



REACH → *gather* GROW


BY DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY:

NOBLE BAIRD
PATRICK BICKNELL
HOLLY BOSTON
SIERRA COMBS
JUSTIN DEAN
DONNA FOX
DEBBIE GABBARA
LARRY GABBARA
MITCHELL HOLMES
SHAWNA JOHNSON
BEN KIRKMAN

CHUCK LINDSEY
JAMES MANN
JILL OSMON
PHILIP PIASECKI
JOHN RIGG
FERDINAND SANDERS
JOHN STONE
RYAN STORY
JOSH THAYER
ROY TOWNSEND
KEATON WASHBURN

DESIGNED BY: CASEY MAXWELL
FORMATTED BY: SHAWNA JOHNSON





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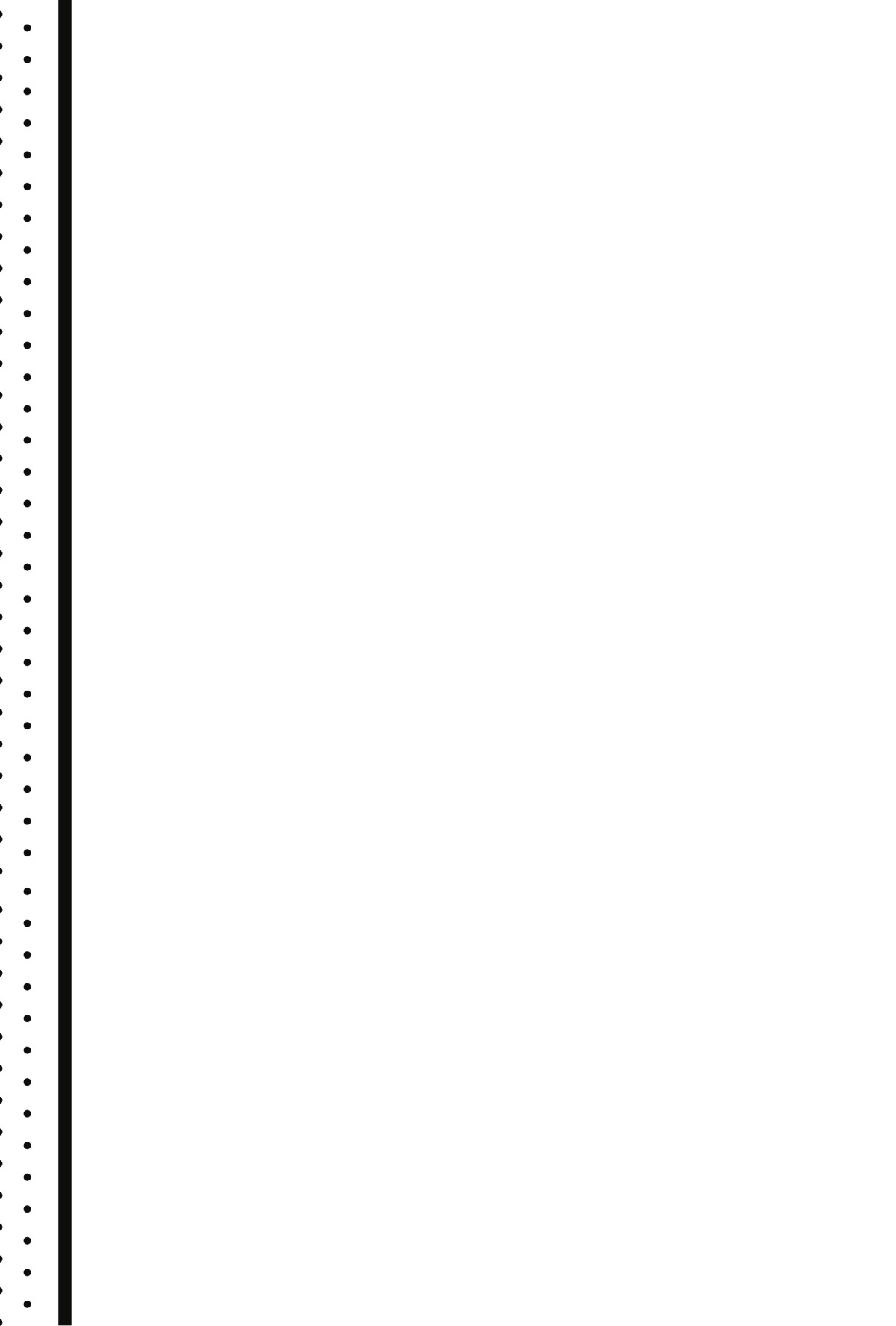


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PREFACE

Matthew 28:19-20 is referred to as the Great Commission. It is the last two verses of the book of Matthew. Jesus has already risen from the dead, and He gets the disciples together for some final words. It is a coach's last pep talk as the players enter the arena for a big game. He says, ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”***

It is these verses that are the basis for who we are as the Church: The Church exists to glorify God by reaching the world, gathering with the saints, and growing in the Word.

This mission seems quite clear from Jesus' words:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (glorify God by reaching the world), ***“baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”*** (glorify God by gathering with the saints), ***“teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”*** (glorify God by growing in the Word).

This process is not a straight line with an ending point. It is more like a spiral as we reach, gather, grow, we should then want to be reaching more of the world, gathering, growing, and so on.

Reach Gather Grow consists of four study guides for personal or group discussion and twenty-four devotions covering the mission of the Church. These help remind the believer to focus on essentials and listen for their calling by God.



LESSON ONE

REACH

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

One of the greatest blessings of my life is that I was raised in a Christian home. However, my parents were not. When my dad was 18 he gave his life to the Lord at a Billy Graham crusade. My mother was a “bus kid.” Her parents did not want to go to church, but they let my mom and her sister get on a bus and be taken to church. She accepted Jesus as her Savior at a young age.

1. What has been your spiritual journey? Do you know that of your parents?

For years there has been a discussion of how to share the Gospel. Some have focused on church programs of going door to door (it is also referred to as Cold Turkey witnessing). The thought here is that no one knows when they will die. There should be a sense of urgency. Paul's response in Acts 26:28-29 is often referenced, ***“And Agrippa said to Paul, ‘In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?’ And Paul said, ‘Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am - except for these chains.’”*** A Billy Graham crusade can be this kind of situation.

The other route is Friendship Evangelism where you first develop a relationship that earns the right to go deeper. It is where you first meet physical and emotional needs in order to approach the spiritual need. James chapter 2 addresses this well. We need to care about the person and not just try to check “to witness” off of our “to-do list.” I am so thankful that a bus driver and Sunday School teachers expressed the love of God in words and actions for my mom.

2. What are the advantages of both approaches?

3. Where is the balance?

Clearly, the most important thing is that we share the Good News.

One of my favorite verses is 1 Thessalonians 2:8, ***“So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”*** Paul says they shared two things – the Gospel and their lives. He preached the love of God in his walk and talk. Looking at the context has several points to consider when we discuss witnessing in sharing what we have experienced through Jesus Christ.

Perspective

In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-4, Paul sets the stage for discussing a proper perspective, ***“For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so***

we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.”

4. What things caught your attention as you read this passage?

Paul openly talks about how they were persecuted, yet they pressed forward in obedience to God. Their focus was on obeying God, confidently following through with others, and contently working through their circumstances. Witnessing is about God and others.

5. Who are we trying to please when witnessing?

6. How can persecution or tough times enhance our witnessing?

Boldness

Looking back at 1 Thessalonians 2:2 again, we read an important concept, ***“But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.”***

7. What does ***“shamefully treated”*** mean to you?

8. What does boldness look like?

9. How (or to whom) can you be bolder in your witnessing?

No Babbling Zone

No Babbling Zone might sound weird, but we all know people who like to argue for the sake of arguing. That is not effective witnessing. Paul adds in 1 Thessalonians 2:5, ***“For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed - God is witness.”***

10. Who likes to get someone distracted or sidetracked during a witnessing opportunity?

11. When it comes to our salvation and witnessing, is sharing what Jesus did enough, or do we need to make it look prettier or more acceptable?

Be Real

In 1 Thessalonians 2:6, Paul says that they had no ulterior motives, ***“Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.”***

12. What does it mean to be real and how important is it?

Gentleness

In a section full of persecution, confidence, and boldness, Paul speaks of gentleness or kindness in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, ***“But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.”***

13. How does gentleness fit into witnessing?

Talk about the love of the Lord

Paul does not ignore the aspect of preaching the Gospel. In 1 Thessalonians 2:8, he says, ***“So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”***

14. Why did Paul say they shared the Gospel?

We should live with an “Audience of One” (God). We know He is always watching and should strive to please Him in everything. We witness in obedience, but love should also motivate us. It is love for God and love for others.

15. Who is someone who you dearly love that you do not know if they are saved? What will you do? When?”

Walk in the love of the Lord

Finally, as we discussed earlier, Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:8, that they shared life together, ***“So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”***

16. What topics are you comfortable talking about? How can these lead to a conversation about the Lord?

17. Who have you been witnessing to but have not shown love through your actions? What will you do? When?

18. Who has seen you living out your salvation, but you have not spoken the Gospel to them? What will you do (text, phone call, email, or getting together)? When?

I recently read a cute story. A young girl was on her way home from church on Sunday and said to her mother, "Mom, did you tell me that God was so big that the world cannot contain Him and that you cannot see the end of Him?" She replied, "That is right, honey." The little girl continued, "Well today I learned that God lives inside of me." Her mom smiled and said, "That is right, too." She said, "I am confused. If God is so big that He cannot even fit in the world, and He also lives inside of me, shouldn't people see Him coming out of me?"

Let the love of God overflow from you and spill all over others!

LESSON ONE | REACH

THE GOSPEL IN WORD

REACH | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Noble Baird

The Thessalonians' Faith and Example

"We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake." 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5

Words are powerful. They have the ability to change your life in a matter of seconds:

- "Will you marry me?"
- "We're pregnant!"
- "I am sorry, there was nothing more we could do."
- "You are no longer the right fit for this job."

Then there are some words that can simply change your mood for the day:

- "I love you."
- "How can I help?"
- "Welcome, we've missed you!"
- "May the Force be with you." (My personal favorite.)

No matter what, with each of those words and phrases, I am sure some emotion was stirred up.

In 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, Paul has opened his letter to the church in Thessalonica with thanksgiving. He is thanking the Lord for what He is doing in the church and how the Spirit has been moving and working in their lives. He then takes the time to mention the Gospel, which is the foundation of their faith. In verse 5, Paul specifically writes, ***“Because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.”***

I love how Paul takes the time to remind the church of the ***“word”*** of the Gospel. It was how the Gospel truly came and was verbally shared with them of all that Christ had done for their sake. It was not something that they just felt or experienced, but it was verbal words of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What is that Gospel? I love how Paul writes to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, ***“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you - unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.”*** That is the Gospel in word - That Jesus died for our sins, was buried, rose again from the grave, and ultimately conquered death, Hell, and the grave!

Words are powerful. No matter what may be said or shared with you, there is no doubt that the most powerful words we have ever heard or shared are the words of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I hope that in all we do and in the opportunities we are given, that we always keep these words fresh and ready so that we can share the love and life-changing sacrifice of Christ!

WHERE TRUE POWER COMES FROM

REACH | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 2

Justin Dean

Superheroes are now a huge part of our culture. Loving superheroes is now the cool thing to do rather than something only comic book nerds love. Everywhere you go you can find Marvel shirts, Avenger's memorabilia, and Batman posters. Everyone loves to fantasize about having some sort of superpower. Everyone wants to have power, super or normal power that comes from money, respect, or wisdom. In 1 Thessalonians 1:5, we see that Paul references the powers he has through the Gospel and tells us where that power comes from, ***"Because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake."***

Too often we forget where true power comes from. We think that the words we say and what we do are what changes and affects people, but really that power comes from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's power changes hearts, it moves the Gospel. His power is unstoppable. After His resurrection from the dead and before He ascended into Heaven, He spoke to the disciples in Acts 1:8, ***"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."***

Jesus felt the necessity to emphasize what was to come in His final moments on Earth. Jesus tells us of the power that we receive when we become believers, and the necessity to live in and use that power every day. Unfortunately, many of us live by our own empty efforts and not the power that comes from obedience to the Holy Spirit. We try to do everything ourselves and live according to our own strength

when we should seek the Holy Spirit's power in our lives. This is seeking His will for our lives through prayer, loving our neighbors, trusting Him with our anxieties, giving our sin to Him, and much more. Francis Chan wrote a book entitled *Forgotten God*. It is about living according to the Holy Spirit's power, and to close I wanted to include a quote that really impacted my desire to live according to the Holy Spirit's power.

Francis Chan wrote, "The world is not moved by love or actions that are of human creation. And the church is not empowered to live differently from any other gathering of people without the Holy Spirit. But when believers live in the power of the Spirit, the evidence in their lives is supernatural. The church cannot help but be different, and the world cannot help but notice."

MONKEY SEE MONKEY DO

REACH | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 3

Holly Boston

“And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.” 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7

You can Google anything. When I was asked to write a devotion on this Scripture, the saying, “Monkey see, monkey do” came to my mind. The origin of this saying did not mean as much to me as the meaning: the act of imitation, usually with limited knowledge or concern for the consequences. I found it interesting. Have you ever been mortified by something your child did or said; only to realize it was something they learned from you? I used to use the word “crap” all the time (still trying to break the habit). My sister would tell me that was not a good word and I would dismiss her because it was nothing compared to what others were saying. Then I heard my son say it. Ouch! Years ago, my husband and I went to our son’s IEP. The meeting started as usual with orientation questions (i.e. address, phone number). Then they asked who was president. Carter responded with the correct name followed by, “But my dad says...” I have never seen my husband move that quickly. Carter’s mouth was immediately covered for fear of what would come. Our kids learn good and bad from us. Our Scripture reminded me that people learn who Jesus is and what it means to live for Him from us!

In 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, Paul thanks the Thessalonians for the godly example they are setting. He points out that they have done this by becoming *“imitators of us and of the Lord.”* I never noticed *“us.”* Paul is saying that the believers were imitating him, Silvanus,

and Timothy and therefore were imitators of Jesus. These believers learned to live for Christ by watching their life. I was left with a very sobering thought, "What people know about Jesus comes from my flawed example."

This prompted some self-examination. People see that I attend gatherings at church, weekly Bible studies, and serving opportunities, but what about my personal time? Do I spend the first minutes of my day with Him; studying His Word, talking with Him, and then spend my day seeking opportunities to glorify Him and build His kingdom? Does my husband know that he comes second only to God, even before our children because that is what the Bible says (Ephesians 5:22,25,31) or because that is how I live? Do my children show their father respect because they are told to or because of my behavior (Ephesians 5:33)? Does my family see a woman with a servant's heart who does all for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31) or a woman who complains of feeling unappreciated? The list goes on and on.

What does your list look like? Husband, maybe you need to ask yourself, "Do I love my wife ***'as Christ loved the church'*** (Ephesians 5:25)? Father, are your children experiencing the unconditional love (Romans 5:8) and necessary discipline (Hebrews 12:7) you receive from your Heavenly Father? Believer, do others see your complete dependence on the Lord (Psalm 62) regardless of your circumstances? Do others receive from you the same grace and forgiveness you have received at the cross?" Your list goes on and on, too.

When we discuss reaching others for Christ, we are told to be ready to give the reason for our hope (1 Peter 3:15) and to do it with gentleness and respect. We are strongly encouraged to study Scripture and be able to share with others how they can receive complete forgiveness

and spend eternity in Heaven because of Christ's work on the cross. When we continue to read 1 Thessalonians 1:7-9, we are reminded that our commitment to living for the Lord is an important part of people coming to know Christ. Paul tells the Thessalonians that because ***“you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God”*** (verse 9) people all over Macedonia and Achaëa came to know Christ.

In closing, remember the meaning of “Monkey see, Monkey do.” As children, we learned with limited knowledge or concern for the consequences. Believer, the lost are watching us. They are learning about who Jesus is and how to live for Him from us with little knowledge and without concern for the consequences. They do not know what we know: our choices have eternal consequences. They determine eternal life or eternal death.

I am reminded of another old saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” Believer, a changed life changes lives.

One final question: What if you are the only Bible they ever read?

BOLDNESS

REACH | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 4

Mitchell Holmes

It is human nature to avoid opposition. As a species, we do not enjoy the process of feeling uncomfortable. We do not like to have disagreements. We do not want to feel separated from others. We do not want to seem offensive to others because of our lack of conformity. The issue with this nature is that, as followers of Christ, we have been given a mission that inherently incites opposition in a secular world. Matthew 28:19-20 says, ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”***

As Christians, we have been commanded to reach the world with the Gospel. This is a daunting task and it scares many people. Preaching the Gospel forces us to have conflict in our lives. We are required to challenge people on their understanding of the universe. We are required to convict people that are living in sin. It is uncomfortable and scary to talk to strangers about some mystical entity in the sky that died on a cross for them. Certainly, even the best evangelizers in existence have struggled with this basic human nature and the desire all humans have to avoid the opposition caused by the Gospel.

However, we have been commanded to spread the Good News. This command and the desire to fulfill it, while wanting to somehow avoid conflict and opposition, has led some followers to mitigate or water down the Gospel message. The thought process is, “If I can deliver the message in an inoffensive way to sinners, if I can make the Gospel more acceptable and more accessible, maybe I can preach

the Gospel without ruffling any feathers.” In doing so, we dilute and distort the commandments of our Creator. If this sounds like you, I want to challenge you to be bold in your faith. Be bold in the Gospel message because nothing is more important.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:2, we read, ***“But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.”*** Paul is declaring that his faith in God gives him the boldness and tenacity he needs to reach a wretched world with the only thing that can save it, even in the midst of adversity and oppression.

When giving directions, you would be doing someone a disservice to not warn them if their route had a rocky cliff face to watch out for. So why then are we comfortable with the disservice of downplaying the necessity for a Savior? I challenge you to live your life in boldness today and have faith in God to guide you through opposition and conflict when telling people the best news in existence.

As I wrap up today, I want to leave you with a true story. My parents live down the street from a couple, we will call them the Smiths, that for my entire childhood could not have been less neighborly to my family. From curse words to slander, this couple was the bane of my existence and the root of much frustration in my early life. We did not get along and I had no intentions of ever changing that. They had thrown the first stone and I was content to make no effort to extend an olive branch. Years later, it was discovered that my mother had a serious brain tumor. During the process of busy hospital visits and sleepless nights, I was home alone one day when I heard a knock on my door. Mr. Smith was at my doorway. I hesitantly opened the door expecting the worst. He proceeded to hand me stacks of jars filled with jams and jellies and canned goods. He had heard about

my mother's predicament and had come as a neighbor with gifts. He then told me that ever since Mrs. Smith had been diagnosed with cancer, they had started trying new things such as making the various canned goods he was now blessing our family with. During this conversation, I felt the Holy Spirit whisper in my heart that I needed to go and pray with Mrs. Smith. I was being called to talk with her and ensure that her soul would spend all of eternity in Heaven. I let my bitterness, rage, and frustration take hold and I ignored the whisper of the Holy Spirit. I put it off for months. It was in the back of my mind but I kept ignoring it. Then one day, while I ate breakfast, I saw a hearse drive by and go to the Smith household. I had let my sinful emotions stamp out any boldness in me and as a result, I never got to share the Gospel with Mrs. Smith one last time.

It is my sincere hope that a seed had been planted by someone else and I hope she is in Heaven, but my lack of boldness was made evident at that moment. I remember Mrs. Smith and every time I see an opportunity to talk about Jesus but do not want to because of the fear of opposition. Please remember what really matters in this world and please have a spirit of boldness.

GOD'S GLORY

REACH | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 5

Keaton Washburn

Have you ever watched or listened to a preacher or teacher and wondered about their motivations? I find myself listening to “big name” preachers from time to time and sometimes I get the feeling that, even though they are preaching the Bible, they are not looking to give God the glory. Instead, they are using the Bible as a prop for their platform.

In 1 John 4:1, God speaks through John to give believers this warning, ***“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”*** John is writing to a people he loves dearly, calling them, ***“Beloved.”*** Because he cares for them deeply, he warns them to test prophets and preachers. This same instruction applies to believers today. Just because a sermon is circulating on Facebook does not mean it is credible. Even though a song claims to be by a worship band and it sounds really good, that does not mean it is worth singing. The test that John gives to see if it is from God or not is this, ***“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already”*** (1 John 4:2-3). A preacher or Christian artist that does not magnify the work of Christ is not worth listening to.

Paul also talks about this in 1 Thessalonians, which we have been studying. In 1 Thessalonians 2:5-6, speaking of his preaching motivations, he says, ***“For we never came with words of flattery,***

as you know, nor with a pretext for greed - God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ."

Paul's motivation was God's glory, making His name great, not his own. He could have made demands but chose not to, only preaching the work of Christ through simple words, not flattery.

I listened to a podcast recently about the collapse of a megachurch. As the podcast went on, it became clear that the reason this church grew so rapidly was that the leader was charismatic and an entertaining preacher. People came to hear him. For that same reason though, the church collapsed. When motivations are not pure, ultimately, it will crumble because it does not have the blessing of God.

As you share the Gospel, is your motivation to make God's name great? If so, God will bless and use those words. As you take in sermons and music, are those leaders preaching Christ or themselves? Test the spirits, if it is not for God's glory, it is not worth consuming.

GENTLE

REACH | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 6

John Rigg

Now that I have four grandchildren, I have to constantly remind myself that I cannot expect the younger ones to act in the same way as the older ones. Two of the grandchildren are ten years old and two are six. Although they differ in age by only four years, their maturity level seems miles apart. The grandchildren that are ten have grown to where they comprehend things quite differently than the six-year-olds do and is often revealed in the way they act. At times I forget this and want to treat them as if they were the same age, but I cannot. So, I find myself having to interact with the younger ones with far greater patience and in a much gentler way.

Throughout the writings of the Apostle Paul, I have noticed his unique ability to recognize the spiritual age of people and then act towards them accordingly. Note Paul's words as he writes to the church in Thessalonica, ***"But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children"*** (1 Thessalonians 2:7).

The believers in Thessalonica were much like my younger grandchildren, they needed to be treated differently, not because they were younger in age, but because they were younger spiritually. Paul loved the believers there and cared for them in the same way a mother would care for her own children. Just like a good mother nurtures her young children, Paul was caring for the believers with patience and gentleness that was rooted in his great love for them.

This led me to this thought:

Do I treat all my brothers and sisters in the Lord the same?

Do I expect those who have recently come to faith to be acting like those who have been believers a long time?

Sadly, I think I forget this sometimes and then become frustrated and impatient with those new in the faith. My expectation for them is unrealistic and can cause me to be hard on them and more severe than I ought to. Instead of nurturing them in a gentle way, I can respond in a harsh and unloving way. This needs to change.

Paul's words and actions have inspired me to better understand the spiritual maturity of those I have relationships with and treat the younger ones with far greater patience and in a much gentler way. For me not to act in this way would mean that I have stopped growing fruit myself, and am now in need of that same gentleness from others as well.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” Galatians 5:22–23

The background of the slide is a dark gray rectangle. It is framed by a border composed of several rectangular panels. The top-left panel features a pattern of parallel diagonal lines. The top-right, bottom-left, and bottom-right panels are filled with a grid of small dots. The bottom-right panel also includes a triangular section with a pattern of upward-pointing chevrons. The central text is white and centered within the dark gray area.

LESSON TWO

GATHER

PASTOR RYAN STORY

There has been a growing realization that church culture does not always line up with the Word of God, and this is most evident on a Sunday. Worldwide millions of churches open their doors every Sunday morning and “do some church.” Where church culture is caught lacking is that many Christians who are attending a gathering are not aware of the monumental significance a gathering has for one’s spiritual life. Leo Durocher (worth a Google search if you do not know baseball) once wrote, “Baseball is like church. Many attend few understand.” Sadly, many attend a weekend gathering and few understand the monumental importance of why we as believers gather.

1. Why is a weekend gathering important to you and your family?

Paul’s main reason to write the letters to the church of Thessaloniki was to encourage them in their walk. While Leo “The Lip” Durocher may have a point, many who “go to church” do not understand. I do not believe a Christian should ever leave someone in a place of not understanding. I also think it is dangerous to base understanding on time. I feel the church’s job (reminder the church of Jesus Christ is any professing believer, not just staff members) is to ensure that every person understands the reasoning and importance of all that we do to praise and glorify our risen Savior.

I love digging into God’s Word to find the truth. If we dig into three verses of 1 Thessalonians, I believe we can pull out what ought to be our central focus when we gather together. We need to break down a few key truths.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20, Paul writes, ***“But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you - I, Paul, again and again - but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.”***

2. Who does Paul say hindered him?

Key Truth Number 1:

The devil opposes the work of the Lord.

I believe that the devil loves living behind the confusion. Jesus says the devil, has ***“no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies”*** (John 8:44). The devil will use any opportunity to attempt to slow down the furthering of God’s Kingdom through His bride. The devil is no creator, the devil is not omnipotent, omnipresent, or omniscient. However, the devil delights when a believer feels too hindered to move closer to God.

3. How can a believer be hindered from growing closer to God in a gathering?

4. How is James 4:7 (“**Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you**”) an encouragement from being hindered?

Therefore, if we know the scheme of the enemy is to hinder us from gathering, we now can look at what a gathering looks like.

Again, 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20 says, “**But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you - I, Paul, again and again - but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.**”

5. What is Paul's desire for the church of Thessaloniki?

Key Truth Number 2:

An important aspect of a gathering is people.

I love that God preserved and inspired Paul to pen this truth that we can read 2000 years later. Paul's desire was to see people face to face.

LESSON TWO | GATHER

6. How can the devil hinder us from wanting to see people face to face?

The devil is not on the same power tier as God. God is the creator. The devil is not. So all the devil can do is use (or misuse) the creation of God. I hope the poetic irony that the greatest hindrance and enemy of God's Church has to play by God's rules and use God's creation. Satan loves to use people to drive us away from gathering.

7. How can we make sure the devil does not use the people we should have an earnest desire to see as a hindrance?

8. Why is it so easy for Christians to be "good with" not seeing each other face to face?

Disclaimer - I am a literal person. I operate in black and white. The one thing we must realize is we live in a different world than Paul. Paul did not have internet, Smartphones, Zoom, or live-streaming capability. God has blessed us with technology, but the devil can and will corrupt it. Live-streaming a gathering is a great means to reach new people; however, it also can become an excuse to not have to become an active part of the Body of Christ. It is not for us to judge a person's heart, only God gets to do that, but do not be hindered in your walk with Jesus because you believe in a lie.

To bring this lesson to a close we have to look for one more truth. If we know Satan is attempting to hinder us from gathering face to face, we now have to unlock the focus of believers when they meet.

One more time, 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20 says, ***“But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you - I, Paul, again and again - but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.”***

9. Who does Paul say is his hope, glory, joy, and the object he will boast about before Jesus at His coming?

I struggled with this last verse for a bit. Like He always does, God showed me an amazing truth. The last verse in chapter two could create some horrible theology if we are not careful. If we begin to think that Paul is advocating the worship of man, we run into a whole bunch of sin. Read Romans chapter one if you would like more details about worshiping the creation rather than the Creator.

We first have to understand that ***“all Scripture is breathed out by God”*** (2 Timothy 3:16). We can draw the conclusion that Paul is encouraging the Christians of Thessaloniki, and God is not defamed or upset by this. There is nothing bad about a pastor encouraging his people. We also have to draw the conclusion that these verses are also God speaking to His Church.

LESSON TWO | GATHER

Since Paul was not an idolater, we cannot conclude that his heart was in the wrong place with this adoration to the Church. To add to that, God would have never allowed Paul's sin to creep into His Word. We also know that our Lord is ***"is a great God, and a great King above all gods"*** (Psalm 95:3; Go read all of Psalm 95, you will not regret it). So we can draw the conclusion that God is not in fact worshipping us either.

10. So how can Paul say a person is his glory and joy and God allows this in His Word?

Key Truth Number 3:

**We do not boast about a person;
we boast about what Jesus has done inside that person.**

We can get swayed into forgetting that every person who steps into any of our locations is there because Jesus is doing a work in their lives. We should never worship the number of people who are coming, but we praise God because of the work He is doing in their lives. Paul let out such a bold exhortation to the church because he knew that inside the church is where we all cling to an amazing truth, ***"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come"*** (2 Corinthians 5:17).

11. Where was Paul's joy focused?

12. How can we un-hinder ourselves and focus on the work of Christ during a gathering?

“Baseball is like church. Many attend few understand.” Let us strive to understand that we are called to be a church that is unhindered, people-loving, and Jesus worshiping.

LESSON TWO | GATHER

WALK WORTHY

GATHER | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 1

John Stone

“For you know how, like a father with his children.” 1
Thessalonians 2:11

God treating us like children is a common theme in Scripture:

- *“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”* 1
John 3:1
- *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”* Ephesians 5:1-2
- *“You shall walk in all the way that the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you shall possess.”* Deuteronomy 5:33
- *“When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.”* Genesis 17:1
- *“Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways!”* Psalm 128:1

A lot can be understood by how a person walks. Some stride purposefully with their heads high and shoulders back. Other people

glance nervously around; moving hesitantly and carefully as though stepping through a minefield. Some swagger or strut confidently while others slink or shuffle. Kids run and bounce off walls. Each has their own style that inaudibly announces to the world what manner of person they are. Similarly, the way Christians walk should be a clearly understood indicator of who we are, and, or more importantly, “Whose” we are.

What does the Bible mean by the word “walk?” It is used hundreds of times throughout Scripture and each occurrence paints a part of the picture that can help us understand God’s purpose for us. Of all the men in the first genealogy found in Genesis, Enoch and Noah are the only two who “walked with God.” Interestingly, God must have really enjoyed the fellowship because He took Enoch to Heaven as a relatively young man. Noah was chosen to preserve life in a foreshadowing of the work that Christ would do for us. The history of the nation of Israel throughout the Old Testament is a rollercoaster of kings and priests who either “walked after” righteousness or after unrighteousness into judgment. We have the same choice. We can walk after our righteous Father or we can “walk around on the roof” open to sinful impulses like David (2 Samuel 11:12). We can “walk before” God in faith as Abraham did or we can stumble in sinful self-righteousness (John 8:39). We can run our race to win (1 Corinthians 9:4) or we can dig a hole and sit on the talents our Master has given us (Matthew 25:25). From the Garden to the Law of Moses to the Epistles, hundreds of commands and imperatives of how to walk can be listed. From the beginning, these lists separated God’s people from the rest of the world. Strict obedience was the indicator that these people were different, set apart. Because of the redeeming work of Christ, we are now free to joyfully fulfill all those commands out of gratitude to our Father. In 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12, Christians are being begged to “walk after, walk before, and walk with” God; to walk worthy of Him. We are to bring glory to Him through our lives.

So, how do we actually do this? Jesus condensed all the lists down to one all-inclusive thing: love! It is love for God and love for others.

There are a number of examples from Jesus' life of what walking in love looks like:

- Jesus laid down His divine privileges and sacrificed Himself for us (Philippians 2:3-8). Jesus said, ***"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends"*** (John 15:12-13). We, like Christ, should humbly lay down our self-interest and put the needs of others first to the glory of God.
- Jesus had compassion for those who were hurting (Matthew 9:36; 14:14; Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13; John 11:35). Can we feel compassion and weep with those who are broken and hurting? We should have real empathy for the needs of others, feel their pain, cry at their sorrow, hurt at their loss, and help meet actual physical needs using our own resources.
- Jesus showed real caring and tenderness toward children. He rebuked His disciples openly for trying to prevent children from coming to see Him. It made enough of an impression that three of the Gospel writers recorded the event (Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16). Not only are we commanded by Christ to have simple faith in God the way a child does, but one of His strongest warnings of punishment is made against those who cause a child to stumble in their own walk after God (Matthew 18:3-6).
- Jesus demonstrated a servant's heart (Mark 10:42-45). Would we wash our enemy's feet (John 13:5)? Could we face a crowd of hungry people and meet all their needs, while at the same time, knowing they were not committed, but just there for the free food (John 6)?

- Jesus interceded on behalf of His disciples and all believers (John 17:13-26). Do we love someone enough to ask our sovereign, all-powerful King to help them? To restore them? To protect them? To save them from their sins (James 5:14-20)?

May we be a people who can say with the beggar who Jesus healed, “I was lame but now I walk!” May we walk worthy of the One who has given us all things pertaining to life and godliness. May our walk be one that is easily recognized as different from the world; a walk of love.

“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” 3 John 1:4

HEARING OF THE WORD OF GOD

GATHER | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 2

Patrick Bicknell

Gathering together as the saints of the church, around the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, is one of the most essential aspects of our walk with Christ. What is so amazing about the hearing of the Word of God is not that it is only for the unbelievers to hear of the amazing grace of God and to believe and have faith in the finished work of Christ, but it is also for the believer to hear and to have their faith strengthened. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, ***“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”***

I believe there are three important truths found in this verse. The first was already mentioned, but it is that the preaching, hearing, and believing of the Word of God is what brings about faith. Paul also talks about this in his letter to the Romans when he says, ***“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”*** (Romans 10:17).

The second truth found in this verse ties directly with the first one and it is that we must accept the Word that we hear preached with faith that it is the inerrant, infallible Word of God, and not the word of men. Paul expresses that he is thankful that when the believers at the church of Thessalonica heard the Word preached that they accepted it not as the word of man but for what it really is, the Word of God. The importance of Scripture being preached faithfully, and heard in the gathering of the saints is not because of the importance of pastors, but it is because Scripture is the Word of God. Scripture

is the way in which God has revealed Himself to us, giving us exactly what we need to know for salvation, justification, sanctification, and everything else we need to know to be followers of Christ.

The last truth I see in this verse of 1 Thessalonians is that gathering around the preaching of the Word of God is essential for believers because it is at work within us. To go even deeper than this verse we can go to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, ***“All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”*** This truth is so essential for the believer to understand because the Word of God that is at work within us is what sanctifies us. It is what trains us to know how we can obey God, how we can correct our sinful ways, and how we can be equipped to do the good works that God has laid out for us. If we neglect this aspect of our walk with Christ we are missing out on a beautiful time to gather with the body of Christ and praise God for the amazing truths that He has revealed to us in His Scripture.

PRIDE AND JOY

GATHER | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 3

Sierra Combs

If I were to ask you what gave you the most hope, brought you the most joy, or made you the proudest, what would be the first thing that came to your mind? Would it be an accomplishment, or perhaps a possession? Would it be a talent, your career, or your prized collection of baseball cards or designer handbags? Would it be your family, children, house, or car? What are your pride and joy?

Paul asks this question of himself when writing to the believers who lived in Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians 2:19, he asks ***“For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming?”*** Before I tell you his answer, let me give you a little back story. Paul is writing this letter (the Book of 1 Thessalonians that we find in the Bible) to these believers praising them on their Christ-likeness and Christian conduct, and has just told them how much he desperately wanted to see them again. It seems that the last time he was with them, he involuntarily had to leave and was prevented via Satan from returning “over and over again.” So while he waits for the time when he can return, Paul writes this letter and asks them what they think is his hope, joy, and crown. His answer is simple. What made Paul the proudest is those who had received the Gospel of Jesus Christ - especially these believers at Thessalonica. Verses 19-20 say, ***“For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.”***

Paul knew that the real value on this Earth (apart from himself knowing Christ) is people. It is not possessions, money, or even talents or abilities. Before Paul was born again, he had all of these

things. Before Christ, he was a man named Saul who was one of the top Jewish religious leaders. He was incredibly knowledgeable of the Law and Scriptures, was likely very talented in his teaching, and would have had every earthly thing he could have wanted at his fingertips. He knew the value of those things, and yet once he met Christ, he happily let those things fade away as he traded his value system for something else: sharing the Gospel of Jesus with people and seeing them saved. This is what gave him joy, made him proud, and gave him hope.

Paul knew what the Thessalonians were before they trusted Jesus as their Savior: idol-worshipping pagans, completely lost in darkness. Yet here they were, completely transformed by the power of God into loving, faithful Christ-followers. For Paul, who gave everything he had, put every effort he had into seeing people saved, and was persecuted beyond what we could understand, this was more than enough to keep his fire burning. He knew that he had the honor of being used by God to further the Kingdom and that one day, he would receive that crown in Heaven that he could lay at the feet of Christ.

For me, this is quite convicting. In our American cushy lives, we face little opposition with sharing the Gospel with others, and yet do we yearn with a passion to see people saved? Is it our pride, joy, and hope? Let this be a challenge to us to refocus our mindset and value systems. May we passionately yearn to share the Gospel of Jesus with the lost world around us. May it bring us hope and joy to win souls for Christ, seeing them transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. May we earnestly run the race that the Lord has put before us, earning crowns along the way that we can one day lay at the feet of our Savior!

THANKFUL

GATHER | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 4

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

“For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God?” 1 Thessalonians 3:9

Pastor Chuck recently recommended *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*. It went on sale on *Logos* so I bought it. I am enjoying it. I was enlightened on how Gene L. Green translated 1 Thessalonians 3:9, “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?”

Actually, this passage is a rhetorical question. With a rhetorical question, one is not expecting an answer. The question might not have an answer, or it might have an obvious answer. So, why would you ask a question and not expect an answer? A question can be so obvious that it is a statement.

Psalms 116:12 also asks the same kind of question, ***“What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?”*** God has been so good to us, how can we ever repay Him. What do you buy or give the One who has “everything?”

However, what is Paul saying he is thankful for? He is thankful for the other believers. He is overjoyed with how other believers encouraged him and what they had accomplished together by the Lord.

Weekly Gatherings consist of singing, giving, and a message, but that is not all. Hebrews 10:25 mentions that part of Gatherings should be the act of ***“encouraging one another.”***

This Sunday, look around the auditorium and realize how blessed you are by being able to freely meet and by those around you. Pause and pray for them. Thank God for them. Paul recognized and acknowledged the hand of God at work in the lives of his readers.

One of the biggest choices many of us make each day is whether we will focus on affliction or blessings. Do you think God placed the wrong people around you? That was a rhetorical question. Look around you and be thankful.

I challenge you to let others know your feelings. Say something like:

- "I am thankful for you!"
- "I appreciate you!"

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you." Philippians 1:3

PRAY

GATHER | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 5

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

“As we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?” 1
Thessalonians 3:10

One of the best gifts I was ever given was when an inmate wrote me that he fasted and prayed for me for a whole day. Most people would view him as having nothing to offer, but he regularly encourages me. He also prays for me often. I am so thankful.

Paul was praying for them ***“earnestly night and day.”*** He wanted to see them, but more importantly, he wanted them to see Jesus. He wanted their faith to grow.

I like how Acts 20:32 states it, ***“And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”*** To commend someone to God is to pray for them. We pray for God's best for them. We understand that God knows what is best, so we pray they would seek and follow Him.

I am regularly challenged by 1 Samuel 12:23, ***“Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you, and I will instruct you in the good and the right way.”*** We owe it to each other to be praying for each other. Not only is it a good thing, but not doing it is a sin. Part of Gatherings includes prayer. We have prayer led by the Pastor, but we should also be looking around the room to pray for each other. Take time throughout the week to pray for others.

You might be wondering, “What should I pray for them?” Paul gives a great example in Philippians 1:9-11, ***“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”***

Pray that their love for the Lord and others may continue to grow. Pray that they would not settle for good when God is offering excellent. Also, pray for proper living. Pray that God would protect them from the evil one. Jesus taught in Matthew 6:13, ***“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”***

“Pray without ceasing.”

1 Thessalonians 5:17

INCREASED LOVE

GATHER | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 6

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

“And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you.” 1 Thessalonians 3:12

Paul wants believers to ***“increase and abound in love for one another.”*** This is not a new concept. We know we need to love one another. It is not just a good idea, it is crucial.

In Mark chapter 12, a scribe asked Jesus what was the most important commandment. We are familiar with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5), but the Jewish leaders had added to the list. They had about 613 commandments. Jesus gives the greatest commandment, ***“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength”*** (verse 30). The greatest commandment is to love God! Jesus did not stop there. He continued, ***“The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these”*** (verse 31). Loving one another is a commandment and it is high on the list.

It is hard to ignore how often this command to love one another is given:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” John 15:12

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” John 13:34

"These things I command you, so that you will love one another."

John 15:17

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God." 1 John

4:7

"Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

1 John 4:11

"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart." 1 Peter 1:22

"Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." Romans 12:10

"For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." 1 John 3:11

"Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Romans 13:8

"And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us." 1 John 3:23

"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." 1 Peter 4:8

"For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Galatians 5:14

Finally, as Christians, love should be our distinguishing characteristic. John 13:35 says, ***“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*** The key ingredient to our walk is love – love for God and love for one another.



LESSON THREE

GROW

PASTOR ROY TOWNSEND

Have you ever heard the saying, “The ends justify the means?” According to the dictionary, this phrase means that wrong or unfair methods may be used if the overall goal is good. I have had many conversations with people about what is right and what is wrong. Whether it be a modern-day governmental policy or a historical event, people are always looking to know what is right and wrong. When I get into these conversations, I often ask how that person “knows” when something is right or wrong.

1. How do you know what is right or wrong?

2. Do you feel that your upbringing has an influence on what you believe is right or wrong?

3. How much influence does our current culture have on what is believed to be right or wrong (TV, media, books, popular culture)?

Paul, when he was writing to the church in Thessalonica, stated in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-3, ***“Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.”***

Here we are given some wisdom on how to live our lives and continue to grow in our understanding of what is right or wrong. We are given the understanding that we are to **“walk”** and **“please”** God. From that, we are to do this more and more. We are to know the instructions that were given to the church **“more and more.”** So, we as followers are to use the Scriptures as a basis for what is right or wrong.

4. What are the problems with using modern thoughts and philosophies to determine what is right or wrong?

Proverbs 14:12 reads, **“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”** We read that man’s wisdom will set us on a path towards death, but when we rely on God’s instructions we are on a path that pleases Him. Plus, when we grow **“more and more,”** this will lead us to fulfill God’s plan for our own sanctification.

Paul continues in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4:4-8, **“That each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”**

Paul asks and urges the church to walk in a manner that pleases God in two specific areas that will grow us toward **“sanctification.”**

5. The Biblical word “**sanctification**” is a difficult word to understand. Please explain to your Growth Community what your understanding is of the word sanctification.

6. What about this concept causes confusion?

In studying the word sanctification, I learned that it can be translated as holiness. Paul is reinforcing the concept that the believer’s life should be one of holiness. An aspect of holiness is to be set apart from the world or separated from the world. We as God’s people should have a separation from the world or we are to live a life that is set apart from the world. So back to our original questions about right or wrong. The world may define something as right based upon popular belief or cultural belief, but we as followers of Christ are to live a holy life. Romans 12:1 reads, ***“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”***

7. What about living a holy, separated, or set-apart life causes fear among believers?

8. Why does Paul encourage our growth *“more and more?”*

We cannot just stop at our original growth when we accept Christ as our Savior. We become saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, but we have not completely arrived in our walk towards holiness or sanctification. The Christian walk is a journey toward a set-apart life. We must continue to grow - more and more because life circumstances will change and our culture will change. We must continue to learn His Word. We must continue to choose this life to become mature followers of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 5:14 reads, ***“But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”*** We must continue to grow. Psalm 119:11 reads, ***“I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.”***

9. Why does the River Church include a believer's growth as part of the mission of the church?

10. How are we storing up God's Word in our hearts?

We need to be encouraged when we are studying God's Word that on this journey we can become more Christ-like and honor His

instructions by growing more and more and living a separate life to be a witness to the world.

Finally, 2 Timothy 2:21 reads, ***“Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.”***

LESSON THREE | GROW

SEXUAL IMMORALITY

GROW | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Chuck Lindsey

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality.” 1 Thessalonians 4:3 (NKJV)

One of the questions that I am often asked as a pastor is, “What is God’s will for my life?” It is a question that I always love to hear, for I believe that all true believers want to know what God wants. The question comes in many forms:

“Is this the person God wants me to marry?”

“Is this the house He would want us to buy?”

“Is this the job that I should take?”

“Is this the move that God wants me to make?”

However, at the end of the day, each of those questions centers around the idea that God has a will, a desire, or a preference for our lives individually. That is thrilling to think about. What does God specifically want for me?

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Paul answers that question in an overarching sense. By that I mean, it answers the question of God’s will in an ultimate sense. It says, ***“For this is the will of God.”*** That is pretty clear, right? We are talking about what God wants. It is His will. It is what He desires. It is what the God of the Universe wants.

It goes on and says, ***“For this is the will of God, your [our] sanctification.”*** The word ***“sanctification”*** comes from the Greek word for “holiness” (Hagios) and it means to “be set apart unto God, reserved for God and His use.” It refers to our hearts (emotions), minds (thinking), and lives (actions) being set apart to God. This means that we have separated ourselves from the world, from sin,

from the worship of self, and the worship of other false gods. Also, we are His. We have given Him our lives. We are His. We are reserved for Him, His will, and His use. This is God's will for us as His people.

Now one of the most important areas that this applies to is what is mentioned next in the verse, ***“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality.”*** ***“Sexual immorality”*** is a broad term that refers to any sexual activity or thought that is outside of the context of a marriage between one man and one woman. What we learn from this passage (now that we understand the word ***“sanctification”***) is that when we are involved in anything sinfully sexual, we are giving ourselves to that thing. We are taking what is reserved for God and we are giving it to another “god” in worship. Scripture confirms this understanding continually.

Romans 6:16 (NKJV) is an example when it says, ***“Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?”***

In 1 Corinthians chapter 6, Paul talks about how sexual immorality joins us to that thing. On and on we could go. The point we are making is this, sexual sin is more than just an act or a thought. It is the giving of ourselves, what is meant to be reserved for God, to the false “god” of sex and it will always bring death and destruction into our lives.

God's will, as is made clear from His Word, is that we not only separate ourselves from all forms of sexual immorality but that we also actively give ourselves to the Lord. It is not an either/or, it is a both/and. We separate from other things and separate to the Lord.

Finally, 2 Corinthians 6:17-18 (NKJV) says, ***“Therefore Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.”*** This is what God wants, and because it is, He will help us carry it out.

SELF-CONTROL

GROW | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 2

James Mann

One of the biggest things that I struggle with in my walk with Christ is this concept of self-control. This idea is one that I am constantly having to check myself on and keep at the forefront of my mind. There are many people who are going to be able to identify with what I am about to say. I am the type of person that is either completely 100% in on something or I am 100% out. There is not usually an in-between. Sometimes we can think of this and have difficulty in realizing why this is an issue. A prime example that I can think of in my own life is food. Many people know that I love food. Food on the surface level seems like a good thing. We need it to survive. The issue comes when there is no self-control and food is consumed at an astronomical rate. Next thing we know, we are spending our entire life savings on food because we cannot control ourselves. Too much of a good thing can quickly turn into a bad thing when we are not closely evaluating ourselves.

This whole idea can become detrimental when this is something that does not just apply to actions but the people in our lives as well. I am either all in on friendships and the relationships I have with people, or I am completely out. I find myself entirely focused on the relationships I have with people until I find myself getting hurt by them. It is at this point that I push them away and dissolve the relationship altogether. Many of us do this because we let our emotions be the determining factor in our lives. In 1 Thessalonians 4:4-5, Paul discusses this idea of self-control, ***“That each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.”***

Whenever I read the Bible and realize it tells us how to act, it is always a huge kick in the teeth when I find myself identifying with the side that God relates to those who do not know Him. We are called to control ourselves with holiness and honor in the forefront of our minds and not out of emotional impulses. If we find ourselves continuously cutting people out of our lives because of an issue of self-control, then we are acting like someone who does not know God. If we are consuming the things of this world without control, we are acting like someone who does not know God. We need to pray to God for the strength to control ourselves and work daily at making sure we are not acting out of impulse.

BE DIFFERENT

GROW | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 3

Debbie Gabbara

“And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice - the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.” Romans 12:1-2 (NLT)

It takes work to be intentional in our thoughts and actions. Sometimes we have time to consider decisions we are about to make and other times we just react.

Oh, I wish I could change the thousands of times that I reacted to a situation or someone’s words and it did not sound good when I was responding or feel so good afterward. Thankfully, there have also been times for which I am so grateful that my brain took a pause before my mouth started moving.

We cannot expect the world not to act worldly. However, God expects believers to live a life that pleases Him. As followers of Christ, we are called to live lives that look different, because, in Christ Jesus, we are different. When the sorrow of our brokenness leads us to repentance and we have asked for forgiveness of our sins, Jesus promises that He will forgive us and cleanse us from our sin. Then we have to work at changing the way we think, act, and react. We should not be living like the world, but striving to live a holy life that pleases God.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 (NLT) Paul writes, ***“God’s will is for you to be holy, so stay away from all sexual sin. Then each of you will control his own body and live in holiness and honor – not in lustful passion like the pagans who do not know God and his ways.”***

The Lord does not leave us on our own to try to guess what He means by these verses. The Thessalonians received very clear direction from Paul as to what this would look like for their lives, and those instructions are still relevant for the world we live in today. They were to abstain from the immorality around them; stay away from the temptation. The Psalms begin very plainly telling us to stay away from places we should not be. Psalm 1:1 tells us that walking by can lead to standing around which can lead to sitting down in the middle of the sin and getting comfortable. Paul is reminding the people of Thessalonica that they have to make conscious decisions to stay away from the sin that is all around them.

Growing in our Christian walk is a process, but it is a process that we should always be working on. Like the Thessalonians, we should be encouraged to give ourselves to the Lord because of all that He has done for us. With our eyes fixed on Jesus, we continue to grow stronger and become better able to resist the pull of the world. This is truly the way to worship the Lord.

“So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.”
Romans 8:6 (NLT)

STRIVE FOR HOLINESS

GROW | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 4

Josh Thayer

“That each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor.” 1 Thessalonians 4:4

Holiness is one of those words that sometimes seems daunting. Maybe it is just me but whenever I read the Bible and come across that word or anything to do with being holy, I just never feel good enough. I look at my own life and think, how can God love me? With all the mistakes I have made, with how far I feel like I am from holiness, how can God even care for me? Even after reading what holy means in the dictionary (“Morally and spiritually excellent”), I feel further away than I ever have.

The good thing about having a relationship with Jesus is that He will always love you and long for you to join Him in Heaven. Even in seasons when we feel like we are far from God and when sometimes we are running away, He is always looking for a way to bring you and me back to Him. I just recently became a father, and until now I thought I knew what that feeling was like. However, when I look at my daughter, I think there is nothing you could ever do to make me not love her and make me not want to be with her. That is the love that Jesus has for us!

So knowing that, why would we not strive to do everything we can to be as close to God as we can? To be in His love, grace, and presence is something we should want, right? Holiness is something we should strive for. I say strive because holiness is something we will never achieve, but it is something that we are constantly chasing. When we chase holiness we become someone different. In life, it

is impossible to be neutral. Everyone has something that controls them, either God or sin. Being a Christian myself does not mean I cannot sin, it just means I am no longer a slave to sin. I strive for holiness because I love and belong to God - and so can you. When we have hope that we will have eternal life with Jesus in Heaven it gives us a new joy and purpose. That is something that should make us thankful every day!

Romans 6:22 (NIV) adds, ***“But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.”***

GODS WILL FOR US

GROW | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 5

Shawna Johnson

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.” 1 Thessalonians 4:3

If you are reading this today, I am going to assume you are a Christian. If you are a Christian, I am going to assume you regularly desire to live your life according to God's will.

As a young adult and new follower of Jesus, I would often ask that, “What is God's will for my life?” I was mostly wanting to know the answers concerning things like my career and where I should live. Of course, we need to go to the Lord in prayer, fasting, and seeking wise counsel in all of those things. The Lord will lead you with His peace. However, I know sometimes we wish we could find the name of the school we are supposed to go to, the career we are supposed to choose, and the name of our future spouse written in bold letters in Scripture. We really do, myself included, make it more difficult than it needs to be sometimes! While you may not find the name of the company you are going to work for or the major you should pursue spelled out in Scripture, the Lord does in fact show us His will for our lives!

While there are several places in Scripture we find God's will, today we are going to focus on one section in particular.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Paul begins by saying ***“For this is the will of God.”*** Did you hear that? Listen up! We are about to learn what God wills for our lives! Paul says, ***“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that***

each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8). God regularly calls us to holiness.

We often look for the life-altering decisions as needing God’s direction; however, we need to look to God daily for direction and strength. We need Him to help us do the right things and make the right choices. God cares about every detail of our lives. He does not want to just show up at “big” moments of our lives but cares about each step along the way. He does not just want part of us, He wants our whole hearts and lives.

My prayer for us today is to pursue holiness. In 1 Thessalonians 4:7, we are told, ***“For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.”***

LIVING FOR THE LORD

GROW | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 6

Larry Gabbara

The world around us is a mess! People do not give any thought to how they treat each other. There are television shows that stay on the air year after year airing peoples' dirty laundry. The messed-up personal situations that people are willing to talk about on national television are amazing to me. They did not have a television in Paul's day, but the world was a big mess then, too. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul encourages them to be strong in their faith. He knew that they were surrounded by a world that had very low moral standards.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:6 (NKJV), he writes, ***“That no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified.”***

When you hear these words, what is the first thing that comes to your mind? What I think is that we are not to cheat, steal, swindle, deceive, or tell lies about the people in our life.

Paul is closing his letter with instructions to the people of Thessalonica so that they would understand how God expects His people to live. Of course, these words still hold true for us today.

As we read the text, we find that Paul was thankful for the growth that he saw in the Thessalonians, but he still was expecting them to continue to grow in their walk with the Lord. Paul hoped that the teaching he was doing with the Thessalonians helped them to know the purpose of their lives. He wanted them to understand that they

should be living to please God, not themselves, and that would lead to living lives that showed their love and respect for themselves and those around them.

As Christians, we should not live as the world does, but to please the Lord, as instructed here in Thessalonians. The instructions in Paul's letter, are not suggestions, they are commandments from the Lord that we all must follow. Paul explains to us in Romans that God judges those who are immoral. Romans 1:18 (NLT) says, ***“But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”***

Commentaries say the first century Roman Empire people were immoral, and morality was not thought of or even practiced. This was an unknown virtue, they truly lived in the world of self-satisfaction, and in carnal sin. Paul made the instructions clear what the will of God was for them, and it is the same today for us. He tells the Thessalonians that they should live differently than those who did not follow the Lord. The world should see us as different, too. As believers, we should not be living a life that is viewed as immoral. We must remember that when we received the free gift of salvation as a Christian, we now should be living for the Lord.

That leads me to think about our walk, and our maturity with the Lord. Are we growing today? Is our fruit visible to the world?

LESSON FOUR

GROW MORE

PHILIP PIASECKI

There is something so special and nostalgic about the first couple of jobs you ever had. I was very blessed in high school and college to have some fun or unique jobs until I began my ministry as a full-time worship leader. During the summers in high school, I would work at the kids' day camp at the Waterford location. Each day was different in this job, from pelting kids with dodgeballs to trying to help make sure a bus survived the drive from Waterford to Cleveland for a baseball game. In college, I spent time working at the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office and at a doctor's office processing blood samples. Both of those jobs I was woefully underqualified for, but both were such unique experiences in my life.

1. What was the first job or most unique job you ever had?

2. What are some memories or life lessons you learned from that job?

In 1 Thessalonians 4:10-12, we read, ***“For that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.”***

3. What stands out to you in these verses?

Each and every day our goal as believers should be to grow in our walk with Christ. Within this growth, each and every aspect of our life should be impacted. This section of Scripture in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 is all about continuing to grow more and more in the Lord, and Paul addresses some very practical things in the Thessalonians' lives where he wants them to grow. The first thing Paul says is to ***“aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs.”*** I want to first say what Paul is not saying. He is not saying never to speak out against anything. Christians can use this verse as an excuse to put their blinders on and never speak out against sin or injustice.

4. Did Jesus live a quiet life?

We have the example of Jesus going town to town preaching messages that were contrary and highly offensive to the current culture. As we grow in our Christian walk, we need to grow in wisdom trying to discern when it is time to speak up and when it is the time to hold our tongues.

It seems in this passage that the believers in Thessalonica were getting distracted from their work, becoming a distraction and a burden to other people, while also being a bad example to those around them that were not Christians. The first thing Paul is encouraging us to do in this section of Scripture is to work hard. Since the beginning of time, people have had jobs. Even before sin entered the Garden of Eden, Adam was given the job of taking care of the animals and the plants in the garden.

Genesis 2:15 records, ***“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”***

5. Does understanding that work existed before sin entered the world change your perspective on your job?

God has equipped each and every one of us with the ability to do a job, and do that job well. We are called to work hard in whatever we do. Work, jobs, and responsibilities are all ordained by the Lord in our lives, and we work to honor Him.

Colossians 3:23-24 is a great reminder and command, ***“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”***

We do not work for the approval of man but we work for the Lord. I want you to be encouraged today and know that whatever kind of work you do, you can honor and glorify the Lord through it. You can be used as a witness to those that are not believers through that job.

Instead of working hard, believers in Thessalonica were neglecting their work and becoming slothful. This neglect of their work was leading to multiple different issues. Instead of working, they were bothering and distracting other people who were being faithful and working hard. I absolutely love working in an office environment where people are free to walk around, talk to one another, and bounce ideas off each other. However, there are definitely times when I am trying to get work done, and I will have someone in my ear wanting to talk about the latest Marvel movie or most recent sporting event. That is what I picture happening here in Thessalonica. While people were trying to be productive, these slothful believers were constantly

in their ears trying to talk about whatever gossip there was. That is why Paul tells them to “live quietly and mind your own affairs.”

6. Practically, how do you think we can practice living quietly and minding our own affairs?

An area of growth that I see needed in many believers is being okay not knowing everything that is going on. It is always great to be able to pray for someone, but sometimes “prayer requests” can just be gossip in disguise. When I read **“mind your own affairs”** in my head I hear Paul telling them to “mind your business!” Sometimes, there are things happening in other people’s lives that do not involve us, and that is okay. We should not be constantly talking about other people and what they are struggling with. This can become a distraction from the work that the Lord has put in front of us to accomplish.

7. Do you feel you struggle with always needing to know what is happening in other people’s lives?

Proverbs 21:23 says, **“Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble.”**

Ephesians 4:29 adds, **“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”**

The Bible is serious about how we speak and what we speak about. We need to make sure we are more concerned about honoring God in our own lives than gossiping around what others are struggling with.

8. According to 1 Thessalonians 4:12, why is living this way important?

9. How do you think our witness to the world is impacted when we fail in these areas?

When we fail to follow the instructions of Paul from 1 Thessalonians 4:10-12 we ultimately give Christians a bad name. If the world sees us as lazy, rude, or nosey it makes the world less likely to want to have what we have. We do not want to be known for these sinful things, instead, we should be an example to the world of the amazing fruitfulness that being a believer can produce in us. Knowing that we are working for Christ should make us dedicated and hard-working. Also, knowing that we are all God's children should make us want to love each other and respect each other instead of gossiping and negatively being in everyone's business.

John 13:34-35 says, ***"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."***

10. Why is the example that you set for your world so important?

11. How have you been challenged to grow in your walk with Christ through this passage?

Ultimately, when we talk about spiritual growth, it needs to be evident in our actions and how we live our life. This can show itself in so many different ways, including how we work and interact with other believers. My challenge today is that you work hard in whatever area the Lord currently has you working in and that you honor and support other believers. We do this so that ultimately we can show the world what an amazing Savior we serve so that they would want to give their lives to Christ as well.

A QUIET LIFE

GROW MORE | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 1

Ferdinand Sanders

“And to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you.” 1 Thessalonians 4:11

The rapid advancement and integration of technology in our everyday lives have been such a positive thing. However, it comes with negative elements, too. With unlimited access to information and connection to others, why is it that we feel more disconnected than ever? That is not to mention that hostility levels are at an all-time high. From the moment you wake up, to the moment you lay your head on your pillow at night, the world is fighting for your attention. Be it the internet, billboards, tv, movies, or radio, there has never been more “noise” than there is right now. With schedules packed to the brim and an infinite amount of media to be consumed, Paul urges us in his first letter to the Thessalonians to ***“aspire to live quietly.”***

This verse in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 is found within a portion of Scripture that has been labeled as “A Life Pleasing to God.” I do not know about you, but those five words hold a lot of weight! I find it interesting when I read this passage that a “quiet life” makes the list of a life pleasing to God. Are we not told, ***“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation”*** (Mark 16:15)? Yes, but I think this is a great reminder of how the manner in which we present the message may in fact be just as important as the message itself. The “quiet life” that Paul references in 1 Thessalonians 4:11 does not mean retreating from the world or moving out into isolation. It is the lens or the filter that drives the decisions on how we live and interact with the world.

In the context of the world we live in today, we need this now more than ever. I cannot help but also bring attention to our presence on social media as well. I do not think Paul had Facebook in mind when he wrote his letters, but these principles hold just as true. I love the way Paul words this in 2 Timothy when he writes, ***“No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him”*** (2 Timothy 2:4). Even behind the safety and separation of a computer screen, phone, or tablet, we need to be careful to not entangle ourselves into “civilian affairs.” Even if our intention is “good” in our eyes, we can end up doing more harm than good.

As the salt and light of the Earth (Matthew 5), we are not to retreat or go hide until Jesus comes back. There is a quote from St. Francis of Assisi that says, “It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.” I love this quote as it embodies the reminder that our “walk” is just as important as our “talk.” This matches the call for us ***“to live quietly,”*** which does not need to compromise our presence and impact on the world around us.

MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS

GROW MORE | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 2

Pastor Ben Kirkman

“And to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you.” 1 Thessalonians 4:11

Have you ever stuck your nose into someone else’s business? It can be so easy to look at other people and see their flaws (and by that I mean what you think their flaws are), or the way you would live their life if you were them. The reality often is that we have no idea what others are actually dealing with, or what the Holy Spirit is doing in their lives. We have a limited understanding of what they are going through, yet we know exactly what they “should” do and how they “should” respond.

Do you ever look for other people’s flaws so you can feel better about yourself? Do you ever look for struggles in the lives of others so you can “stir the pot?” You know the scenario, it will give you something to talk about with your friends: “Have you heard,” “did you see,” and “can you believe?” Before you know it there is a whole group of people dogging on someone over something that may be a complete misunderstanding or even completely false. It can get pretty messed up and cause a lot of hurts. It is shameful to think we might actually be guilty of any of this. However, it happens, does it not?

I think of Luke 6:41-42, ***“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye, You hypocrite, first take the out of your***

own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye." When Paul tells the believers in 1 Thessalonians to *"mind your own affairs,"* I believe he is pointing out a whole lot of self-righteous speck-seekers that were overlooking their own problems. That nonsense could have been avoided if they would first check themselves and their motives.

There is a real opportunity as we follow Christ's example to love, encourage, and help people through whatever hurt they may be facing. As believers in the finished work of Christ, we are children of God; we are family. We should be loving, encouraging, and helping one another. Our reaching out should be with pure motives founded in truth and love.

HANDS THAT WORK

GROW MORE | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 3

Donna Fox

We had the pleasure of recently celebrating my mother's 95th birthday! At 95, her mind is sharp, but her body continues to deteriorate, especially her hands. She has painful arthritis in her hands, yet she daily works at puzzles, crafts, and other projects to keep them nimble. She could easily stop using her hands and be idle, but her hands would only further deteriorate and become unusable. Her doctors have told her to keep working with her hands to keep them moving. It is an age-old concept that even Paul spoke of in 1 Thessalonians 4:11, ***"To aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you."***

Paul is speaking to the church in Thessalonica. He had instructed them in the past on how to live a God-honoring life, but they had slipped away from that knowledge. They were fixated on the second coming of Christ, which they thought was imminent, so some were idle, not working, and sitting waiting for that second coming. The wealthier Christians were having to take care of these slothful Christians and Paul was pointing out that you need to ***"work with your hands."***

I was raised on a farm. There is never a shortage of chores on a farm! My mother rose early to make breakfast before the day began. There were eggs to gather, gardens to weed, vegetables to can, and pigs to birth. She was always at work doing something on the farm. She set a good example for me and my brothers to avoid being idle, lest the work not get done! She was a true example of a "Proverbs 31 woman," not eating the bread of idleness (Proverbs 31:27).

Paul also set a good example for Christ's followers in Thessalonica. Paul was a tentmaker by trade (Acts 18:3). He worked day and night so he would not be a burden to others (1 Thessalonians 2:9-10). He had told them before, and he was telling them again, set a good example to outsiders (verse 12).

We should always be looking for, and prepared for, the second coming of Christ. Yet, we should not sit back, be lazy, and just watch and wait. We need to be working with our hands, earning a living, supporting our family, and most importantly, telling others about Jesus in hopes of bringing them to Jesus for salvation. Others are looking to us as an example. Be that example!

“No man understands fully the blessings
which God has bestowed on him,
if he has hands to work and will not work.”
Barnes Commentary

WALK PROPERLY BEFORE OUTSIDERS

GROW MORE | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 4

John Rigg

What verse in the Bible says, “God helps those who help themselves?” I will give you a minute to look for it. Find it? Nope, and you will not.

According to Wikipedia, the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is a motto that emphasizes the importance of self-initiative and agency. The expression is known around the world and is used to inspire people to self-help. The phrase originated in Ancient Greece as “the gods help those who help themselves” and may originally have been proverbial.

Although it is not in the Bible, did you know a recent poll found that seventy-five percent of American teenagers said they believed that it was the central message of the Bible?

As shocking as this may be to us, it should not surprise us. American culture has shifted into a self-help culture. This even includes Christian culture. Sometimes this self-help ideal can come through Christian music, Christian books, and even the pulpit on Sundays. Many Christians today are being tricked into believing that their dependence is to be placed solely on themselves, which removes any dependence on God.

It can make us wonder what Paul meant by this statement in his letter to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 4:12, ***“So that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one?”***

When Paul made the statement “**be dependent on no one**,” it was in the context of walking properly before those that are outside the faith. It is those that have not yet come to faith in Jesus who are always watching to see how Christians are living their lives. A great deal of the time they watch and wait for an opportunity to discount the message they carry.

In the prior sentence, Paul stated the importance of working with one’s own hands, “**And to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you**” (1 Thessalonians 4:11).

Christians are to work with their own hands barring any physical limitations they may have. Working with one’s own hands allows the self-supporting person not to be a burden to others. Paul had taught this earlier in the letter (1 Thessalonians 2:9).

Why is it so important that a Christian “works with his own hands?” Whereas the motto, “God helps them who help themselves,” is meant to encourage dependence on self, Paul’s statement, “**to work with your hands**,” was meant to discourage those spreading the Gospel from having unbelievers perceive they were being charged for the message. The Thessalonian believers were to provide for their own livelihood when presenting God’s plan of salvation to those without faith. In turn, when believers walk properly before outsiders and do not charge for the Gospel, which is freely given to all men, unbelievers will have a better opportunity of deeming the message worthy of acceptance and not something they feel obligated to pay for.

“**What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.**” (1 Corinthians 9:18)

EXCELLENT WORK

GROW MORE | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 5

Jill Osmon

“So that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.” 1 Thessalonians 4:12

I worked to find overly flowery words to explain what the second part of verse 12 means, but I have to be completely real, God has called us to work. Please do not misunderstand, work can take many forms. Some work you get paid for, some you do to serve God and His people, and some you do as the calling in taking care of your family. However, whatever it is, God has called us to work. One commentary said, “Christianity does not discharge us from the work and duty of our particular callings, but teaches us to be diligent therein.” We need to be diligent in our work, work with integrity and excellence. Titus 2:7 says, ***“Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity.”*** Colossians 3:23 adds, ***“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.”***

My brother is an artist, he takes his craft very seriously, respecting the talent and gifting that he has been given. He works to be excellent. We have had many conversations about Christians and his view (he is not a believer) on how Christians who have horrible reputations of bad work ethics, not working to be excellent but working to do the bare minimum. I will never forget what he said to me. He asked, “Why don’t Christians do things with excellence? They accept just getting by, to create and work without any sense of quality or hard work.” He then said, “If God is supposed to be what it is all about, wouldn’t you want to do everything to the best of your ability, with excellence to make Him look good?”

It was a moment of deep sadness for me, and real conviction. I knew from that moment on, anything I did, even inconsequential, would be done with excellence, not for the world but to show the world that God deserves my best, to ultimately point people to the Gospel. I love what this commentary says about work, "In Paul's assessment, manual labor is not beneath Christians, and Paul himself had done what he demands that these idle brothers do. The apostle plainly regards work as one way believers may honor God, show love to their fellow Christians, and display the transforming power of the gospel to outsiders. He wants the idle brothers to embrace his perspective and to set an impressive, not disgraceful, example for their unbelieving contemporaries."

God calls us to work, not to be idle so that we can focus on pointing people to Jesus. Our lack of work, which allows dependence on something other than God, should not be the focus but ultimately the Gospel should be the focus in all things, including our work.

HOPE

GROW MORE | 1 THESSALONIANS, DEVOTION 6

John Stone

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Romans 8:18-21 (NASB)

What is the invisible quality that strengthens some to press on against all odds while others stumble and fall, exhausted and beaten? Where does that strength come from when every resource is gone?

We live in a world that is fallen (Genesis 3) and the effects of sin can be seen and felt everywhere. As Christians, we walk the road of this life, not as residents, but outsiders; not comfortable and satisfied, but on our way to our true home, our true satisfaction (Psalm 17:15). All around us the heartbreaking corruption and depravity can be felt as it weighs us down and presses in sticking to our feet like mud. Our walk can quickly turn into a tiring slog as we wade through the mess.

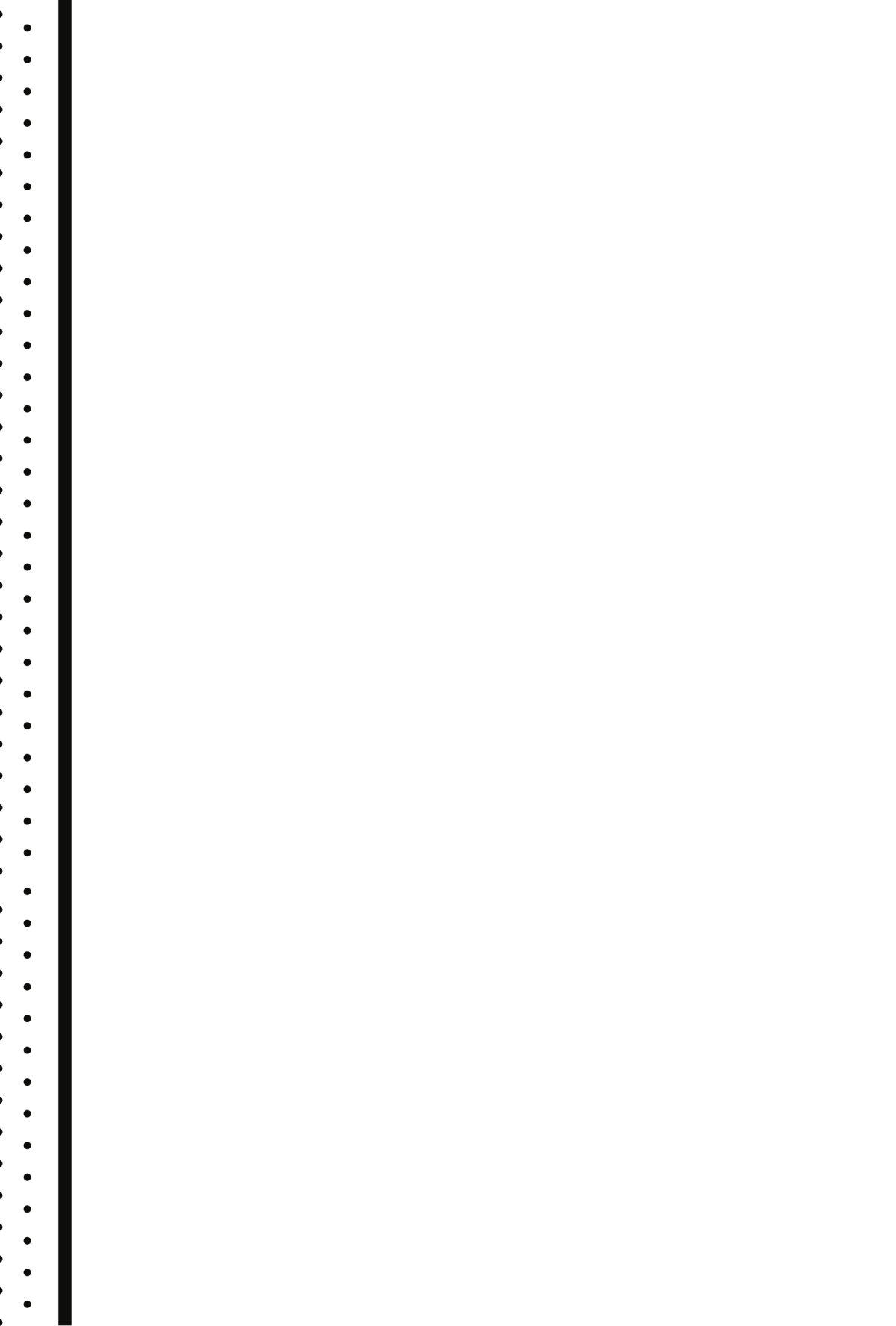
When we look around, what do we see? There are generations of people floundering in the pursuit of happiness, unaware that the things they are chasing are nothing more than a temporary anesthetic to dull the ache of hopelessness.

Ultimate, soul-satisfying, life-anchoring hope is what every person needs more than they need food, clothing, or health. It is invisible,

unmeasurable. It gives endurance and purpose, joy in suffering, and contentment in little. True hope, unlike the temporary numbness the world offers, makes life worth living and, more importantly, worth living to the glory of God. He has given us everything we need to walk in full assurance (Hebrews 11:1) of the finished work of Jesus Christ. Our hope is not based on a Savior who died for our sins only, but on a Savior who was raised from the dead (Romans 1:4) after defeating death and Hell (Revelation 1:17-18) and is now ruling the universe from the right hand of the Father. He is the One on whom we base our faith and hope. This rock-solid foundation is only found through complete trust and reliance on the King of kings, the One Who Provides (Chronicles 29:10-17; Genesis 22:8).

Sharing the life-transforming hope God has given us should be the driving purpose behind everything we do. As we are navigating this life, we should look with compassion and understanding at the desperate behavior of those who have no hope. Their destructive, empty attempts to find meaning and happiness will continue in vain until someone (you and me) speaks the truth of the Gospel to them (Mark 1:15; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Romans 10:9-10) and by the grace of God, He transforms them. It is only by God's grace that we as believers have hope of salvation, the hope of eternal life, and hope with purpose and meaning. We need to be the voice of hope in a hopeless world.

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” 1 Thessalonians 4:13



OUR MISSION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, “we don’t go to church, we are the Church.” We believe that as God’s people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

Weekend Gatherings at The River Church are all about Jesus, through singing, giving, serving, baptizing, taking the Lord’s Supper, and participating in messages that are all about Jesus and bringing glory to Him. We know that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it’s not only a refresher it’s bringing life-change.

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***“all things in common.”*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

The River Church
8393 E. Holly Rd. Holly, MI 48442
theriverchurch.cc • info@theriverchurch.cc