

CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH SPIRITUAL HABITS

It seems very repetitive to keep saying that this is really exciting. Growing in the Lord is the most exciting journey known to man. Are you experiencing that excitement? We have been journeying in the adventure of connecting.

For three years, we sought to connect the dots in Scripture to see how everything in the Bible connects to Jesus. We are now connecting to God through entities He has given to us in addition to the Bible. Most recently, we sought to connect to God through His church. Now we are about to embark upon connecting to God through spiritual habits. The more connected to God a person is the more like Jesus God will conform him.

For the next ten weeks we will look at habits that need to be in a believer's life if they really want to grow spiritually.

WEEK 1 PUT SPIRITUAL HABITS IN PLACE-----Dennis Watson

It has been said that you are very much shaped by what you regularly do. There is a lot of truth to this statement and it is necessary for believers in Jesus Christ to put godly habits in place with the purpose of becoming like Him. What kind of daily habits do you have? What results are you getting? We are not talking about things that “make you” saved. Salvation is a gift of God. We are talking about putting habits in place that will enable us to grow in our relationship with the living God. Do you want that? If so, hold on because here we go! I want to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus.

DAY 1 GOD WANTS TO MAKE YOU LIKE JESUS

READ ROMANS 8:26-30

Key Idea: God’s will is to make us like Jesus. Once in a relationship with Jesus, through salvation, God uses other people, circumstances, and spiritual habits to change us and make us like Jesus. It is a daily process.

The Holy Spirit is at work in a fallen, sinful, and broken world to bring the healing of God through Jesus Christ. His work is to convince and convict, regarding sin, and to convert people to God through Jesus Christ, and to conform them to be like Jesus. God is working through His Holy Spirit to bring broken, sinful, and lost people into a relationship with Himself so He can make them like Jesus. Major Ian Thomas says, “Jesus was man as God intended man to be.” So God sent Jesus, who was fully God and fully man, not only to save us, but to be for us and in us “man as God intended man to be.” Paul writes that from before time “God purposed for His followers to be conformed or made to be like Jesus.”

God changes people in at least three ways. First, He changes people as they live in relationships to family, friends, coworkers, and even enemies. We read about this in **Proverbs 27:17**, “*As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.*” We need to live in relationships with other people and not resist the sharpening and the filing away of rough edges.

Second, He changes His people through circumstances. You can see this in **Romans 8:28**, “*And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*” As the believer walks in obedience, love, and trust with the Lord, He shapes and makes us like Jesus as we go through wonderful times or through times that are painful.

The last way He changes us to be like Christ is in the process, where we participate with Him. This is what these devotions are all about. These are the spiritual habits that we begin to practice so God can use His Word, His Spirit, the church, prayer, and obedience to shape and fashion us into the likeness of Christ. This is where God does an “inside job” on us, working from the inside out. The other two are His work from the outside in, through people and circumstances. This is the area where we make a conscious choice of our will. For example, Zacchaeus made a choice to climb a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus. He, by choice, put himself in the path of Jesus. With spiritual habits, we willingly place ourselves in the path of Jesus so that we may encounter Him.

Do you want to be like Jesus? I do! We begin a journey today where God works to conform us to be like His Son, Jesus. There is a "good news/bad news" encounter here. People do not stay the same. This is the good news and the bad news. We are becoming either more like Jesus or more like the world. Which do you want to be?

DAY 2 BE DETERMINED TO ALWAYS BE GROWING

READ 2 PETER 3:11-18

Key Idea: The world as we know it is passing away and we are looking forward to a new heaven and new earth. How should we live? We are to be diligent and grow in the grace and knowledge of God.

Peter is writing here in light of what has happened and will happen, in order to challenge people about how to live. The major point here is that we are to live anticipating what God is ultimately going to do. As believers, we are looking for the coming day of the Lord. We are looking for the new heaven and the new earth where righteousness dwells. He says that therefore we are to be diligent, holy, and godly. We are to live in harmony with God's plan, purpose, and will, so that in the Day of the Lord we will have peace with Him. We are anticipating rewards, blessings, and the benefits of living with Him daily. We are looking forward to the day our good works will benefit us and we will be rewarded for them.

However, the focus for our devotion today is verse 18. Take a moment to read that verse again. It opens with an imperative—“grow.” This is a loaded word. The word is an imperative—it is a command that says, “You grow.” However, it goes further; it is a present, active tense that means, “You keep growing always.” Believers are always to be growing. We must put ourselves in a position to be growing always in the Lord. Peter also adds two qualifiers. We are always to be growing “*in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord.*” To grow in grace has to do with Christian character traits as we see in 2 Peter 1:5-7 and Galatians 5:22-23. We have been saved by grace,

strengthened by grace, and grace enables us to endure suffering. Grace is the sufficiency of God that enables us to carry on no matter what is going on. We are to grow in His grace.

We are also to grow in the knowledge of the Lord. Once again, be reminded that this is a command and it is to be ongoing. This kind of growth requires discipline and effort. We must seek to grow in knowledge. This comes through God's Word and practicing spiritual habits DAILY to guarantee the growth. This knowledge is both intellectual and experiential. It is intellectual as we dig in and read and study the Bible, and it is experiential as we live out the Word in an ongoing daily walk with Jesus. Here is how Warren Wiersbe puts it:

It is one thing to "know the Bible," and quite another thing to know the Son of God, the central theme of the Bible. The better we know Christ through the Word, the more we grow in grace; the more we grow in grace, the better we understand the Word of God.¹

Make a daily choice and effort to be growing in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

DAY 3 KEEP MOVING ON TO MATURITY

READ HEBREWS 5:12-14

Key Idea: We need to be maturing intentionally in our faith by way of practice and ongoing habits. A child knows the ABC's but needs to go further. Letters make words when they are correctly connected. Those words make sentences, and the sentences combine to tell truth.

Milk is the staple for infants, but they are expected to move on to solid food for proper nutrition. Of course milk is a good start for an infant but in order to grow and be strong, healthy, and live an effective life, other forms of nutrition are necessary, like solid foods.

The same is true of the follower of Jesus. Bible stories are good but as the believer grows, he/she needs to go much deeper and be challenged with the truth of God and how to apply it and share it with others.

The writer of Hebrews was rebuking the people for their lack of maturity. If you look at verse 14 you will see what it takes to be a maturing believer. First, solid food is required. This provides strength and growth for bones,

¹Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament, Volume 2.

muscles, and mind. For the believer solid food is The Word and all that is associated with it. Second, the phrase “by reason of use” translates a single word that means practice. The practice is that of digging into truth on a daily and ongoing basis. Third is in the phrase “having their senses exercised.” Once again, this phrase translates one word which means to exercise. By digging into His Word as a daily habit, you will exercise yourself toward maturity.

This was a problem in the church of the first century and it is a problem we still have today. It is similar to people who just let themselves go. They stop eating right, taking care of themselves, getting exercise, and over time, physically they become a mess. Believers must seek to maintain good spiritual habits. If not they will become a spiritual mess. Please understand I know that salvation is a free gift. However, spiritual maturity is a process which is accomplished by discipline and good, godly habits which put a person in the position to be nurtured by those habits.

Please don't just let yourself go spiritually. Make a decision now to begin to practice good habits that will contribute to your growth as a follower of Jesus.

DAY 4 BE HOLY

READ 1 PETER 1:13-16

Key Idea: It is God's will that His children be conformed to the likeness of Christ. This is a process called sanctification. Sanctify means to make something holy.

What do you think of when you hear the word holy? Too often, our thoughts go to a person who has taken a vow of poverty and submits to living segregated from other people. We think of someone who becomes a hermit or some kind of weirdo. In these verses, which were first recorded in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, to be holy meant to be set aside for godly pursuits. It further means to be about His plan and purpose. God wills for His people to be holy—to be set aside for His purposes.

The first journey to this holiness is to be rightly associated with the One who is Holy—Jesus. A person must be born again with the Holy Spirit living in them. He is the One who makes us holy. Next, we need to get our minds ready for action (verse 13). To be obedient to God is a conscious act of the will. In your mind, determine to follow Jesus in obedience at all times. The Psalmist writes in **Psalms 16:8**, “*I keep the Lord in mind always.*” That is having your mind prepared for action.

Peter then says that we need to be “sober.” To be sober is to be free from anything spiritually, mentally, or physically that is intoxicating or controlling. We are to be under the influence only of God’s Word and His Spirit. We are to live spirit-guided and truth-led lives. In verse 14 he goes on to tell us to live free of ungodly desires. To do this we must seek God, with all of who we are, so that He becomes our number one desire and all else pales in comparison.

Being, or becoming holy, is a process called sanctification—remember we are praying in agreement with God that He has predestined us to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus. We will not arrive there on this side of heaven but He will be regularly shaping us in this process of sanctification. Be Holy!

DAY 5 TIME TO EXERCISE

READ 1 TIMOTHY 4:7-8

Key Idea: Spiritual growth and habits will require regular exercise.

I have heard and related many times the story about a concert violinist who was asked how she became such an accomplished violinist. Her response, “Planned neglect. There were many things that used to demand my time. When I went to my room after breakfast, I made my bed, straightened the room, dusted, and did whatever seemed necessary. When I finished my work, I turned to my violin practice. This system prevented me from accomplishing what I should on the violin. So I reversed things. I deliberately neglect everything else until my practice period was complete. And that program of planned neglect is the secret of my success.” (Our Daily Bread)

Paul tells Timothy to “*exercise yourself toward godliness.*” This is discipline in the area of becoming more like Jesus. Have you ever noticed the word “disciple” is a lot like discipline? Discipline is a huge part of being a follower of Jesus. Jesus said that anyone who wanted to follow Him had to, “*deny himself*”, and that requires discipline! Too often, we allow other things to dictate how we use our time. For instance, a little laziness will keep you in bed too long. Deny yourself, get up, and spend time in God’s Word. Perhaps desire for leisure will cause you to lie around, and keep you from gathering with other believers to study, fellowship, or worship. I have discovered your “want to” pretty much dictates what you actually do. That is where and how you spend your time. We must fix our “want to” so we will do what we know we should do.

I have come to the point in my life that physical exercise is part of my daily routine. It is rare that I miss a day. Often I think, “I really don’t want to do this” but I really do because I have determined it is important. Physical

exercise is good for the temporary world but exercise for godliness is beneficial for this world and the one to come. I have also come to the point that I begin each day spending time in God's Word and in prayer. I need time with the Lord. I need His Word. All believers need time with God in prayer and in His Word if we are to be growing believers.

Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys football team for almost three decades, said, "The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don't want to do in order to achieve what they've always wanted to be." This is true of believers. We need to make sure that it is our hearts desire to be growing in the Lord and; then we need to match what we do with what we say we want.

Bottom line—are you ready to exercise yourself for the purpose of being, *"conformed to the likeness of Christ?"* Then let's go!

WEEK 2 HABITS REGARDING THE BIBLE-----Chris Watson

What is the big deal about the Bible that makes it a book we need to get more and more familiar with? As we read in our scripture today it was “*given by inspiration of God.*” God is the ultimate author. He used many people to pen the Bible, but only One person truly wrote it. “What we mean by biblical inspiration is the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on the Bible’s writers, which guaranteed that what they wrote was accurate and trustworthy. Revelation means the communicating of truth to man by God; inspiration has to do with the recording of this communication in a way that is dependable.”²

DAY 1 WHAT’S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT THE BIBLE ANYWAY?

READ 2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17

Key Idea: God’s Word is a gift given for the purpose of becoming what God wills.

Chuck Missler says, “The Bible consists of sixty-six separate books penned by over forty authors over a period of several thousand years, it is an integrated message system. Every passage, every word, every number and every place is there for a specific reason. A skillful design pervades the whole.” (Learn The Bible in 24 Hours, page 1).

Paul says scripture is specifically useful in four areas:

1. “Profitable for doctrine” - Biblical doctrine helps us understand the will of God for our lives. Biblical doctrine teaches us the nature and the character of God (Psalm 90:2; 97:2; John 4:24), the path of salvation through faith (Ephesians 2:8–9; Romans 10:9–10), instruction for the church (1 Corinthians 14:26; Titus 2:1–10), and God’s standard of holiness for our lives (1 Peter 1:14–17; 1 Corinthians 6:18–20). When we accept the Bible as God’s Word to us (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21), we have a solid foundation for our doctrine.³ What we believe and follow must be based solely on Truth and the Truth is found in God’s Word.

2. “Profitable for reproof” - The Greek word for reproof means to expose or convict. In other words, if we are in the wrong, but we think we are right, we need to go to God’s Word and see what it says. It will tell us the truth and show us the light, and if we are walking with God and desire to know Him, we will be convicted by His Word. Not only does it align us with the Truth, but it makes sure that our heart is in the right place.

² Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – New Testament, Volume 2.

³ <https://www.gotquestions.org/what-is-doctrine.html>

3. “Profitable for correction” - Correction is similar to reproof but goes a step further. Reproof is personal, while correction here is overall. The word for correction comes from the word straight. God’s Word helps us get things aligned with Him and also each other. In other words, if there is disagreement among brothers or sisters in the faith, it helps us to “straighten things up” by seeking God and His Word. If we are willing to accept reproof and correction (at all times of our life), then we get to the fun part, if you will.

4. “Instruction in righteousness” - I want to be right all of the time, how about you? But I am human and I am not right all of the time. In fact, I am wrong more than I like to admit. However, when I/we allow God’s Word to show us right doctrine and at the same time we are willing to accept reproof and correction when we are wrong, then we will see it manifest itself to a life of righteousness. We will want to know God, honor Him, and walk with Him. We won’t need to prove ourselves to walk with God, for He will be all we need.

Are you allowing God’s Word to teach you the truth about God and yourself? Are you acknowledging when you need reproof and correction whether it is one on one with the Lord or with others? If we live a life of moment by moment seeking God and repentance, then walking with Him in righteousness will be oh so sweet.

Celebrate God’s Word and get into it. Next week we will look at six habits regarding the Bible.

DAY 2 HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE

READ PSALM 19:7-11

Key Idea: Having the Bible in our possession is a miracle accomplished by God.

The Bible is inspired by God as we have already said (2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20-21). It is 66 books comprised into one, written by 40 people who were divinely instructed what to pen by the Lord. It was written over approximately 1600 years (1500 BC to 100 AD). The Old Testament was written mainly in Hebrew and the New Testament was written in Greek.

The various books of the Bible were collected, arranged, and recognized as inspired authority by councils of rabbis and councils of church leaders based on very careful guidelines. Prior to the invention of the great printing press, the Bible was copied by hand. In many cases it was copied by scribes who developed intricate methods of counting words and letters to insure that no errors had been made. In most cases when errors were made, the copy had to be thrown away and started over.

The Bible was the first book that was ever printed on the printing press (movable type, Gutenberg Press, 1455, Latin). From the hand written copies to the printing press, there is much evidence that the Bible we have today is true to the original writings. Of the thousands of copies made by hand before AD 1500, more than 5900 Greek manuscripts from the New Testament alone exist today. The text of the Bible is better preserved than the writings of Caesar, Plato and Aristotle. Let that sink in a while. Just think, we don't seem to question any of those writings do we?

Later, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls confirmed the astonishing reliability of some of the copies of the Old Testament made through the years. Though some spelling variations existed, no variation affects basic Bible doctrines. As the Bible has been carried to other countries, it was translated into the common language of the people by scholars who wanted to know God's Word. However, today there are still nearly 2,000 groups without the Bible in their own language.

God's Word is incredible and it has been handled with respect and great authority over the years. We should continue to realize the treasure we have and treat it as such.

DAY 3 HABITS TO PRACTICE REGARDING THE BIBLE

READ 2 PETER 1:2-8

Key Idea: God wants us to become like Christ, so our desire should be to put ourselves in a position to become like Christ. God has worked a miracle in our salvation. We participate in growing in Christlikeness as we put habits in place.

The context here is that God has given us everything we need for life and godliness, including precious promises. Much of what He has given us is found in His Word. Like someone giving you something as a gift, it is not yours until you take it, until you possess it. Furthermore, it becomes beneficial, enjoyable, and profitable if you use it as it was intended. The same is true for Jesus and His Word. In salvation we must trust in Jesus (Jesus says, *"Repent, believe and follow Me."*). Once we have placed our faith in Jesus, one of the greatest habits we can put into place is daily scripture reading and prayer (we will look at prayer next week). God's Word guides, changes, convicts, and leads us. If we are not in His Word, we cannot be a faithful follower of Jesus and follow His direction for our life. For this reason, be diligent—make every effort—to establish habits that will enable you to walk with Jesus.

Peter goes on to use the word “add” in verse 5. He is talking about adding to our faith. *We know faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17)*. If we truly want to know God, we will know His Word, and in doing so, these things will be “added” (the verses 5-7 speak of such things as knowledge, self-control, and kindness). The word add, in the imperative, translates epichorēgēsate, from which come the English words “chorus,” “choreograph,” and “choreography.” In ancient Greece the state established a chorus, but the director, the chorēgys, paid the expenses for training the chorus. Then the word came to be used of one who provides for or supports others or supplies something for them in abundance. A believer is to “furnish, supply, or support” his life with these virtues. (The same word is translated “supplies” in 2 Cor. 9:10 and “supported” in Col. 2:19. Peter used it again in 2 Peter 1:11 where the NIV renders it “receive.”)⁴

So the Bible is a big deal because it is a miraculous book, written by men, inspired by God so that people could become what God wants them to be. If we are regularly in His Word and seeking Him, we will see God and His Word “adding” these things to our faith if you will. We will see ourselves growing, changing, and becoming more like Christ every day. Do you have the habit of daily being in God’s Word? Most likely as you are doing this devotion, you do. Don’t ever let that habit stop. Keep at it. Keep at it when God’s Word seems to be living and active and when it “seems” to be a routine. In the whole process, always ask God to speak to you through His Word. Lovers of the Lord love His Word.

Here are the 6 habits we will look at and begin to practice regarding the Bible:

Hear it

Read it

Study it

Memorize it

Meditate on it

Apply it

⁴ The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty.

DAY 4 PRACTICE THE HABIT OF HEARING THE WORD

READ ROMANS 10:14-21

Key Idea: In order to grow in your faith and become more like Jesus, you and I must practice hearing the Word of God regularly.

How many times have we turned to this passage of scripture over the past few years? **Romans 10:17** is such an important verse. It is loaded with meaning and significance. "*Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.*" True faith has a true and reliable object. The Word of God connects us to that true and reliable object. That object is God. God is true and reliable. The Bible is given to us so we might know Him and live in a relationship with Him. Here Paul is talking about saving faith. Saving faith has a beginning, a continuation, and then an ultimate fulfillment. This verse speaks of all three. The context in particular is about how a person comes to salvation. It is through hearing and obeying (responding) to the Gospel. However, the implication is also the continuation of faith. We read all about this in Hebrews 11 which is known as the roll call of faith. These believers of old heard from God and followed Him. They were justified (saved), sanctified (God was convicting and was working in them), and glorified (saw Jesus when they passed from this life). What about you? Have you been justified? If so, then you will surely be sanctified. So praise God! You will experience glorification with Jesus.

We hear the Word of God when we read it. We also hear the Word of God as it is preached. Do you only eat once a week? Of course not, you eat many times. The same is true for God's Word. Sunday should be a time of celebration and hearing God's Word because we have been feasting on it all week. The Lord put the preacher/pastor in place to proclaim the Word of God, and then for us to go and live, sharing it. Hearing the Word of God, both in worship and in small groups, is just another way we get to hear from the Lord.

We can also hear the Word other ways. Such as through podcasts, websites, reading articles, or listen to sermons based on a scripture or passage in the Bible. Again there are many great resources we have today. I am constantly reading and listening to sermons, articles, and books that speak to God's Word. While I would suggest that every believer do this, it's great to be reminded they do not take place of the Word of God itself. Read and listen to God's Word.

Make a habit of reading and listening to God's Word regularly. For me, this happens in the morning, very early before anyone in my house gets up. I'm not sure what is best for you, but be sure to start or continue a time to read God's Word daily. If you don't MAKE time to do it, then the time will not be there. Feast on and live by the Truth and Word of God.

DAY 5 PRACTICE THE HABIT OF READING THE WORD

READ NEHEMIAH 8:1-18

Key Idea: Growing to be more like Jesus requires reading God's Word on a daily basis.

Notice verse 5, as the book was opened, the people stood. Have you ever wondered why we stand when we read Scripture? It is out of honor and respect for God and His Word. In our reading today Ezra reads the law and the people wept when they heard the words of the law (verse 9). Notice the flow of what happened as the people read God's Word.

First, as they heard it and as it was explained by priests and Levites (verse 13), they were joyous and they begin to weep. Then they were instructed to celebrate as they understood the words that were declared to them, the words they were hearing from God through the law. From here they were instructed to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (booths). "The Feast of Tabernacles takes place on the 15th of the Hebrew month Tishri. This was the seventh month on the Hebrew calendar and usually occurs in late September to mid-October. The feast begins five days after the Day of Atonement and at the time the fall harvest had just been completed. It was a time of joyous celebration as the Israelites celebrated God's continued provision for them in the current harvest and remembered His provision and protection during the 40 years in the wilderness."⁵ This was a joyous occasion that had not taken place since the time of Joshua. Notice as we read chapter 9, we see the people beginning to confess their sins.

Look at this Biblical flow in reading God's Word: joyous understanding, celebration, conviction, and confession. This should be true as we read God's Word. We should be joyous because of the Gospel and celebrate what God has done in His elaborate plan and celebrate what God has and continues to do for us. Even in this celebration we are convicted as we read God's Word and look at the mirror of our life. This should lead to confession and obedience as it did with the people here.

Obviously you are reading God's Word as you are using this devotion. I encourage you to have a daily reading plan as well, so you can read through the Bible. Here is a website that allows you to pick through many different plans of reading through the Bible: <http://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-reading-plan/>. Currently I am doing 5 chapters a day in various books. Whatever works for you, just be sure to grasp and take up God's Word.

⁵<https://www.gotquestions.org/Feast-of-Tabernacles.html>

WEEK 3 HABITS REGARDING THE BIBLE (2)-----Dennis Watson

“If the pleasures of love can attract a man to a woman, if hunger and loneliness can make a man travel miles in search of food and shelter, how much more will the desire for truth and holiness make a man seek God?”
Augustine of Hippo

Jesus said that people who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed. This hunger drives a person to keep going (see Proverbs 16:26). As we hunger to be like Jesus we should be compelled to dig into the Word. Last week we looked at three Bible habits and this week we will look at three more.

DAY 1 PRACTICE THE HABIT OF STUDYING THE WORD

READ ACTS 17:10-15

Key idea: Regular Bible study involves going deeper, using resources, and writing things down.

The Bereans were people who did not just accept what they heard. Instead, they examined the Scriptures. That means they investigated thoroughly to better know and understand what God’s Word said. Your church offers many in-depth Bible studies where you can participate with other people doing the same study. However, you can begin a Bible study of your own. You will see a wonderful resource below called Right Now Media. Members of Harp’s Crossing can access this resource for free. You will need to contact the church receptionist to receive an email invitation.

You can also begin a study on your own with minimal resources. It is good to have a study Bible, but not totally necessary. A Bible dictionary would also help. Then pick a starting place and simply ask some questions.

Who is speaking and who is being spoken too? It is important to notice if it is God speaking or is someone else. Likewise, who is being spoken to—who are the listeners?

What is being talked about? You may want to look at the previous verses or chapter to find out what is going on. All Bible verses have a context. There is an immediate context and there is the larger context of the whole book and the whole Bible.

When was this event taking place? What were the circumstances of the writing? For instance, what was going on when Jesus was transfigured?

Where was the action taking place? What other events had happened there?

Why was it important? Why do you suppose this event was important to be included in God's Word?

How did the immediate hearers receive the message and why was it important to them? It is here that we can come to an understanding of what God may be saying to us.

Bible study includes the use of resources like commentaries, Bible dictionaries, a study Bible, computer software like Word Search, Logos, and Bible Works. I have been using Word Search for years, it is a very good resource and can be started with minimal investment. You can find out more at: <https://www.wordsearchbible.com>

Make regular Bible study part of your routine!

Check out resources like <https://www.rightnow.org>

"The Bible: Why Does It Endure?" Mart De Haan

"Why We Trust the Bible" Stephen J. Nichols

"Why We Believe the Bible" John Piper

"Twenty-Four Hours Through The Bible" Chuck Missler

DAY 2 PRACTICE THE HABIT OF MEMORIZING THE WORD

READ PSALM 119:9-16

Key Idea: Memorizing God's Word prepares us to have godly wisdom and knowledge readily available for what will come our way.

The Psalmist understood struggles and knew that he needed to hide God's Word in his heart. The same is true for all of us who choose to follow Jesus and want to be made to be like Him. One way to hide His Word in your heart is to practice memorizing Scripture.

BENEFITS OF MEMORIZING SCRIPTURE

1. It helps me resist temptation.

Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You!
Psalm 119:11 (NKJV)

2. It helps me make wise decisions.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Psalm 119:105 (NKJV)

3. It strengthens me when I'm under stress.

Remember the word to Your servant, Upon which You have caused me to hope. 50 This is my comfort in my affliction, For Your word has given me life. Psalm 119:49-50 (NKJV)

4. It comforts me when I'm sad.

Your words were found, and I ate them, And Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; For I am called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts. Jeremiah 15:16 (NKJV)

5. It helps me witness to unbelievers.

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear. 1 Peter 3:15 (NKJV)

Memorizing scripture is a great way to learn the Bible. Pick one verse or a passage a week and commit it to memory using it as a point of meditation. Below is a great place to begin.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY COURSE

The following verses suggest a “balance” in Scripture Memory. The verses selected are key verses in understanding the foundations of the Christian Life and Christian Growth. Do not feel tied-down to this suggested list. This is only a tool to lead you in an understanding of the importance of memorizing “key” verses.

Live The New Life:

Christ the Center
Obedience to Christ
The Word
Prayer
Fellowship
Witnessing

II Cor. 5:17; Gal. 2:20
Rom. 12:1; John 14:21
II Tim. 3:16; Josh. 1:8
John 15:7; Phil. 4:6-7
Matt. 18:20; Heb. 10:24
Matt. 4:19; Rom. 1:16

Proclaim Christ:

All Have Sinned	Rom. 3:23; Isa. 53:6
Sin's Penalty	Rom. 6:23; Heb. 9:27
Christ Paid the Penalty	Rom. 5:8; I Peter 3:18
Salvation Not By Works	Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5
Must Receive Christ	John 1:12; Rev. 3:20
Assurance of Salvation	I John 5:13; John 5:24

Rely on God's Resources:

His Spirit	I Cor. 3:16; I Cor. 2:12
His Strength	Isa. 41:10; Phil. 4:13
His Faithfulness	Lam. 3:22; Num. 23:19
His Peace	Isa. 26:3; I Peter 5:7
His Provision	Rom. 8:32; Phil. 4:19
His Help in Temptation	Heb. 2:18; Ps. 119:9,11

Be Christ's Disciple

Put Christ First	Matt. 6:33; Luke 9:23
Separate from the World	I John 2:15-16; Rom. 12:2
Be Steadfast	I Cor. 15:58; Heb. 12:3
Serve Others	Mark 10:45; II Cor. 4:5
Give Generously	Prov. 3:9-10; II Cor. 9:6-7
Develop World Vision	Acts 1:8; Matt. 28:19-20

Grow in Christlikeness:

Love	John 13:34-35; I John 3:18
Humility	Phil. 2:3-4; I Peter 5:5-6
Purity	Eph. 5:3; I Peter 2:11
Honesty	Lev. 19:11; Acts 24:16
Faith	Heb. 11:6; Rom. 4:20-21
Good Works	Gal. 6:9-10; Matt. 5:16

DAY 3 PRACTICE THE HABIT OF MEDITATING ON GOD'S WORD

READ JOSHUA 1:1-9

Key Idea: Growing out of memorizing is meditation. To grow to be like Christ requires allowing God's Word to permeate our thinking.

Joshua was the successor of Moses. He had a huge task. He was responsible for completing the task of the Exodus by leading the people into the Promised Land. This included dividing and conquering the land. God gave very clear instructions to Joshua. Joshua was going to need more than his own strength. God told him to be strong and remember the book of the law: *“This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.”* (Joshua 1:8) He would be made successful and prosperous by following the Word of God. This included quoting it and meditating on it. If you want to be successful and prosperous, you need to do the same. This is not successful and prosperous the way the world understands it, but it is according to God. This means to be and to do what God has in store for you. I believe this is how to be effective as a follower of Jesus. I do not believe it is possible to be effective as a Jesus follower without regularly lingering with the Word of God through meditation.

Donald Whitney defines this kind of meditation as “deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture, or upon life from a scriptural perspective, for the purposes of understanding, application, and prayer.” (Whitney, Donald S. Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life (pp. 46-47). NavPress. Kindle Edition. Page 46)

Two illustrations to make this point: I drink iced sweet tea and on a few occasions I have enjoyed hot tea. The way to make hot tea is to heat up a cup of water and steep the tea bag in the hot water. You do not just dip it the tea bag, you leave it in the hot water, so the tea in the bag permeates the water with the flavor and nutrients of the tea. This is like meditating on Scripture. You leave it long enough to get all you can of its flavor and nutrients.

The second illustration is one of corrective lenses. I often say jokingly that I do not need my glasses except to see. I really only need them to read if the lighting is not good and the type is small. However, when I put them on, it is amazing the difference they make in seeing the words on a page or on my computer screen. Once again, having the Word of God in us enables us to see more clearly and perceive the world around us. God’s Word enables us to interpret correctly what is going on. We need it to see and understand correctly all of the time.

Like any habit, it takes practice to become proficient. Do it daily, even several times daily. Grab up a scriptural teaching and let it ruminate in your mind during the day and even as you lie down to sleep at night. Add meditating to your regular routine.

DAY 4 PRACTICE THE HABIT OF APPLYING GOD’S WORD

READ JAMES 1:21-25

Key Idea: Hearing, reading, studying, memorizing and meditating on the Word of God are great but the purpose is a life that is impacted by The Word. This requires being a doer of The Word also.

I enjoy watching an accomplished athlete perform his or her skill. As I watch, it looks so easy and I think to myself, “I can do that.” I can make all the right moves. I know how; at least in my mind and in my desires I can. In reality, I can’t do it except in my mind. The old saying, “The proof is in the pudding” comes to bear here. The only way to determine if the pudding is good is to eat it. Thinking and believing in your mind does not make you an accomplished athlete. It takes practice and performance.

Practicing Bible habits is necessary for spiritual growth and being an effective Jesus follower. The habit of application is like the test. It is like having an appliance at home in a box. It is great to have, but it is far greater to use it.

James tells us that it is important to hear The Word, but hearing alone can deceive the hearer causing them to incorrectly think that hearing is enough. Believers will not grow and mature only on passive listening in worship and Bible study class. These are necessary but only part of the whole that includes hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, meditating, and applying Scripture.

James tells us to be “doers of the word.” I memorized this verse as a very young child. I think somewhere along the way I allowed it to lose its power. It is that old saying “familiarity breeds contempt.” Without paying close attention to Bible passages we have heard and maybe even memorized, we may just take them for granted and we lose the power. The statement, “*Be doers of the Word*” is a very strong statement. The word for “doers” here is the word for poet and it means to be a performer. We are to perform the Word of God. The greatest blessing of The Word of God is not the learning of it but the doing of it. Too many believers mark their Bibles, but their Bibles rarely leave a mark on them.

The mark of Biblical learning is Bible stewardship. It is using it daily. It is found in applying The Word daily. If we do not use it, have we really learned it? What good does it do for a pitcher in baseball to be taught how to grip a baseball in order to throw a curve ball if he does not become a performer of what he has learned? Learning the grip is only the beginning. The real learning is in practicing over and over throwing it and then throwing it in the game setting.

One habit you will be challenged with soon is the habit of journaling. Journaling is the habit of recording the works and ways of God in your life. It is a place to write down what is going on in your life, what God is showing you from His Word, and what you need to do in light of what He is saying. Go ahead and begin to write down verses you need to memorize. Meditate on the verses and then ask, "What do I need to do to begin to practice applying the truth of this passage?" Then do it. Not legalistically, but as you seek to experience the presence of God in your life in an ongoing way.

DAY 5 THE BIBLE: IT IS ALL ABOUT JESUS

READ HEBREWS 1:1-4; 1 JOHN 5:13

Key Idea: The Bible has one main topic: Jesus.

There are thirty-nine books that make up the Old Testament. The writer of Hebrews tells us that God spoke through both prophets and others, in different ways and at different times in these thirty-nine books. And now in these last days He has spoken through His Son. "Last days" usually refers to the time between Jesus' earthly ministry and His return to reign in the New Heaven and New Earth. So "last days" refers to our time now, the time to come before Jesus returns, and the time since He came. In these verses Jesus is presented as the ultimate Word of God. He is the Word and He is who and what The Word is all about.

From the opening words of Genesis to the wrap up of the book of Revelation, the whole of Scripture is about Jesus. We find in Genesis 3 the anticipation of One who will "*crush the serpent's head.*" In Genesis 49:10 we see that the "*scepter will not depart from Judah.*" Jesus is known as the "*lion of the tribe of Judah.*" This is clearly a reference to the kingship which will find its fulfillment in Jesus. The verses which follow are prophetic of the way things will be in the Millennium. We see many other references of how God protected the line of Judah and the kings. He set up the line and cleared the way, giving prophecy after prophecy of the coming of the Messiah who would come from the root of David.

He is above all; nothing compares to Him.

John writes to remind us that he writes that we may know that we have eternal life through Jesus, the focus of all of the Bible.

Hear it, read it, study it, memorize it, meditate on it, and apply it daily! The most powerful way to know and experience the power of the resurrection is the Word of God.

WEEK 4 CONFORMED TO THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST: THE HABIT OF PRAYER-----Chris Watson

Can you really expect to have a relationship with someone that is meaningful and impacting if there is no communication? The Bible is God's message to us. Prayer is interacting with God. As believers we hear from God through His Word. We then turn it around, talking with God about what we hear, read, and study. Praying is simply communication (listening and talking) with God. This could best be summed up in the words Jesus taught us to pray in the model prayer in Matthew 6, "*Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" This week we look closely at the habit of prayer.

DAY 1 JESUS EXPECTS US TO PRAY

READ MATTHEW 6:5-13

Key Idea: Jesus clearly expected His followers to pray. He gave them a model to follow.

Jesus expected His followers to pray. We see this clearly in Matthew 6. Matthew 6:5 and 7 says, "*And when you pray.*" Jesus goes on to say don't pray to be seen or heard by men or seek to use big words or many words, in front of others. For those that do that have received their rewards already. We are not to pray to be seen or for others to hear, rather, it is to be a conversation, both talking and listening with the Creator of the universe.

Matthew 6:6 says, "*But when you pray.*" Jesus goes on to say that instead of praying to be seen, go into your room, close the door, and pour your heart out to Jesus. The focus here is to make specific time for Jesus each day, to get alone with Him, and to converse. We are to seek God daily, to be alone with Him. Ed Litton has said, "My value to God in public is dependent on what I am with Him in private." In other words, be sure to talk with Jesus one on one, get to know Him. Before I can have Godly influence, I must be with God.

After Jesus tells them what not to do in prayer, He doesn't leave them alone but rather shows them how to pray. In prayer we should always spend time thanking God for who He is and how holy and great He is. Not only are we expressing truth and love to God, but it is also a great reminder for us of what to focus on. We are also to ask God to provide for us, knowing that if we are able (Proverbs 6:6-8) we are to work our part in providing. God gives us the means necessary to do what He has called us to do. Notice though, we not only pray for ourselves but for others as we see in the last verse. We are to forgive others as we have been forgiven. CS Lewis has said, "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God

has forgiven the inexcusable in you.” We can only forgive in the fact that we have been forgiven.

We left out one verse thus far though and that is verse 10 that says, “*Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” We pray for our spouses, kids, grandkids, extended family, the lost, and many others. In all this our prayer should be for God’s will to be done. Jesus tells us to pray specifically here and in other areas of scripture. In doing so our overall focus is for God’s will to be done.

Remember it’s not “if” we pray but “when” we do. In other words, believers should be “prayer believing” and “practicing” people. In the end prayer is conversing with God and agreeing with Him about His will.

DAY 2 PRAY ALWAYS

READ 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18; COLOSSIANS 4:2

Key Idea: Prayer is a habit that needs to be practiced more and more. It seems that we need to pray all the time. It is not only possible but necessary.

As a kid I remember thinking “pray without ceasing,” how is that possible? As an adult I now think it is a necessity to pray without ceasing. I need God. I need Him to direct or redirect my heart, mind, and thoughts, and for me to put my eyes on Him and the Truth. Remember prayer is a conversation with God about His kingdom and His will. We live between two worlds if you will, the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of god of this world. Because we live “in the world” but are not to be of it, we must live in a continuous state of prayer. Romans 8:29 reminds us that it is God’s plan and purpose for us to be conformed to His likeness, and prayer is a huge step in this.

But what does praying without ceasing look like? “Continual prayer is not prayer that prevails without any interruption, but prayer that continues whenever possible. The adverb for continually (*adialeiptōs*) was used in Greek of a hacking cough. Paul was speaking of maintaining continuous fellowship with God as much as possible in the midst of daily living in which concentration is frequently broken.”⁶ In other words, seek to be in direct communication with God all throughout the day, in the good and the bad, and though that communication with Him may get interrupted, seek to always go straight back to it; by doing so we will be more and more in tune with Him and His Word.

⁶ The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty.

Prayer is not a luxury or something that is optional but is essential for spiritual growth and to walk with God. As breathing is necessary for our physical life, so is prayer for our spiritual life. Prayer should not be casual but constant, not haphazard but happening. Donald Whitney says, “Prayer is in one sense an expression of a Christian’s unbroken relationship with the Father.”⁷

How is your prayer life? Is it ongoing or haphazard? Do you see prayer as an option or a necessity? Do you have a prayer closet and place you regularly seek God? Do you have specific people and requests that you are always praying for? Think through these questions as you pray today. Remember prayer is a must for Christ followers; we need it in our lives.

DAY 3 PRAY AND NEVER GIVE UP

READ LUKE 18:1-8

Key Idea: Prayer is an activity that requires persistence.

This is an incredible parable! What is really unusual about it is Jesus tells us at the beginning what the parable is about. In the NIV, the translation goes like this, “*Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*” This is a lesson in prayer that persists. That means it never stops. In fact it is often referred to as “the parable of the persistent widow.”

During World War II, when the bombing was so intense on the city of London, a sign appeared in front of one of the churches in London that read, “If your knees knock together, kneel on them!” That is practically a restatement of what our Lord has said, “*Men ought always to pray, and not to faint.*”⁸

We are to never give up. When you begin to pray you should persist until He answers or until He says stop. We have all had things we have prayed for and we thought something like, “this is going to take a miracle,” or “this will never happen” or “am I kidding myself?” Now this is for another devotion, but when we pray we are to believe and trust, especially when we pray in accordance with God’s will. The frustrating thing is that in praying it sometimes “appears” that God is not working. God is always at work though, even when we don’t see it. I recently heard a testimony of a woman who had prayed for her husband’s salvation for 30 years. Yes, 30 years! In his 80’s, God saved him and what a mighty testimony his wife had to share.

⁷Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life (p. 81). NavPress. Kindle Edition.

⁸Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee

There are many things that we can pray knowing we are praying for God's plan and will. The widow was not asking for anything but justice. We pray in keeping with God's will or how He has instructed us. For instance, we pray for the lost because we know Jesus says that "*He is not willing that any perish but all come to salvation*" (**2 Peter 3:9**), therefore, we pray for the lost, specifically people we know. We also pray for the sick because He instructs us to (James 5:14-15). Some have said, "Well I prayed once and it didn't work" or "I prayed and God knows my heart. I have already told Him." That reminds me of a story of a woman who had been married for many, many years, and her husband overheard her saying, "My husband hasn't told me he loved me since we got married," to which he responded, "I meant what I told you and I will let you know if anything changes." OUCH!

We seek God in prayer because He tells us to and because our heart needs it. What are we to do when we have prayed for years and don't "see" God working? Keep praying, keep asking, and don't give up. Remember that God is faithful. So pray in accordance with His will and trust His heart and plan. Persevering in prayer knits you together with God's will and the person or situation you are praying for. Think of a situation or person that you are praying for and yet you want to quit or give up. Can your situation or person afford that? Of course not, keep praying and seeking God!

DAY 4 PRAYER IS LEARNED BY PRACTICE

READ LUKE 11:1-13

Key Idea: Prayer is learned mostly by practice. Jesus' disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray. Jesus then gave them the model prayer. Prayer is not something you learn by reading books about prayer, but by practicing the habit of prayer.

Andrew Murray, South African minister and author of *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, wrote, "Reading a book about prayer, listening to lectures and talking about it is very good, but it won't teach you to pray. You get nothing without exercise, without practice. I might listen for a year to a professor of music playing the most beautiful music, but that won't teach me to play an instrument."⁹

Prayer is learned. Jesus taught the disciples how to pray, but had they just been taught and not actually prayed, then it would have been for naught. We learn prayer and more about prayer by praying. Prayer is beneficial

⁹Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (p. 85). NavPress. Kindle Edition.

both in organized prayer and in hearing God's voice. Let me explain. I have a prayer list and at times it is overwhelming. Several times throughout the year I have to add on to it and retype it so I can read it! Throughout the week I pray over this list of lost people, struggling marriages, health issues, prodigals, God's Church, and my family, just to name a few. However, there are times where I just stop and listen to the Lord and ask Him specifically what He would have me pray about. So there is a method to my madness. I pray for those who need it, and at the same time I allow the Holy Spirit to guide my prayers.

What does your prayer life look like? Who are you praying for? I read a statement today on Twitter from Ed Litton, "If God answered all your prayers from this past week, who would now be saved or on their way in discipleship?" How did you respond? Who are you interceding for and praying for to come to salvation and to grow in Christ specifically?

In your personal prayer life, does it overflow to your family? In other words, are you praying with your family, with your spouse, and your kids? If your kids are grown, are you encouraging them in their prayer life? How are you praying specifically for them? Maybe take the time to write out a prayer for them and send it in an email or letter letting them know you are praying for them. By doing so you are leading by example.

Pray and never give up. What is our other option? To trust ourselves, to throw our hands in the air and be done with it? Remember the wife who prayed for her husband? Be faithful in praying and faithful in seeking God day after day.

There is NOTHING impossible with God.

DAY 5 PRIESTHOOD OF THE BELIEVER AND PRAYER

READ 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-7; HEBREWS 7:25

Key Idea: Prayer is about standing in the gap for other people.

In Hebrews 7:25 we read that Jesus is our great High Priest who is at the right hand of God "to make intercession." Jesus is right now interceding for us. We are blessed to join with Him in interceding for others. As priests ourselves we stand before people on behalf of God and through intercession we stand before God on behalf of others. In an article on intercessory prayer by the Christian Broadcasting Network, intercession involves taking hold of God's will and refusing to let go until His will comes to pass. This is a powerful definition describing what we are to be doing. We need to get in the gap and intercede for people and stay with it until God's will is done.

My father has often said, “What I pray about I won’t worry about; what I pray about I will not fuss or fume about; what I pray about I will leave to the Lord and be prepared to be directed by Him.” This is something I think that we are all trying to learn and tell ourselves throughout each day. This includes worrying about the “small” things and the “big” things whether they deal with us directly or indirectly.

As believers we have the incredible opportunity to stand in the gap (pray) for others. Today’s Scripture reminds us that Jesus intercedes for us. As believers we can do the same. Who are you interceding for? Who are you praying for because they are not praying for themselves? Who are you praying for who doesn’t believe in prayer? Again, remember the wife who prayed for her husband for 30 years? We need to be persistent and stand in the gap for people. I am always greatly encouraged when people tell me they are praying for me; I am so encouraged by that as a husband, father and pastor. Prayer is so important.

Remember prayer is not something just for specific people to do , but for all believers. We can pray for ourselves and we can also ask others to pray for us, but we can also go directly to Jesus. Think about this for a minute: the God of the universe hears our prayers, the One who named the stars hears our prayers, the One who told the ocean how far to go hears our prayers, you get the idea. God hears our prayers; He loves and wants that communication with us.

Who are you praying for? Have you thought about letting them know? It is always encouraging to know others are praying. As we finish up this week’s devotional, here is an acrostic to help us know how to pray:

A – Adoration: Thank God for who He is, adore Him, be thankful for God and His character.

C – Confess: Confess your sins to the Lord, and be specific, ask Him to help you.

T – Thanksgiving: Thank the Lord for the wonderful things He has done; maybe even make a list of what you are thankful for.

S – Supplication: Stand in the gap for your family, friends, lost, hurting, etc.

WEEK 5 BEING CONFORMED TO THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST: THE HABIT OF WORSHIP-----Dennis Watson

Worship has to do with love, focus, response, and surrender. It is characteristic of a love relationship. We spend time with people we love and we seek to give them our undivided attention. We also communicate with them and seek to do what expresses our love and appreciation. That is what worship is all about—loving God, focusing on Him, responding to Him, and surrendering to Him. In this, we will be made to be more like Him.

DAY 1 WORSHIP IS ABOUT LOVE

READ MARK 12:30

Key Idea: Worship is about loving God.

We are looking at the habit of worship this week. Remember we are not just talking about what you should do, ought to do, or have to do. We are talking about what we do because we want to be conformed to the likeness of Christ. If you want to be conformed to the likeness of Christ, then the habit of worship must be in place. N.T. Wright says, “You become like what you worship. When you gaze in awe, admiration, and wonder at something or someone, you begin to take on something of the character of the object of your worship.” What or who is it that you worship? Jesus tells us the first and greatest commandment is to love God with your whole being. This sets the stage for worship. After all, we mimic what we worship.

The word worship comes from an old Saxon word ‘weorthscype.’ This later became ‘worthship.’ It means to give worth or value to something. In the case of God, it is to give the greatest worth or value to God. There should be no other to whom we ascribe such worth. This is what God delivered through Moses in the Ten Commandments, “*You shall have no other gods before Me.*”

I remember as a young teen watching the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show on TV (black and white of course). That was my first experience of seeing screaming fans in a delirious state crying and pulling their hair and throwing clothing up on the stage. It seemed extremely odd. Here were four young men singing and playing guitars and drums, singing really great songs, but they were just people. I have seen that many times through the years. I have also observed people in worship of the God who gave those people their voices and ability. The same God who created all that our eyes can see and our ears can hear and beyond. Why not try ascribing to Him the worth and applause that is due Him?

Here is what I think the problem is. There is a myth out there. It is the myth that says a person falls in love. I do not believe that. You may fall for something but it is not love. It may be a warm fuzzy feeling but it is not love. Love is a choice. It is a decision. Have you ever thought that is why so many marriages fail? Falling in love will not last but a decision to love especially with the love of God will last a lifetime.

Now for the application; look at this passage:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. 2Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. Colossians 3:1-2 (NKJV)

Love is a decision. As we read in Colossians, we set our hearts and minds on individuals and things we have determined worthy. God created all things including you. He sent Jesus to make sure you understood that He loved you, and through Jesus He made you right for a love relationship with Him by letting you know that He has forgiven you. All through the day, make it a choice to think of God and what He has done and will do. Live in awe of all He has and will provide.

DAY 2 WORSHIP IS FOCUSING ON AND RESPONDING TO GOD

READ JOHN 20:24-29

Key Idea: Worshipping is about responding to the greatness of God.

Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them after the resurrection. After a little time had passed, the disciples were together and Thomas was with them. The disciples were trying to convince Thomas that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Thomas was one of the disciples. He had heard Jesus preach, seen Him heal, and knew of His statement that He would be raised from the dead after three days. For Thomas only seeing would cause him to believe. He insisted that he would not believe unless he could see and touch the nail prints in His hands and the wound in His side.

Eight days later when Thomas was with the disciples, Jesus came into the room where they were. He showed up again in a miraculous way since the doors were shut. Jesus went to Thomas knowing that he would not believe until he saw and touched the wounds. Jesus showed Thomas His hands and His side.

Thomas' response, "My Lord and My God" is the high point of the Gospel. Here was a skeptical man, confronted by the evidence of Jesus' resurrection. He announced that Jesus, the Man of Galilee, is God manifest in the flesh.

Thus the truths in the first chapter were realized personally in this apostle (1:1, 14, 18). The Resurrection (a) demonstrated that what Jesus predicted about His being raised was true (Mark 8:31; 9:9, 31; 10:34; John 2:19), (b) proved that Jesus is the Son of God (Rom. 1:4) and was sent by God ("vindicated by the Spirit," 1 Tim. 3:16), (c) testified to the success of His mission of salvation (Rom. 4:25), (d) entitled Jesus to a position of glory (1 Peter 1:11), and (e) proclaimed that Jesus is the "Lord" (Acts 2:36).¹⁰

Thomas' attention was toward Jesus but when he encountered the risen Jesus, he responded to Him with faith and worship. Thomas responded in a voice of praise for who Jesus was.

When you know Jesus for who He really is, the result is confession and proclamation in worship of who He is. The more you know Him, the more you love Him, and the more you love and know Him, the more you worship Him and it continues on and on.

DAY 3 SERVE, FOLLOW, AND PRAY, THEN CELEBRATE IN WORSHIP

READ GENESIS 24

Key Idea: Worship flows out of getting in on what God is up to.

This is a much longer section of Scripture than usual, but here is a biblical, historical, account that is rich with meaning. Abraham's son, Isaac, was forty years old and it was time for him to marry. However, Abraham was very careful not to permit him to marry one of the local girls from among the Canaanites. Abraham sent his servant to Abraham's family's hometown. The purpose? To find a wife for Isaac. This was a long journey, probably a thousand mile round trip. The servant, along with several others, took ten camels and traveled to Abraham's hometown. When he came to a well near the city of Nahor he prayed that the Lord would make his journey successful. He was specific in his prayers and he prayed that when he asked a young woman for a drink, she would offer him a drink and then offer to water the camels. Before he even finished praying, Rebekah, a family member of Abraham, came up, offered the servant water, and then watered his camels.

Abraham's servant went to her home and told why he was there, how he had prayed, and how as he was praying Rebekah came up. He then asked if she could come with him to be the wife of his master's son Isaac, and they agreed. The result is found in **Genesis 24:52**, "*And it came to pass, when Abraham's servant heard their words, that he worshiped the LORD, bowing himself to the earth.*" The servant was so overwhelmed to have experi-

¹⁰The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty.

enced God's direction and provision that he fell to his knees and worshipped.

Look at this account again. The servant followed his master's instructions. He was on a divine mission that would continue God's plan for Abraham's family. He journeyed, prayed, and was blessed to see God provide. The outcome was joyous worship. If you really want to worship, follow the Lord, obey Him, pray, and get in on what He is doing. Then you will worship in the most meaningful way. Worship is responding in celebration to what God has done. It goes something like this:

Look to the Lord
Encounter the Lord
Experience the Lord
Worship the Lord
Begin again

If you really want to enjoy worshipping the Lord, follow Him, obey Him, trust Him, join Him, and watch Him work and then celebrate!

DAY 4 THE HABIT OF WORSHIP: RIGHTING YOUR PERSPECTIVE

READ ISAIAH 6:1-8

Key Idea: Only God can be trusted to heal our greatest struggles.

This segment of Scripture records the call of Isaiah. It opens up with the announcement of a national tragedy for the Southern Kingdom of Judah; it was the year that King Uzziah died. King Uzziah had reigned for fifty-two years as King of Judah. Many believe he was the last truly great King of Judah, and after his death, the glory of the Lord was no longer to be seen. As is often the case, people fix their eyes on a person as the one who provides hope and security for them. This is not unusual in a nation. In the United States, we put hope in the election of a new President every four years to lead us out of the mess we are in. With us, as was with Isaiah, this is a case of misplaced hope. It is not just national or political leaders we look to, but also well-known people like actors, actresses, musicians, and athletes. We hope our team will win the national championship, the World Series, or the Super Bowl. Misplaced hope, or security, can cause us to take our eyes off of the real source of our hope and security, even if it is for just a moment.

This is where and when God got Isaiah's attention. Suddenly Isaiah's misplaced hope was revealed. Isaiah's attention was off King Uzziah because he was dead. Where else could he turn? It was then that he "*saw the Lord sitting on a throne high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple.*" At last, he could see God and hear from Him because he was no

longer trusting God to work through a king. His dependence was on the Lord. He could hear from Him and respond to Him. He saw God's majesty and greatness, not the king's. It does not say it, but it is obvious that Isaiah joined in with the seraphim in worship even if all he did was fall on his knees and worship.

It was in this that worship turned into that two-way communication. Isaiah heard from God. In worship we should hear from God. We should proclaim His greatness and sing of His glory and confess His wonder. Then we should listen and be prepared to hear from Him. Isaiah did hear from God. He was first convicted of his sin and unworthiness. He confessed, *"Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts."* Now he was ready to hear God's call and instructions.

God provided the cleansing Isaiah needed and then called out to Isaiah, *"Whom shall I send and who will go for us?"* Isaiah responded in surrender, *"Here am I, send me."*

Did you see the aspects of worship? Make sure there is no one else you are depending on for your hope and security. Confess and rejoice in the greatness and mighty power of God. Listen to Him and surrender to His plan and purposes for you. When Isaiah got his perspective right, he worshipped, heard from God, and surrendered to Him.

DAY 5 WORSHIP: THE REVELATION OF GOD IN CREATION, IN HIS WORD AND IN HIS REDEEMER

READ PSALM 19

Key Idea: God has revealed Himself in creation, His Word and in Jesus. These become occasions for worship.

Keeping in mind that worship is focusing on and responding to God, this Psalm opens in a fantastic way. *"The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows His handiwork."* The focus in this Psalm is on the Creator, the Writer of the Word and the Redeemer.

Obviously the vastness, beauty, and splendor of the universe points to a Designer, Creator and One who assembled all of this with purpose. Paul, in Romans, confronts the ungodly who suppress the truth. He says that these people ignore the creation, not acknowledging the Creator. The Psalmist declares that the creation declares the glory of God. The creation utters speech and reveals knowledge. Just look around and see that God's signature is there. Worship the Creator! Turn to Him and give Him glory—the applause that is due Him. Do not miss Him and do not fail to enjoy celebrating His handiwork!

God has revealed Himself in creation that is known as general revelation. He has also revealed Himself in a more specific and special way which is known as special revelation in His Word. God has given us His Word in the pages of Scripture. He says that His Word, law, commandments, testimony, judgments, and statutes are perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, true, and righteous. What a mighty declaration of God's revelation that converts the soul, makes the simple wise, rejoices the heart, enlightens the eyes, and endures forever. In just a few short verses, the Word of God is laid out with its glorious power and impact! Worship God in His creation and in His Word. What a call to worship!

As high and mighty as the first eleven verses are, the climax is found in the remaining verses. The Psalmist acknowledges the struggle of all people. The struggle is found in what the law points out. We are sinners, and there is no excuse or explanation for our sin. We cannot, by our own defense, deal with our sin, guilt and failure. The Word, commandments, and statutes point out sin, implying that we need a Deliverer. These final three verses point out our need and then proclaims our Deliverer—*“O Lord my strength and my redeemer.”* All of us need the Savior. Talk about worship! Jesus is your deliverer. You cannot excuse, cover, or understand your sin. What can you do? Do as the Psalmist, and cry out, ¹⁴*“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer. Psalm 19:14 (NKJV)*

WEEK 6 BEING CONFORMED TO THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST: THE HABIT OF FELLOWSHIP-----Chris Watson

If we are going to grow in our relationship with Jesus and be effective as believers being conformed to the likeness of Christ, we must meet and fellowship together. The New Testament word for fellowship translates the Greek word 'koinonia.' This means to be in common; to be united together. Believers need to be united and to meet together regularly for the purpose of sharing, encouraging, helping, and sharpening one another. It is a two-way street. All believers need the benefits of fellowship.

DAY 1 LET'S GET TOGETHER

READ ACTS 2:44-47

Key Idea: God intends for His family, the church, to gather together.

Together is a wonderful word. It is found numerous times in the book of Acts, describing the church body as people who assembled themselves together. Sometimes it shows us as 'together' and sometimes it shows us as 'in one accord.' Acts 2 begins with a verse that describes the believers as they were gathered as being "in one accord." The chapter ends with four verses that describe the believers as "together" and "in one accord" "holding all things in common." There were no needs among the believers because they did what it took to take care of one another.

Meet together

Eat together

Pray together

Study together

Serve together

On mission together

Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, "*Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*" We need the Holy Spirit and we need others. Reread the list above that Scripture instructs us to do together. Are you doing them? Are we doing them as a Church? There are no "rebels" or "renegades" when it comes to God's kingdom. We cannot go out and do our own thing; we need God, His Word, and His Church (other believers).

Notice the second half of verse 47 that says, *“And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”* Who was adding to the number? The Lord was, the people were not doing it. There were no gimmicks, no tricks, no fanfare, or no new ways of getting people to God. Rather God’s people were loving God, loving others, and worshiping the Lord. In doing so, people were added to the number, meaning God’s Church was growing. What if we as believers took today’s verses to heart? It has been said that if unbelievers really saw believers doing what God intended and desired, then unbelievers would be drawn to the Lord and others.

Dr. Ray Ortland has said “The Christian who is not committed to a group of other believers for praying, sharing, and serving, so that he is known, as he knows others, is not an obedient Christian. He is not in the will of God. However vocal he may be in his theology, he is not obeying the Lord. What about you? Are you committed to God and His people? We need others and others need us, no matter how spiritually mature we think we may be.”

DAY 2 RESPONSIBLE TO GATHER TOGETHER

READ HEBREWS 10:24-25

Key Idea: Believers are to be responsible to gather for the purpose of encouraging and supporting one another.

Just a day ago I drove by a distant neighbor’s house as they were packing their car to head out of town. At second glance it was evident they were heading to some sort of softball tournament. Now I don’t know where they were going, or how long they were going, but I remember thinking “That’s commitment.” It happens though throughout our country every weekend, bags are packed, campers are packed, bats and balls are loaded up, and off families go to wherever. We say we are teaching our kids “commitment and family time,” but often we use that as an excuse. What we really need is to be connected to God’s Church and connecting our family to God and His Church. I am not saying to be committed to God and His church we cannot play sports, have hobbies, and so on. But how we spend our time often shows what we are really committed to. Sometimes we get out of the habit of being with other believers because of “other commitments.” In doing so, it shows where our true commitment lies. Sometimes we have just gotten out of the habit or become lax in our commitment to God and His Church.

Remember our devotion from yesterday talked about how we need others and others need us? If I miss my Sunday School class, Wednesday night Bible study or worship, not only am I missing out, but so are others. We are to spur (encourage) one another. In order to do this, we must meet together regularly for that purpose.

Scripture goes on to say we are not to forsake, to leave behind other believers. Unfortunately many do this, ignoring the needs of others and their responsibility to provoke others to love and good works. I saw the opposite of this happen a few years ago in one of our small groups. One person was facing a potential battle that was overwhelming, and he shared about it in class. It just so “happened” that another person in class that morning had just gone through almost the exact same battle. The person who had just faced the battle was able to talk and minister to the other. This would not have happened if they had not been in small group that morning. At times we think it is insignificant to show up, but it can be greatly beneficial for both our physical and spiritual well-being, even when we don’t know how.

We need God, each other and His Church; there are no if’s, and’s, or but’s about it. As believers we can’t afford to have a laissez faire attitude about His Church; we need it. Remember Who it was that established the Church? Men, right? Wrong, it was God.

Were you once more committed and connected to God and His Church than you are now? Were you once more involved in your small group, worship, and Wednesday nights? Recommit. Don’t get me wrong - activity by itself doesn’t equal spirituality. However, we cannot be what God intended us to be without being actively connected to His Church and His people.

DAY 3 AS IRON SHARPENS IRON

READ PROVERBS 27:17

Key idea: We need others in our life to sharpen us and encourage us to be who God intends us to be.

What happens when iron sharpens iron? There will be sparks. There will be heat of some sort. There will be pounding and shaping. The goal is to shape or sharpen. In other words, the process of the sharpening may not always be enjoyable, but we will be glad it happened in the end. No person needs only “yes” people in their lives. If we only have people in our lives that tell us what we want to hear or who agree with us all of the time, then we will not be sharpened. Similarly, we don’t need people who just disagree with us for the sake of it. We need true friends who encourage and challenge us and, as Scripture says, sharpen us.

The only way I can be sharpened by another brother in Christ is to be with him or near him. I must spend time with him inside and outside of God’s Church so that a relationship is built, not a shallow one, but a true friendship. In this same chapter in verse 6 we read, *“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.”*

In other words it is better to know and hear the truth from a friend than to hear a lie and deceit from an enemy. **Proverbs 18:24** says, *“a man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”*

What is the purpose of iron sharpening iron? While there may be sparks and friction, the countenance of a friend will be sharpened. In other words, true friends encourage each other as we walk through life. The overall outcome of true friendship is that we better each other in Christ. It is not a competition, but a desire to see each other grow in Christ. We need to be with other believers in order to sharpen and be sharpened.

DAY 4 FELLOWSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY

READ JAMES 5:19-20 AND GALATIANS 6:1

Key Idea: Believers need to be accountable and hold other believers accountable for living godly lives.

Accountability is a wonderful safeguard for all people. Believers like everyone else, need accountability. Accountability means that people are helping you stay on the track you have agreed you need to stay on. People who are seeking to lose weight will find other people to hold them accountable to eat right and to exercise. People who desire to walk or run a certain distance will find great accountability in others doing the same thing. You get the idea. We as believers are all in the same boat; we need to be accountable to others and vice versa.

Believers need to be in agreement about holiness, walking with the Lord, their testimony, and being conformed to the likeness of Christ. In this crazy world we sometimes get off the path and we need others in our life to get us back on track. Remember, we don't just need “yes” people. We need people that will tell us what we need to hear, not necessarily what we want to hear. We must hold each other accountable with how we live, how we treat people, and how we demonstrate habits that contribute to spiritual growth. In the kingdom of God there needs to be people who care and love each other. This is also true in our everyday lives, our work, our families, and in our church lives.

As a Church we should be accountable to others and others should be accountable to us. We often do this through our Sunday school classes. People who are in trouble spiritually, or who have something going on in their life unknown to others, will often begin to fade away. This may start by missing a Sunday, then another, and then maybe another. It has been said that if a person who was connected to God, His Church and a small group is nowhere to be found in the span of three weeks, they may be fighting a battle in their life. I am not talking about being on vacation or being sick,

I am talking about just not being with other believers. You can almost guarantee they have walked away from God, walked away from God's Church or someone has hurt their feelings. Which begs the question when we see another believer go missing for a week, do we just brush it off or find out where they are? I am not talking about saying, "Why weren't you at Church today? You bad person." I am talking about genuinely connecting with someone you missed, and letting them know you really missed them. Remember we are a Church FAMILY.

An unaccountable man or woman is a dangerous man or woman. We are first accountable to God and then to others, beginning with our family and other believers. Accountability and fellowship helps keep us safe as believers. I am accountable to my wife, my kids, the Church, and others. I meet with a group of men every Monday morning at 6:00. There are five of us who meet and study God's Word, pray for each other, and just enjoy fellowship. If I missed a Monday and didn't let anyone know why, you can guarantee I would get texts from these men, because I am accountable to them and vice versa.

Who are you accountable to? Who asks you the hard questions? Who is watching out for you, knows your weaknesses, and knows they can speak truth in your life? Everyone needs somebody, and if somebody has nobody, you can guarantee nothing good is happening.

DAY 5 FELLOWSHIP WITH JESUS IS THE BASIS OF OUR FELLOWSHIP WITH EACH OTHER

READ 1 JOHN 1-2:1

Key Idea: The basis of our fellowship with other believers is our fellowship with God.

1 John was written to encourage the true believers, but also to show the truth opposite to the beliefs of the Gnostics. Gnosticism was perhaps the most dangerous heresy that threatened the early church during the first three centuries. Influenced by such philosophers as Plato, Gnosticism is based on two false premises. First, it espouses a dualism regarding spirit and matter. Gnostics assert that matter is inherently evil and spirit is good. As a result of this presupposition, Gnostics believe anything done in the body, even the grossest sin, has no meaning because real life exists in the spirit realm only. Second, Gnostics claim to possess an elevated knowledge, a "higher truth" known only to a certain few. Gnosticism comes from the Greek word gnosis which means "to know." Gnostics claim to possess a higher knowledge, not from the Bible, but acquired on some mystical higher plane of existence. Gnostics see themselves as a privileged class elevated above everybody else by their higher, deeper knowledge of God.¹¹

¹¹<https://www.gotquestions.org/Christian-gnosticism.html>

This helps us understand a little better the background of this passage. Again, it was also written to encourage the church and to help believers know that they had the truth of God. The basis of our fellowship with other believers is our fellowship with God. Verse 3 states that if we have trust fellowship with God, then we will have fellowship with other believers. However, if we claim to have fellowship with God and yet walk in the darkness, the truth is not in us. In other words, if we claim to be believers but continuously walk in sin, something is wrong because they both cannot be true. We must walk in the light as He is in the light.

If we claim we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. (verse 8) We are all sinners, we have sinned and as imperfect individuals, we will continue to sin. As believers we struggle between walking with God and our sin that pulls us the other direction. We often try to look good and try to “be good” but we must come to the realization that there is really no good in us. We must realize that our only hope is the goodness and blood of Jesus who is the Righteous One. The basis for our fellowship as believers is Jesus, our advocate and our sin taker. He is our provision. This is why Christians can have so much in common so quickly. Jesus gives us other believers to share our daily walk with.

Do you know Jesus? Are you walking with Him? Are you encouraged by other believers? We all need Jesus and we all need other believers. Be sure to have other believers who love you and hold you accountable. Above all remember **1 John 2:1b**, *If anyone sins we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one.* Paraclete or advocate is what Jesus is; He is the one who is by our side and not just helps us but became sin for us.

WEEK 7 BEING CONFORMED TO THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST: THE HABIT OF LEARNING-----Dennis Watson

I love to learn! I haven't always been that way. I once thought of learning as a miserable chore that was forced on me. School for me, was simply to be endured. When Sheila and I got married, she forced me to be a good student. This too, however, was learning forced upon me. Then soon after becoming pastor of Harp's Crossing, the Lord placed within me a hunger to learn His Word and that hunger has grown with intensity over the years. It seems as though I spent over twenty years as a "student" before I actually became one. Learning for the believer needs to become a lifelong endeavor if we desire to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus.

DAY 1 HUNGERING, THIRSTING AND LEARNING

READ MATTHEW 5:6 AND PROVERBS 16:26

Key Idea: Believers need to cultivate and maintain a hunger and thirst to seek after the things of the Lord.

"You have to develop a taste for it." I used to hear that about broccoli and think to myself, why? Why should I develop a taste for broccoli? It just didn't make sense to me. It didn't look appetizing and there was nothing appealing to its smell. But for some reason, maybe because it is good for you, I decided to give it a try. Only by beginning with a heavy load of cheese (because catsup didn't seem to go with something green), was I able to start eating it. Hey, it wasn't bad. Soon I tried it steamed without the cheese, and decided I liked it. Please understand that if I am given a choice of a cheeseburger meal with French fries or broccoli, I will choose the burger with fries in a minute!

The writer of Proverbs gives us a great word regarding appetite. The NIV puts it this way in **Proverbs 16:26**, "*The laborer's appetite works for him; his hunger drives him on.*" Your appetite works for you and the accompanying hunger drives you on. I had to develop an appetite for broccoli. I am often compelled to eat it. You need to develop an appetite for learning and then allow that hunger to drive you to be learning all of the time. Believers need to be lifelong learners of God's Word and Truth. Jesus said that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness that comes from God will be blessed. Jesus told us to develop a hunger and thirst for that which comes only from Him—true righteousness.

Are you reading? Are you studying? Are you regularly placing yourself in a position to learn? We live in a day where there are unlimited resources that can be used to learn. It does not happen by accident but by intent.

More than twenty years ago I had a mentor, an example who fashioned this learning attitude for me. Dr. James Wright was a pastor for many years. For me he was an example of learning. Even in his very advanced years, Dr. Wright was a learner. Often, he would just “drop by” my office at the church. He would bring me books that he had used in his personal and preaching study. I still have those books and they are very special because they were gifts from a very godly man who, by example, showed me lifelong learning. He would often sit and tell me what he had learned that morning in his study time. He remained eager and hungry to learn until the end of his life.

Make it a habit to daily learn from God, His Word, and from others who are following Him.

DAY 2 LOVE THE LORD WITH YOUR MIND

READ MARK 12:30; MATTHEW 5:13

Key Idea: Believers need to stay sharp and ready to share The Truth whenever and wherever we can.

Believers need to stay sharp and ready to share the Truth whenever and wherever we can. Jesus says that His followers are salt and light in the world. He also warns about salt losing its savor. I like the way J. Vernon McGee speaks about this:

The Scots translate “savour” by the more expressive word “tang.” I like their word much better. “If the salt has lost its tang.” The problem today is that most church members have not only lost their tang as salt, but as pepper they have lost their pep also. We have very few salt and pepper Christians in our day. Now salt doesn’t keep fermentation and that type of thing from taking place, but it will arrest it. You and I ought to be the salt in the earth and have an influence for good in the world.¹²

One of the ways believers lose their tang is by not staying fresh. Of course we stay fresh by reading God’s Word and prayer. We can also stay fresh by learning. You need to be a student of God’s Word. We need to be learners growing and making application of God’s Truth in our own lives and prepared to share with others with sharpness and tang.

In regards to loving God with your mind, John Piper says there are several components to intellectual love for God:

¹² Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

- Dedicating our minds to knowing Him
- Thinking clearly and truly about Him so that we don't have false ideas in our minds
- Not being satisfied with merely an intellectual awareness of His attributes, character, and acts but intentionally devoting that mental effort to serve the affections (emotions) for God

<http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-does-it-mean-to-love-the-lord-with-all-your-mind>

With this I believe we always need to be learning and allowing the Truth of God to grip our minds and our emotions. There needs to be in every believer, an intellectual pursuit of Truth and application.

Your church offers a variety of Discipleship classes for you to grow and to be able to apply the Truth practically and to share with others. Are you taking advantages of these classes? Are you reading books that will challenge and stretch your mind with the Truth of God? It is time to start.

Suggested Reading: [Love Your God With All Your Mind](#), J.P. Moreland

DAY 3 STUDY, OBEY, AND TEACH

READ EZRA 7:1-10

Key Idea: Leaders must constantly prepare their hearts to seek the Lord.

The book of Ezra is a really fantastic book about revival and reformation. There were two groups of Jewish exiles who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon after seventy years of exile. The first group was about 50,000 people under the leadership of Zerubbabel. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel the temple was rebuilt and completed. That group was followed by a group under the leadership of Ezra.

Are you a leader? If you are a follower of Jesus, you are a leader. People are looking to you and should be because you are an example of one who trusts in and depends on the Lord. That makes you a leader. Ezra was a leader. Ezra took very seriously the role of leader. Look again at verse 10, it tells us that Ezra *“prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.”* Remember that Ezra was born in captivity in Babylon. He became a skilled student of the Jewish Scriptures. No doubt some of the priests had brought with them copies of the Old Testament scrolls. Ezra had *“prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord.”* He determined to study what he had of God's Word. He was a student of the Bible that was available at that time. As I write these words I am sitting in my home office. I probably have close to fifty Bibles on my shelves. In addition, I have more Bible study resources than I could ever use.

My little laptop on which I am writing these words has hundreds of digital Bible resources programed in and thousands of others available through the internet. What a day in which to live and learn the Truth of God! People followed Ezra because he was a student who followed the Word of God and set out to teach others.

Our church is blessed with people like Ezra. Men and women who regularly study, do, and teach the Word of God. I am not just talking about pastors and evangelists but also laypeople who diligently and regularly study to be prepared to share and teach others.

You, too, need to study so you can learn, do, and teach others. Teaching may not be in a formal setting. It may be with your children or grandchildren. It may be in your place of work or social settings. People are looking to you because you are a follower of Jesus. Prepare your heart to seek the Word of God. Be a lifelong learner of His Word.

In addition to being a learner of God's Word, read books on history, science, and other subjects you find interesting. However, read and study all things through the eyes of God. There is a list of books at the end of this week that may be of interest to you.

Suggested reading:

I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist, Norman Geisler and Frank Turek

Learn the Bible in 24 Hours, Chuck Missler, (This is also a DVD study with a workbook)

Heaven, Randy Alcorn

www.rightnowmedia.org

DAY 4 STUDY TO BE READY TO ANSWER FOR YOUR HOPE

READ 1 PETER 3:13-15

Key idea: Study to share what and why you believe what you believe.

When talking with Jesus followers about spiritual growth and maturity we often use words like "have to," "must," and "we have got to." These words or phrases instantly make me think of religion. It sounds like there are things we must do to be good Christians. I definitely recoil from this. The things we "need to do and must do" are in keeping with a vision, and that vision is being conformed to the likeness of Christ. This is God's plan for His children, that we would be like Christ. There are habits we must put in place in order to be conformed like Christ.

J.P Moreland, in his book Love Your God With all Your Mind, speaks of the good life and writes:

“I must also seek to live for others. Among other things, this means that I need to discover my vocation, my overall calling in life, composed of my talents, spiritual gifts, historical circumstances, and so forth. And I should passionately seek to occupy my vocational place for the good of believers and unbelievers alike. Make no mistake about it. Such a life is not easy. It involves discipline, hard work, suffering, patience and endurance in forming habits conducive to and characteristic of this kind of life” (Page 87).

This sounds heavy but it is a part of denying oneself, taking up your cross, and following Jesus. Peter urges all believers to come to every day like this. He tells us to be ready to give an answer to people about the hope that is within us. Just think of the incredible hope that we as Jesus followers have. Since Jesus came and took the judgment of sin off of us, God now lives in us. This is the sovereign God who made all things and will bring all of history to His climactic conclusion, and we are His beneficiaries. The whole idea of being ready to give an answer is a call to study and anticipate the questions.

The word for answer is a compound word that means to “speak from.” It means to speak from what we have learned and are learning about our faith. Then we are to begin to engage the people around us, allowing and even encouraging them, to ask questions about what and why we believe. That is a little scary! What if they ask questions we cannot answer? Tell them you are not sure, but you will do some more research. Those questions will sharpen you.

This area of study that equips you to answer people, when they ask questions about your faith, is called apologetics. This comes from the Greek word in **1 Peter 3:15** that is translated “*give a defense.*” There are many great books and studies in apologetics. You can also go to rightnowmedia.org and search apologetics to find seventeen apologetics studies at this time.

Get yourself ready to serve others by giving answers for your hope.

DAY 5 STUDY OF THE WORD OF GOD IS CUMULATIVE

READ ISAIAH 28:9-14

Key idea: Daily Bible reading and study is intended to be cumulative.

Have you ever watched it snow? I remember as a little kid when the weatherman would forecast snow I would regularly go to our back porch and turn on the outside light and watch the snowflakes come down in the light. I couldn't see the ground until the next morning. During the night those little flakes accumulated slowly to come up to several inches which, for Georgia, was a heavy snow. It took hours and a steady falling, but the snow accumulated.

That is the way Bible study and Bible reading works. It adds up and accumulates. Over time, bit by bit, it adds up, and the result is growing faith and a better grasp of God's Word and how it all connects. It is important to regularly read and study the Bible and do so systematically.

The passage for today deals with the people of God who had gotten into a backslidden state by ignoring the truth. It was not just the people but also those who were supposed to be leading and teaching them. The people mocked the prophet Isaiah saying that he was treating them like children in presenting the truth of God. They said he was teaching them in a childlike method of line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little. God rebuked them for their failure to hear and heed instruction and told them they would be instructed by people they could not understand. He was speaking about people who would defeat them and take them away who spoke another language. They would learn in another way rather than precept upon precept and line upon line and a little here and a little there.

Have you ever had to learn hard lessons because you refused to learn in the more elementary and simple way? Experience is a great teacher but there are some things I would just as soon not learn by experience. I can read that speed limit sign. It is clear, simple and very understandable. That simple sign can instruct me or I can experience the teaching method of the law when an officer of the law gives me a ticket for ignoring the sign. Experience is a great teacher but the simple method is preferred.

There is a method of Bible study known as the Inductive Method. It has been the method of Precept Ministry for years. This is simple and involves three parts:

Observation: What does the passage say?

Interpretation: What does the passage mean?

Application: How does the meaning of the passage apply to me?

I share this only to encourage you to study the Bible regularly. Every day is preferred. It does not require a great deal of time. It can be as little as fifteen minutes or as much as an hour or more. The important thing is to come away with a morsel of truth and watch it accumulate!

WEEK 8 BEING CONFORMED TO THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST: THE HABIT OF SERVING-----Chris Watson

As followers of Jesus we are to be servants. We are to be about serving God and serving others. President John F. Kennedy expressed this idea clearly when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." That is the attitude of serving. Not asking or seeking for you, but for God and for others. As a habit, we need to ask what others need from us and how we can more effectively serve God. Include in your daily agenda serving God and serving others.

DAY 1 SERVE AS SERVING THE LORD – MORE ABOUT SELFISH MOTIVES AND WHAT THE CHURCH IS.

READ MATTHEW 20:25-28

Key idea: The habit of serving is first about serving God. All that the believer does has to do with serving God. The motivation for all we do, should be to serve Him and do His will.

In this biblical, historical, account Jesus told His twelve closest followers that He would soon be betrayed to the religious elite, and they would condemn Him to death. He would be delivered to the Gentiles, beaten, and then crucified. He also told them that He would rise from the dead three days later. It was in this context that the mother of two of His closest disciples asked Jesus about her sons, James and John, sitting at His right and left hands in the greatest place of honor. What terrible timing! It was at this point, in response to her selfish request, that Jesus tells them what following Him is all about.

Who is in charge; who is king/queen of the hill; who is great and greatest? Jesus is telling them being great is not what is important! He is saying that they should not major on the minors! It is not a question of 'what about me or where do I fit?' It is a question of who needs to be served! It is not an issue of whose name is in the lights or who gets top billing. There is only One who is worthy of this, and all we do in His name is about serving God and others for and in His name.

In this passage the word for 'servant' is the word 'diakanos.' The word 'diakanos' is the word for servant, but it is also the word from which we get the word deacon, and it means to serve.

Serving is an attitude mirrored. Jesus' followers needed to watch His actions and attitude, and reflect those actions and attitudes as a mirror. In Philippians 2:5 we are exhorted to have the same attitude that Jesus had. In the rest of that section we see how Jesus did not think of Himself or about Himself but about His Father's will and plan to save sinners!

Serving is an action imitated. In our lives we seek people to imitate. We live in a hero-crazed culture. Musicians, entertainers, and athletes become the heroes of children and adults. As heroes they are imitated, and most of the time, at least for believers, that is not a good thing. Jesus is the greatest hero by far, and in truth none can compare. He is The One we should imitate. Jesus came to serve and then told us in **John 20:21** “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” He also said in **John 13:15**, “For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.”

Serving is an activity to be fine-tuned. Serving others and serving God needs to be tuned as to motive. Why do you serve in your church? Why are you going on that mission trip? Why are you serving that person? A musician tunes his instrument regularly. There is not just a one-time tuning. Rather the more changes that take place—location, weather, temperature, and the like, the more necessary it is to tune and retune. I need to tune to God’s Word and Spirit constantly. I get knocked out of tune a lot. I can find myself serving for selfish purposes or to please other people. I want my motives to be fine-tuned to serving God for His purposes and His glory and His name sake. A follower of Jesus must stay in tune with the Word and the Spirit of God. If not, we can do right things with the wrong motive. The habits of the Word of God and prayer are essential to serving.

Who are you serving? Are you looking to be served or to serve? I have noticed when I serve, God takes care of what I need spiritually, but if I am being idle, I tend to be selfish and think about me. What about you? Whom will you serve today? Your spouse, your kids, your grandkids, boss, co-worker and/or the church?

DAY 2 SERVE THE LORD WITH GLADNESS

READ PSALM 100

Key Idea: Serving the Lord should be done with great joy and enthusiasm. Serving Him should come from a heart of gladness. It should be evident that our serving flows from a joyful and contented heart.

In my years of serving in youth ministry I would often meet with current teachers or those wanting to teach Sunday school or other small groups. I would always say, “If God has you to serve here and your heart is in it, then I want you here, but if it’s not God’s plan, and your heart is not here, then please don’t.” I remember the first time I said it. I got some weird looks in a meeting. Over time people understood my heart, in that you must be committed to God, His Word, and where you are serving. If not one of two things (and usually both) will happen. You will burn out quick, and in doing so, those you teach will notice something is off, and they will not enjoy it either. Are you serving now? Are you serving for the Lord or men? Are you

serving because you have to or you get to? Are you serving because God has you to serve, or because it was your plan? Don't get me wrong, serving can have its challenges and very tough times, but if our heart is first for the Lord, then God will lead us.

There are 3 characteristics that should be true of the believer and about the believer's service:

Joyful (vv. 1-2):

We can easily understand the people of Israel shouting joyfully in praise to their great God (vv. 3, 5), but the psalmist calls for all the nations of the earth to praise Him. This is a recurring theme in the "Royal Psalms" (97:1, 6; 98:2-4, 7; 99:1-2), for it was Israel's responsibility to introduce the Gentiles to the true and living God. The church has been commissioned to take the good news into all the world (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15), and it will be a glorious day when God's people gather at His throne from "all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues" (Rev. 7:9). But our shouting ought to lead to serving Him, for He is the only true God (Deut. 6:13; 10:12; Josh. 24:15-24). Worship leads to service, and true service is worship. If we sing in the Spirit and with understanding, our songs are received in heaven as sacrifices to the Lord (Heb. 13:15).

Submissive (v. 3):

The verb "know" means "to know by experience." It also carries the meaning of "acknowledge." What we have experienced in our hearts we openly confess to others and bear witness of our glorious God. (See 1 Kings 18:39.) The phrase "made us" means much more than "He created us," for He also created the nations that do not know Him. It means "Jehovah constituted us as a nation, His chosen people." (See 95:6-7; 149:2; Deut. 32:6, 15; Isa. 29:23; 60:21.) The phrase "not we ourselves" can also be translated "and we are his." This connects with the next statement, "We are his people..." (see Isa. 43:1). The image of God's people as a flock of sheep is frequently found in Scripture (74:1; 77:20; 78:52; 79:13; 80:1; 95:7; Gen. 48:15; 49:24; Num. 27:17; Isa. 40:11; John 10; 21:16-17; Heb. 13:20-21; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:1-4). This verse is a simple statement of faith: Jehovah is God, Creator, Redeemer and Shepherd, and we are submitted to Him. If the sheep do not submit to their shepherd, they will stray into danger.

Thankful (vv. 4-5):

The procession of worshipers has now reached the gates of the sanctuary, and they burst out in songs of praise. Why? Because of the Lord's goodness, mercy (loving kindness), and faithfulness. (See parallels in 106:1, 107:1, 118:1, and 136:1-3; and see also 1 Chron. 16:34 and 2 Chron. 5:13.) "O, taste and see that the Lord is good" (37:8), and He gives that which is good (85:12; Rom. 8:28). The word "truth" is a form of the Hebrew word amen and refers to God's faithfulness and reliability. It is the same word used in Exodus 17:12 to describe Moses's hands "staying steady," and in

Genesis 15:6 it is translated “believed” (“relied on,” literally “said *amen* to the Lord”). (See Deut. 7:9 and 32:4.) From generation to generation, the Lord can be trusted (90:1; Ex. 34:5-7). It is significant that the fathers’ and mothers’ worship today will have an important influence on their children tomorrow. If we are controlled by the Holy Spirit of God and the holy Word of God, we will reveal it in the way we worship God. Instead of imitating the world, we will be led by the Word and the Spirit to be joyful in the Lord, submissive to the Lord, and thankful to the Lord, and the world will see the difference. Finally, note that a spirit of thanksgiving helps us overcome some of the “sins in good standing” that too often invade our lives: complaining (v. 1), idolatry (v. 2), pride (v. 3), and ingratitude (v. 4). It was when our first parents became “unthankful” that the human race began that terrible descent into sin and judgment (Rom. 1:18-32; note v. 21). Instead of being thankful for what they had, Adam and Eve believed Satan’s lie that the Lord was holding out on them (Gen. 3:1—“*every tree*”), and this led to their sin. A thankful spirit is a triumphant spirit.¹³

Are you serving with joyfulness, submissiveness, and thankfulness? May our heart always be right in the way we serve the Lord and others, and when we feel like it gets off the path, may we get back on.

DAY 3 THE HABIT OF SERVING: SKILLED BY GOD

READ EXODUS 31:1-11

Key Idea: God gifts His children for serving.

Later this year we will spend a great deal of time on ministry and serving. Both Pastor Dennis and I are really excited about this, but until then we will not go into much detail. We will only speak of the truth that God has gifted or skilled all of us to serve.

In our text today and surrounding verses, God had provided a plan for the Tabernacle. Our God is not just a God of the “big stuff” but as you noticed in our text today, He also cares about the details. God had the Tabernacle built using His people to build it. Specifically, He called out Bezalel who was used for the purpose of workmanship. Remember **1 Corinthians 12:18**? It says, “*But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.*” God had Bezalel, and just Bazalel for this job.

¹³ Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – Wisdom and Poetry.

God also provided the ability and skill for Bezalel to build the Tabernacle. Look at verses 3-6 of today's passage, ³*"And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship,* ⁴ *to design artistic works, to work in gold, in silver, in bronze,* ⁵ *in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of workmanship.* ⁶*And I, indeed I, have appointed with him Aholiab the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and I have put wisdom in the hearts of all who are gifted artisans, that they may make all that I have commanded you."* **Exodus 31:3-6** (NKJV). God had Bezalel for this specific task. He did not call just anyone, but this one person. In Exodus 35:30 Moses tells the people that God has called Bezalel by name. He would use his skill and abilities for God's plan and for God's work. Bezael was the guy for the job. Has God called you to a specific ministry or place of service? Are you listening?

God has the whole plan and knows it from start to finish. Bezalel listened and followed how God would use him. Are you? How does God want to use you specifically? Not someone else, but you!

DAY 4 DISCOVERING YOUR PLACE IN MINISTRY

READ ROMANS 12:1-8

Key Idea: God has a plan for each of His followers to find their place in ministry in and through His church.

In the fall of this year we will begin a church-wide focus on your place in ministry in and through our church. Do you still have your puzzle piece from earlier this year when we began these new devotions? The puzzle pieces remind us that each person is an important part of the church. When we are not connected to God and His Church, and we avoid gathering together with other believers Sunday after Sunday, then we miss the opportunity to serve in a place of ministry and also miss the blessing of others' service. What is your PLACE in God's Church?

PLACE stands for:

Personal Discovery

Learning Spiritual Gifts

Abilities Awareness

Connecting Passion with Ministry

Experiences of Life

What are you passionate about? What would it look like for you to take that passion and use it both inside and outside of God’s church? We will break this down during our next set of devotions. Be praying now about how God has gifted you, and what you are really passionate about. This includes those who regularly use their gifts and those who may just be getting interested or starting.

Every believer is on a journey that begins at the point of salvation. Along the way, it is important to discover your PLACE in the Body of Christ. You have a unique combination of personality, spiritual gifts, abilities, passions, and experiences that God designed to create your unique role in the work of His kingdom: “... for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12 NKJV).¹⁴ Imagine if EVERY believer used his or her gifts inside and outside of God’s Church? What would that look like, and how might God use that to transform our church and community?

Please begin praying now as the pastors prepare for this time where each person will be working on their PLACE. A few months back we had several of our members attend the PLACE conference, and we are really excited about the great potential. Pray that God will lead each of us to find our PLACE, and with great joy and passion serve Him inside and outside the church.

DAY 5 SERVING WITH PASSION AND PURPOSE

READ JOHN 4:34-38

Key Idea: Jesus was motivated and fulfilled in His life by doing the will of His Father.

The account with the Samaritan woman at the well had just taken place. Jesus shares the truth with her and she experiences new birth, and by default she goes and tells others. The disciples return and invite Jesus to join them for food because they assume He is hungry. Jesus responds that His food was to do the Father’s will, the work of His Father. Jesus knew that in doing His Father’s will, He would be satisfied and so would His Father.

Many people have all the world has to offer and are still not satisfied. Maybe you know people like I do who maybe have all the money, homes, and stuff anyone could ever want, but still they are not satisfied. I feel God has blessed me much more than I deserve. Yet when I seek to put my satisfaction in things, I am not satisfied. Stuff, things, or relationships can never satisfy like Jesus and doing His will.

¹⁴ “Finding Your Place in Life and Ministry” Participant Guide and Assessment tool

It's been said that the Will of God ought to be a source of strength and satisfaction to the child of God, just as if he sat down to a sumptuous feast. If what we are doing tears us down instead of builds us up, then we may well question whether it is the will of God for us. Jesus was motivated by doing His Father's will and was anticipating the outcome, the harvest. Even when it was difficult for our Lord, like dying on the cross for our sins, He was still motivated by His Father's will and business. He knew it was God's plan and knew God would use it for His glory.

Are you wearied by serving God? Why are you doing it? If it is because it is His will, then it should not be a burden. Are you anticipating a God-provided outcome? If so, you will be serving with anticipation that He will provide the harvest. Remember God's Word tells us to serve the Lord, for we are serving the Lord and not men. We can't have two masters. We can't serve both God and money or God and relationships, or God and things. We must serve God and be about His business. Are you about your Father's business? Are you about His plan? Pray that you serve Him with all you have. In doing so anticipate how the Lord will work, and thank Him that you get to be a part of His plan.

WEEK 9 BEING CONFORMED TO THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST: STEWARDSHIP-----Dennis Watson

God has made everything that there is and therefore He is the owner of it all. The definition of stewardship according to Google is “the job of supervising or taking care of something, such as an organization or property.” The implication is that the “something” here belongs to someone else. We are stewards of the creations of God. He gave Adam and Eve the task of tending and keeping it. We continue to have the blessing and privilege of watch care. **Proverbs 3:6** says, “*In all your ways acknowledge Him.*” If we trust Him and know that all we have is His and came from Him, then in all we do we will look to Him.

DAY 1 STEWARDSHIP BEGINS WITH GOD

READ PSALM 24:1; DEUTERONOMY 8:18-20; JAMES 1:17

Key Idea: God has given us everything we possess. This is where stewardship begins. Remember this and do not forget.

Psalm 24 opens with these words, “*The earth is the LORD’S, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell therein.*” All that exists, what we see and do not see, exists because God made it, and it all belongs to Him. Stewardship is all en-compassing. Our time, abilities, skills, intellect, possessions, and money, everything comes from God. Very early in Israel’s history, God tells His people to be careful about something. He warned them about forgetting where they came from and Who was responsible for their blessings. Forgetting this was a huge struggle for Israel in the Old Testament, and the same is true of believers today. There was this warning early on, and then again in Proverbs 3:5-6, the people are told to “*trust the Lord and acknowledge Him.*” We are to acknowledge God in all that we do.

Have you ever thought about the fact that God has given you the ability to do all that you do? Deuteronomy says it is God, “*who gives you the power to get wealth.*” So whatever abilities you have come from God. We can get so self-focused that we forget where our abilities come from. Here is where that warning not to forget enters. Instead of forgetting, we need to develop a practice of acknowledging and giving thanks to God for our abilities. Whatever it is you do—your work, skills, abilities, and special talents, all come from God. This puts you in a position all the time to acknowledge Him and give Him thanks. It even puts you in a position that all that you do, you do for Him and because of Him.

Stewardship expresses our obedience regarding the management of everything God has placed in our control. Stewardship is the commitment of one’s self to God’s service with the understanding that it is all for His glory and honor.

DAY 2 MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME

READ EPHESIANS 5:8-21

Key Idea: Time is perhaps the most valuable resource God has given to us. You will never again have more than you have right now. Be wise and redeem the time.

Time is a nonrenewable asset. There will not be time added nor will there be the opportunity to save time. It cannot be saved in a bottle or in a bank. You can spend it but you cannot save it. Paul tells believers to live wisely and to redeem the time. The NIV translates that phrase “making the most of every opportunity.” We are to be wise and careful and make the most use of time so that we can use all of our time as stewards.

Twenty-four hours in a day and one hundred sixty-eight hours in a week. We all have the same amount of time. Some people will make better use of time than others, but we all have the same amount. The writer of Proverbs talks many times about the sluggard. The NKJV translates it as “the lazy man.” In Proverbs we read about the lazy man who makes excuses for not doing the things he should be doing. For instance, he does not go to church because it may rain or the traffic may be too bad. The lazy man has time for the internet, TV, and games, but no time for spiritual disciplines. So he plops down on the couch or rolls over in the bed and does not make the most of every opportunity. The writer of Proverbs in Proverbs 24:33-34 speaks of a little sleep, a little slumber, and a little folding of the hands. It all adds up; the loss of time adds up. You don’t have to do anything to lose time. Don’t lose time; use it, making the most of every opportunity.

What are you doing with your time? Think about your average day. How much time do you spend with your family? How much time do you spend caring for and reaching out to others? How much time do you spend on spiritual habits which contribute to spiritual growth?

This may help: There are ninety-six fifteen minute segments in a day. Let’s say you sleep eight hours at night. That will leave you sixty-four fifteen minute segments. How will you spend those sixty-four fifteen minute segments?

Donald Whitney in Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life summarizes this way:

“Time appears so plentiful that losing much of it seems inconsequential. People waste money easily as well, but if people threw away their money as thoughtlessly as some throw away their time, we would think them insane. Yet time is infinitely more precious than money because money can’t buy time. You can, however, at least minimize the loss and waste of time

by disciplining yourself for the purpose of godliness.” (Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (pp. 166-167). NavPress. Kindle Edition).

DAY 3 SEE THAT YOU EXCEL IN THE GRACE OF GIVING

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 8:5-7

Key Idea: Giving is what God does and then He seeks to lead us to be givers also.

Stewardship is not a financial program. It is not just about money. However, what you do with your money has much to say about your stewardship. Mike Gilchrist used to say, “The tithe is a 10% reminder that all of it belongs to God.” Giving is a huge part of biblical faith.

Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth to encourage them to walk with the Lord and turn away from ungodly practices. He encouraged them about giving by giving them the illustration of the Macedonian churches. Although the Macedonian believers were going through trials *“their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality.”* Paul was commending the Macedonians regarding their giving to the Corinthian believers. The Macedonians showed the way with an eager desire to give a gift for the ministry. They were urging Paul to receive their gift. Then Paul used those words that I use every Sunday as we pray for the offering, *“They first gave themselves to the Lord.”* That is the beginning point of biblical giving--the realization that God is the Chief Giver in that He gave His only begotten Son. Biblical giving then is a response to God’s giving. Not only did He give His Son, but *“every good and perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17).*

Paul was seeking to give an example of a group of believers who were excelling in godly giving. At the same time, he hoped to lead the Corinthian believers out of their malaise of spiritual immaturity. They were caught up in the battles of spiritual gifts and speaking in tongues. So in this passage Paul urged the Corinthian believers to excel not only in speech, knowledge, and faith, but to abound in the gift of giving also.

The following words appear in the NKJV of the Bible; here is the number of times they appear. This is just a rough compilation without looking at usage. It does not include words like believing, praying, giving, and loving. Give is used more times than believe, pray and love combined.

- Believe: 278
- Pray: 146
- Love: 362
- Give: 865

You cannot serve God in an abundance of ways and then neglect giving. *"God loves a cheerful giver"* **2 Corinthians 9:7**. Jesus said that *"It is a greater blessing to give than to receive."* **Acts 20:35**

I hope you are experiencing firsthand the blessing of giving!

DAY 4 GIVING: WHERE DO I BEGIN?

READ MALACHI 3:7-11

Key Idea: The tithe is the beginning place of stewardship and giving.

What if God had just said give, but did not give us an idea where to begin? Where would we begin? How much would be in keeping with His expectations? In the Old Testament we are introduced and taught about the tithe. The word tithe means a tenth part. The people were instructed by God to give the first tenth of all of their grain or increase. In reality there were several tenths but the tithe was to be the first 10% of their gain or increase. I believe that the tithe is the beginning point for the believer. Tithing should be an ongoing habit of all believers. The tithe is not the goal, it is the beginning point. In the New Testament Jesus always went beyond the law. The tithe is the beginning place, not the stopping place. I know of people who started there and got to a place that they lived on the tithe and gave 90% away!

We read about the tithe in the book of Malachi also. God's people had become rebellious and turned away from Him as they had done many times before. The prophet Malachi issued the appeal of God to the people of God to *"Return to me and I will return to you."* Of course their response was, *"In what way shall we return to you?"* God asked them a very direct question, *"Will a man rob God?"* They asked, *"How have we robbed you?"* His response was, *"In tithes and offerings."* Did you see that? To not tithe and give offerings is robbing God! The people were out of God's will because they were not tithing, and the way to return was to once again tithe. When a believer withholds tithes and offerings, it is because they do not trust the Lord. A tithe is the tenth and offerings are all other offerings over and above the tithe.

When you do not tithe you are not only robbing God, you are robbing yourself. We rob ourselves of the spiritual blessings that accompany obedient giving (2 Cor. 9:15-16). Consequently, we will not hang onto that money because it will end up going to the doctor, repairs for the car, to replace worn out shoes, or many other needs. When you fail to trust God, whatever you do trust in becomes ineffective (see Haggai 1:6).

The failure to tithe robs others of the blessings provided by God through His church. Malachi said that when they tithe there would be food in the storehouse. God's blessings are spread to others through ministries. Tithing would bring resources into God's church, and the testimony of God's provision would be experienced by others.

Are you tithing? If not, start now and stop robbing God.

DAY 5 LIVE AS A STEWARD AND ANTICIPATE REWARDS

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 3:11-15

Key Idea: All of our lives we are stewards of all opportunities as well as all resources. Make them add up for God's glory and your reward.

A believer who is being conformed to the likeness of Christ must be thoughtful knowing every moment is a stewardship moment. I like to think of it this way, and I regularly practice this thought. I have this time, this place, and these people, what am I to do as an ambassador of Christ?

When am I building on the foundation of Christ? I am building all of the time. Life is not neatly divided into secular and sacred. For the follower of Jesus, all of life is sacred. It is a testimony of Him. Jesus told us to shine our light so that other people could see our good works, and as a result, give glory to God. Is that only while in church? No, it is all the time and in every place and with all people. I am to be a steward, not just of money, time, talents, and resources, but all opportunities.

In 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, Paul is writing about the relationship of believers to the church and about building the church on the foundation of Jesus. However, it is not incorrect to expand the application. All of us, as believers, are building our life on a foundation. That foundation is supposed to be Jesus, and we are to build with good works and deeds that we do for God's glory. In 1 Corinthians 10:31 Paul tells us to do all we do for God's glory. So we are either building with imperishable items like gold, silver, and precious jewels; or perishable things like wood, hay, and straw. The imperishable will endure the testing by fire, but the perishable will be burned up. Our works will be revealed as real or fake. The perishable works will be burned up, but the believer will be saved. The imperishable will not be burned up, and these believers will not only be saved, but rewarded. I want all my life to count. I want all my moments and days to matter in God's plan of economy. I know I will have some wood, hay and straw, but going forward, I want there to be more gold, silver, and precious jewels. I want to take those times, places, and people and honor God on those occasions. I want to be alert to give Him glory and thus build with the imperishable and receive the promised reward. I will live daily for His glory and anticipating His reward!

Will you join me?

WEEK 10 BEING CONFORMED TO THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST: EVANGELISM, JOURNALING, FASTING-----Chris Watson

Learning to be disciplined regarding spiritual habits that put us in a place to grow spiritually and be conformed to the likeness of Christ must become a way of life. It is like Zacchaeus climbing the tree to see Jesus except tree climbing becomes a way of life, not to see a glimpse of Jesus, but to put ourselves in His path to come to know Him in an intimate way. There are many habits we could begin to practice and we have gone through several that are vital to our spiritual growth. This week we look briefly at three more before wrapping up.

DAY 1 CONFORMED TO THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST: THE HABIT OF EVANGELIZING

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 15:3-8

Key Idea: The Scriptures bear witness and the Holy Spirit bears witness, and as a result we are to bear witness.

The Greek word for witness is “*martus*” from where we get our word martyr. So taken to the extreme we should be willing to be a witness for the Lord even if it were to mean our life. We know this was the case for several people in Scripture including Stephen who was killed for his faith. Now in America our lives are not in danger like the lives of believers in other countries. However, we do need to be reminded that when we place our life in Jesus’ hands, our lives are now His. He bought us with a price.

Acts 8:4, 25, 35; 11:20—this is the word evangelizing but is translated “preaching the word.” It means evangelizing which is to announce the good news. Evangelism is presenting Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to sinful people, in order that they may come to put their trust in God through Him, to receive Him as their Savior, and to serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His church.¹⁵ Some have said that they evangelize with their lives, and we should do this, but we are to also evangelize with our words. How will people know the truth if someone doesn’t share with them (Romans 10:14-15)?

Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10). God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). We have looked recently at the words of Jesus when He gave the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20. This Scripture reminds us to go and make disciples. Now God makes the disciples but He uses us in the

¹⁵Whitney, Donald S.. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (p. 120). NavPress. Kindle Edition.

process as we share the truth of Jesus Christ. Acts 1:8 also reminds us that we are to be witnesses everywhere. Recently God put this verse in context for me by placing on my heart the 4 C's: Church, Community, Country and Continents. In other words we are to be God's witnesses everywhere from home to the other side of the world.

Truth be known we are all witnesses. The question is what kind of witnesses are we? The Scripture bears witness to the Truth, and the Holy Spirit bears witness, and as a result we are to bear witness. Do people see Jesus in you when you talk? Do they see Jesus in you with how you live, what you do, and where you go? I pray that this is what is seen in all of us. As we go, let's live out and speak out the truth of God. We are His witnesses.

DAY 2 CONFORMED TO THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST: THE HABIT OF JOURNALING

READ PSALM 90

Key Idea: Journaling is the habit of writing down thoughts, ideas and concepts that come to you while you are praying, reading and meditating on God's idea. It is an often neglected spiritual habit.

Moses wrote this Psalm. It is a reflective Psalm. Moses had spent forty years in Egypt and had to flee because he killed a man. He spent another forty years shepherding another man's sheep. He returned to Egypt to lead God's people out of bondage. He then spent forty years leading the people as they wandered in disobedience until that hard-hearted generation died off. Moses, too, died not having entered the land of promise, but he did get a glimpse of it.

When I read this Psalm, it sounds like a journal entry. A journal entry can be a prayer as this was a prayer of Moses. He had spent many years with the people in the wilderness, wandering. He must have meditated many times on God's greatness—His Creation. He probably saw over one million people die during nearly forty years of wandering. That was a lot of funerals. Moses wrote what he had seen, experienced, and also what he knew to be true.

Journaling can be of great benefit. It often does us good to write what we are learning, what we see God doing, our prayers, and also what we have just read in God's Word. It's been said that the more that we can use all of our five senses, the better we can learn and understand. Therefore it is good to read God's Word and to pray, but the benefits of journaling are also very good. For most, it is a learned discipline, and you have to make a point to do it. But there are so many benefits, including looking back over the previous months and years and potentially even passing your journal on to your family showing what God has taught you, your struggles, and so on.

The present benefit of spiritual discipline is a fulfilled, God-blessed, fruitful, and useful life. If you get involved in spiritual gymnastics, the blessings of godliness will carry on into eternity. Although many people spend far more time exercising their bodies than their souls, the excellent servant of Jesus Christ realizes that spiritual discipline is a priority.¹⁶

What disciplines are true of your life right now? Those things, for instance, that you do daily no matter what. We should realize the great benefit and blessings of the spiritual disciplines. While most all disciplines can be good, spiritual disciplines seem to yield the most benefit.

DAY 3 CONFORMED TO THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST: THE HABIT OF FASTING

READ MATTHEW 6:16-18

Key Idea: Fasting is abstaining from something, usually food, in order to seek the Lord with greater clarity and focus. It is probably one of the least understood and practiced disciplines among believers.

Christians in a gluttonous, denial-less, self-indulgent society may struggle to accept and begin the practice of fasting. Few disciplines go so radically against the flesh and the mainstream of culture as this one. Nevertheless, we dare not overlook its biblical significance. Of course, some people, for medical reasons, cannot fast. Still, even those unable to fast from food can enjoy many applications of this discipline. No Christian should ignore fasting's benefits in the disciplined pursuit of a Christ like life.¹⁷

Overall fasting is meant to take what you would be doing at that time, and instead of doing it, you pray, read, and seek out the Lord, either for a specific situation or just generally hearing from the Lord. In Scripture fasting is usually from food. Obviously when you are fasting from food and you think, "I'm hungry; it's time to eat," that's a reminder to you, "No, I'm fasting." That thought draws your mind back to why you were fasting in the first place and keeps you focused on your purpose.

Donald Whitney has said, "self-indulgence is the enemy of gratitude, and self-discipline usually its friend and generator. That is why gluttony is a deadly sin. The early desert fathers believed that a person's appetites are linked: full stomachs and jaded palates take the edge from our hunger and thirst for righteousness. They spoil the appetite for God."¹⁸

¹⁶John MacArthur, Jr. (Whitney, Donald S.. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (p. 249). NavPress. Kindle Edition.)

¹⁷(Whitney, Donald S.. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (p. 192). NavPress. Kindle Edition.)

¹⁸CORNELIUS PLANTINGA JR. (Whitney, Donald S.. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (p. 191). NavPress. Kindle Edition.)

What do you and I hunger and thirst for more, lunch, dinner or God, His plan, and His will? Do we treat needing our next meal like we do our next word from God? Notice our Scripture from today says, “*when you fast.*” So the assumption is not maybe you and I should fast, but rather when we do. Donald Whitney says there are nine kinds of fasts in the Bible:

1. The normal fast—a fast from food but not water Luke 4:2
2. A partial fast—limitation of diet—Daniel 1:12—Daniel and his three friends eat vegetable and drink water
3. An absolute fast—Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:16
4. A supernatural fast—Moses for forty days
5. A private fast—Matthew 6:16-18
6. A congregational fast—Joel 2:15-16; Acts 13:2
7. A national fast—2 Chronicles 20:3
8. One regular OT fast—Leviticus 16:29-31—The Day of Atonement
9. Occasional fasts—special occasions as the need arises

The most common fast among Christians today would probably fall under the categories of normal (abstaining from food but drinking water), private, and occasional. Again this type of fasting is so beneficial. Do you practice fasting? If not, why not begin this week? As always be sure to know your health conditions, and what you can/can’t handle. It is always good when starting out, to fast from just one meal. Over time you can build up should the Lord lead you to go longer.

If you would like some further reading and studying on this, look at [God’s Chosen Fast](#), Arthur Wallis.

DAY 4 START GOOD HABITS

READ GENESIS 5:21-24

Key Idea: We need to make sure that we are regularly establishing and practicing habits in our lives that will enable us to grow.

It has been said that it takes 21 days of doing something consecutively for it to become a habit; in other words, it just becomes part of who you are and your daily routine. We all probably have or had some “bad habits” that are a part of our life, and we really did not have to work at those; they just came normal as our default to sin. However, putting in right and good habits most often take more intentional focus and determination. Isn’t it interesting that the things that are wrong come natural, but the things that are right with the right heart and motivation are usually harder to do? That’s because we are sinners. However, those good habits in our lives draw us closer to the Lord and His plan.

Developing habits to grow spiritually is extremely important for all followers of Jesus. The Amplified Bible makes it clear that Enoch who was taken by God and did not die had a habit of walking with God in *“habitual fellowship.”* When Enoch was 65 years old, Methuselah was born. ²² *Enoch walked [in habitual fellowship] with God after the birth of Methuselah 300 years and had other sons and daughters.* ²³ *So all the days of Enoch were 365 years.* ²⁴ *And Enoch walked [in habitual fellowship] with God; and he was not, for God took him [home with Him].* **Genesis 5:21-24 (AMP)**

It is also said in Genesis 6:9 that Noah walked with God, and it was true as well for Abraham’s servant who sought a wife for Isaac and Jacob as well. These were people who walked with God, and obedience flowed from their walk. Jesus Himself had a habit of going to the Mount of Olives (Luke 22) and meeting with God. If Jesus needs alone time with the Father, then so do I. Jesus put habits in His life so that He was always about His Father’s business. Growing closer to Jesus doesn’t happen by accident, chance, or happenstance. It happens as we seek the Lord, and the Lord promises that if we seek Him, we will find Him. This includes Scripture reading, prayer, fasting, journaling, and other habits we have mentioned. Therefore it means TIME. A desired sit-down, getting-to-know relationship with God cannot be fulfilled on a fast food time table. We want it now, here, fast, and quick. But time with God requires just that, time, and time means godly habits. The focus is not on the habits; the habits help us bring our focus to God Himself. What habits are normal parts of your life? What habits need to be a part of your life?

DAY 5 DEVELOP SPIRITUAL HABITS TO GUARD YOUR CONVICTIONS

READ DANIEL 1

Key Idea: Followers of Jesus will face times of great difficulty from those who do not follow Jesus or in any way trust His Word. If we are going to live the testimony and shine the light, we must have unshakeable convictions.

Daniel and his three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were probably between the ages of 14 and 20. They were definitely young. They had decided not to eat that of the kings’ delicacies, but why? We don’t know for sure. However, “two reasons seem most likely for Daniel’s sensitivity to defilement. First, this king would not hesitate to serve foods identified as ‘unclean’ by the Law of Moses (see Leviticus 11). Secondly, the food and wine served at Nebuchadnezzar’s table may have been associated with the worship of heathen gods, similar to the problem described in 1 Corinthians 8-10. In either instance, or perhaps in both, Daniel saw defilement as a danger to be actively avoided. While we don’t know why for sure, we do know Daniel was convicted this was the right choice, and it was from the Lord.

Convictions are often firmly held beliefs or opinions. Biblical convictions are those beliefs that are based on the truth of God's Word. Daniel and his friends were about to enter a challenge where they had to stand as very young people in a very hostile culture. Daniel and his friends knew this was right for them. They were obviously strong in their convictions. They had established prayer habits, study habits, and eating habits. We can clearly assume this as their faith was strong. After all they were ready to die for doing what was right rather than live doing what was wrong. For those of you reading this devotion who are middle, high school, or even college students, this verse comes to mind when thinking of this account, *"Let no one despise (look down on) your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity."* **1 Timothy 4:12**

When we seek God and habits that will provide an opportunity for spiritual growth, I believe He will do for us what He did for Daniel and his friends. He will enable us to grow in knowledge and wisdom. It doesn't mean that things will go like we planned or dreamed but, we will know God and His plan will always prevail. When we are yielding to good, godly habits in our lives, those habits will always help in truly walking with and knowing God.

Begin and be reminded of the habits today:

- Spend time daily in God's Word
- Daily Prayer
- Regular worship
- Fellowship with other believers
- Regular learning and growth
- Serving God and others
- Stewardship/Tithing
- Evangelism
- Journaling
- Fasting

Let's make sure the habits we put in our life are godly ones, and pass them on, especially to our family.

Connecting to God is a rather simple process. In fact it is like many things in life—simple but not easy. For instance, connecting to God through Jesus is simple. He paid it all. The hard part is admitting we are sinners and we cannot save ourselves from our foolish sin tendencies. Connecting to His church is simple but requires some time and effort on our part to experience the blessings of being connected to His family—His church. Connecting to God through spiritual growth is simple but once again it takes time and discipline. However we will not enjoy the blessings and benefits of knowing Him in a more intimate way without those habits.

We have now completed the first and the second of four “I Will Connect to God Through...” devotional and preaching studies. The next is “I Will Connect to God Through Serving.” Is there any doubt that the servants of God like Moses, Mary the mother of Jesus, Paul and Peter were intimately connected to God in ways they would not have been had they not served him the way they did? These servants and many others we read about in scripture became intimately connected to God as they served Him and depended on Him for what they needed. I hope you are ready to take the next step of Connecting to God Through Serving.

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