

MORE AND MORE

Session 1 - Praise

Introduction

The phrase “more and more” appears less than two dozen times in the Bible, yet it always seems to indicate something important. This week, we’re looking at the topic of Praise.

Read Psalm 71:14-18. Then read this section and work through the exercises below.

Praise is simply appreciation or admiration. We praise others to let them know that we admire them, or appreciate a job well done. We praise God for this same reason - to express our admiration and appreciation for him, his goodness, his mercy, and all he’s given us.

God does not need praises from us. God is not going to feel better because we’ve given him praise. Rather, praise is something that God calls us to do in order to strengthen our relationship with him. We’re called to praise God continually for everything. *We’re built to offer more and more praise.*

In today’s culture, the majority of people only experience praising God by singing a song or reciting some words for a few minutes at a Christmas or Easter church service. Many experienced Christians spend only a few moments in praise each week. For others, the phrases “Praise God” or “Praise the Lord” are part of their vocabulary, but they are trite - just like saying “bless you” or “gesundheit” when someone sneezes - and mean little or nothing.

Praise, by its very nature, requires that you are intentional about offering it. You need to make an effort to notice the praiseworthy thing or action, and then offer praise for it. Praise = Action. And yet far too often, we miss opportunities to praise God through being inattentive or failing to take the few steps necessary to offer genuine praise.

Quick exercises - try them and make some notes about your experience

1. Make a list of one thing, one person, and one activity that you’re grateful for today. Then stop for three (or more) minutes and intentionally offer praise to God for putting them in your life. Tell God how they make you feel, and how they make your life better.
2. Jewish people praise God formally at the beginning of a Shabbat dinner - “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth the fruit of the vine”. (They offer similar praise in breaking bread.) Try intentionally offering praise every time you eat or drink something over the next 24 hours, even if it’s not a meal.

Bible Reading - stop for a moment and say a prayer, asking for God's guidance in reading. Then read each of the verses below. For each one, make notes about what they say to you about our topic for this session. You'll share your thoughts during our meeting.

- 1 Chronicles 16:1-36 (bonus points for reading Psalm 105)
- Isaiah 12:1-10
- Luke 13:10-14
- Luke 17:11-19
- Luke 19:37-40
- Romans 15:9
- Hebrews 13:15
- Revelation 5:11-14

Wrap-up - read **Matthew 25:19-23** and then read this and answer the questions below

Praise is not a one-way street. One of the most fervent hopes of the Christian should be to receive praise from God. At our judgement, we should long to hear the words, "well done" from God, as we're welcomed into the new heaven and new earth to live in joy for eternity. And that's something that we can praise God for today too! How can being intentional about offering God more and more praise in your life...

- ...help you to experience God more and more?
- ...help others to see Jesus in you?

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Session 2 - Love

Introduction

The phrase “more and more” appears less than two dozen times in the Bible, yet it always seems to indicate something important. This week, we’re looking at the topic of Love.

Read 1 John 4:19-21, then read this section and work through the exercises below.

Love should be something that is always growing in us. The passage in 1 John clearly calls out the relationship between loving God and loving others. Plus it comes as a command - if you love God, then you must love others. The only problem is that I don’t like some of my brothers and sisters. Some of them make themselves pretty unloving and unloveable. If I’m honest, some of them see me as unloving and unloveable too.

What’s more - love is a verb. Just a page earlier in this letter, John writes about loving not just in thoughts and words, but in action - and that is how we know that we are holding on to God’s truth (1 John 3:18-19). We must act in love more and more!

Remember when the disciples cried to Jesus that it seemed impossible that anyone - even them - could meet God’s high standard and inherit eternal life? Jesus’ answer there (Mark 10:26-27) helps us understand our ability to love in this context as well.

For us, loving everyone all the time is impossible. With God, however, it’s possible.

In some strange and wonderful way, loving God more and more empowers us to love others more and more. It’s not always easy, but it is possible.

Quick exercises - try them and make some notes about your experience

1. Make a list of three people you know - one who you love a lot, one who you like, and one who you dislike. Now think and pray about an action you can take in the next 24 hours to show them love. Take that action and make a note on what happened in each case.
2. Loving God is key to loving others - and loving God’s word is one way we grow that love. Think and pray about a system that would fit into your daily life for getting more into God’s word. Then write down the system, what you could do to make it public, and a reward that you will give yourself for regularly following it for the next 60 days.

Bible Reading - stop for a moment and say a prayer, asking for God's guidance in reading. Then read each of the verses below. For each one, make notes about what they say to you about our topic for this session. You'll share your thoughts during our meeting.

- Philippians 1:9-11
- 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10
- 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4, 11-12

Loving more and more - some direct applications

- Deuteronomy 19:1-13
- Psalm 119:127-132
- Luke 7:36-43
- John 21:15-19
- Romans 12:9-20 (I counted 17 ways to love in these verses)
- 1 Peter 3:8-9

Wrap-up - read this and answer the questions below

John Wesley felt that the way you grow spiritually after you come to faith is by paying close attention to your actions, and by intentionally doing more and more of what the Bible calls us to do. This concept of repeated action was very important in his view, and he taught early Methodists to follow through on following God. He wrote, "I am more and more convinced, that the devil himself desires nothing more than this, that the people of any place should be half-awakened, and then left to themselves to fall asleep again. Therefore I determine, by the grace of God, not to strike one stroke in any place where I cannot follow the blow."

- Where have you started loving, but have not followed through with repeated action? Can you do something to change that this week?
- Who needs to hear from you again with a message of Jesus' love and sacrifice?

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Session 3 - Unfaithful

Introduction

The phrase “more and more” in the Bible always seems to indicate something important. This week, we’re looking at a negative development, becoming more and more Unfaithful.

Read 2 Chronicles 35:16-36:20, then read this section and do the exercises below.

Today’s reading begins with King Josiah. The kings before him had been unfaithful. Suddenly, here comes King Josiah who seems determined to do what God wants. He is a faithful leader, who brings Passover back to being celebrated in Israel as God had originally ordained it. He also cleansed Israel of false religions to keep the people focused on God (2 Kings 23).

Then, in Josiah’s death, we see that his faithfulness had its limits. He goes into a battle which God has not called him to fight, and is killed. He also has not passed the habits of faithfulness on to his sons Jehoahaz and Eliakim. After Josiah, his sons and the other kings and leaders of Israel become more and more unfaithful to God. In the end, the King of Babylon crushes Jerusalem, burning the Temple and taking the nation away as slaves.

Unfaithfulness can be a slippery slope. We can draw lines around our faithfulness based on what our parents or our culture have taught us. We can be lured into unfaithfulness by those around us. And let’s be honest ... it is not difficult to look faithful to those around us, and yet be more and more unfaithful in our hearts.

Paul writes to Timothy, “But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God - having a form of godliness but denying its power.” (2 Tim 3:1-5a) I think that Paul is warning about people who do “Christian-y” things, they say the right words and show up at the right events, when in reality they do all of those other things behind the scenes. They ... and sometimes we ... are becoming more and more unfaithful.

Quick exercises - making plans around faithfulness and unfaithfulness

1. Josiah did many things right, causing others to pay attention to God. What are some faithful things that you can do more and more, so that others see God more clearly?
2. Paul’s list of unfaithful traits is long and maybe you see one or two in your life. What unfaithful trait are you keeping secret? Other than repentance and prayer, what can you and this group do about it? (hint: “I just have to change” is not the right answer.)

Bible Reading - stop for a moment and say a prayer, asking for God's guidance in reading. Then read each of the scriptures below. For each one, make notes about what they say to you about our topic for this session. You'll share your thoughts during our meeting.

- 2 Chronicles 28:22-23 (bonus points for reading the chapter)
- 2 Chronicles 36:14 (plus any comment on our opening Bible reading)
- Psalm 16:2-4
- John 12:37-46
- 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 (think about how this behavior parallels the kings in 2 Chron)
- 2 Timothy 2:11-18

Wrap-up - think back about the readings above, and ways that you saw people becoming more unfaithful. Then read this and answer the questions below.

God commands us to be faithful followers, reading His word and doing what it says. He lovingly calls us near, but God never forces us to be faithful. Just as he did for the people and the kings and leaders of Israel in our reading, God sends us messengers - people who speak out and live out the word of God in our lives - as part of God's calling to us to be faithful. Knowing God's word and letting it work on your heart and mind is important. Living in community with fellow believers is equally important and we should keep our ears open for the messengers God sends our way in our community.

- Who has been speaking God's truth into your life recently? What have you done about it (or why have you not done anything about it)?
- For whom do you need to act as a messenger of God? What is the message? When will they hear from you?

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Session 4 - Power

Introduction

The phrase “more and more” in the Bible always seems to indicate something important. This week, we’re looking at more and more Power.

Read 2 Samuel 5:1-10 and then read this section.

Power is an interesting thing in the Bible. Many of the references are to governmental or military power. Sometimes that earthly power is used for good, and sometimes it’s not - and David does some of each in his reign as King. Scripture tells us that David is gaining more and more earthly power as King and as a warrior because God is with him.

Scripture also tells us that God puts governments in place and removes them for His purposes. God is in control of all earthly power - and nothing happens without his knowledge. In fact, Satan only has power on earth because God allows him to (see Job 1:9-12).

Most often, when we talk about powerful people in our daily conversations, we mean this sort of earthly power too. Someone may gain power by being a popular celebrity, an influential business person or politician, or even simply someone with great wealth. Sometimes we give earthly power to people, sometimes they seize it for themselves, and Scripture points out that sometimes people gain earthly power because God is with them.

Earthly power is important. With it, people can get great things accomplished, and make life better for the people they have power over. Or they can use that power selfishly, and make their life better while the people they have power over stagnate or even suffer. Earthly power waxes and wanes, especially when humans are the driver behind that power. Some people even work their whole lives chasing more and more earthly power.

Now, read Acts 9:10-22 and this section, and then do the exercises below.

When we look at the scripture about Saul, we see something a bit different. We see that he is becoming more and more powerful, but in a different way. He is not becoming politically powerful - though he seems to be becoming a bit famous with the Jewish people, he does not seem to have power over them. There’s no mention of money or financial power, and we can assume that Saul is not powerfully rich, because in a few chapters we see him working as a tentmaker - not the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

He seems to be seen as powerful because he’s talking differently and no longer trying to arrest Jewish Christians - and that’s not the normal path to earthly power that we’re familiar with.

This is the type of power that we want to talk about in this lesson - spiritual power. Scripture tells us that Saul is growing more and more powerful “by proving that Jesus is the Messiah”. It’s clear that his spiritual power is increasing. And it’s equally clear that this type of transformation is sometimes baffling to other people.

Remember, just days before this, Saul was on his way to arrest Jewish Christians in Damascus. They knew that this meant that some of them would be killed, and others would lose everything they had. They had two choices - deny Jesus, or suffer prison, persecution, and possible death under Saul and the Jewish leaders. They were justifiably scared.

Then a few days later, along comes Saul telling people in the synagogue that Jesus is the Messiah - and doing it convincingly, with power. You can see why they would be confused about this change they are seeing.

If you read the rest of the book of Acts, it's clear that Saul's conversion is real. It's such a stark change that his name even changes - to Paul. As he spends more time with God, getting closer and closer to his Savior and Lord, his spiritual power increases. And as his spiritual power increases, so does his influence for the Kingdom of God - more and more people come to know Jesus (we'll look at that in our next lesson).

Paul's spiritual power increases and he begins to travel widely and spread the Gospel convincingly. His spiritual power increases, and we see miracles happening around him, as people are healed of physical and mental illness. His spiritual power increases, and the churches that he plants (and others) come to him for advice and direction in how to follow Jesus more closely.

Yet, Paul does not grow in earthly power. He does not become a Roman Senator or a famous orator. He becomes well known, but that does not make him more powerful in any earthly sense. In fact, in later years, his earthly power decreases and he becomes a prisoner.

Paul gains more and more spiritual power as he gets closer and closer to Jesus and spends more and more time with our Lord and Savior.

We do too.

We're going to take a look at some cases where people are experiencing spiritual power. Before we do, think a little about that power in your own life with these exercises.

Quick exercises -

1. Make a list of 3 spiritually powerful people - one well known, one less well known, and one who you know personally. Do research about them. Do they have any habits or traits in common? How do those things impact the spiritual power in their lives?
2. Do you think it's possible for you to have more spiritual power? Why or why not?

Bible Reading - stop for a moment and say a prayer, asking for God's guidance in reading. Then read each of the scriptures below. For each one, make notes about what they say to you. You'll share your thoughts during our meeting.

Verse	Thoughts about Spiritual Power shown in the verses	Anything else God points out to you about these verses
Numbers 11:24-30		
Judges 14:1-6, 15:1-15		
Matthew 3 and Acts 1:1-5		
2 Corinthians 12:1-10		
2 Thessalonians 1:3-12		

Wrap-up - think back about the readings above, and ways that you saw spiritual power growing.

Many times, when we want to do something that we feel God is calling us to do, we are content to begin that work in our own power. We may work hard, and convince others to work alongside us too. After all, we have the brains and talent that God gave us, so if we put in the effort, then we should get the results, right?

Certainly God gives us guidance in the things that we should do - through the Bible, through the counsel of others, and through the guidance of his Holy Spirit that is his gift to those who surrender to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Sometimes he gives us extra spiritual power to accomplish something (as we've seen in some of our readings) or to influence someone (for example, Acts 8:29).

When God's Spirit gives people power, it is used to accomplish God's purposes, so that God may be glorified.

So consider this passage for a moment as you think about the things that God is guiding you to do in your life today, this week, this month, this year, and for the rest of your life. Then answer the questions below.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)

- If God's power is at work in you, and God can do more than you can even imagine, how does that change how you think about the spiritual power you could experience?
- What should you be asking or imagining?
- Power can mean impact. If God's glory lasts "throughout all generations", how does that change the way you look at the potential impact of spiritual power in your life?
- What should you be asking or imagining?

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Session 5 - Believers

Introduction

The phrase “more and more” in the Bible always seems to indicate something important. This week, we’re looking at more and more believers in Jesus.

Read Acts 18:1-11 and then read this section.

In our last lesson, we saw Paul gaining more and more spiritual power and convincing the Jewish people in Damascus that Jesus was the Messiah. Now we see him in Corinth doing the same thing again. And again, we see spiritual power upsetting those who are comfortable in the status quo of their religion. Some of the Jewish people at the synagogue are so offended by the message of Jesus that they argue with Paul and become abusive (spoiler: they later plot to kill him). He heads next door to preach, and even after he leaves the synagogue, the head of the synagogue and his whole family come to believe in Jesus.

The house next door to the synagogue is owned by Titius Justus. From his name, we can assume he’s a gentile. Scripture says that he believes in God, so it seems like maybe living next to the synagogue rubbed off on him. Paul’s preaching at his house is full of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul spent a year and a half more in Corinth, and more and more Corinthians heard the message and he baptized more and more new believers.

People were believing because Paul was testifying about Jesus to them. God’s Power made this possible, of course - Paul knew that it was not his achievement, but God’s. He was not just teaching life lessons or five point motivational, self-improvement messages. I’m sure he used different words and different stories, but his sermons all had the same theme - testifying that Jesus was the Messiah and “teaching them the word of God.”

Now, read Matthew 28:16-20 and this section, and then do the exercises below.

Paul was not with the apostles when Jesus gave this command to them, but it’s obvious that at some point Paul got the message too. He accepted Jesus, and was healed from the blindness that happened when he experienced Jesus ... and from then on he devoted his life to doing exactly the things Jesus commanded his followers (like us) to do. However, telling people about Jesus is not the only command that Paul followed.

Based on his letters, he tried to live out *everything* God commanded in an honest and transparent way. And that's how he lived out Jesus' Great Commission. He made disciples because he himself was a disciple. He taught others to obey Jesus by showing them that he himself obeyed Jesus. He lived an overtly Christian life in front of others every day.

The most eloquent preacher in the land may convince new believers for a time, but they will eventually fall if they are not focusing on following Jesus and doing everything he commands.

Paul had speed bumps in his Christian life too. He said, "*For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*" (Romans 7:15) Even his weaknesses became a reason for him to point to Jesus (2 Corinthians 12:5-10).

We don't have to be perfect for God to use us to introduce unbelievers to Jesus. We don't have to be convincing speakers for the Holy Spirit to work through us to bring people to trust in Jesus as Savior. We just need to faithfully follow Jesus and tell others about him. God does all the work, and more and more people will come to trust Jesus for salvation.

We're going to take a look at some cases where more and more non-believers are becoming new believers. Before we do, think a little about your experience through these exercises.

Quick exercises -

1. Write names of some people who you've told about Jesus in the past who have come to trust Jesus today. Next write names of people who you know who don't have faith in Jesus today. Take actions today to help someone on the first list remain faithful and to help someone on the second list be introduced to Jesus.
2. What is blocking you from fully living out Jesus' Great Commission? Pause and reflect for a few minutes. Be honest with yourself. Ask God. Why is it stopping you?

Bible Reading - stop for a moment and say a prayer, asking for God's guidance in reading. Then read each of the scriptures below. For each one, make notes about what they say to you. You'll share your thoughts during our meeting.

Verse	Thoughts about new believers shown in the verses	Anything else God points out to you about these verses
Isaiah 42:1-9		
Acts 2:14-47		
Acts 5:12-16		
Acts 13:38-48		
Romans 15:8-13		
2 Corinthians 4		

Wrap-up

As we read earlier, Timothy and Silas joined Paul in Corinth. Later in his life, he writes Timothy at least two letters encouraging him in ministry. Here's a bit from one of them...

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:12-16)

Paul knew very well that he was imperfect. Jesus used Paul's whole life to attract others. Like Paul (and Timothy, and all believers) we are called to testify about Jesus with words as well as through living a transparent, honest, God-centered life ... even when we're imperfect.

Take a moment to think through and answer a few questions.

- It's easy to think that our weaknesses or inadequacies mean that we can't do something. What weakness or inadequacy blocks you from telling someone about the Jesus you know and love? Why?
- A lot of our culture today is about comfort. Often, Jesus causes people to be uncomfortable in their lives. What comforts in your life are holding you back from inviting more and more believers to trust Jesus? Why?
- It's clear that God wants more and more people to know him, to trust Jesus, and to begin a relationship with him. Where is that on *your* priority list today? Why?