$27,000
\$1,000	\$12,000	\$36,000
\$1,250	\$15,000	\$45,000
\$1,500	\$18,000	\$54,000

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



What process did church leadership use to arrive at the Grow initiative?

Our pastors and elders engaged in a multi-year process to articulate our vision and strategic goals based on our mission of **loving Christ Jesus, boldly proclaiming Truth, serving our neighbor and growing God's kingdom**. That process included input from the congregation and all our ministry teams and committees. The process led us to prioritize discipleship and evangelism, and using our facilities toward those goals. Three major projects emerged, and they are part of this initiative: creating a church-planting incubator at 9 Court Square and connecting the Courtyard to our historic building, consolidating and securing our children's ministry areas and creating a more welcoming lobby for guests.

Will we take on debt for the projects?

The elders have determined not to take on long-term debt to complete the projects, but they are open to short-term construction loans as long as campaign commitments are in line with the loan amounts.

Can surplus operating funds or designated funds be used for the projects?

Some surplus funds might be used for initial phases of the project, such as engineering and permitting, to create a more condensed and efficient timeline for the projects. Estimates call for engineering and permitting to take about four months and actual construction to take about eight months.

Continued, next page >>

What happens if we do not raise the amount desired?

If we don't raise \$1.5 million to complete these projects, then Session will determine how to prioritize what needs to be completed with the funds committed.

What happens if we raise more than the amount the Grow Initiative is seeking to raise?

If we raise more than we are aiming for, other planned and prioritized projects that contribute to our mission and vision can be initiated. The projects that are part of this campaign are the current priorities.

What specifically are we going to use 9 Court Square for?

The goal is to create a flexible space on the first floor so that a new church plant would have space to begin. The goal would be for that church plant to eventually have its own space, which frees up the space for future launches. That's why we call 9 Court Square a church-planting incubator. The second floor will contain offices that can either be leased to generate revenue or that we can offer to ministries we support at a low or no cost.

What's the timeline of the projects?

Because we are committed to funding these initiatives with no long-term debt, the start date for these projects depends mostly on the success of our fund-raising efforts. Once funding is deemed acceptable, the typical process begins with engineering bids, engineering and permitting. This can take a few months, and then construction can begin. One vendor has estimated it could take eight months to complete the three projects once engineering and permitting is completed. If more funds than the goal

are committed, more initiatives will be funded and final project completion timeframes extended - which would be a blessing.

Why aren't we using the courtyard more?

The courtyard has been used for numerous events in 2022, including several downtown festivals and events, as well as for church events such as our church picnic and children's events such as Summer JAM Camp. To use it even more, we need to create a better flow to the courtyard from the historic part of our building and the sanctuary. We also need to create bathroom and kitchenette facilities that are more accessible to the courtyard and don't require travel through the building.

What is First Pres asking of me through the Grow initiative?

Start with prayer. Ask God how you can join your First Pres family in growing in our evangelism and our discipleship, and in leveraging our facilities toward those ends. **One of your commitments will be relational:** We are all praying for and developing a relationship with at least one person who isn't walking with Jesus. This is a crucial component of our mission and of this initiative. **The second commitment is a sacrificial financial commitment** above and beyond your regular giving to the church. We are not asking for equal gifts from all in our church family, but rather equal sacrifice consistent with how God has blessed each of us financially. Our leadership team is praying for 100% participation with these two commitments from our church family.

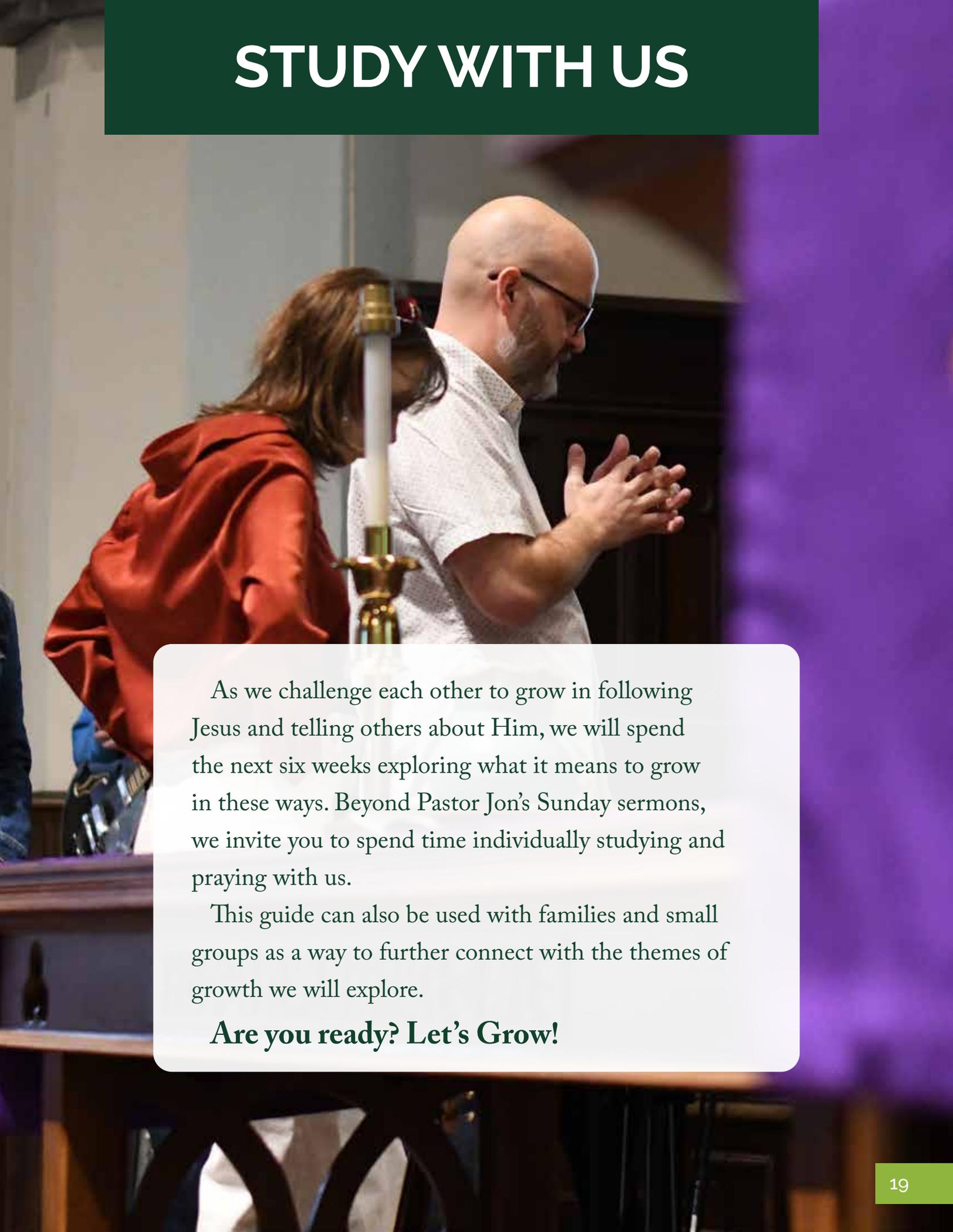
When can I get more information?

We will be hosting several Vision Gatherings, for which you will receive an invitation in the mail. Attend a session and see the plans. You can also find information about Grow at our website.



firstpreshbg.org/grow

STUDY WITH US

A photograph of a man and a woman in a church setting. The man, on the right, is bald, has glasses, and a beard, wearing a white short-sleeved shirt. He is clapping his hands. The woman, on the left, has long brown hair and is wearing a red hoodie. They are standing in front of a wooden altar with a white candle in a brass holder. The background is a church interior with purple lighting on the right side.

As we challenge each other to grow in following Jesus and telling others about Him, we will spend the next six weeks exploring what it means to grow in these ways. Beyond Pastor Jon's Sunday sermons, we invite you to spend time individually studying and praying with us.

This guide can also be used with families and small groups as a way to further connect with the themes of growth we will explore.

Are you ready? Let's Grow!

WEEK 1 HOW TO GROW

Sunday, February 26

Galatians 5:13-26

Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control.

These traits, listed in Galatians 5, make up the fruit of the (Holy) Spirit, the evidence of being followers of Jesus. Who doesn't want to have these attributes defining their days? Couldn't we all use a little more peace? Don't we wish that person would speak to us in a gentler tone? Aren't we tired of not having the self-control we long for but seems always just out of our grasp? We know the Christian life should be

 **Growth is a process. It is not a one-time easy transaction that never needs repeating.**

marked by these traits, but we aren't quite sure how to get there.

So, what do we do? Grab a new planner or notebook? Write out our goals on index cards to post them on our mirrors, kitchen cabinets, and anywhere else they may catch our eye? Look to the latest and best-selling self-help book? We want patience – and we want it now!

Instant gratification. Fast fixes. One pill to make it all disappear. Easy credit with no money down. That's 21st-century

America, the world we live in. We think we “deserve” these things; that we are entitled to them.

But think about it. Have you ever really been satisfied with that quick-fix solution? Has anything in the world ever really filled up your heart in the same way the living God does?

What if God is actually more interested in the state of your heart than He is in providing you with these quick fixes? What if the one true God is gently calling to you to swing wide the doors of your heart and let Him in? Will you? Will you – today – say “Yes, Lord”? Will you allow His Holy Spirit to work in your heart and mind so that this fruit can begin to grow?

Bear in mind that **growth is a process**. It's not a one-time easy transaction that never needs repeating. It's a consistent, little-by-little process that calls us to yield ourselves to who God is and what He can do. And

what He will do in return is immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

For these next few weeks, pray and ask the Lord to grow His fruit in you. It will not always be easy. But it will be worth it.

Q: Where are you looking for a quick-fix in your life? What areas of your heart and mind do you need to yield so that the fruit of the Spirit can grow?

Monday, February 27

Genesis 2:15

Proverbs 4:23

What is a garden? It's a particular place that is intentionally set aside for things to grow.

You may not have thought of your heart as a garden, but it is. It's a place where your thoughts, feelings, words, and actions all take shape. Some of the things we grow in our hearts are good and praiseworthy (love for one another, for example). Some of the things we allow to grow in our hearts are not good (envy, bitterness, etc.).

Did you know that the very first job God gave to man was to garden? Today's passage in Genesis shows us that God's plan from the very beginning was to garden – to grow things. So, God must think growing is a good idea.

But notice the particular words in this passage... “*and put him in the Garden of Eden to **work it and take care of it.***” These are not passive tasks. These are active verbs, and so growth is active. It does not just happen.

In Proverbs 4:23 we are instructed with another active verb, “*Above all else, **guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.***” Consider these phrases separately:

- **Above all else** – more than anything else, at all costs, in all ways
- **Guard your heart** – actively protect, intentionally care for, pay attention to, don't neglect
- **For everything you do flows from it** – every word, thought, and action originates in your heart

As we begin this journey over these next few weeks, we invite you to think of your heart as God's own garden – a place where He can grow His fruit. Pay attention to the verbs in Scripture and participate in the gardening of your own soul – work on it,

take care of it. Everything you do flows from it.

Q: Are you actively tending to the garden of your heart (or passively waiting for something to just change)? Are you guarding your heart? Think of all the influences (books, music, movies, news media, etc.) that bombard your eyes and ears daily. Are there places where God is calling you to more actively guard your heart from these influences?

Tuesday, February 28

1 Timothy 6:11-16

One of the first steps in gardening is cultivating the soil. The place has been picked out and the seeds are waiting to be planted. But first, the soil has to be made ready. Remember, fruit doesn't grow overnight and, for best results, you'll want to cultivate your garden

 **When we cultivate something, we promote its growth by labor and attention.**

spot to get the best return on your effort. But what does that mean?

When we cultivate something, we **promote or improve its growth, by labor and attention**. Some synonyms for cultivate are nurture, develop, nourish, or prepare. As you contemplate the place your garden is planted, consider what things (activities, habits, relationships, etc.) might need to be addressed so that the fruit of the Spirit may grow.

It might be helpful to also think about the opposite of cultivating – neglect, destruction, abandonment, or ignoring. What things in your life have you been neglecting? What might need to be rooted out or trimmed back so that your garden (your heart) is ready for planting?

Today's passage once again uses those **active verbs**. We are called to **flee** (from that which is not pleasing to God) and to **pursue** (things like righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness). And by God's grace, we will do them **intentionally and repeatedly** so that our hearts may yield a lifetime of devotion and discipleship – shining our light for Him.

Q: In your walk with the Lord, what are you nurturing? And what are you neglecting?

Wednesday, March 1

Ephesians 2:4-10

Matthew 12:33

So why all this talk about growing and gardening and cultivating? And how does all this relate to the Church? Because our lives are **not** our own. Today's passage in Ephesians tells us that God made us alive with Christ. Furthermore, "*We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*" (v. 10).

We are **not** our own. We were bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20). The answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism (What is your only comfort in life and death?) succinctly sums up who we are and to whom we belong: "That I am not my own but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."

Such good news! We are His; we have been bought by Him and given good works to do. Those good works include growing – ourselves and others – into faithful disciples who know and love the Lord. But how do we grow? Is it wishful thinking? Is it a haphazard process? No, it is **intentional moving forward focused on an end goal**. Continuing with the metaphor of gardening we've been using: Think about the steps involved in planting a garden. The plot of land is intentionally picked; the soil is prepared; the seeds are purchased, etc. It's all done with the goal of having delicious fruits and vegetables or beautiful flowers that you can enjoy for yourself and share with others.

Now translate that thinking into the Christian life. God, the Master Gardener, has picked His plot of land (this world, our neighborhood, our home, etc.). He has purchased the seeds (believers) and He is in the midst of planting and tending those seeds so that they take root and will grow. His desired end result? A beautiful harvest – men and women and boys and girls who know and love and serve the Lord.

How can we know that we are growing, though? Today's passage in Matthew reminds us that a tree (or plant) is recognized by its fruit. Each one can only bear the kind of fruit that it is. You don't plant cucumber seeds and expect to see squash. Nor would you expect oranges to grow on lemon trees. Likewise, as followers of Jesus, with the Gospel in our hearts and

 **Think about the steps involved in planting a garden...**

minds, **we should be bearing fruit of the Gospel** – growing in our own love and knowledge of our Lord and helping others to do the same. (And as we grow, the fruit of the Spirit we talked about in the very first reading will begin to take root in our own lives.)

That kind of fruit is what God loves and what the world needs.

Q: How does knowing you are not your own spur you on to cultivate the fruit in your life? What fruit has the Lord been growing in you over the last year? Where are you not producing fruit?

Thursday, March 2

Matthew 9:35-38

Good news is hard to keep to yourself, right? That's often the case. A new job? Tell your mom. The scans came back clear? Tell your prayer circle. Won the lottery? Tell the world.

As Christians, we have the best news of all. **There is no better news than the Gospel of Jesus Christ.** So why are we so reluctant to tell everyone – anyone – we meet?

Today's passage in Matthew shows us that Jesus told the disciples, "*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few*" (v. 37). Today's harvest is indeed plentiful. According to some estimates, 3 billion people in more than 7,000 people groups have not heard about Jesus. And, though God may call a few of us to a harvest field in another part of the world, the majority of us are called to be harvest workers in the field where we live, learn, and play – our homes, our offices, our schools.

 **According to some estimates, 3 billion people have not heard of Jesus.**

But why should we? What's the reason? Notice earlier in this passage in Matthew "*He (Jesus) had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*" (v. 36). **Jesus saw the need.** He understood the wear and tear this life can have on a person. He knew that even the most righteous works were like filthy rags. He saw their humanity – the depravity, the brokenness – and He had compassion.

Do we? Do we have that kind of compassion? Do our hearts break at the thought of people dying without Jesus? This is literally a life-or-death question – it's

a question of **eternal** life or death.

Will you look with compassion on a world full of lost and hurting people? And will you say, as the prophet Isaiah did, "*Here I am. Send me!*" (Isaiah 6:8)?

Q: Think of someone you know – someone who isn't walking with Jesus right now. Who is this "One" person for you? Begin to pray for them and look for ways you can intentionally spend time with them. Not as a project, but as a friend who wants them to know the best news of all.

Friday, March 3

Matthew 28:16-20

Telling others about Jesus. Does the idea make you anxious? Or maybe it makes your heart sing? Either way, you can rest in the knowledge that **the results of your efforts are up to God.**

Today's passage reminds us that we as Christians have been instructed by the Savior Himself. We have been given the Great Commission – to "*go and make disciples of all nations*" (v. 19). This passage isn't a minor suggestion. It's the foundational call of Christ to those who want to follow Him.

These are our marching orders! We have been given the responsibility (and privilege) of telling others the Good News. We've been commanded, and our job is to obey.

But the results? They are His – for His purposes and His glory. Consider what Paul wrote to the Corinthian church when they were squabbling over details of who they followed (Apollos or Paul). In 1 Corinthians 3:5-7, Paul made it clear that men are messengers but God is the one who is doing the work. He is responsible for the results:

"What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."

As Christians living centuries after those words were written, we can know the truth of that passage remains the same. As we look again to the Great Commission in Matthew 28, we can take comfort in the final sentence of this passage. "*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (v. 20). We're not alone. Praise

 **We're not alone. He is Emmanuel, God with us.**

God! Read it again: **We're not alone.** He showed us in His very coming to earth; He took on flesh and walked with us. He gave us his Holy Spirit to live inside of us. And He shows us again as He gives this Great Commission – always, always, always. He is Emmanuel – God with us.

Q: French poet Victor Hugo said, "And when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake." In what ways can you labor for Him? How can you rest in Him – knowing He is on His throne? Know today that no power of hell nor scheme of man can ever pluck us from His hand (credit to the Gettys' song "In Christ Alone"). And pray. Pray for your "One" that they might know the peace of God and rest in Him the same way.

Saturday, March 4

*Every Saturday throughout this devotional, you'll see this same list of questions and prayer points. This is an **intentional pause** to allow you time and space to reflect and meditate on what you are learning and how you are growing.*

In the Christian life (particularly in the 21st century) there are many ways to learn more about our faith. We can read the Bible, dig into a topical study, learn theological terms and study Church history. We can even pop in our earbuds and listen to any number of sermons or Christian podcasts while we are busy doing something else.

But our goal as believers in Jesus isn't the gathering of more information. The goal of our Christian growth should be transformation. And to do that, we need space and time to reflect, meditate, and pray.

Use these questions each week to consider what God is showing you – about yourself but more importantly about Him. (These questions can also be used to spark deeper conversation within your family or small group.)

Review this week's Scripture passages and reflection questions.

- What stands out to you?
- What was particularly challenging for you?
- What did this week's passages show you about God's character?
- How is the Lord stirring your heart and mind to greater love and obedience?

Pray.

- **Pray** about how the Lord is at work in your life,

our church, and this community.

- **Pray** about the ways He is asking you to join in and to grow.
- **Pray** for an open heart to hear Him. Pray, too, for a willing heart to obey when and where He leads.
- **Pray** for your "One." Pray for the relationship you're building. Pray for the questions, hurts, and challenges they face. Pray that that Holy Spirit will draw them to a saving faith in the Lord. Pray for how you can best bear witness and share the hope you have.

WEEK 2 WHY GROW?

Sunday, March 5

Matthew 22:34-40

At the end of last week, we read the Great Commission – to make disciples. You might even say it's our job description. We are to make disciples. We – not just pastors, not just elders, not just Sunday School teachers, not just missionaries – WE (all of us!) are to make disciples.

But **how**?

We learn **how** to make disciples by reading the Great Commandment (today's passage).

- We are to love the Lord with all our heart and soul and mind.
- And we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

It really is that straightforward. We overcomplicate and overanalyze it. We organize it and then we procrastinate about it. But, put simply, **when we love someone (or something), we spend time with them.** And, if you think about it, we must love an awful lot of things – our closest friends and family, our phones, our habits, our television-watching, or internet surfing. These things all have a part of our hearts because they have a part of our time. In fact, you could say **what we spend time on (or who we spend time with) is shaping (discipling) us.**

So, if we are to make disciples (and we are!), then how do we do it? **By spending time together.**

First, spend time with God and love Him with all your heart and soul and mind. Simple ways to do this can include reading Scripture, listening to hymns and

worship music, writing out your prayers, studying a theological topic, etc.

And second, spend time with others and love them with the gift of your time, attention, and care.

It really is that straightforward.

Q: Who and what is discipling you? Who and what has your time and attention? What things are distracting you from building relationships with God and others, including your "One"?

Monday, March 6

Mark 6:35-44

Our job is to make disciples. And we do it by spending time together.

Every one of us has some extra, unclaimed free time that we're just waiting to give away, right? Not quite. The reality is that we live in a fast-paced, technological, me-centered world where our time is filled to the brim with work, family, and friends. We are wearing ourselves out volunteering, coordinating, going, giving, well, you get the idea...

But this is one way we overcomplicate our role in making disciples. We think we have to find extra time, additional time apart from every other thing we're doing. We think making disciples is a task unto itself and we can't possibly manage to squeeze one more thing in. And while we agree in our heads that it's our job, we just can't find the time in our calendar to do it.

 **Give Him what you have and He will multiply your efforts.**

Friends, you don't need extra time. And you don't need new hobbies. And you don't need to know the Bible forwards and backwards and every footnote in between. What you need is a willing heart and God working through you. Give Him what you have and He will multiply your efforts – just like Jesus did with the loaves and the fishes in this passage from Mark.

And think about this... **we make disciples when we love God, when we live out our faith in the day-to-day, when we live lives of obedience. We make disciples by doing this in the presence of others.** By living out our faith, we are loving others as we love ourselves. We're not withholding the best news of all. We're pointing them to the one true source of hope and peace and healing and salvation.

So, making disciples can be as simple as telling your

friend over coffee how the Lord is seeing you through a hard time. Making disciples happens when you're standing side by side at the kitchen sink with your spouse and recounting the ways you saw God at work that day. Making disciples is remembering to lift others up in prayer at your dinner table with your family.

We make disciples by testifying to who He is when we walk through our own questions and trials. We point one another to our Savior when we persevere and do not grow weary. We teach each other again and again that the Gospel is about Jesus and not us as we allow Him to shape and guide our words and actions – and we do it in the presence of others.

Q: Where can you intentionally use your time (everyday, ordinary occurrences) to disciple others (point them to Jesus)? Who are some specific people in your day-to-day life that you know don't know Jesus? How can you begin to build relationships with them?

Tuesday, March 7

2 Corinthians 5:11-15

Acts 4:1-20

We've talked about **how** we are to make disciples. But it's important to remember **why**. Why are we supposed to make disciples?

"For Christ's love compels us..." (2 Cor. 5:14). That's the long and the short of it. Christ has loved us with an everlasting love. We've been given an inheritance. We're adopted sons and daughters of the one true God. And because of these things – in gratitude for His love, we are compelled to offer the same blessing to people who don't have it yet.

In Acts 4, we read that Peter and John were speaking to the people about Jesus. The rulers of the day didn't like this so Peter and John were taken to jail. The rulers asked Peter "*By what power or what name do you do this?*" (v. 7). Peter responds that "*it is by the name of Jesus Christ...*" (v. 10). He succinctly states in verse 12 that "*salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*" Peter gets it. He knows the love of Christ, and he is compelled to speak the truth.

But, further in this passage we read about the rulers wanting to stop this thing (faith in Jesus) from spreading. So they call Peter back in and command him (and John) not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. He and John promptly reply that "**we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard**" (v. 20).

They can't help it. May it be the same for us! May Christ's love and the Lord's faithfulness and the gifts of the Spirit prompt us again and again to speak about what we have seen and heard.

Q: In what ways is Jesus' love compelling you to speak about Him? Do you sense the same urgency as Peter? If not, pray that God will fill you with it.

Wednesday, March 8

1 Thessalonians 2:8

By now, you're probably thinking something like... *I want to tell others. But I'm overwhelmed. I don't know where to start.*

We get it. Except . . .

For our loved ones – our friends and family and those we know and care for. How much do we love them? The choice we are making to speak (or not) can directly impact where they spend their eternity (with or without God). As we said before, **this is literally a question of (eternal) life or death.** So yes, we may feel tired or overwhelmed or fearful, but this small verse in Thessalonians helps provide the motivation we need. *"Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well."*

Delighted. That one word speaks volumes about the joy we are to possess as we look to make disciples. And, again, right here this verse echoes our previous instruction – that we make disciples by sharing our lives. Sure, discipleship can happen in a focused study or Bible class. But perhaps the most effective means of discipleship is simply sharing our lives. Things like:

- **Meeting** someone regularly for coffee.
- **Inviting** someone into your home for dinner.
- **Asking** someone to join you in a hobby you do.
- **Seeking** someone's advice on something they know about that you don't.
- **Being** honest and vulnerable about your own doubts, fears, and trials, and yet of your own faith in God.

So, let's take to heart the words of Hebrews 12:1-3. Let's throw off everything that hinders us. And run with perseverance this race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Q: What's hindering you? And what are some ways you can share your lives with others?

Thursday, March 9

Philippians 2:1-11 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Does it really matter if I make disciples? Aren't there others who are more gifted, have more time, and have a wider reach? Why do I need to make the effort?

Let's go back to the basics of our faith.

- How do I know Jesus loves me?
Because the Bible tells me so.
- How do I know I need to make disciples?
Because the Bible tells me so.

In today's passage, the Bible tells us why we are to make disciples.

- **"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ"** – Have you been encouraged by the Lord?
- **"If any comfort from His love"** – Have you been comforted by Him?
- **"If any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion"** – Have you received the Lord's tenderness and compassion?

The answers, of course, are yes.

If so, then... *"in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others"* (v.3-4).

And, in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, we are reminded that we are to praise God... *"the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God"*.

Don't miss that key phrase right in the middle of this verse in Corinthians – **"so that."** We have been comforted in all our troubles **so that** we can comfort others with the comfort we have received. We are not comforted by God for no reason. We are to turn around and extend that same comfort – the comfort we ourselves have received – to our friends, neighbors, family and coworkers.

And the reason why we do this – why we extend comfort, why we make disciples? That can be summed up in verse 3 of this passage in Corinthians,

 **Does it really matter if I make disciples?**

which says: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." He is due all the praise and honor and glory we can give. He is worthy. And that's why we stretch ourselves. That is why we reach beyond our comfort zone. For His name.

Q: How have you received encouragement and comfort from God? Have you told someone about it? Have you told your "One"? Who could you tell? And how can you now comfort others in the way God has comforted you?

Friday, March 10

Mark 1:16-20

Have you ever noticed the smaller simple words and phrases in Scripture? Just like that "so that" phrase we read yesterday, there are many other phrases in the middle of Bible verses that say so much. Maybe you're so familiar with the stories and people described in Scripture that these seemingly insignificant phrases don't jump out at you any more. Consider this...
Over and over in Scripture, we see God take action or we see Jesus perform a miracle. And, all too often, we read quickly over the next phrases so that we can jump to the next miracle. But don't miss what these small phrases are and how they should impact what we do as believers.

If you are following Jesus, He is at work in your life.

Repeatedly in Scripture, after Jesus has done a good work, there are short phrases that tell us what happened next – they went and told others:

- Luke 2:17 – "When they had seen Him, **they spread the word...**"
- John 1:40-42 – "The first thing Andrew did was to **find his brother and tell him...**"
- John 1:44-45 – "Philip found Nathanael **and told him...**"
- Luke 4:36-37 – "All the people were amazed **and said to each other... and the news about Him spread...**"

Notice in today's passage from Mark that Jesus says "Come, follow me... and I will send you out to fish for people" (v. 17). He is defining the work that they (and we) are to do. Notice too, their response, "At

once they left their nets and followed Him" (v. 18).

If you are following Jesus, He is at work in your life. Don't keep the news to yourself. Spread the word!

Q: What is your response when God is at work in and around you? Do you hurry to tell others? Or do you delay and make excuses? Consider how He wants your immediate obedience and willing heart to tell the Good News.

Saturday, March 11

Review this week's Scripture passages and reflection questions.

- What stands out to you?
- What was particularly challenging for you?
- What did this week's passages show you about God's character?
- How is the Lord stirring your heart and mind to greater love and obedience?

Pray.

- **Pray** about how the Lord is at work in your life, our church, and this community.
- **Pray** about the ways He is asking you to join in and to grow.
- **Pray** for an open heart to hear Him. Pray, too, for a willing heart to obey when and where He leads.
- **Pray** for your "One." Pray for the relationship you're building. Pray for the questions, hurts, and challenges they face. Pray that that Holy Spirit will draw them to a saving faith in the Lord. Pray for how you can best bear witness and share the hope you have.

WEEK 3 GROWING IN DISCERNMENT

Sunday, March 12

2 Timothy 3:16-17

What guides your daily life? How do you make decisions – both big and small? Where are you finding your source of identity? Where does wisdom come from

As Christians, the answer to these questions should be the Bible. Not that Scripture will tell you what job you should have or who to marry. But Scripture does tell us that we are to be wise:

- Prov. 4:7 – *"The beginning of wisdom is this – get wisdom. Though it cost you all have, get understanding..."*
- Prov. 3:7 – *"Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil..."*
- Eph. 5:15 – *"Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise..."*

And where do we find wisdom?

- Prov. 2:6 – *"For the Lord gives wisdom, from His mouth come knowledge and understanding..."*
- James 1:5 – *"If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously... and it will be given to you..."*

So as you make decisions, consider today's passage from 2 Timothy. All (not some) Scripture is God-breathed (inspired by the one true God). And, as The Message version of the Bible states it more plainly, **"Every part of Scripture... is useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way"** (v. 16).

But don't miss that small **"so that"** phrase in the next verse. Why should we look to Scripture? **"So that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work..."** (v. 17).

So, if you're looking for wisdom, look to the Bible. It will guide you and equip you for every good work.

Q: Where do you find wisdom? How do you know what is wise? How has the Bible guided you into wisdom in your life? What specific Scriptures have led you to make wise decisions?

Monday, March 13

Psalm 119:97-105

Is the Bible relevant to you? Is it a source of comfort in all your pains? Or is it a source of fear because you don't know it very well? Or perhaps it's a source of shame because of the ways you neglect it day after day?

Some think the Bible is outdated. Do you? Do you think it's simply not adequate for this complex 21st

century world we live in? After all, we live very modern lives and this book is centuries old.

In today's Psalm we read *"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path..."* (v. 105). But maybe the Bible's light has gone out? Maybe there's no way this old book could possibly relate to the world we live in today?

Don't believe it. *"The grass withers, the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever..."* (Isaiah 40:8). Scripture may not give us a minute-by-minute to-do list. But Scripture does include many instructions (action words!) for us to put into practice. Consider the wisdom and instruction in just one chapter of one New Testament book, Colossians 3:

- Col. 3:1: **"Set your hearts on things above where Christ is..."**
- Col. 3:5: **"Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature..."**
- Col. 3:8: **"Rid yourselves of... anger, rage, filthy language..."**
- Col. 3:12: **"Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness..."**
- Col. 3:13: **"Forgive as the Lord forgave you."**
- Col. 3:15: **"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts..."**

Scripture repeatedly offers us wisdom for how to live our lives. We are to give thanks. We are to pray, to worship, and to serve. We're reminded that we should not trust in our own wisdom, we're to show hospitality and consider others better than ourselves. The list could go on and on.

So, if you're not sure what to do or who to approach, turn to the One who created the stars and calls them by name (Isaiah 40:26). Call out to the One who is familiar with all your ways. He knows your words before you speak them. He knit you together in your mother's womb (Psalm 139: 3-4,13).

And read today's passage again. Soak in the sheer delight that we can find in His Word.

Q: Are His words "sweeter than honey" to your mouth? Are you gaining understanding from spending time in His Word?

Tuesday, March 14

Hebrews 4:12-13

Do you have a cherished item – something that is

deeply loved and valued above other possessions?

What do you do with this cherished item? Do you keep it tucked safely away from sunlight, sticky fingers, and other potential forms of harm? Or do you keep it somewhere that you see it day and night as an ongoing reminder of its preciousness to you? Do you tell others about it and bring them to see it?

Think again about this treasured piece and the objective value it holds. Maybe it's worth thousands of dollars (like a rare baseball card). Or maybe it's something that is really special only to you (like a handwritten note by a loved one no longer with you).

Think objectively again about the worth of this particular thing. Is it living and breathing? Does it give life? Can it inform, help, and lead you? Does it show you how to better love and forgive?

All this talk of cherished items. Have you ever thought of the Bible as a thing to be cherished? An item of in-valuable worth – not in terms of dollars and cents but one filled with eternal treasures? Can you fathom the work, time and care – not to mention faith – that it took for these precious words of history to be recorded and passed

down and eventually presented to you in an easy-to-read format of your choice (translation, font size, cover options, words in red, etc.)? Our easy access to the Bible (we can even read it on our phones!) makes it easy to forget the significance of what we have.

Scripture is not just an ancient, historical textbook. No! As today's passage in Hebrews reminds us "**the word of God is alive and active...** it penetrates... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (v. 12). It is unlike any other book – it is alive! As we read it, we are comforted, challenged, and changed by its words through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds. Its words are precious because they are the words, thoughts, and actions of the one true God, the Creator and Sustainer of this whole universe. And we hold them in the palm of our hands.

But, perhaps we should ask instead, do we hold these words in our hearts and minds?

Q: Are you feeding on the feast – the unending buffet – that is the Holy Bible? Are these words of utmost importance to you? Do you prioritize their place in your daily schedule? Do they come from your lips as you speak to others? Do they dance in your mind during the day and do you wrestle with them at night? Do they shape the way that you think about your relationships, choices, and world events?

Wednesday, March 15

Matthew 7:7-23

By this point, you may be wondering how this all comes together. How can you possibly share your life and your faith? How can you know who to tell and when the time is right? How do you know who your "One" should be?

Today's passage reminds us that we have Heaven's wisdom at our disposal. "*Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you...*" Scripture invites us to pray for wisdom and, furthermore, it promises it will be provided to us.

But do we live this way? Or are we running around day after day living like practical atheists? Yes, we know there's one true God. Yes, we believe He loves us. We even dare to believe that He forgives all our sin and that we will get to spend eternity with Him. But, is that where our faith ends? We agree in theory but when we make those daily decisions, it's all about us.

Does your inner dialogue sometimes sound like this? "*I don't need to take time to pray about this (decision, relationship, etc.). I'm smart. I've got this covered. No need for assistance. God's probably too busy to be bothered by this small thing anyway. He's got bigger things to handle. I know what's needed. It'll be easier if I handle it myself.*"

Nope. That's not the Christian life. If we are to fulfill our role as disciples of Jesus Christ by making other disciples of Jesus Christ, we have to live out our faith. In practical, everyday circumstances. Faith isn't just for Sunday morning. Or when the test results are inconclusive. **Faith is a 24-7, 7-days-a-week, 365-days-a-year relationship with the Living God. There is no pause button.** There is only Him. And He has laid out for us a beautiful opportunity in these verses from Matthew. Day after day, decision after decision, over and over again – we are invited to ask, seek, and knock. And we are assured that He will answer.

Q: Are you living out your faith in all the small moments? Are you withholding any area or relationship in your life? Isn't He able to handle it all? Have you asked, sought, and knocked about who you should be sharing your faith with? If not, why not?

Thursday, March 16

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

Returning to some of our earlier imagery about gar-

dening, one of the most important parts in the growing process is weeding. If you're trying to grow flowers or vegetables, you don't want weeds taking up valuable space and resources, choking the life out of what you're trying to grow. No; you weed out what is bad, unwanted, and unnecessary.

The same is true in our walk with Jesus. Too easily we allow weeds to creep in... a few extra minutes here and there on social media... choosing to binge watch another episode instead of getting the sleep we so desperately want (and need)... allowing that conversation to become one of gossip instead of encouragement. If we are not intentionally guarding our garden, weeds like these will settle in and take root. And have you ever noticed how weeds can get more difficult to pull the longer they are neglected?

But take heart. **We've been given the power to pull out these weeds.** In today's passage in 2 Corinthians, we come to understand how we do this. We "demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God" (NIV). And we are **to take our thoughts captive – "fitting every loose thought and emotion and impulse into the structure of life shaped by Christ"** (The Message).

We're not left to ourselves to live this Christian life. Wisdom and strength don't come from us. They come from God as we weed the gardens of our thoughts, words, and actions.

Then, fruit will grow.

Q: Is there good fruit growing in your heart and mind? Is there room for fruit to grow? Or is fruit being choked out by weeds (bad habits, sinful attitudes and actions, lazy and self-centered living)? Ask the Lord to show you how to start weeding your life.

Friday, March 17

Romans 12:2

Today's passage in Romans gives us two instructions about what to do with our thoughts:

- Do not conform to the pattern of this world.
- Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Simply put, are your thoughts being shaped by the world? Or are they being shaped by the Word? Is there anything in all creation more valuable than the Word of God? Consider these thoughts about our Bible:

- *"The sufficiency of Scripture means that we don't need any more special revelation. We don't need*

any more inspired, inerrant words. In the Bible God has given us, we have the perfect standard for judging all other knowledge." (John Piper)

- *"Even though [the Bible] is an ancient document, every person in every situation in every society that's ever existed can find in this book things that endure forever... (it) is never out of date or obsolete. It speaks to us as pointedly and directly as it ever has to anyone in any century since it was written. It's so pure that it lasts forever."* (John MacArthur)
- *"God's Word has always been His chosen instrument to create, convict, convert, and conform His people."* (Mark Dever and Paul Alexander)

If God's word is sufficient (and it is!), **why would we seek after any other source of wisdom?** Why would we chase after the things of this world? What other thing can so accurately provide our identity, purpose, comfort, and security?

Q: How are you conforming to this world? And are you making a point to regularly and repeatedly transform your mind by spending time in God's Word?

There's a wonderful prayer from an old hymn/poem. It's one worth praying regularly as you look to His Word for wisdom:

Make the book live to me, O Lord.
Show me yourself within your Word.
Show me myself and show me my Savior.
And make the book live to me, O Lord.

(Hudson Pope)

Saturday, March 18

Review this week's Scripture passages and reflection questions.

- What stands out to you?
- What was particularly challenging for you?
- What did this week's passages show you about God's character?
- How is the Lord stirring your heart and mind to greater love and obedience?

Pray.

- **Pray** about how the Lord is at work in your life, our church, and this community.

- **Pray** about the ways He is asking you to join in and to grow.
- **Pray** for an open heart to hear Him. Pray, too, for a willing heart to obey when and where He leads.
- **Pray** for your "One." Pray for the relationship you're building. Pray for the questions, hurts, and challenges they face. Pray that that Holy Spirit will draw them to a saving faith in the Lord. Pray for how you can best bear witness and share the hope you have.

WEEK 4 GROWING IN OBEDIENCE

Sunday, March 19

Philippians 3:7-11

These past few weeks, we've been reminded that growth is an expectation in the Christian life and that the Bible is sufficient in helping us to grow. So what now? What does this look like in our daily lives?

This is where the rubber meets the road. It's said that "the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." It's time to do something different and expect different (and better) results.

 **How do we get to know Him? We spend time with Him.**

Growth requires change.

People and things cannot stay the same and expect to grow. By its very definition, growth is development from one thing to another. In Christian terms, we could call this obedience. We recognize God's authority as Creator and Sustainer and we yield ourselves to Him. We obey what He says.

For instance, prevalent throughout Scripture is the command to know Him. And how do we get to know Him? By spending time with Him. **Obedience is where theory and reality collide.** We choose to obey what He is asking of us. Often we bristle at words like "obey" or "obedience." They sound rigid or archaic. We focus on all that we would be giving up or missing out on. But obedience is precisely what God is calling us to do so that we receive His best.

The apostle Paul understood this. As we read in today's passage, he says that anything that was his gain

he would "*now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*" (v. 7-8). In fact, Paul goes on to say that he considers anything and everything "*garbage, that I may gain Christ*" (v. 8).

May Paul's willing obedience be an example to us this day. Oh, that we would pray and live these words of his: "*I want to know Christ*" (v. 10).

Q: How have you been growing during the past few weeks? What is God pointing out about where you need to grow in obedience? Is your prayer, "I want to know Christ"?

Monday, March 20

Philippians 3:12-14

Continuing in the same chapter as yesterday's reading, we learn more of Paul's heart for obedience. He's almost thinking out loud as he writes – pondering his state of obedience.

"*Not that I have already obtained all this... but I press on to take hold...*" (v. 12). Paul's comments here help us see that **obedience is an ongoing task. It's something we do repeatedly.** Notice he says he is pressing on – an ongoing action, not just that he did in the past or will do in the future. It's consistently doing it over and over again.

He goes on in verses 13-14: "*But one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal...*". Here Paul is acknowledging a willingness to obey. He's so focused on the goal that he's willing to set aside everything else.

And what is that goal? What is Paul working toward? What great treasure is worth dying to his own goals and dreams and desires?

"*I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*" (v. 14). Paul's prize – and our prize – is eternity with Jesus!

Is eternity with Jesus our prize? Is it something we value or long for? Or are we so easily distracted by titles and to-do lists and trivial matters that our hearts are clogged and cluttered – too full and too noisy to hear God's still, small voice?

Paul's choice of words indicates that obedience is

 **Obedience is not always easy. ... It requires effort.**

not always easy.

"*Straining toward what is ahead...*" (v. 13). It's a strain; it requires effort. It doesn't come easily or naturally. No, it's dying to self. And living for Him. Living obediently to what He has called us to do.

Q: Where do you need to put off or die to your own desires? And what do you need to put on or bring to life instead?

Tuesday, March 21

Luke 9:57-62

Are we eager to obey? Are we ready at a moment's notice to say yes to Jesus?

In Luke, we read about being ready to follow our Savior. Jesus is walking and talking with a few men. They confess their willingness to follow him – but... Isn't that how it goes? *I'm willing, Lord. But first...*

- "Let me finish that project at work."
- "Let me save up enough money."
- "Let me get the kids back into school."
- "Let me clean myself up."

These men walking with Jesus are making similar excuses. In response to Jesus saying "Follow me, one man says "Lord, **first let me** go and bury my father" (v. 59). And another man says "I will follow you, Lord, but **first let me** go back and say goodbye to my family" (v. 61).

These men (and us too, if we're honest) are too preoccupied with the cares of this world. Like them, we are focused on our own agendas. And when we are looking at those things instead of looking at our Savior, we often miss out on the blessing of participating in what God is doing.

We are routinely given opportunities to be the hands, feet, eyes, ears, and heart of Jesus. But we are often so busy with ourselves, we miss out on the opportunity to spend time with Him.

Friends, we must count the cost. We must be ready and willing to obey. We must follow where He leads and to do that, we must be spending time with Him. As we do that and as we ourselves are satisfied in Him, we will have the opportunity to help point others to the same source of Living Water (John 4:13-15).

Q: What are you preoccupied with? What is crowding out your ability to spend time with Jesus and to let that overflow into others' lives?

Wednesday, March 22

Galatians 2:20

Ready and willing to obey. Yes, we want to be. But how much, Lord? What will it cost me?

Today's verse in Galatians tells us that it **is no longer we who live but Christ lives in us**. Obedience comes at a cost – to count everything as loss. That seems like a pretty high price to pay, don't you think? Consider this reflection on Christian obedience and dying to self:

"If you are ever going to be an ambassador in the hands of a God of glorious and powerful grace, you must die. You must die to your plans for your own life. You must die to your self-focused dreams of success. You must die to your demands for comfort and ease. You must die to your individual definition of the good life. You must die to your demands for pleasure, acclaim, prominence, and respect. You must die to your desire to be in control. You must die to your hope for independent righteousness. You must die to your plans for others. You must die to your cravings for a certain lifestyle or that particular location. You must die to your own kingship. You must die to the pursuit of your own glory in order to take up the cause of the glory of Another. You must die to your control over your own time. You must die to your maintenance of your own reputation. You must die to having the final answer and getting your own way. You must die to your unfaltering confidence in you. You must die." (Paul David Tripp)

That's a high calling. But don't lose sight of the result of our obedience (dying to self):

*The truth is that, though we were justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone lit **always produces fruit, "good works,"...a transformed life**]. (J. I. Packer)*

The results of obedience are the "*surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*" (Phil. 3:8). Obedience results in a transformed life as we renew our minds (Romans 12:2) and contemplate His glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). And, remembering again, obedience results in the fruit of the Spirit growing in our lives – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Still not sure how to be obedient? It is described very practically for us in Ephesians 4:22-24. We are told to "*put off your old self*" and "*to be made new in the*

attitude of your minds, and to put on the new self". Chew on this idea as you change from your pajamas each morning into your clothes to go to work or school. Each time you do this, you are putting off one thing and putting on another. So, too, you are called to put off your old ways and live as a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Q: Theology professor Iain Duguid says, "The further you go in obedience, the more you see of God's plan. God doesn't often tell us the end from the beginning. He prefers to lead us on step-by-step in dependence upon Him." Do you long to know God's plan for your life? Do you want to know His will? God will give you those answers through your obedience – not as one big roadmap, but in step-by-step directions as we follow His lead.

Thursday, March 23

James 1:22-25

So what's the big deal about obedience to God?

In his book "The Discipline of Grace," Jerry Bridges talks about having a "cruise-control vs. racecar" mindset to obedience. Here's what he says:

"Most of us believers practice what I call a 'cruise-control; approach to obedience. We press the pedal of obedience until we've brought our behavior up to a certain level or speed, which is most often determined by the behavior standard of other Christians around us. We don't want to lag behind them, nor are we eager to forge ahead. We want to just comfortably blend in. Once we have arrived at this comfortable level of obedience, we push the cruise-control button in our hearts, ease back, and relax. We don't have to watch the speed limit signs in God's Word, and we certainly don't have to experience the fatigue that comes with striving to obey him with all our heart, soul, and mind.

By contrast, consider race-car drivers. They wouldn't think of using cruise control. They're not interested in blending in with those around them. They want to win the race. So they're totally focused on their driving. They try to push their car to the outer limits of its mechanical ability and endurance and press themselves to the limits of their skill. They're driving with all their heart, soul, and mind. This is what it means to love and obey God with all our heart, soul, and mind. It means striving for holiness,

in the words of Hebrews 12:14. It means making every effort to add to our faith the various facets of Christian character, in the words of 2 Peter 1:5-7."

We cannot drift (cruise) through the Christian life.

We cannot merely hear the words of faith and expect growth to happen. No, as this passage in James points out – we must do what the Word says. We must move our faith beyond simply hearing or even just mentally agreeing. Faith is an activity that we are to engage in with our whole being (heart, soul, and mind). Eternity is before us. Let's not delay any longer in doing the work we've been called to do.

Q: How are you living your life of faith on cruise control? How can you more actively obey what God is calling you to do? How can you move out of cruise control with your "One"?

Friday, March 24

John 14:15

Think for a moment... How well are you obeying? If you were asked to rate your obedience to God, what might you look to to determine that rating?

Maybe you go to church on Sundays and holidays. You make charitable donations – including to your church. You try not to scream or swear but you're human, right? And you certainly aren't as bad as (fill-in-the-blank for the person or group of people of your choice).

Hmm. Is that what obedience is? Are we obeying just to check off a set of boxes? No, we are not only to obey. But we are to **grow in our obedience**.

As Christians, our lives should be marked by more obedience each passing year.

But what does that look like? What does growing in obedience mean? Don't you already feel you're doing and giving all that you possibly can? Consider these potential areas for greater obedience:

- Recognizing and repenting of (turning away from) your own personal sin
- Forgiving others who have wronged you
- Not allowing a root of bitterness to take hold in your heart against another

 **What does growing in obedience mean?**

WEEK 5 GROWING IN COMMITMENT

Sunday, March 26

John 21:15-19

Last week we considered that loving God means keeping His commands to us. In today's passage, we see Jesus ask Peter if he loves Him and then we read His command to Peter's response. It's of such importance that Jesus says it three times to Peter.

- John 21:15: "Feed my lambs."
- John 21:16: "Take care of my sheep."
- John 21:17: "Feed my sheep."

The repetition of this command certainly underscores Jesus's belief in its importance. And who are His sheep? We are!

- Psalm 100:3: "It is He who made us and we are His; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture."
- Psalm 95:7: "For He is our God and we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care."
- Isaiah 40:11: "He tends His flock like a shepherd; He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart."

Scripture clearly commands us (believers) to care for His sheep (His people). We are to do this for those who share in our faith but also for those who do not.

Ezekiel 34 is an interesting passage of Scripture that fleshes out this imagery of shepherd and sheep. If you haven't read it, you may want to take a few moments to do so. The Lord's heart for his sheep is clearly evident in this passage. In it, we read of His commitment to and care for His people.

Throughout Scripture, we are encouraged that, if we love God, we should do what He commands. And today's passage in John defines one such command – to take care of people.

Q: What does it mean for you to "take care of" His sheep? What does this look like with your "One"? Pray for a greater love for His sheep and a willing heart to act on that love.

- Asking forgiveness for the hurt and pain you cause others
- Loving your spouse (or children or neighbor) well
- Restraining yourself from unkind speech
- Giving your time and treasure to the church generously and joyfully
- Reading your Bible consistently and letting it shape and transform your thinking

These are just a few ways that God may be calling you into deeper discipleship – a greater measure of obedience to His commands. Not because they are burdensome. But because they give life.

We obey because we love Him. Today's verse in John sums it up simply as Jesus instructs His followers, "If you love me, keep my commands."

Q: What are some places you long to see greater obedience? Pray now that God will show you where you need more obedience, and then be ready to obey.

Saturday, March 25

Review this week's Scripture passages and reflection questions.

- What stands out to you?
- What was particularly challenging for you?
- What did this week's passages show you about God's character?
- How is the Lord stirring your heart and mind to greater love and obedience?

Pray.

- **Pray** about how the Lord is at work in your life, our church, and this community.
- **Pray** about the ways He is asking you to join in and to grow.
- **Pray** for an open heart to hear Him. Pray, too, for a willing heart to obey when and where He leads.
- **Pray** for your "One." Pray for the relationship you're building. Pray for the questions, hurts, and challenges they face. Pray that that Holy Spirit will draw them to a saving faith in the Lord. Pray for how you can best bear witness and share the hope you have.

Monday, March 27

Luke 15:4-7

Does God really care about sheep (people)? Today's Scripture passage demonstrates just how much He loves them.

"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them..." (Luke 15:4). The passage goes on to say that the shepherd would leave the ninety-nine to go look for the one lost sheep. "And when he finds it, he **joyfully** puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep'" (Luke 15:5-6).

Yes, the Great Shepherd rejoices over the finding of that one lost "sheep." God loves sinners (which we all are). How about you? **Are you in the business of finding lost sheep?**

Think about the circles you travel in – your friends, family, acquaintances, neighbors, etc. Do you stay in your own "bubble" – that safe place where you're comfortable and are not being challenged? Are you tending only to the ones who are closest and safest to you?

Thinking further, do you stay in your safe "bubble" at church? Do you sit week after week in your regular pew and only say hello if the new person comes into "your" space? Are you happy to attend a Bible study or prayer meeting but don't feel the need to ask someone to join you? Do you willingly give from your bank account to support the upcoming mission trip but draw the line at packing your own suitcase?

Staying where we are makes our spiritual minds and muscles flabby. We become lazy in our thinking and lazy in our efforts. We're sure that someone else will step up and fill that gap. And then, if "they" don't, we'll make excuses. We'll shift the blame. We'll grow discontent and complain with a bunch of "if only..." statements.

Here's an "if only..." statement to consider. If only you were willing to step forward...

- To sit with babies in the nursery while parents participate in worship.
- To spend a weekend with the youth at a retreat.
- To serve food and a smile during soup kitchen.
- To provide a listening ear.

And beyond service within that Christian "bubble," what would happen if only **you** were willing to step forward?

- To invite a coworker to join you at a church service or event.

- To build a relationship with your neighbor that moves beyond waving hello and instead takes the time to let them know about the reason for your hope.
- To provide comfort and support to those who face ongoing illnesses.
- To show up and help your friend when it's needed most, demonstrating a living faith.

If only someone would do these things...

"Don't ask which option is safest... Ask which option would be likely to allow me to make the greatest investment in the Kingdom." (Darryl Dash)

Q: Remember, Jesus took the opportunity to step out of His "bubble" when He dined with sinners, visited tax collectors, and spoke with prostitutes. How can you make the greatest investment in the Kingdom that you can?

Tuesday, March 28

2 Peter 1:5-8

Do you ever feel like you've jumped into the middle of a conversation? You can tell it's one you want to be a part of, but you have to figure out what's going on so you can participate.

Today's passage starts out in the middle of another thought. It begins "*For this very reason, make every effort...*" (v.5). To understand why we need to make the effort that will be outlined in the remaining verses, we need to go backwards in the same chapter to read verses 3-4:

"His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises **so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (v.3-4).**

(There's another one of those small "**so that**" phrases in the middle of a passage of Scripture!)

Breaking these verses down into manageable chunks, we see that God has given us everything we need **so that** we can participate (with Him) in this life of faith. Now that we know we have this generous gift, we can continue reading this passage to learn what God wants us to do.

"Make every effort to add to your faith..." (v. 5). So because God has given us everything we need, we should then give our best effort to add goodness,

knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, and love. For, if we possess these qualities in growing measure, they will keep us *"from being ineffective and unproductive"* (v. 8) in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, God has given an amazing gift and instructs us to add to (to exercise) our faith. In doing so, we'll gain these wonderful qualities and be prevented from ineffectiveness.

That sounds like a great deal – one we should all want to be a part of and one we should be eager to invite others to as well.

Q: Meditate on all God has given to you through salvation in Jesus, and beyond that, all the blessings He has put in your life. In what ways can you make every effort to "add" to your faith?

Wednesday, March 29

2 Peter 1:3-4

We were reminded yesterday that we've been given "everything we need for a godly life." But how do we access this "everything we need"? It's not dropped off at our doorstep. And it's not packaged in a pretty bow. Nope. It's a wonderful gift – but it's one we must participate in to receive.

Today's verse in 2 Peter shows us how and where we receive everything we need. *"His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our*

knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness."

 **There is nothing more valuable than knowing Jesus Christ as our Savior.**

To receive everything we need, we must know Him. Do you recall the passage we read in Philippians a week or so ago — *"I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord."* (Philippians 3:8).

That's commitment – to be willing to consider everything a loss because knowing Jesus is of inestimable worth. The Message version of this verse phrases it as a **"high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus."**

What about us? Do we really feel it's worthwhile to know Jesus? Is He our greatest treasure?

Are we willing to put aside everything else so that we can know Him better?

Scripture tells us that we have everything we need for a godly life **through our knowledge of Him.** What

effort are we making to add to our knowledge of Him?

There is nothing – **nothing** – more valuable than knowing Jesus Christ as our Savior.

Q: What efforts are you taking to know Him? Are you reading Scripture regularly? Are you hiding His Word in your heart (Psalm 119:11) – meditating on it and memorizing it? Does it shape your thoughts and feelings as well as your actions and reactions? Simply knowing the Word isn't sufficient (even the Pharisees knew the Word). We grow by having our identity, hope, purpose, and security built on what Christ has done.

Thursday, March 30

2 Peter 3:9-14

What's the hurry? Why do I need to "press on" and "make every effort"?

Today's passage in 2 Peter reminds us of the urgency we should keep in mind about our faith. *"The day of the Lord will come like a thief"* (v. 10). No one knows when that day will come so we should heed the call throughout Scripture to be ready.

After describing *"the day of the Lord,"* verse 11 goes on to tell us what we are to be about. *"Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? **You ought to live holy and godly lives.**"*

There is no time to waste. Not for ourselves and definitely not for our loved ones — especially those who don't know Jesus as their Savior. Eternity hangs in the balance. That is why we press on in our faith (Phil. 3:14). That is why we throw off everything that hinders (Heb. 12:1). That is why we make every effort (2 Pet. 1:5). **So that we will know Him more fully and help others to do the same.** We look forward to *"a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells"* (v. 13).

"So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with Him" (v. 14). That small phrase at the beginning of this verse **"so then"** tells us that because of what was in the previous verse (we have eternity with Him to look forward to) we should make every effort to be at peace with Him

There is no more valuable way to spend our time, energy, attention, and affection.

Q: Can you easily point to how you are growing in your own faith and in your efforts to share your faith with others? Do you want to grow in your commitment level to your Savior and your church?

Friday, March 31

Jude 1:21
Ephesians 4:11-16

Making every effort to know Him. Tending the garden of our hearts. Growing in obedience. Why? What's it all for?

Our goal is to grow in godliness. Not for our own sake. But for the sake of the Kingdom. To the glory of God. To do that, we must grow in our own personal commitment to the Gospel and the growth of His Kingdom.

The obvious next question is – how committed are we? Not just with our lips but with our lives. After all, *"the heart is deceitful above all things"* (Jeremiah 17:9). We can delude ourselves into believing we are as committed as can be. But consider these few questions and measure your own level of personal commitment to your own personal spiritual growth and your commitment to the growth of His Kingdom. Ask yourself:

- Is any part of my heart, schedule, or life portioned off from His oversight and care?
- How well do I know the Bible? Am I a regular reader and doer of what it says?
- Is attending church a personal priority and a pleasure for me? Is corporate worship about Him and His greatness or about me and my personal preferences?
- When I see someone I don't know at church, do I eagerly welcome them in? Or am I more focused on getting to "my seat" and saying hello to those I already know?
- What about my prayer life? Is it a lifeline or an occasional occurrence? Am I praying for things to go my way? Or do I willingly and frequently pray "Not my will but Yours be done"?
- Who am I investing in spiritually? Am I actively looking for people who need to know His loving kindness?

Friends, **we can all grow in our commitment to Jesus**. None of us has attained perfection. So take heart and know that we all like sheep have gone astray;

each of us has turned to our own way (Isaiah 53:6). But thanks be to God! He does **not** leave us as we are. He lovingly tends to us – His wayward sheep. He seeks. He saves. He builds. He fills. He guides. He invites. The list is endless for the lengths He will go to to make us His own.

Q: Which questions (above) strike your heart the most? Think about them and answer them honestly. Pray about what God has revealed to you.

Saturday, April 1

Review this week's Scripture passages and reflection questions.

- What stands out to you?
- What was particularly challenging for you?
- What did this week's passages show you about God's character?
- How is the Lord stirring your heart and mind to greater love and obedience?

Pray.

- **Pray** about how the Lord is at work in your life, our church, and this community.
- **Pray** about the ways He is asking you to join in and to grow.
- **Pray** for an open heart to hear Him. Pray, too, for a willing heart to obey when and where He leads.
- **Pray** for your "One." Pray for the relationship you're building. Pray for the questions, hurts, and challenges they face. Pray that that Holy Spirit will draw them to a saving faith in the Lord. Pray for how you can best bear witness and share the hope you have.

WEEK 6 GROWING IN LOVE

Sunday, April 2

John 6:27-29
Ephesians 3:16-19

For weeks we've been considering growth – how and why we grow; why it is a priority for us to grow; what our growth means for others. So what is the end result? What are we working toward? Or perhaps better stated

– what (or who) is it that we are working to become like?

Any goal guru will tell you to “begin with the end in mind.” For everyone, the end is eternity. One day this earth will pass away and will be no more (Matthew 24:35). **So what does God want us to do while we wait for that day to come?**

In John 6, He tells His disciples “*Do not work for food that spoils but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you... the work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.*”

We are to make every effort, to tend the garden of our heart, etc. because it is what God has called us to do — to believe in Jesus. Yes, there is an initial acceptance of Him as Savior, but the work of believing continues until that Day we are in eternity with Him.

Consider how easily you allow your heart and mind to stray from Jesus. Circumstances will throw you for a loop and people will disappoint you. And all too quickly, you will doubt God’s goodness. Your heart will betray what you think is settled as you wonder where He is, whether He cares, and whether He can help. In the midst of all these things, will you continue the work that God is doing in you (and through you)? **Will you believe Jesus?**

In Ephesians 3, we read the apostle Paul’s prayer for the Ephesian church (and us as well since it’s been preserved in the Bible). He prays that we may know (believe) how wide, long, high, and deep is the love of Christ (v. 18-19). This verse is beautifully expanded upon in the Amplified version: “*And may you... be fully capable of comprehending with all the saints [God’s people] the width and length and height and depth of His love [fully experiencing that amazing, endless love]; and [that you may come] to know [practically, through personal experience] the love of Christ which far surpasses [mere] knowledge [without experience], that you may be filled up [throughout your being] to all the fullness of God [so that you may have the richest experience of God’s presence in your lives, completely filled and flooded with God Himself].*”

What a beautiful description of the Christian life – to be “*completely filled and flooded with God Himself*” (v. 19). God is at work in you to bring about this kind of saving and growing faith. And He is at work to use you to help bring that same faith to others.

Q: How high and wide and long and deep is Jesus’ love? Where have you seen this answered in your own walk with Jesus? Make a list for yourself - a tangible, visible reminder of God’s goodness and faithfulness.

Monday, April 3

John 15:1-17

We started this devotional series together thinking about the fruit of the Spirit – what it is and how we long for it to grow in us. We’ve considered, too, the need for our active participation in our faith. Scripture is filled with **active verbs** instructing us how to live the Christian life – pursue, believe, give, obey, praise, gather, tell, bless, rejoice, submit, pray – to name just a few.

And yet, one of the most profound passages of Scripture that details what Christian growth should look like uses a much more passive verb. In John 15, Jesus tells his disciples “*I am the true vine and Father is the gardener*” (v. 1). But He does not go on to instruct them that they are to work, pursue, or even do. The verb that Jesus uses is to **remain**. “*Remain in me as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me*” (v. 4).

He goes on in verse 5 to say “*If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*”

What sweet relief this passage provides to us. Yes, we are to be active in our faith – believing and forgiving and giving and telling others. But **the heart of where all this fruit originates is in our remaining in Him**. Said another way, we are to dwell in Him, to live in Him. We are to be in His Word and His words will be in us. What comfort and strength to know that He tends to the garden of my heart and will produce the necessary fruit. I am to **intentionally** position myself in His presence (in His Word, with His people, etc.) and to **remain** there. And He will bring about the results.

Why does He do this? “*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love*” (v. 9). He does this because of His great love for us. His great love for the whole world. In John 3:16, we see the demonstration of His love – the lengths He would go to to prove His love. “*For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*” And in John 15, he tells his disciples (and us) to remain in His love. “*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last*” (v. 16).

Did you notice another “**so that**” in the middle of

 **We are to dwell in Him, to live in Him.**

that verse? We were chosen by Him **so that** we would bear fruit. And we are told that we bear fruit by remaining in Him.

Good news indeed.

Q: Ponder what it means to “remain in” Jesus. Practically, what does it look like for you?

Tuesday, April 4

1 John 4:7-12

Building on the thoughts from yesterday's reading, as we remain in His love, we stay connected to the vine (the source and root). Through that connection to the vine (His great love), we will bear fruit. The last verse we referenced yesterday (John 15:16) tells us that we will bear fruit **that lasts**. The fruit that we bear – through our commitment and obedience and love – is an eternal investment, not one that will wither and perish or be uprooted by the fiercest storm.

Today's reading in 1 John reminds us that **love comes from God**. And *“since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”* (v. 11). That's how we bear fruit – by loving one another. Not with words but in our deeds.

 **Christianity is not a spectator sport.**

Christianity is not a spectator sport. We're not called to just sit on the

sidelines and cheer for others (though encouragement is a good thing). No! We are active participants in this eternal reality. We should be on the field, giving our best effort, working toward the end goal. **Are our hearts and minds fully engaged in this effort?**

Friends, joy is contagious! If you love a certain football or baseball team, you are quick to share in their ups and downs and to draw others into that conversation with you. May the same be true for our Christian faith! Speak well of your faith – who God is and what He has done. Similarly, speak well of your church – your brothers and sisters in Christ. We are His team and that makes us teammates; image-bearers together, shoulder to shoulder, working with the same purpose. Don't douse their love and enthusiasm with negativity and divisive talk or stir up strife. Carry the load together.

This world in its present form is fading away. It is lost in its darkness; culture is not neutral and, in fact, evil is actively at work to keep us and our loved ones aimless – full of doubt, skepticism, and fear. **As be-**

lievers in Jesus, we are to actively fight back against those forces of evil and proclaim the love of Jesus day after day – to ourselves and to each other. We need to be reminded that we are athletes on the field of harvest.

As we do this, we will have battle scars – grass stains, bloody noses, and bruised ribs. There will be times of pain and sorrow. But we need to remember that we have a Great Physician. In His great love, He tends to our wounds and bandages us up. He sees and knows our pain and He heals. He equips us as we continue the battle and, most importantly, He is with us in it all.

Q: Have you been more of a spectator or an athlete when it comes to your life in the church? If a spectator, what steps can you take to step into the arena?

Wednesday, April 5

Romans 12:3-16

Four-letter words. There are several that are better off not being spoken at all. But thankfully there are some good ones too. We've been considering one of the best and most challenging ones throughout this entire devotional – **GROW**.

As we approach Easter, we are reminded once again of a favorite four-letter word – **LOVE**. Through God's great love for us, we who were once far off have been brought near (Ephesians 2:13). In His great love, God chose us before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). Because He loved us so much, God gave His one and only Son (John 3:16).

And yesterday we specifically considered another four-letter word – **TEAM**. We need to remember that we are working together with the same goal in mind.

So how do we who believe in Jesus put all of these pieces together? How can we combine what it means to grow, to love, and to act as a team? With another four letter word – **TIME**. It's by spending time that we get to know and understand and love something or someone else.

Think about your own life and the time spent specifically on your faith. How much time do you spend:

- Reading, studying, learning, and memorizing the Bible?
- Praying to God, communicating with Him, lifting up the needs of others?
- Praising God for His blessings and provision?
- Thanking God for all His good gifts, especially

remembering the gift of salvation?

- Worshiping God, focusing on His majesty, glory, and worthiness?
- Serving God through your church? Teaching a class, helping in the nursery, greeting others at the door, building relationships with the youth, serving with the soup kitchen, participating in a prayer meeting, taking the time to encourage your fellow workers (particularly but not limited to the pastors, staff, and other leaders)?

This list isn't put here to shame you or guilt you. It's meant to spur you onto greater things – to live the life God has called you to live. Today's passage in Romans 12 reminds us that *"we have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us"* (v. 6). As a team, we don't all play the same position. But we all can and should use the gifts given to each of us by His grace.

If we want to grow in love as a team, we will spend time together.

"It is in the family of God that I am able to care and be cared for; love and be loved; forgive and be forgiven; rebuke and be rebuked; encourage and be encouraged. All of which is essential to the task of being a disciple of the risen Lord Jesus." (Tim Chester and Steve Timmis)

Q: What kind of a teammate are you? Are you loving and spending time with your teammates?

Thursday, April 6

John 13:34-35

Do we really need to make the effort? Is it really that important for us to grow?

Yes. It is that important. We live in a lost and broken world where evil (presently) reigns and is, in fact, actively working against our Christian faith. So as Christians, we must likewise **actively work to live out the hope, joy, and peace of the Gospel**. Because as we do, this dark world will see that something is different about those who profess to know Jesus as Savior and Lord.

In John 13, as Jesus spent time with His disciples just prior to His arrest, He told them what to do: *"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another"* (v. 34). But perhaps more significant than just telling them what to do, He told them why they were to do it. *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"* (v. 35).

As we love, we make ourselves known as dis-

ciples of Jesus Christ. And, through our obedience (this example of love on display) the Holy Spirit will draw those who do not yet believe to a saving faith.

Gratefully, perfection is not required.

What He asks is a little time, a willing heart, and love for each other. And we can rest knowing that **the results are not on our shoulders; the results are up to Him**. Our role is to simply live out what we say we believe – to love others as He has loved us.

Q: What are some practical ways you can love your brothers and sisters at our church? And what are some practical ways you can love those who are not yet Christians?

Friday, April 7

Revelation 3:14-16

There's nothing more refreshing on a hot summer's day than an ice-cold glass of water. And there's little as comforting on a cold winter's night as a steaming hot cup of cocoa or tea. These extremes of temperature are a picture for us to consider as we wind down this devotional.

These drinks are best served at a specific temperature. So, too, is our love for the Lord; our love for Him should be one of burning hot intensity. In Revelation 3, we read John's letter to an ancient church in a specific town.

But the words captured in this letter are as true for us today as they were for those church members then.

"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

The strong words in this portion of the letter paint quite a picture. Do any of us want to be spit out because God considers us to be lukewarm and of no good use? Absolutely not! And it's with this picture in mind that we must commit ourselves to growing in our own faith. We must commit to greater love and obedience for the sake of the Kingdom.

Because eternity is at hand, we can't afford to let another day go by that consists of halfhearted effort and lukewarm love for our Savior. May it never

 **Our love for the Lord should be one of burning intensity.**

EASTER SUNDAY GROWING IN JOY

Easter Sunday, April 9

Psalm 103

There is no better news – no greater hope for the world – than the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The power of sin has been canceled! Death has lost its sting! Jesus has overcome the grave!

Such joyous news and such a powerful demonstration of God's love requires praise and proclamation.

One of the best summaries of the joy, the hope, and the power of God is in Psalm 103:

*"Praise the Lord, my soul; **all** my inmost being, praise His holy name.
Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not **all** His benefits –
who forgives **all** your sins and heals **all** your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things..." (v. 1-5)*

*"The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in love...
He does not treat us as our sins deserve..." (v. 8-10)*

Friends, with this hope and with this confidence, **let us press us in our faith**. As a team of believers, let's run toward the end goal (eternity with Him) with joy and peace, knowing He goes before us and behind us, beside us, and even in us to guide the way.

And let's not settle for a little "self-improvement". No, let us boldly shine our lights for Jesus. **Let's live out what we say we believe**. And as we do, let our love for the Lord spill over into our words and actions so that others will be drawn into His loving presence.

- **Pray** that the Gospel will **grow** deeper in us – individually and together.
- **Pray** that the love of Jesus will **grow** us to move beyond ourselves and bear fruit that lasts.
- **Pray** that God will **grow** His Kingdom – that many more will come to a saving faith in Him.
- **Pray** for God's Word to **grow** in and around us so that He alone will receive the glory He is due!

be! May our hearts burn with a fierce and fiery love for the Lord. And may that fiery love ignite us into action!

Our church often shares this thought from Oswald Chambers – that **prayer does not fit us for greater work; prayer IS the greater work**. Scripture tells us that "unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1). So let's join together to do the greater work. Let's pray for God's loving power and merciful goodness to work mightily in and through us. Let's pray that the Lord will continue to build His house.

Today, pray for those who do not yet know Jesus. Pray specifically for your "One." Pray that those who do not know Him will be drawn into the warmth of the fire of our collective love for Him. Pray that more people will know the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ! In Him we have forgiveness of sins, the power of the resurrection over sin and death, the peace and joy that come as we walk by faith in step with the Holy Spirit, and the hope of eternity with God, our Heavenly Father.

Pray with praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation!

Saturday, April 8

Review this week's Scripture passages and reflection questions.

- What stands out to you?
- What was particularly challenging for you?
- What did this week's passages show you about God's character?
- How is the Lord stirring your heart and mind to greater love and obedience?

Pray.

- **Pray** about how the Lord is at work in your life, our church, and this community.
- **Pray** about the ways He is asking you to join in and to grow.
- **Pray** for an open heart to hear Him. Pray, too, for a willing heart to obey when and where He leads.
- **Pray** for your "One." Pray for the relationship you're building. Pray for the questions, hurts, and challenges they face. Pray that that Holy Spirit will draw them to a saving faith in the Lord. Pray for how you can best bear witness and share the hope you have.



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