

BE THE CHURCH

**BY PASTOR JAYSON COMBS
& DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON**

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY:

MITCHELL HOLMES
JOANNA MONTGOMERY
MATT MONTGOMERY
ADAM MOORE
MARK PITTENGER
COURTNEY SANDERS
FERDINAND SANDERS

RICH SAWICKI
JEREMY SMITH
HALEIGH WASHBURN
KEATON WASHBURN
JOE WILSON
GARY WRIGHT

DESIGNED BY: CASEY MAXWELL
FORMATTED BY: SHAWNA JOHNSON

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THE RIVER CHURCH

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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).

The next step while growing involves serving. It is important that one realize that believers do not “go to church.” We are the church – Christ's body. We need to stop focusing on going to church and emphasize being the Church.

Be The Church covers the mission of the Church (Reach, Gather, Grow), but it also challenges believers to get involved and Join The Team (JTT). Since the Great Commission was given by Jesus instructing believers as a coach would in a pep talk, this implies that believers are part of the team and need to play their part or position.

Be The Church consists of six study guides for personal or group discussion and thirty-eight devotions covering the mission of the Church. Be The Church reminds the believer to focus on essentials and listen to their calling by God.



LESSON ONE

JOIN THE TEAM

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

BE THE CHURCH

Join The Team (JTT) is the opportunity of being part of something bigger than yourself. It is the calling of God to be involved with other believers in serving the Lord. Although it is a high calling, it is still a calling to all believers.

1. What teams were you on in school or other?

2. What are some positive elements of being part of a team?

We accept Jesus as Savior by faith. However, faith should be followed by actions. We do not serve in order to get to Heaven; we serve as a thank you to God because we are going to Heaven.

3. What does it mean to be “saved by faith?”

4. What Bible verses support your answer?

God not only calls us to serve, but He also equips us. God has given gifts, talents, skills, and interests to His children.

LESSON ONE | JOIN THE TEAM

5. Apart from what God has given, what is one of the best gifts you remember receiving from someone?

6. What is the greatest compliment you can give someone who gives you a gift?

When we get someone a gift and see them value it, life is good. When children play with the toy instead of the box, the parents feel a sense of pride in a job well done. All too often people choose to store it away or regift it. I can only imagine our thoughts and feelings if we received a gift from someone that we had once given to another. I think it is fair to say that gifts are meant to be used.

One year when I was coaching boys high school varsity soccer, I had four freshmen make the starting line-up. That was very unique. I told them if I was going to coach them for four years that I wanted to show them how God could use what they loved to do for His glory. I took the soccer team to Mexico to frame a church building. The team was fabulous. Several times the missionary told us to take a break because he did not want to finish the project too soon (we could only be in the village as long as we were building). I asked about pulling out a soccer ball to kick around. He denied the request every time. Finally, he got frustrated with me and said, "I don't know what your view of ministry is, but mine is not to play. By the way, they don't even know what soccer is." I pointed out that the children were already playing soccer. He did not notice because they were using a two-liter bottle since they could not afford a real ball. He conceded to five minutes, but only five minutes.

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As soon as we pulled out the soccer ball, everyone started yelling for the ball. Surprisingly, men showed up. The missionary had not met the men of the village. The men challenged my guys to a game and invited us to their “field” down by the water. The missionary gave his approval. The game went well. Friendships were created. We were able to share the Gospel with 128 men plus women and children. Many hands went up signifying that they had accepted Christ as their Savior. It was amazing. The boys played well and were invited to play neighboring teams. We even had to take boats to get to an island to play a select team.

We all learned God could use what we love to do for His glory. I ended up making fourteen more trips with students to Mexico. Every time the missionary requested that we play soccer.

7. What are some areas of service that are needed in or through the church? Please list at least 30.

LESSON ONE | JOIN THE TEAM

8. What are some of your interests and how can they be used for God's glory? (Ask the group for suggestions on how to use your skills and interests.)

As a child, I feared if I gave my life to Jesus that He would send me to Africa to a place that did not even have baseball. Maybe you had similar thoughts. However, I realized that it would not make sense for God to place an interest, skill, talent, and even gift in me that He did not want to use for His glory.

Please grab the tools of your trade and Join The Team. We want you and need you.

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” 1 Peter 4:10

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PUT ME IN, COACH

JOIN THE TEAM, DEVOTION 1

Mark Pittenger

As I remember coaching youth travel baseball, I often think about tryouts. Tryouts can be a nerve-wracking time for both players and coaches. One thing we would do, as coaches during tryouts, is evaluating the player's strengths. Can they throw hard? Do they run fast? Are they a power hitter or more of a singles and doubles kind of hitter? Answering these questions helps coaches to determine how that player's skills could be utilized to better the team, like, what position would they be best at on the field or where in the batting order they would hit. Faster runners usually bat first and second in the batting order. Power hitters bat third, fourth, and fifth and the singles and doubles hitters finish out the lineup.

When it comes to playing the field, there are nine positions to be filled. Outfielders are fast runners, have quick reaction times, and can throw the ball a long distance. Infielders do not have to throw the ball as far but need to have a better reaction time and good communication skills, as they are the voice between the catcher and the outfielders. Pitchers are unique in that they know how to grip and release the ball when throwing and how much power to put into the pitch to determine how the ball travels. Some may think the pitcher is the captain of the field but it is actually the catcher! The catcher is the only player that can clearly see every base and is the one who decides what pitches the pitcher should throw. It takes a strong knowledge of the game and both mental and physical toughness to be a catcher.

I tell you all of this because it is the same within the church. Each of us has a unique skill set, given to us by God, to be used for His

glory! Much like the players on a baseball team, each member brings their unique skill set to the table, and when combined with the other members, makes for a successful formula to reach the final goal.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, the Apostle Paul tells us, ***“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”***

Once you give your life to Jesus, you become part of the team. There are no tryouts and no chance of being cut (John 10:28).

Paul goes on to tell us in verses 14-15, ***“For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body.”***

Maybe you can sing, play an instrument, or you are a good speaker. Maybe you are gifted in working with kids or teens. Maybe you are better at communicating with adults. Maybe your gift is using tools or building things. It could be that you are more of a thinker and solving problems is your thing. The bottom line is that no matter what your strengths are, they can, and should, be used to glorify God and to further build His kingdom here on Earth (Matthew 28:19-20).

I urge you to examine yourself and find your strengths. Talk to God through prayer about how you can use these strengths to spread the Gospel. Get connected with the church and see where there are opportunities to use your gift. Whatever it is that you bring to the table, it is needed. You are a player on team Jesus! You just need to say, “Put me in, Coach” (Isaiah 6:8).

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“Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’” Matthew 9:37-38

SERVING WITH A PURPOSE

JOIN THE TEAM, DEVOTION 2

Joe Wilson

“As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

1 Peter 4:10 (KJV)

I must admit, once I left the military I really struggled with finding my purpose. While I was serving in the Air Force I felt as if I had a purpose. I had a very fulfilling and honorable purpose. To be completely transparent, I was not saved at this point, and battled with life in the “Civilian World,” or so I thought this was the issue. The real issue was I was constantly searching and striving to find that purpose and brotherhood I desperately missed. I sure wish I knew then what I understand now. It was in 2001 that I accepted Jesus Christ to be my Lord and Savior and it was then and there my true journey began. It began my journey to finding my purpose again.

As I was navigating my Christian infancy, I was still very self-centered. Basically, it was still all about me and what this Christian thing could do for me. Fast forward a few years and I started to receive small opportunities to serve within the church and I did so begrudgingly, but at that point in my life, it was still all about me and the accolades I received. Proverbs 11:2 (KJV) warns us, ***“When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom.”***

Why have I confessed all this to you? As my walk with Christ has matured over the last 20 years, I have found so much joy in serving God and others that it is hard to put into words. It is not about me. It is about knowing and following the example Jesus has provided, ***“Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to***

minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28 KJV).

What is the takeaway? I have found what I was looking for and so can you. I have again found my brotherhood and so can you. I have found my purpose and so can you! We can be part of something so much bigger than ourselves and do this together! If you have questions, ask. Ask what serving God and others can look like for you. The next time you see a “Join the Team” table, step out in faith and ask the question, “What does serving look like for me?”

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” John 15:13 (KJV).

TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK

JOIN THE TEAM, DEVOTION 3

Gary Wright

“Teamwork makes the dream work” is a phrase that you have probably heard. It is when a group of people who have a common goal work together to make it happen. If you have ever been on a team that works together you know how true the phrase can be.

In Exodus chapter 18, Moses, the leader of the Israelite people, is doing his best to lead the people as God had called him to do, but Moses is trying to do everything on his own. He is even settling basic disputes among the people.

Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law tells Moses, ***“You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone”*** (Exodus 18:18). Jethro warns Moses that if he continues trying to do everything on his own, he will not only wear himself out, but it will also affect the Israelite people. Jethro makes it clear that Moses cannot do everything alone.

Jethro suggests that Moses set up a team to help settle disputes. In Exodus 18:21, we read, ***“Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens.”*** The team would have the same goal as Moses because they would be men of God that were trustworthy. Every ten people would have one of these godly leaders to talk to about disputes. If the leader of ten could not solve the dispute it would be referred to the person in charge of 50, then 100, and then 1,000. After that, then and only then it would go to Moses.

Jethro says in Exodus 18:22, ***“So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.”*** Jethro lets Moses know this will make things easier. Warren Wiersbe says the Hebrew word translated “easier” means “to take cargo from a ship.” The team would take some of the weight of Moses’ ministry off his shoulders and carry some of his burdens so he could focus on the leadership of the Israelites.

The River Church has men and women who have been called by God to lead in different ministries. They cannot do it alone. Just like Moses, these leaders need a team of godly, trustworthy volunteers with the same goals to come alongside and take some of the weight off of them and help carry some of the burdens. The church needs people like you and me.

God can use a good team under a good leader to do far more than one person could ever do on their own and far more than we could ever imagine. A good team will also keep our leaders from becoming bogged down or burnt out. The River Church needs us. Pray about where the Lord wants you to serve and join the team!

Teamwork makes the dream work!

THE PROGRAM

JOIN THE TEAM, DEVOTION 4

Rich Sawicki

Are you ready to join the team? All you have to do is receive the free gift. Romans 10:9 says, ***“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”***

There are a few things that are very important when joining a team. We will call these things the who, what, and where of being part of a team. Get out those Bibles and get ready to play.

Here is what we will cover in today's pre-game:

1. Who is the Coach?
2. What is the character of the team?
3. Where are the games played?

1. Who is the Coach and what is the Coach's name?

- Elohim = My Creator
- Jehovah = My Lord God
- Ejsaddal = My Supplier
- Adonai = My Master
- Jehovah Jireh = My Provider
- Jehovah Rophe = My Healer
- Jehovah Nissi = My Banner
- Jehovah Makadesh = My Sanctifier
- Jehovah Tsidkenu = My Righteousness
- Jehovah Shalom = My Peace
- Jehovah Rohi = My Shepherd
- Jehovah Shammah = My Abiding Presence

2. What is the character of the team?

- We have to be ready to share the Gospel.
Read Matthew 28:19-20.
- We are going to have to be bold in the Word of God.
Read 1 Timothy 1:7-8.
- Our message has to be rooted in the Holy Bible.
Read Colossians 2:6-7.
- As Christ's disciples, we should love God with all our heart, soul, and mind.
Read Matthew 22:37.
- The team has been called to love others as we love ourselves.
Read Mark 12:31.
- What holds the team together is the fellowship of believers.
Read Acts 2:42-44.
- We are called to be imitators of Christ on and off the field.
Read Ephesians 5:1-2.

3. Where is the game played?

- The home games may or may not have a home-field advantage.
Read Mark 6:4.
- Your teammates, as well as the spectators in the audience, will be encouraged by your actions.
Read Romans 1:12.
- Be ready to give them an account or understanding of how and why you conduct yourself the way you do.
Read Colossians 4:5-6.
- In all that you do, in the game and off the field, do it for the Lord.
Read Corinthians 10:31.
- Some games are "away" games. How do we know that God wants us to play away games?
Read Matthew 28:19-20.

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- This is good advice when we are either home or away, but we should stay focused on the game at hand.

Read Acts 13:47.

It is time to bring it in as a team, to recap, and replay the game in slow motion.

1. Who is the Coach and what is the Coach's name?

They are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

2. What is the character of the team?

There are many parts of the body and a body needs all of its different parts to function.

3. Where is the game played?

Wherever we go (home or away) we must be ready, willing, and able to share the Gospel.

Coach speaking: "Huddle up gals and guys, let's bring it in. I want to congratulate you for persevering until the end. Well done good and faithful servant."

"His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'" Matthew 25:23

“WE WANT YOU!”

JOIN THE TEAM, DEVOTION 5

Adam Moore

If you grew up in the '80s at all, then chances are you remember a sign with the American figure Uncle Sam next to captions that read, “I want you.” Of course, the Uncle Sam advertisements were looking for young and willing U.S. Army recruits.

One of the false narratives circulating today is that churches of sizeable attendance have all the help they need, and hence more volunteers are not needed. Sadly, I must admit that at one point in time my thinking was not far off from this. I am reminded that as a follower of Jesus we are all expected to serve.

On the night of Jesus' arrest and during the feast of the Passover, a dispute broke out among the disciples on who the greatest was among them. Jesus settled the dispute in Luke chapter 22 by letting the disciples know that the greatest among them was the one that serves, and then uses Himself as the example. Verses 24-27 read, ***“A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.’”***

Throughout history, you will discover that some of the greatest leaders have always been the leaders that are willing to serve. In other words, they are the ones who will roll up their sleeves or get

in the trenches when the opportunity arises. They are the ones who lead by example and have not deemed themselves to superior to complete a given task. Interestingly enough, during this same feast of the Passover, Jesus showed His servant leadership by doing a task that was generally reserved for the lowest servant of the household and He stooped down and washed His disciples' feet.

Mathew 20:28 also reminds us, ***“The son of man came not to be served, but to serve.”*** Our Lord and Savior revealed the ultimate act of servant leadership, and we are created to serve one another. Friends, I implore you to get involved. Your church and community want you.

A SERVANT'S HEART

JOIN THE TEAM, DEVOTION 6

Mitchell Holmes

When I think of Jesus and I think of all that He did during His time on Earth, I am overwhelmed by His power, His majesty, and His divine authority. He did things that we as humans can only marvel at and dream about. Jesus walked on water, healed the blind, fed multitudes with a child's lunch, and raised the dead back to life. Jesus did these things and leaves us in awe of the incredible miracles that He performed. Despite these Earth-shattering and physics-bending miracles, to me, one of the greatest acts that Jesus performed occurs in John chapter 13. Before you continue, I encourage you to read John 13:1-17.

This is the story of Jesus washing His disciples' feet. What is happening at this time is Jesus is at dinner with His disciples shortly before He will be betrayed in the garden of Gethsemane. After they finish eating, Jesus begins to wash His disciples' feet. This may not seem like much to us with our well-manicured and protected feet but in those days, they did not have tennis shoes or daily washing. They wore sandals so their feet were exposed to the elements; they walked everywhere through the dirt, mud, and droppings from the various beasts of burden that would have been common in those days. Needless to say, peoples' feet would have been disgusting at those times. To wash someone's feet was a form of submission to them, it was to place yourself below them. This job was not one meant for the Creator and Savior of the universe. Yet, Jesus kneels down and begins to scrub the grime and filth off of the feet of His disciples.

Jesus is conveying to these men a very important message. It is one that applies to us still today. Starting in verse 13, He says, ***"You call***

me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." What Jesus is saying here is that if He, the Creator of the world and Son of God, is willing to place Himself below the disciples, they must be willing to do the same thing. He is saying that no person is greater than another and that we have to be willing to lower ourselves to serve others. We have to have a servant's heart. Think about the implication of this; Jesus is so much greater, so much more perfect than even the disciples, so much more than you or I and yet He still had a heart of service, He still lowered Himself below us to love us.

Think about the fact that Jesus washed Judas' feet, the very man that would betray Jesus hours later. Jesus knew full well what was coming, He knew without a doubt that Judas was the man responsible for the coming pain that He would endure, and yet even then He chose to serve and love Judas. While we may not be able to perform miracles and we may not walk on water or heal the sick, we can serve others. We can humble ourselves, we can lower ourselves, and we can put others before ourselves. In so doing, we demonstrate the love of Jesus. There may be Judases in your life, people who have hurt you, and people that you want nothing to do with, but Jesus gave us a clear example of how to love. We all must adopt this servant's heart and we must be willing to place others before ourselves and serve them for the good of the Kingdom.

Who in your life "washed your feet?" Who was it that placed your need for a Savior before themselves and was willing to love on you? Think about how that person impacted your life and led you to Jesus. That

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person may not have impacted thousands of people, they may not have touched the hearts of multitudes, but they did impact you. With that in mind, who is someone in your life that needs to be reached? Who in your life needs someone to place their needs before your own? How will you serve them and show them the love of Jesus?

GOD IS WITH US

JOIN THE TEAM, DEVOTION 7

Jeremy Smith

God has called all believers to follow Him. One of the easiest, and likely most overlooked ways is to serve one another. Unfortunately, we start to question why do I need to greet someone, join the worship team, or teach a Growth Community? I know from my own experience that it is easy to write off or view it as something someone else is already doing. This was especially the case when my family came to The River.

We had felt almost like we were run off or pushed out of our previous church. There were some definite wounds that were prevalent, and some issues we needed to work through. So, when we started to attend the church, it was like slow baby steps to getting involved and connected. It was in a small Growth Community that really introduced this idea to me.

In Genesis chapter 37, we get introduced to Joseph. His father favored him, which in turn made his brothers resent him, and sell him to some Midianites. Joseph was sold a couple of times and eventually ended up with Potiphar. Genesis 39:2 says, ***“The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man.”*** He gains some power and authority within Potiphar’s house, but resists the advances from Potiphar’s wife and is thrown in jail. Again in Genesis 39:21, we read, ***“The Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.”*** Joseph spends some time in prison and over a few years interprets a couple of dreams for the pharaoh. That leads to the pharaoh eventually freeing Joseph and Joseph becoming the governor of the land during a famine. This is when we read his brothers come looking for some

LESSON ONE | DEVOTION 7

food. It would have been really easy for Joseph to tell them off, or too bad, but instead, he ends up treating them just like all the others. Ultimately it leads to a reunion with his family.

The story has always stood out to me. It is a reminder to give everything you have in whatever you are doing. It gives reassurance that even when we cannot see it God is still working and in control, also a reminder that God is God and we are not. God may be using something in your life to help give you a different perspective or outlook on a situation so that down the line you can be a light to someone else. God wants us in fellowship with others. Wherever that may be for you, remember that similarly how God was with Joseph to make him successful, He will be with us.

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LESSON TWO

AUDIENCE OF ONE

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

BE THE CHURCH

Join The Team (JTT) is the opportunity of being part of something bigger than yourself. It is the calling of God to be involved with other believers in serving the Lord. Although it is a high calling, it is still a calling to all believers.

The coach is a vital part of every team. An effective coach places his players in the right position giving them needed instructions.

1. Who was your least favorite coach, director, or teacher?

2. What was it that made them (or any “poor” coach) ineffective?

3. Who was your favorite coach, director, or teacher?

4. What was it that made them (or other great coaches) influential?

Two of the biggest challenges for a coach are for the players to “buy into the system” and for them to listen to the coach above all other voices.

BUYING INTO THE SYSTEM

In football, “buying into the system” could mean that the wide receivers still perform strong routes even though they know the team is going to run the ball. Recently, Mac Jones of the New England Patriots only threw three passes on a windy Monday night game in Buffalo. It was the fewest pass attempts in an NFL game in nearly a half-century. They ended up winning the game. The “system” worked.

As a church, we believe the system is the Great Commission as found in 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.”***

As believers, we glorify God by reaching the world with the Gospel, gathering together as saints, and growing in the Word.

5. What are some ways one could Join The Team in regards to glorifying God by reaching the world with the Gospel? What roles need to be filled during outreach events or even weekly?

6. What are some ways one could Join The Team in regards to glorifying God by gathering with the saints? What roles need to be filled during a gathering?

BE THE CHURCH

7. What are some ways one could Join The Team in regards to glorifying God by growing in the Word? What roles need to be filled concerning Growth Communities?

LISTENING TO ONLY THE COACH

Two of the biggest challenges for a coach are for the players to “buy into the system” and for them to listen to the coach above all other voices.

Parents seem to know more than every coach (and definitely the officials). It can be difficult as their parent yells for them to do something different than what the coach instructed. Often there are not enough balls on the field or court for every child to please their parents.

Friends can be another distracting voice. Players may want to prove the naysayers wrong. They get teased for not scoring and begin to focus on the wrong things during the game. Sometimes they listen to friends with their flattery and start to believe they deserve something different.

8. What kind of spectators were your parents? What kind of spectator are you?

In our daily walk, Scripture talks about the importance of listening to “the Coach.”

- ***“For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.”*** Galatians 1:10
- ***“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.”*** 1 Thessalonians 2:4
- ***“For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”*** John 12:43
- ***“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.”*** Colossians 3:23
- ***“But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’”*** Acts 5:29

9. What verses stand out to you? Why?

10. What principles can be learned from these verses?

There may be times when what you are doing goes unnoticed. You may feel unappreciated. You might feel taken for granted. You might not get the best roles. When others say this (including the devil or yourself), remember that you only listen to the Coach. You have an audience of One!

BE THE CHURCH

WE > I

AUDIENCE OF ONE, DEVOTION 1

Mark Pittenger

Helen Keller once said, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” All throughout the Bible, we can see teamwork being displayed. In Genesis, we see the Trinity working together in the creation account (Genesis 1:2-3; John 1:1). Moses had Aaron to help him with speaking to and leading the Israelites (Exodus 4:10-15). In the New Testament, we see Jesus bringing twelve men together to be His disciples and then later sending them out in teams of two (Mark 6:7). We can see Paul traveling with others all throughout his ministry (Acts). These are a few examples I could grab off the top of my head but there are countless others, and, I think you get the picture. It is always better to be a part of a team when trying to accomplish a shared goal.

Have you ever heard the saying, “Many hands make light work?” In Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (NIV), Solomon tells us, ***“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: if either of them falls down, one can help the other up.”*** In verse 9, we see that working within a team makes the work, no matter how hard, go further. “We” can accomplish far more than you or I can!

In verse 10, we see that being part of a team means someone has your back, and you have theirs. I work in a shop, and I work on a team of fifteen people. We have the understanding that we will cover each other if needed. For example, if one of us has to walk away from the job for any reason, we know that we can count on one another to cover the job until we return. Also, if something were to occur that caused harm to me or my coworkers, it is good to know that there is someone close by to react quickly and provide, or get help. We need each other.

In another sense, the phrase ***“if either of them falls down”*** may apply to when you or I have failed at accomplishing the task at hand. In this case, the situation provides an opportunity for growth. You may be able to teach me something and I may be able to teach you something. Proverbs 11:14 explains, ***“Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.”*** We must be willing to listen to the advice of those wiser than us. We must humble ourselves with the understanding that we can always grow. Where one person may lack a skill, another person can fill that void.

So, is God working something in your heart? Do you feel called to get involved in a ministry? Do you want to get involved but do not know where to start? Reach out to the church. Ask where there are opportunities to help. You never know what God has in store for you. You may discover a skill set that you never knew you had. One thing is for sure, you will not be alone. There is always someone willing to lend a hand. You just have to take that first step.

“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”
Proverbs 27:17 (NIV)

VICTORY!

AUDIENCE OF ONE, DEVOTION 2

Gary Wright

When I was younger I played softball quite a bit. I am very competitive and I love to win and softball was no different. One season our team started off with four wins and zero losses. The next week however we had to play the best team in the league in a doubleheader. We practiced hard that week and ended up beating the team in both games. It was quite the victory.

In softball, the other team is the adversary. In order to have victory over them, there are some things we can do: batting practice, fielding practice, and working together as a team. All this practice and hard work helped us overcome and have victory over our adversary.

Because we all have sin in our life, we have an adversary, that adversary is death. No matter how hard we try, we cannot have victory over it on our own. Although that sounds very hopeless, Paul tells us where we can find hope.

In 1 Corinthians 15:57, we read, ***“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** Jesus gave us victory over death. He lived a sinless life, He removed our sin by paying the penalty for it on the cross, and conquered death by being raised from the dead. When we put our faith in Jesus we may die a physical death, but we will live eternally with Him.

It is quite the victory.

With our victory over the best team in the league, our team had confidence like never before. We ended our season with only one loss.

LESSON TWO | DEVOTION 2

If we truly believe that we have victory over death, we should also have confidence like never before. Paul writes about this in 1 Corinthians 15:58, ***“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”***

God gave us victory over death through faith in Jesus! When we have confidence in that victory we should be firm (steadfast) and unwavering (immovable) in God’s will for our lives. We as believers should be giving all we have to the Lord’s work (abounding), not just a warm body filling a position. Our labor is not in vain, our work in the Lord has a purpose and that purpose is to point others to victory over death through faith in Jesus Christ!

This month The River Church has been asking us to get involved in serving (Join the Team). Where is God calling you to be abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain?

THE OTHER SIDE

AUDIENCE OF ONE, DEVOTION 3

Jeremy Smith

Jesus handpicked out twelve people to be His disciples. This included people from all walks of life, including fishermen, a tax collector, a doctor, and one who ultimately betrayed Him. It raises some questions in my mind. For instance, why would you intentionally pick someone who you knew would betray you? Did Jesus think that it was possible through showing His love and grace towards others it could or even would change the outcome? It also makes me realize that Jesus showed no bias. I would think, if I was put in the same position, I would rather choose anybody on the entire Earth over someone who I know is going to lead to my death.

Yet, Jesus never showed any ill will towards Judas. Jesus let Judas sit under His learning tree. He still let Judas have a seat at the table for the Last Supper. He even served Judas and humbled Himself to wash Judas' feet. There was no anger, bitterness, or wrath from Jesus. Ephesians 4:31 tells us, ***“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.”***

Is that something you would be able to do? Would you still be able to worship God, next to your brother or sister in Christ, if you felt they had wronged you? Even more difficult, would you be able to sit down and have a meal with someone, knowing that just moments later they would turn you over to the authorities for a handful of silver?

In Titus chapter 2, Paul tells us how the older should help teach the younger generation ***“with sound doctrine.”*** It continues on in verses 2-8, ***“Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-***

controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us."

We have those all around us who are wiser or more experienced. They have likely gone through the same or at least similar experiences we are going through and have made it out the other side. On the other side, we also have those around us who need help, guidance, a word of encouragement, or maybe just someone to pray with. My challenge to you would be to find someone on either side. Notice someone you can confide in, and someone who you can help build up.

LEAN ON ME

AUDIENCE OF ONE, DEVOTION 4

Rich Sawicki

Joining a team is both exciting and intimidating.

The possibility of making new friends is exciting. Your new friends will have the same goals but different skills, making it a great learning opportunity. You will celebrate wins together and be there for each other in the losses.

I have played sports on lots of different teams growing up. The first time I joined a church sports team, it was a summer softball league at the park. The church staff provided food in the pavilion each week. While we all ate together, one of the leaders would give a message. I loved being on this team and never missed a week!

Let me just start by saying softball is one of my least favorite sports. It definitely was not the sport that drew me to the team. It was the fellowship and hanging out with other believers. How did they act? They were different than I was used to from the other teams I played on!

They made honest calls. There was some trash-talking, but it was not ridiculing or belittling. It was a very competitive experience. While they played to win, winning the game was not the most important thing. It was all about how you played the game. The opposite teams would cheer you on. When you got struck out or missed a catch, it was okay. The only thing they seemed to care about was if you were giving it your all! It is good to have other people around you that want to see you giving it your all. It makes you play better and brings your game up to another level.

LESSON TWO | DEVOTION 4

Let me tell you the funniest thing that happened when I was on that softball team. It still makes me smile every time I think about it. We were playing against the A-Team, also known as the Pastors' team. These guys had been playing together for a while, their team was stacked. Our team was filled with new people that had never played together before. So we knew we were going to have to really bring it. One of our batters was up to the plate. They hit a pop-up and got an out. Right at that moment, without even thinking about it, the batter let out a swear word. Without any hesitation or condemnation, the A-team yells out "Church league, church league" and we all start laughing. It was truly the funniest thing ever, I am smiling right now just remembering it again.

Sometimes the intensity of life can bring out the worst in us. However, it could bring out the best in us. If we are with the right people when things go wrong or we have a moment of weakness, they can help us to get back on the right track.

Check out this story in Exodus chapter 17 about a time Moses needed his team. It was during a moment of weakness. When Moses sent Joshua off to fight the Amalekites he told him to take a team with him. Moses also took his own team, Aaron and Hur, with him to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held his staff up in the air, Joshua and his team were winning the battle. Whenever Moses lowered his arms, they would start to lose. When Aaron and Hur saw Moses was getting tired they brought him a rock to sit on. When Moses' arms became tired, they held his arms up for him, until Joshua and his team won the battle.

We are called to build our foundation on the rock, which is Christ Jesus, and to battle just as Joshua and his team did. We are also called to help our leaders. This could mean setting them on the rock to refresh them or holding them up when they are tired so we can all celebrate victory together as a team.

BE THE CHURCH

The church is just like the softball team I was part of. There were many others that were part of the team each week, that never played softball at all. They were there to serve us, to feed us, to preach to us, to teach us, to pray for us, and to encourage us. They were just as important as those that held a bat and ran the bases.

No matter how intimidating it may feel, please remember you matter and we need you to complete the team. Please read 1 Corinthians 12:12-20.

Please do not let anything stop you from joining the team!

“SERVE ONE ANOTHER”

AUDIENCE OF ONE, DEVOTION 5

Adam Moore

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” 1 Peter 4:10

Did you know that the Bible mentions the words “serve” or “servant” hundreds of times? You will find the underlying theme of servanthood all throughout God’s Word. It is no wonder that the Bible mentions these words so many times when Jesus, the Son of God refers to Himself as a servant.

There are so many ways to get involved to serve your church and serving is about giving. We give of our time, talent, and resources, as we lay aside our pride, desires, and selfishness. By giving of ourselves we can help present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God as found in Romans 12:1.

Our key verse referenced above (1 Peter 4:10) states the words ***“serve one another.”*** It is a great feeling to sit back and be served, but it is an amazing feeling to serve others. I have noticed in my life that some of the most influential Christians I have known have also been exceptional servants.

Many people are familiar with the Bible verse found in Acts 20:35 that states, ***“It is more blessed to give than to receive,”*** but sadly to many this is just paying lip service. I would love to challenge you to go beyond your comfort zone and prove God’s Word and find out firsthand that it is truly more of a blessing to give than to receive. In fact, I would like to word this a little differently and say that it is truly more of a blessing to serve than to be served. Find out the area that

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your unique set of gifts or talent is needed and dive in headfirst. Never lose sight that God made you uniquely different than anyone else on the planet and serve Him within your given capacity.

As a body of believers, we need you on the team! We all have different strengths and weaknesses, but together we make up the body of Christ.

Winston Churchill once said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” I challenge you to join our team and give of yourself even if it makes you uncomfortable. Watch God use and bless you and therein make your life a blessing to others. No one ever gets to the end of their life and wishes they would have done less for God. Recommit yourself today and join your church team and fill in the gaps where needed. It is not too late to join, and we need you! Give your life a new purpose starting right now.

“GOD’S TEAM”

AUDIENCE OF ONE, DEVOTION 6

Joe Wilson

“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers.” Ephesians 4:11 (KJV)

Wayne Gretzky (“The Great One”) was one of the greatest hockey players of all time. He said, “I think that from the time you start playing sports as a child you see that your responsibility to your team is to play the best that you can play as an individual...and yet, not take anything away from being part of a team.”

Just as a coach builds a sports team based on the differing abilities of players, I believe God is assembling His own team. He has given each of us abilities to which He will utilize according to His will in order to build His team as He sees fit.

Will you answer the call? Will you step up to do your part? Will you sacrifice your time and abilities to be part of God’s Team? God has sacrificed so much more for each of us, so much that we could never begin to imagine having the ability to repay it. Think on these passages:

- ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*** John 3:16 (KJV)
- ***“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”*** Romans 5:8 (KJV)
- ***“And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour.”*** Ephesians 5:2 (KJV)

In Matthew 25:14-46, Jesus is teaching the parable of the talents and He mentions in verse 21, ***“Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”*** In verse 23, he again says, ***“Well done, good and faithful servant.”*** These words have been on my heart and in my prayers as of recent and oh how I desire to hear these words when my journey is over, in fact, the thought of not hearing them scares me. Remember the enemy will do everything he can to keep you from joining God’s Team. He will entice you with excuses such as, “I don’t have the time” or “I don’t have the skills.” Does this sound familiar?

Trust in God. Remember it is His team. James 4:7 (KJV) says, ***“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”***

God provides the ultimate example of being a servant in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Matthew 20:28 (KJV) says, ***“Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”***

So again I ask you, “Will you answer the call? Will you step up to do your part? Will you sacrifice your time and abilities to be part of God’s Team?”

SERVING OTHERS

AUDIENCE OF ONE, DEVOTION 7

Mitchell Holmes

Our spiritual growth is such an interesting thing to consider. Growth is never a linear path. Every one of us needs something different, at different times, and in different moderations to achieve growth. If we make the comparison to botany and the growth of plant life, it is very similar. All plants need similar components in order to grow: nutrition, soil, water, and sunlight. However, no two plants need them in the exact same way. A house plant has different needs compared to a desert cactus. One needs to be watered daily, while the other does not. It is the same for us and our walks with the Lord. Hopefully, the goal of our spiritual growth is to draw closer to the Lord. Many things play a role in that process. Naturally, we need to be in the Word and we need to spend time in prayer with the Lord. We need to be fed by attending church gatherings. These are the basics that make up a Christian walk.

One component that I feel is occasionally overlooked is that of service. While it is absolutely important to be constantly learning and gaining an understanding of God's character and what the Bible teaches, it is equally important to use the knowledge, gifts, and talents that we have to help others in their own walks. In 1 Peter 4:10, it says, ***"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."*** Each and every one of us has been gifted, by God's grace, with things unique to us: our talents, knowledge, and history are unique traits specific to us much like a thumbprint. Those unique traits are gifts that make us uniquely equipped to serve. The things we have seen, the hardships we have endured, the lessons we have learned are all things that come together to give us an understanding that is specific to us.

We can use this to demonstrate Jesus in a way that no one else can. A person that has beaten addiction can minister to someone in that arena in a way that someone without that experience cannot. Some are gifted teachers and can use that talent to serve others while for some, they would rather walk on coals than speak in front of an audience. Some are gifted at connecting with people; they form bonds and remember names and specific details of everyone they meet. Others are gifted in prayer and can use their talents to lift up their community in prayer.

By serving in these various ways, we are doing several things. First and foremost, we are pointing people to Christ. By demonstrating love through service and by using our God-given talents, we are a direct representation of the Gospel. Secondly, we ourselves are growing. God does not need anything or anyone to serve others, yet He chooses to use us as His instruments to love on, and reach the world. When God is working through us in this way, it is only natural that our relationship, our connection, and our love for Him will grow. Service opens up a brand-new understanding of God's great love and His character.

I implore you, as you read today, to take three minutes and ask yourself in what capacity you could serve. As I stated previously, it is different for everyone so ask yourself what gifts and talents are unique to you that you can now use to glorify God. If you need assistance in knowing areas that are available to serve, do not hesitate to reach out to someone at your location. This week, remember that service is part of our growth in the Lord. Challenge yourself and even try something new. I assure you the Lord will bless your efforts and use you.

BE THE CHURCH



LESSON THREE

REACH

PASTOR JAYSON COMBS

BE THE CHURCH

As we go through this series on Reach, Gather, Grow, and Back to Reach, I want us to keep answering the question, “What is important?”

1. What initially comes to mind when you think of the question, “What is important?”

I think of setting goals or New Year’s resolutions. I picture the goal of reading through the Bible in a year and by day six I am only three days behind. I know resolutions and goals are important as we change our priority list trying to understand what truly is important. Our lists normally include family, faith, food, and finances.

I have been working on a project in my basement. It sounds simple; I am installing carpet. A friend sent over a bucket of glue. The problem is that I do not know important details. I do not know how thick it should be, if there could be clumps, if I should apply it in a certain direction, and how fast it dries. It is important to know how much time you have. An experienced person would know what is important. They know what is vital.

2. Is there a project you started when you realized you were over your head?

Luke 10:38-42 discusses the matter of figuring out what is important, ***“Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she***

had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.'"

3. What are some initial observations from the passage?

Some might say Mary was lazy and oblivious to what was going on around her. Also, a woman was not to sit at the feet of a rabbi. Others might criticize Martha concluding that she was a bad person.

This passage is not about one woman being good and another one being bad. It is about choosing what is right. A wrong choice can open a channel to bitterness as we smolder inside.

Martha was not a lost soul. In John 11:25-27, we read about a discussion she had with Jesus, ***"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.'"*** Martha's answer was clear and concise. She knew Jesus and believed.

Also, Martha's attention to hospitality was not wrong. Romans 12:13 says, ***"Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show***

hospitality.” In 1 Peter 4:10, we also read, ***“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”***

4. A lot can be said about Martha. How would you describe Mary?

Looking again at Luke chapter 10, the topic is not that Mary is a better person than Martha. It is not about “being a Mary” or “not being a Martha.” There is much more to the lives of these women. It is about a choice they each made in the same situation. It is about knowing what is important. It is about the necessity and priority of the Word of God in our lives.

I believe Martha wanted to sit at Jesus’ feet. Remember, she called Him Lord. I know hospitality is good, so she was not doing a sinful thing. Her misguided priorities finally caused Martha to lose the joy of serving.

5. What does the joy of serving mean to you?

There are at least four things that can happen when we have the wrong things as important.

**When the wrong things are important
we can become distracted.**

Luke 10:40 points out, ***“But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.’”***

Mary became distracted. She was not able to pay attention to the Lord. Distracted literally means “to be dragged away.” It is an interesting image. We have all seen our minds dragged away from what we were supposed to be doing.

Mark 4:19 adds, ***“But the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”*** The Word is choked (we do not hear it) because we are distracted by other things.

6. What kinds of things distract us today?

**When the wrong things are important
we can become stressed.**

Please see what Jesus says in verse 41, ***“But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.’”*** Jesus realized that Martha was anxious, troubled, bothered, disturbed, and uneasy. He sensed the panic in her mind. It is interesting that Jesus points out that she was bothered ***“about many things.”***

7. What things stress us out today?

“People pleasers” need to be careful because their priorities can become a mess. Their mind gets distracted, their time gets wasted, and their heart is troubled.

**When the wrong things are important
we can become angry with others.**

Luke 10:41 has another interesting thought, ***“But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.’”*** Martha is doing what she believes is right, but she then gets mad at Mary.

It does not appear that Martha challenges Mary. Unfortunately, when we have a problem with someone, we all too often tell others instead of confronting them. Martha’s unchecked attitude was destroying her inner soul of service. This is what causes people to become sour and stop serving or even leave the church. Martha had lost the integrating center which makes possible a singleness of vision and action.

8. Is there someone you are holding a grudge against that has you captive?

**When the wrong things are important
we can become angry with God.**

Martha’s misplaced focus on what is important gets her to a point that she gets mad at God. She even says, ***“Lord, do you not care?”*** It appears she is saying that Jesus is part of the problem. Is He an enabler? She even starts giving Jesus directions, ***“Tell her then to***

help me.” Is she placing herself above Jesus without even realizing it? She accuses Jesus of not caring.

The crazy thing in the church is that people can come to a point where they try to bully God into doing what they think is right. They must feel they see something that God is missing so they have to point it out. They feel, “If He does notice it and He cared, He would change the situation.” It is disgusting. It is a shaky ground.

9. Where are areas that we might end up “blaming” God?

Reading and listening to the Word of God should be one of our highest priorities. Deuteronomy 8:3 says, ***“And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”***

Jesus would rather have preferred Martha’s company over her service. He regarded her fellowship with Him as more important than her serving Him a meal. Her company meant more than her service.

Mary’s choice was good:

- In sickness and health
- In youth and old age
- In adversity and prosperity
- In life and death

BE THE CHURCH

10. What is your Bible reading plan?

11. What do you want it to be?

“But the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.” Psalm 147:11

TESTIMONY: KEATON WASHBURN

REACH, DEVOTION 1

Keaton Washburn

I grew up with the privilege of two loving parents who are both followers of Christ. I began going to church almost as soon as I was born and much of my life revolved around the church. My parents were very involved in the church as youth leaders, trustees, and faithful servants wherever there was a need. As I grew up, I was surrounded by Christians and loved so well by those around me. Being in the church so much, I heard the Gospel all the time. As a result, I “accepted Jesus into my heart” over and over. I kept thinking, “maybe it did not work last time.” I lived in fear that I had not done enough for God. However, when I was seven years old, I remember the day that it truly stuck. It was the time when I understood God’s love and the work of Jesus, which paid the way for my sins. My attitude of “doing enough for God” did not stop that day. As I continued to grow older, I continued to fall into habitual sin, over and over. Every time I would sin, I would feel shameful, hide it, and then immediately try and make up for it by praying, reading my Bible, or being kind to someone. This pattern continued until my second year in college.

One night, God, through a close friend, convicted me of my sin and need for confession. That night, for the first time in years, I confessed my sin to this friend and before God. I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. That night, the freedom from sin that God offers to us through Christ became real. From that day on, my walk with Christ has continued to grow. Before then, I was trying to work my way into Heaven by making up for my sin. However, it was not until I admitted my need for Christ’s work on the cross, rather than trying to be good enough, that I had a desire to truly know Him and grow with Him through His Word, prayer, and confession. I have been far from perfect since

LESSON THREE | DEVOTION 1

that day, but God has taken the weight of guilt off my shoulders and replaced it with the freedom that only comes in Christ.

A passage of Scripture that has recently become one of my favorites is Mark 5:1-19. After healing a man of demon possession, this healed man begs Jesus to let him come with him. Instead of letting him come, Jesus says in verse 19, ***“Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”*** This man did so, and verse 20 tells us that everyone marveled at what he said. Similarly, I tell you my story today of God’s mercy on my life so that you will give Him glory and be encouraged to share your testimony of God’s work in your life!

TESTIMONY: HALEIGH WASHBURN

REACH, DEVOTION 2

Haleigh Washburn

I grew up in a Christian home with two parents who loved and supported me. I started going to church immediately after I was born and was raised going to church multiple days a week. Because of this, I accepted Christ at a very young age. However, I did not know what it meant to be a Christian until I was in seventh grade. I remember being at a youth group retreat and realizing that a relationship with Christ is not just a one-way street, I have to put work into it. Once I realized this my relationship began to grow.

Even though I grew up in a Christian home and learned to rely on God, I have struggled with anxiety for as long as I can remember. I remember being a little girl looking up at the white fluffy clouds and worrying that a storm was going to come and take my family away. This was even when it was a sunny day with a zero percent chance of rain. This anxiety continued to affect my life throughout high school and manifested in physical ways which caused me to miss a lot of school. I often felt too sick to get out of bed. After many doctors' visits, I eventually went to see a counselor and was told that most of what I had been experiencing was caused by anxiety. Throughout the whole process of trying to figure out what was wrong, I began to doubt God and His work in my life. I was frustrated with what I was experiencing and mad that He was not taking it away. Eventually, that diagnosis of anxiety led me to seek guidance through some strong Christian women in my life and they helped point me back towards Christ and to see that He was still working in my life.

After getting my anxiety under control, or so I thought, I went away to college and began to experience some of the worst anxiety that I have

ever felt. This eventually led to a time of depression. Again, I began to doubt God and His work in my life. After reaching a dark place, I had a moment of realization that I did not want to let my anxiety and depression run my life and I sought out Christian counsel yet again. God's faithfulness through my whole journey with depression and anxiety is evident through my story. There were many times where I was frustrated, and almost wanted to walk away, but God was always there pulling me back.

A passage that I stumbled across after one of my worst periods, and quickly became one of my favorites, is 1 Corinthians 15:50-56. In the passage, Paul is writing about the future coming of Christ and how we will all be resurrected. He writes in verses 51-52, ***"We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet."*** That is how quickly all of the pain and brokenness in this world will be gone. I cling to the promise that all pain and death will be gone in an instant and we will go to be with Christ.

TESTIMONY: FERDINAND SANDERS

REACH, DEVOTION 3

Ferdinand Sanders

For as long as I can remember, attending church on Sunday mornings was a built-in practice for me and my family. As a kid, it meant a regular flow of vanilla wafers, goldfish, and apple juice at the expense of sitting in “Big Church” for an hour doing my best to stay quiet as the man at the pulpit donning the robe and sash preached until it was time to go out to lunch. Through participating in things like Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, I was introduced to Jesus along with other characters of the Bible and their stories - these experiences taught me about the Christian life and served as the foundation of my faith.

Throughout my middle school and high school years, I attended the youth group with my best friend at his church. It was here that I really felt that I started to have a real and personal relationship with Christ. During these incredibly formative years, I continued to learn about who God was (and is). I was also welcomed into a community with open arms where I felt accepted and was challenged to grow in my faith. I felt true joy and wanted to spend as much time as I could at the church. As I continued to get involved in the church, I had an interest in music and began to serve on the worship team. This passion led me to pursue a degree in worship ministry at Spring Arbor University, spending my college summers at the church as an intern and on staff where I was able to put what I was studying into practice. All of these experiences truly felt like I was living in God's purpose and calling on my life, and affirmed that there was nowhere else I needed to be.

God has continued to lead and guide me, even when I was not so sure of where that was or what He was calling me to do. That is the beautiful thing about it all. I know He is and will always be the best thing that has happened to me and my life. The more I trust who He is, the more my perspective on everything else changes. Before I had a real and personal relationship with Christ, I did not feel like I had a real sense of purpose or direction. I felt like I was on my own in trying to figure things out and deal with the hardships of life. Once I knew that Jesus cared deeply for me personally (including laying His life down for me!), my outlook and perspective completely changed. I knew I was not alone and that God was holding everything together in His hands and was guiding me each and every step. My life now has a purpose and that is to do everything to bring Him honor, praise, and glory.

In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, we read, ***“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”***

TESTIMONY: COURTNEY SANDERS

REACH, DEVOTION 4

Courtney Sanders

I come from a long line of Christians on both sides of my family and have many close family members who are pastors and who are very active in their church communities, so growing up in a Christian home was very normal and expected. I was the first kid to Sunday School every week, learned all of my “memory verses,” sung in all the church productions, and attended youth group, leading worship almost every week as a high schooler.

I accepted Christ into my heart when I was very young because it was something I was taught to strive for and was excited to do! However, I chose to recommit my life to Him through the proclamation of baptism when I was in college when I had more of a grasp on what it meant to commit myself fully to the Lord and His will for my life. My relationship with the Lord really became personal while attending Spring Arbor University, as I was able to step into leadership opportunities and be mentored by wise faculty and staff at SAU who taught me to approach anything from my schoolwork to my crippling anxiety, to my post-graduation job search, from a faith-driven perspective.

Now as a wife, mother of two, and an overall chronically anxious person in the midst of a demanding schedule and chaotic world, it is hard to find small moments for me to come quietly before the Lord. I find myself craving more time with Him and His Word, knowing both are ultimately how I can get through each day with strength, peace, and being able to point my children to Jesus. Being centered in communion with the Father will forever be my goal and even on the days that I fall short (which happen often), knowing His grace is sufficient makes it possible to rest in His love and goodness. His

LESSON THREE | DEVOTION 4

mercies are new every morning, I can try again tomorrow, and He loves me all the same. Praise the Lord for that!

In 2 Timothy 1:7 (NKJV), we read, ***“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”***

TESTIMONY: MATT MONTGOMERY

REACH, DEVOTION 5

Matt Montgomery

My mother was a church secretary and my father was an ordained minister and youth pastor who ran inner-city sports programs, a great Christian family. I remember most of my childhood at church. We attended church services on Sunday mornings and nights. Sports programs were at our church on Mondays. Tuesdays were soul-winning services. Wednesdays were Bible studies, and so were Thursdays. Fridays the youth group (Teen Town) gathered with my dad. I accepted Jesus as my Savior when I was five and remember wanting to be a pastor and follow in my father's footsteps.

Four years later, my father had an affair. My parents divorced causing devastation in the church and in my life. I became the kid known for his father's sin rather than the child who wanted to serve Christ and be a pastor someday. At age 13, I determined I would never be in ministry. The pain and costs were too great. In college, I received a degree in linguistics and cross-cultural studies and majored in Theology. I still knew God was calling me, but I was running away.

After college, I lived a "normal" life. I took a business job and was successful. I married a woman who claimed to love the Lord. Two children and a highly successful career later, I felt the Lord pulling at my heart and calling me again to ministry. I told my wife I was miserable and needed to follow God's leading. I met with my pastor to create a plan to enter into ministry. Two weeks later, my wife said she was not called to be poor or a pastor's wife and she divorced me. My life was crushed, I became like Jonah, hardened my heart, and ran away from ministry. I was bitter and broken.

God has since brought me a wife who loves Christ and loves me for my heart and my love for people. At church, I led a college and career class. It grew from six to about 50, and my heart began to break for souls. I told my pastor I felt called to follow Christ in ministry leadership. I expected welcoming arms but instead was told I could not be a minister because I was divorced. I was broken and devastated again.

Thank God for His grace and mercy. Man gives up on me continually. God never fails, and never stops working on my heart. When I stop worrying about what others think about me and place my eyes on God solely, God never fails and always uses me for His glory. God used harlots, liars, cheaters, murderers, and even enemies for His purpose and His plan. He expects my heart to be pure and dedicated to Him. He will use me as needed. I will never be worthy, but I thank God daily for His grace, compassion, and salvation. I thank Him for the burning desire to share Jesus Christ with the world and that He will use me to help others find Him.

TESTIMONY: JOANNA MONTGOMERY

REACH, DEVOTION 6

Joanna Montgomery

I grew up the third of seven children born to a country pastor. I was saved by Jesus when I was four years old. I do not remember the exact day or time, but I know I was standing on the front porch of our home in the Nebraska Sandhills, watching the summer sunrise with my mom and dad as I prayed for the Lord Jesus Christ to come into my little heart so I could be His forever.

We attended church, but the majority of what I learned about the love of Jesus was revealed through the lives of my parents. I am so thankful God put me in the family He did. I count my blessings as I think of my life and as I see the lives of others. When I was a teenager this made an interesting dilemma. I would go to youth retreats or special services for teens and hear a dynamic speaker give his testimony about how he nearly died from a drug overdose, or was saved from alcoholism, or was snatched at the last minute from suicide by God to save him from eternity in hell, and I would think, "Man, I've never done any of those things - my testimony is so boring. If only I could have done something like that, then I would be better equipped to lead others to Christ."

In my mind, telling people, "I was saved when I was very young, and nearly always obeyed my parents. I never drank, or did drugs, or smoked, or even drove over the speed limit. I rarely got in trouble and always got good grades, and God saved me from all of that," did not sound impressive enough to tell people. How would that reach anyone? It was not even interesting.

LESSON THREE | DEVOTION 6

What I know now though, is God still saved me from all that and more. Because of my willingness to turn to Him as my King, my Savior, my Lord; He saved me from alcoholism, drug addiction, abuse, murder, hate, envy, jealousy, lying, stealing, telling rumors, and from all the evil inside me, my God saved me. I am so thankful my parents shared with me the love of Christ when I was young.

Do not get me wrong, I have sinned. I fall victim to temptation. It is so hard for me to admit my sin, repent, and turn back to God and ask for forgiveness in order to walk closer to Him, but I no longer am jealous of other people's amazing salvation stories. I am so very thankful for mine. God saved me, a horrible sinner, and I cry every time I think about how God has a place for me in His amazing Heaven. I have a home and a loving Father, and I do not deserve any of it. I am overwhelmed with love for my Christ, and I know it is not even a speck of the love Christ has for me.

BE THE CHURCH



LESSON FOUR

GATHER

PASTOR JAYSON COMBS

BE THE CHURCH

My wife and I just bought our son a metal detector. He loves it. He immediately went into the back yard. He was going through the yard hoping to find a hidden treasure. At one point he came into the house with a metal pole he had found. As I looked outside, it was easy to see where he found it as there was a hole in the yard. He was digging in several spots. He was hoping to find something of value, but only found junk.

1. Have you ever used a metal detector?

As I researched the definition of valuable, I found things like to bring in a high price, quality – worthy of respect admiration and esteem, and or considerable use or service importance.

My mind raced to the church. Does the church match these definitions of valuable?

2. Is the church valuable?

I found it surprising that 120 million people every week attend Church in the United States. That is more than all professional sports attendances combined for a year. About two billion will attend this week around the world.

3. What are some of the values of attending church?

LESSON FOUR | GATHER

I have heard people say things like, “It makes my wife happy. It keeps my kids out of trouble. Church makes me feel better. I get to see some people I like. The church encourages me; it keeps me going. The message challenges me; it points out things I need to change.”

I believe the church is on a downward turn. People use to go Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. I just heard a study that people who attend church do so less than twice monthly.

4. Were you raised going to church whenever the doors were open?

David Platt put it this way, “The Church appears to be irrelevant or optional for many professing Christians today.” This will have an adverse outcome on our community and families.

The church has an amazing value. Without it, you cannot become all that God wants you to become, you will not be all that God wants you to be, and you will not do all that God wants you to do.

I want to look at 1 Timothy 3:15 for the premise of this study guide. Paul says, ***“If I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”***

When I speak of the church, I am referring to the gathering of the saints. Church means assembly, those called out. The church is the assembly of the Living God.

I want to point out three values of the church as seen in 1 Timothy 3:15.

Amazing Value

The Church is the Household of God

Paul is writing to Timothy, a younger Pastor, so he would know how things are to operate in the church. These letters have come to be known as the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy; Titus).

The Bible is clear that the church is not a building. It is not an institution. I try not to say, "Go to church" because that is wrong. However, I also try not to say, "You are the church" because that is wrong too. Too many people use it as an excuse to stay home, listen to a sermon on TV, read the Bible, read a book, and even give on the website. You are not the church, we are the church.

Here is the push back - The Household of God. I am not the household of God. You are not the household of God. The church is the household of God. God dwells in me and I am part of the church. God lives in me, so I am part of the household of God.

We are The Household of God. We are the church.

I read an illustration about the Cliff nutrition bar. I enjoy this as a supplement after a good workout; however, I do not want it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The same is true of Christian podcasts, TV services, and Christian books. They are supplements that are added and not to replace.

We are the Household of God. We are the universal church. However, God also talks about the local assembly or church. You cannot do the local church by yourself. It becomes more obvious when you realize there needs to be a faithful proclamation of the Word of God, baptisms, the Lord's Supper, godly leaders, the appointing of Elders (Timothy, Titus), and the care and correction of God's people. The real church feels a calling to change the world.

5. How can the church change the world?

Ephesians 2:19-22 adds, ***“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”***

The Household of God can be compared to our own homes. If my son has a friend over who is using inappropriate language or puts his feet up on the table, I might sit them down and say, “Hey, it is great having you over, but we have some rules in our house.”

Rules can bring success. There are times when I want to explain something new to the boys I am coaching. I might sound strict, but I do not want them to dribble a basketball or talking while I am explaining something. However, once they follow the instructions in a game and score a basket, I am jumping up and down with them giving high fives.

The church is a team that works together and celebrates together.

6. What are some things we could or should celebrate in the church?

BE THE CHURCH

Here are some other values of the church.

An Inheritance in this Household

In 1 Peter 1:4, we read, ***“To an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”***

The Purchase Price of the Family

Acts 20:28 says, ***“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”***

The Teachings and Correction of the Father

In 2 Timothy 4:2, we read, ***“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”***

The Closeness of Siblings

Romans 12:10 says, ***“Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.”***

You are not an only child!

The church is invaluable. I just cannot give it up. There is not a price or thing that can replace it.

Amazing Value

The Church is the Dwelling Place of the Living God

The church is not just the household of God, but it is the dwelling place of the Living God. Again, we look to 1 Timothy 3:15, ***“If I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”***

Ephesians 2:22 adds, ***“In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”***

7. What initial thoughts do you have from these verses?

He is the Living God. The church is not a dead thing. It is not fake. It is a real and living thing. Paul continues the concept in the next verse. In 1 Timothy 3:16, he says, ***“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”***

This makes me want to sing, *He’s Alive*, by Don Francisco.

*And as I looked into His eyes
Love was shining out from Him
Like sunlight from the sky
Guilt and my confusion
Disappeared in sweet release
And every fear I’d ever had
Just melted into peace*

BE THE CHURCH

*He's alive, He's alive
He's alive and I'm forgiven
Heavens gates are open wide
He's alive, He's alive*

8. What other songs come to mind for you?

The church is the household of God, it is the dwelling place of the Living God, and it is the foundation and pillar that holds up the truth.

Amazing Value

The Church is the Foundation and Pillar that holds up the Truth

I recently had a family say they did not need gatherings. They felt there was nothing that could be said that they did not already know. Sadly, they were doubting the power of the Word of God and the importance of worshipping together.

We see that the third point is also from 1 Timothy 3:15, ***“If I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”***

9. What image comes to mind when you think of a pillar?

A pillar brings strength and support. In this case, it holds up the truth.

10. What defines a church?

We are the household of God. We are the family of God. We worship a Living God. There are pillars for all of this.

There are instructions on how we are to come together. An example is in 1 Timothy 5:1-2, where Paul says, ***“Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.”*** There are guidelines on how we are to act.

The Church has been purchased with the blood of God’s Son. Acts 20:28 adds, ***“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”***

Christ founded the church, died for the church, identifies intimately with it, calls it His bride, and refers to it as His body.

We are the guardians of God’s Word. We have the responsibility of preserving God’s Word. This study is not man’s opinions, man’s innovations, man’s creativity, man’s wisdom, or man’s passions. Instead, we lift up one thing and that is the Word of God. Let us magnify it, amplify it, spotlight it, and spread it in the church and all over the World.

Please realize, listening to the Word of God alone is a good thing, and singing to God alone is also good, but singing to God together and hearing His Word preached together is better.

BE THE CHURCH

This is why The River Church is about Reach, Gather, and Grow. Our goal is to point people to the feet of Jesus. We proclaim the Gospel of Jesus to point people to Him. We Gather together as the church to be the household of God, to worship (to grow, to give, and to take), and to enter into the body to be with other believers to be called out. We are to be called up to be cared for, loved, directed, and corrected. This is all done through the local church.

LESSON FOUR | GATHER

FOUNDED ON THE GOSPEL

GATHER, DEVOTION 1

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Patrick Henry (1736-1799) was an American attorney, mayor of Virginia, and well-known for his declaration, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" As one of the founding fathers, he knew the basis for our country. I am moved by another statement he made, "It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great nation was founded, not by religionists, but by Christians not on religion, but on the gospel of Jesus Christ!"

Religion does not and can not save. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ reconnects us to a relationship with God. Jesus saves! Patrick Henry was not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ or his beliefs as a Christian.

Please do not forget our Christian heritage. The history books are being rewritten ignoring the impact and influence of Jesus on changing lives. We need to help our country from losing focus on what God wants and relying on human wisdom, comfort, and pleasure.

I enjoy seeing how America's legal concepts were drawn from Scripture. Our country was founded on the legal concept of the sovereign authority of God. It was not the sovereignty of the state or sovereignty of man. The ultimate power and decision maker was to come from God. In an employee grid chart, He was the one at the top. He was to be recognized as the Founder and CEO.

We see this displayed in several legal documents: The Mayflower Compact, The Declaration of Independence, The Constitution, and The Pledge of Allegiance. God is mentioned in the constitution of all 50 states. He is even recognized on our currency, "In God We Trust."

Exodus 18:16 says, ***“When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws.”*** When people brought disputes to Moses, he looked to see what God had decreed and instructed. He gave godly advice. Exodus 20:3 sounds pretty basic, but its applications should run deep and wide, ***“You shall have no other gods before me.”***

Finally, authorities need to know their source. Romans 13:1 says, ***“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”***

God is our Sovereign Authority and the United States was founded on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS

GATHER, DEVOTION 2

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

John Quincy Adams (1767-1848) was the United States Secretary of State for nine years before becoming the sixth president of the United States. I found it interesting that he named his first son George Washington Adams before giving his own name to his second son (John Adams II). That is pretty American. I appreciate a statement he made, “The highest glory of the American Revolution was this - it connected in one indissoluble bond the principles of civil government with the principles of Christianity.” He fit the government within Christianity. The government should fit within Christianity, not vice versa.

We live in a world today that does not believe in absolutes. They do not feel the truth can be known. They will say, “It is all relative.” They feel that truth changes based on time and perspective. Many hold that truth may be different from one person to another.

However, that is not American. Our nation was founded on the legal concept of fixed standards and absolute truth.

On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence referred to “self-evident” truths. In the second paragraph, we read, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

In epistemology (the theory of knowledge), self-evident truths are propositions that are true by understanding its meaning without proof, and/or by human reason. It is when we “know” something is true even if we cannot explain it.

LESSON FOUR | DEVOTION 2

It was understood that there were items that did not need explaining. Man (and woman) was made in the image of God; therefore, they are created equal. Genesis 1:27 says, ***“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”*** I believe that is why John Quincy Adams was known for fighting the expansion of slavery.

Those early fathers also held to the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5) as unchanging truth. Right was right then and right is right now.

A final reminder from John 17:17, ***“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”*** God’s Word was truthful when it was spoken, written, and still is today.

PILLARS OF CHRISTIANITY

GATHER, DEVOTION 3

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Jedidiah Morse (1761-1826) is known as the father of American geography. He was a Pastor, instructor at a school for young women, and rebutted views against Native American people. He stood up for all people. People may ask why he was willing to stand up for the overlooked. I think it was because of his faith.

Morse said, "Whenever the pillars of Christianity shall be overthrown, our present form of government, and all blessings that flow from them, must fall with them." He knew that Christianity was not a religion it was a lifestyle. It should affect our thinking and actions. As an early influencer in the infancy of our country, he understood that the United States was one nation under God. Without Him, our country would (and is and will) fall apart.

Instead of saying, "God bless America" (He definitely has), I think it is time for us to say (and do), "America bless God."

America was founded on Christian principles. Did you know how the United States Constitution arrived at the concept for three branches of government?

First of all, we need to realize that the United States has three branches of government: the executive, the legislative, and the judicial. Each of these branches has a distinct and essential role in the function of the government, and they were established in Articles 1 (legislative), 2 (executive), and 3 (judicial) of the United States Constitution.

How did the early fathers come up with the idea of three branches of government?

Isaiah 33:22 says, ***“For the Lord is our judge; the Lord is our lawgiver; the Lord is our king; he will save us.”*** Did you catch it?

“For the Lord is our Judge (we have a judicial branch), ***the Lord is our Lawgiver*** (we have a legislative branch), ***the Lord is our King*** (we have a “ruling” branch, our executive branch). I cannot stop there, ***He will save us.***”

Our founding fathers studied the Bible, applied it to their lives, and even applied it to our lives. God’s Word is timeless. Isaiah was applicable in 700 BC, 1776 AD, and 2021 AD.

IMPOSSIBLE

GATHER, DEVOTION 4

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

George Washington's name is inseparable from America, and not only from the nation's history. It identifies countless streets, buildings, mountains, bridges, monuments, cities, and people. Jesse Washington recorded for the *Associated Press*, "The 2000 U.S. Census counted 163,036 people with the surname Washington."

George Washington (1732-1799) was an American military general, statesman, and founding father who was commander in chief of the Continental Army during the American Revolutionary War (1775-83) and served two terms as the first president of the United States (1789 to 1797).

President Washington said, "It is impossible to govern the world without God and the Bible." Merriam-Webster defines impossible as "incapable of being or of occurring." He understood he needed God and the Bible. He understood the world needed God and the Bible. I appreciate his humility and openness.

God and the Bible are needed in our church, community, business, home, and daily life. I found it interesting that the early fathers believed everyone should have religious freedom.

The First Amendment text reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

LESSON FOUR | DEVOTION 4

The Covid-19 virus brought a lot of this to the forefront. We were able to see how our country was founded with the concept of religious freedom. The premise was not to keep the church out of government but to keep the government from running the church.

The government needs Christians. Our appreciation and prayers need to include those in authority. We are challenged in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, ***“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”***

CHRISTIAN PRESIDENTS

GATHER, DEVOTION 5

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

All too often we feel the phrase “Christian President” is an oxymoron. Is it possible for a Christian to be a politician? It is interesting to see how the founding fathers would answer this question.

John Jay (1745-1829) was the second governor of New York, director of the United States policy, negotiator and signatory of the Treaty of Paris of 1783, and the first chief justice. He was clearly one of the founding fathers of our country. He is generally just referred to as Chief Justice John Jay.

He said, “Providence has given to our people the choice of their rulers and it is the duty as well as the privilege and interest of a Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers.” He said that we should vote for Christians. That should be our first non-negotiable. I know it is difficult to know if someone is truly saved or not, but I was encouraged that the Chief Justice respected Christ.

Not only did our founding fathers emphasize and encourage Christians for leadership positions, but they also developed laws that come from Scripture.

Tax exemption for churches has surprised me. Most people are familiar with the phrase 501(c)(3). It is a portion of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code (IRC). You only need to read the first two lines, but I thought you might enjoy the whole context, “Corporations, and any community chest, fund, or foundation, organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, testing for public safety, literary, or educational purposes, or to foster national or international

amateur sports competition (but only if no part of its activities involve the provision of athletic facilities or equipment), or for the prevention of cruelty to children or animals, no part of the net earnings of which insures to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual, no substantial part of the activities of which is carrying on propaganda, or otherwise attempting, to influence legislation (except as otherwise provided in subsection (h)), and which does not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.”

I have wondered how our founding fathers came up with the idea for churches being tax-exempt. It comes from Ezra 7:24, ***“We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on anyone of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God.”*** Our country’s history is being rewritten and changed away from God. We need to remember, appreciate, and hold on to our godly heritage.

REDEEMER

GATHER, DEVOTION 6

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

I have been starting each of these devotions with a quote from one of our country's founding fathers. In this devotion, I thought I would represent many of them by quoting the Supreme Court (1892). It said, "Our laws and our institutions must necessarily be based upon and embody the teachings of the Redeemer of mankind. It's impossible that it should be otherwise; and to this extent our civilization and our institutions are emphatically Christian." The Supreme Court acknowledged the necessity of our nation being Christian and referred to the Redeemer.

The title redeemer is used 29 times in the Bible. I love the title for Jesus. Job 19:25 says, ***"For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth."*** Psalm 19:14 adds, ***"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."*** Psalm 78:35 continues, ***"They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer."*** Jesus is the Redeemer and our founding fathers knew Him.

Did you know that our founding fathers acknowledged that all men are sinners? Our legal system has something called constitutional checks and balances. History.com describes this topic, "The system of checks and balances in government was developed to ensure that no one branch of government would become too powerful. The framers of the U.S. Constitution built a system that divides power between the three branches of the U.S. government—legislative, executive, and judicial—and includes various limits and controls on the powers of each branch." They realized the heart of man and built-in an accountability aspect to keep everyone safe.

The Bible is clear about man's condition. Psalm 106:6 says, ***"Both we and our fathers have sinned; we have committed iniquity; we have done wickedness."*** Romans 3:10 adds, ***"As it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one.'"*** Romans 3:23 continues, ***"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*** We are sinners, everyone one of us. Fortunately, there is a Redeemer named Jesus Christ who paved a way for us to be forgiven of our sins and placed in a relationship with God.

BE THE CHURCH



LESSON FIVE

GROW

PASTOR JAYSON COMBS

In this series, we have already talked about Reach and the importance of answering the question, “What is important?” After studying the response of Martha and Mary to Jesus coming to the house, we learned that everything is second to getting to the feet of Jesus. Then we went to 2 Timothy 3:14-16 and saw the amazing value of the church (Gather) and we are reminded that we can not be all that we were meant to be without each other. This lesson is about Grow.

1. What is spiritual growth?

A beautiful passage on growth comes from Colossians 3:9-10, ***“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”***

Basically, growing is when we look more like Jesus (***“the image of its creator”***), but what does that involve?

Renewal Involves Stopping the Old by Being Broken

Paul tells us to ***“put off the old self.”*** This is part of the growing process. It involves breaking ourselves.

Psalms chapter 51 records David's conversation with God after he accepts the full weight of his sins of adultery and murder. In verses 15-17, he says, ***“O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”***

David was struggling. His joy was gone. He used to dance, sing, and play music before the Lord, but sin stole his gladness. It is not about salvation, but about joy. David realized that God would not be impressed with offerings, but wanted **“a broken and contrite heart.”** As one pastor put it, “David was experiencing personal collapse under guilt.”

2. Have you seen or experienced the depth of this despair?

David does not plead innocence nor shift the blame to someone else. He owns it and it breaks him. He was wealthy and could bring many sacrifices, but he knew that was not enough. Rituals are not going to get you back to God. Growth can only come by being broken. It is seeing sin the way God does. David knew it was time for confession and repentance. He needed to yield to the Lord.

David chose to humble himself before the Lord. This is brokenness. This is part of the renewal process. Warren Wiersbe has written, “We must also let him renew us within so that we will conquer sin and not succumb to temptation.”

It is funny to think of things that are designed to be broken. For an egg to have any value it must be broken. Pinatas are made to be broken. Without breaking it, the children watch in anticipation and frustration. Water balloons are made to be broken (and it can be a lot of fun). If a paintball does not break, it is not counted in the competition.

3. Can you think of anything else that is made to be broken?

When we do not break from our sin we lose the joy of our salvation. We lose our song. Matthew Henry wrote, "It is a sharp work wrought there - no less than the breaking of the heart; not in despair but in necessary humiliation and sorrow for sin. It is a heart pliable to the Word of God, a heart subdued and brought into obedience; it is a heart that is tender."

Also, in Psalm chapter 51, David says in verse 10, ***"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."*** This lines up with our passage in Colossians 3:9-10, ***"Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator."*** This concept is both an Old Testament and New Testament concept.

Paul also refers to renewing in 2 Corinthians 4:16, ***"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day."*** Ephesians 4:22-24 seems to echo our Colossians passage, ***"To put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."***

4. How do we use the word ***"renewed"*** today?

LESSON FIVE | GROW

The word “renew” in Greek means to “renovate.”

5. How do we use the word “renovate” today?

I am working on a renovation project at home due to another leak. I want to ignore it, put out a bucket, turn on a fan, and go play some golf. However, the carpet was starting to smell, and cleaning it was not enough. I had to deconstruct and then reconstruct the roof to solve the problem.

I liked how the commentary by Huges describes it. He talks about the process of deconstruction and reconstruction is taking place right now as our new self is being renewed in the knowledge after the image of its creator. The old nature was deconstructing and he was being reconstructed in the image of Christ. The deconstruction is typically messy, but the daily transformation is beautiful.

That is why David could do the rituals and make like it is all good, but not until he was willing to be broken could he truly be renewed into the likeness of God.

After the deconstruction comes the construction.

6. Is there something you need to take care of now?

Renewal Means Starting the New by Learning More about God

Looking at Colossians 3:9-10 again, we see, ***“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”***

Putting on the new self is about renewal and learning about the knowledge of God. We learn about God through His Word. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, we read, ***“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.”***

God's Word is part of the reconstruction process that helps make us complete and equipped. It is crucial to have the right equipment for the job at hand. The Lord's Word is what equips us to grow. The Lord's Word equips us to break those things that need to be broken. His Word equips us to break down those walls, to break down those strongholds and to break down the foothold of Satan. This is so that we may have the breakthrough of renewal in our lives.

7. When is a time you had the right equipment and it made the job go so much smoother and better or when is a time you did not have the best scenario?

In 1 Peter 2:2, we read, ***“Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.”*** We need to desire the Word of God as our lifeline. It is as crucial to our lives as milk is to a newborn baby.

The Word helps us put off sexual sin of all natures, anger, wrath, slander, obscene talk, and deception. It then helps us put on the new self. It has brought people to see how these Christians love one another.

The Word of God works on our lives by changing our thinking. Romans 12:2 says, ***“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*** A renewed mind thinks more like the Father and begins living correctly.

We do not live with a broken heart. We let the peace of God comfort us so we can grow more like His Son. Colossians 3:15-16, ***“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”***

8. What does the peace of God mean to you?

We need to let the sweet Spirit of the Lord mend our broken heart so that the peace of God may rule in our hearts.

Squeezed but not squashed.
Bewildered but not befuddled.
Pursued but not abandoned.
Knocked down but not knocked out.

BE THE CHURCH

BLASPHEMY IS ILLEGAL

GROW, DEVOTION 1

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

The ruling in *People vs. Ruggles* (1811) declared, “Whatever strikes at the root of Christianity tends manifestly to the dissolution of civil government.” The founding fathers understood the importance of Christianity. The government was not to interfere with Christianity, but the government wanted Christianity’s presence. The government protected Christianity’s existence.

I read a story that amused me. There was a man who became profane about Jesus Christ and the Bible both in written and spoken settings. The courts said it was blasphemy and the man was fined \$500.00 and jailed for three months. The court said if you have attacked Jesus Christ, you have attacked Christianity. If you attack Christianity, you have attacked the foundation of the United States. Therefore, using the Lord’s name in vain is an attack on the United States. Blasphemy is illegal.

It is clear that our founding fathers knew the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:7 says, ***“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”*** In America, taking the Lord’s name in vain is wrong, illegal, and punishable. I do not think the jails and prisons have enough room for all the guilty parties today. We should at least fine them.

Psalm 9:17 is a little scary, ***“The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God.”*** Has our country forgotten God? Do our legislators still protect and promote Christianity? Forgetting God is dangerous.

LESSON FIVE | DEVOTION 1

In 2 Chronicles 7:14, we have the solution for our back-sliding country, ***“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”***

We need to express our need for God, pray, seek God, and repent. Then God will hear us, forgive us, and heal us.

We need the Lord.

We know it is wrong to use the Lord's name in vain, but it is also wrong to remain silent, stagnate, and indifferent.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

GROW, DEVOTION 2

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

The Bible was important to our founding fathers. In a ten-year study undertaken at the University of Houston, researchers examined 15,000 documents from America's founders and determined that:

- 34% of their quotations came directly from the Bible.
- 94% of their quotes were based on the Bible.
- 60% used the Bible to arrive at their conclusion.

This is how many of our laws and our governmental structure were derived.

Not only did they study the Bible, but they wanted that for the generation after them. I am not talking about Christian school like we have today. They felt the Bible should be taught in all schools.

Article 3 of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 says, "Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

Not only was this in the Northwest Ordinance, but the Michigan Constitution Article VIII Section 1 includes, "Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

A daily knowledge of the Bible and how to live it is crucial to every life. This is clearly taught in Deuteronomy 6:4-7, ***"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your***

God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” I appreciate the directive to “impress” God’s truth on the lives of our children. We are to do this morning, day, and night.

Finally, Ephesians 6:4 adds, ***“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”*** Daily life brings regular opportunities to teach about God and His Word. This teaching is in actions and verbally.

Please do not be swayed by the enemy. Our country was founded by people who studied, taught, respected, and lived the Word of God.

NOAH WEBSTER

GROW, DEVOTION 3

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

When I think of Noah Webster (1758-1843), I immediately think of the dictionary. Today, it is entitled the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. He also wrote the *Blue-backed Speller* books that taught five generations of children how to spell and read. Webster has even been called the “Father of American Scholarship and Education.” He did many other things while still being a member of the Connecticut House of Representatives. He had a large influence on the founding and development of our nation.

Webster said, “The moral principles and precepts contained in the Scriptures ought to form the basis of all our civil constitutions and laws. All the miseries and evils which men suffer from vice, crime, ambition, injustice, oppression, slavery, and war, proceed from their despising or neglecting the precepts contained in the Bible.”

The man who was the master of words chose to find his best thoughts from the Bible. He wanted the Bible to be the foundation for the basis for all of life. Psalm 119:11 says, “***I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.***”

One of the areas that needed to be addressed was what is called “Restitution Laws.” This is when someone has wronged another that also caused financial loss. “In addition to receiving a jail sentence and fines, criminal defendants may be ordered to pay restitution to the victims of their crimes. Restitution is different from fines because fines are punitive, while restitution is compensatory. States believe that restitution offers a way to hold a defendant directly accountable for the consequences of their actions” (*Justia.com*).

This was not a new concept as Moses wrote about it in Numbers 5:5-7, ***“And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel, When a man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the Lord, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess his sin that he has committed. And he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong.’”***

The Bible is full of common sense that helped form the basis for the laws we have today.

GODLY RULERS

GROW, DEVOTION 4

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

In 1776, our nation declared its independence. It was a nation of the original 13 states. In 1796 (just 20 years later), our country was developing and growing. Independence Day was celebrated on July 4th for the first time. Tennessee was admitted as the 16th U.S. state. The U.S. State Department issued the first U.S. passport. President George Washington issued his Farewell Address. Finally, on July 11th, the United States took possession of Detroit from Great Britain under the terms of the Jay Treaty (Michigan was not recognized as a state, or joined the union until 1837 as the 26th state).

While all this was going on, the 1796 court stayed the course saying, “In our form of government the Christian religion is the established religion and all sects and denominations of Christians are placed upon the same equal footing.” We were a Christian nation founded upon Christian principles. We need to hold fast to our heritage.

It was a time when the U.S. Constitution chose a Republican form of government with warnings against kings in favor of godly rulers. Article 4 Section 4 says, “The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government, and shall protect each of them against Invasion; and on Application of the Legislature, or of the Executive (when the Legislature cannot be convened) against domestic Violence.” God warned against kings.

Having godly leaders is so valuable. Exodus 18:21 says, ***“Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and***

of tens.” Proverbs 11:14 adds, ***“Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.”*** Finally, Proverbs 24:6 confirms, ***“For by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory.”*** Seeking advice and teaming up is part of God’s design.

We need godly leaders in the church, but also in government, the business world, and on the mission field.

JAMES MADISON

GROW, DEVOTION 5

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

James Madison (1751-1836) served as the fourth president of the United States. He is hailed as the “Father of the Constitution” for his pivotal role in drafting and promoting the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. He is clearly one of the founding fathers of the United States.

President Madison said, “We have staked the whole future of American civilization not upon the power of government, far from it. We have staked the future of all our political institutions upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God.” Today, places are removing the Ten Commandments (I wonder if it is okay to steal at those places) in the thought of separation between church and state. The goal of that was to keep government out of the church, not biblical principles like the Ten Commandments out of the government.

It is also interesting that President Madison challenged us to govern ourselves. Four of the Amendments of the U.S. Constitution refer to “the people.”

Amendment I says, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Amendment II adds, “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”

Amendment IX continues, “The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.”

Amendment X says, “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”

These amendments expect people to be responsible and to work together for the better of all.

Matthew 18:15-17 reminds us to work together, ***“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”***

The goal is not to find a way to hurt others, but for accountability and restoration. We need to encourage one another but we also need to be willing to confront sin and be confronted when we are in the wrong. We need each other. We need to be able to count on each other.

JOHN ADAMS

GROW, DEVOTION 6

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Earlier I referred to John Quincy Adams (6th president). In this devotion, I want to refer to his father, John Adams ((1735-1826). John Adams has quite the resume. He was a leader of the American Revolution that achieved independence from Great Britain. He was an attorney and signer of the Declaration of Independence. He was the first vice president and the second president of the United States.

President John Adams said, “We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is whole inadequate to the government of any other.”

He tells us that the government was to guide and remind a group of people who already feared God. It was for a “moral and religious people.” However, everyone has a sinful nature so parameters were set in place. One of those involved private property. Instead of the state owning all the land, we can own land and have rights.

The Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution references private property rights, “No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the Militia, when in actual service in time of War or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offence to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private

property be taken for public use, without just compensation.” At a time when people were claiming stakes on land, the founding fathers mandated that you could not just take land from someone else.

This was not a new law as the Ten Commandments refer to these kinds of situations. The eighth commandment says, ***“You shall not steal”*** (Exodus 20:15). The tenth commandment adds, ***“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”*** (Exodus 20:17). The goal is to not covet then you will not be tempted to steal. Actions tend to start from the mind and heart.

BE THE CHURCH



LESSON SIX

BACK TO REACH

PASTOR JAYSON COMBS

BE THE CHURCH

This is week four of studying the mission of the church. We are called to Reach, Gather, Grow, and then go Back to Reach. This is the purpose of the church and should be the purpose of our lives. With Reach, we looked at a situation in the lives of Mary and Martha and were reminded that we need to figure out what is important. The most important thing is to be at the feet of Jesus. For Gather, we evaluated what was valuable and how that related to being together at church. Grow brought the concept of being broken and the whole concept of renewal. It is now time to examine Back to Reach.

1. What does Back to Reach mean to you?

When I think of Back to Reach the books entitled *Where's Waldo* come to mind. Each page was a crowded scene and you needed to find a boy wearing jeans with and red and white striped shirt. He was also holding a cane. It sounded so easy.

2. Do you remember those books and did you like them?

This chapter is entitled, "*How Do You Look?*"

3. What do you think that means?

Normally when we think about how we look we quickly look for a mirror to make sure everything is just right. However, this study guide is about the outward aspect of looking. It is about how we view others. We are called not to just look like Jesus but also to view people the way He does.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12, we read about four ways that Paul looked at people. ***“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. 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. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. 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.***

For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”

Paul gave a recap of what happened to the Thessalonians and how many came to know Christ. This section points out how Paul viewed the people. It is a great challenge for us as we continue the mission of the church. Paul is clear on his priorities as stated in verse two, ***“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.”*** He ignored the obstacles and presented Jesus.

He exhibits four clear guidelines on how to view people.

Paul Looked to People Second

This might sound a little odd that Paul did not look to others first. However, that does not mean he looked at himself first. He looked to God. He was more interested in pleasing God than man. He looked to Jesus.

In verses 4-6, we read, ***“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. 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.”***

The goal was to please God not men. When you strive to please men, you will not please God. However, when you first please God, men are treated correctly. Hebrews 12:2 gives solid advice, ***“Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*** Basically, we need to look to Jesus.

By looking to God first, it mandated that he treat others well. Integrity and realness were important; it was not about trickery. Character and conduct are important. He made no empty promises and followed no humanly devised schemes.

He was not into flattery (verse 5). Flattery was the insidious practice of saying nice things to gain influence over others for selfish reasons. Wiersbe has said, “A flatterer is a person who manipulates rather than communicates. A flatterer can use either truth or lies to achieve his unholy purpose, which is to control your decisions for his own profit.” Flattering speech compliments someone else merely as a ploy to win favor with that person or to gain power over him.

4. How is flattery different from compliments and encouragement?

God hates flattery. Psalm 12:3 says, “**May the Lord cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts.**” Integrity is not about tricks or traps. We should not give a sale’s pitch; we should give the Word of God. We need to remember that salvation does not lie at the end of a clever argument.

Paul also avoids any kind of pretext (verse 7). He denies putting on any type of mask that greed puts on too many people. In Paul’s day, people used religion as a means of making money. Paul did not use the Gospel as a cloak to cover covetousness.

Paul was not into ministry for the praise of men. A true ministry of the Gospel deals honestly but lovingly with sin and judgment and leaves the unbeliever with nothing to boast of in himself. It is why some churches try to flatter people with their lives. That is why some churches you walk into you just tell about how great and wonderful

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you are. They do not tell you that you truly need Jesus. We do not look at people in a way to use them. We look to love people because that is who Jesus is.

5. How do some “outsiders” view the church?

6. How is our church different?

Paul Looked to People with a Gentle Heart

Paul looks to people with a gentle heart like a mother for her child. I remember visiting a teen at the hospital. As I walked through the lobby, I saw her mother. Her head was in her hands and she was crying. She saw me approach and welcomed me. As we went into the hospital room together, I saw her change. She put on her “mom powers.” She was logical and loving with her daughter. She was confident. It was impressive. She did not want her daughter to become discouraged or fearful. I have also seen “mom powers” when someone has crossed her child. It is also referred to as the “mama bear.”

7. Do you remember a time when your mom stepped up for you?

In 2 Corinthians 1:4, we read about being gentle, ***“Who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”***

The term gentle is at the heart of this verse. It means to be kind to someone and encompasses a lot of other virtues; acceptance, respect compassion, tolerance of imperfections, patience, tenderheartedness, and loyalty (John MacArthur).

Paul Looked at People as Ones Needing the Gospel

If we have no desire for people around us to know the Gospel, I am not sure we know the Gospel. Looking back at 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, we see that we came to them with the purpose of bringing the Gospel (verses 2, 4, 8, and 9).

We need to realize the Gospel is of first importance. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, we read, ***“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.”***

8. What is contained in the Gospel?

Paul Looked at People as Deserving of His Life

Finally, Paul adds that he not only shared the Gospel, but he also shared his own life. Looking at 1 Thessalonians 2:8, we read, ***“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.”***

To give the Gospel involves giving our lives. I recently had a man share with me how he was struggling with his teenage son. He found an older man in the church who spent time with him giving counsel and encouragement. It was fantastic. That is what the church is supposed to be about. We share life together.

Paul adds more insight in 1 Thessalonians 2:12, ***“We exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”***

Exhorting is literally to call alongside or come alongside. The apostle referred to coming alongside children for the purpose of aiding directing and instruction wisely as a source of character conduct. Encouraging is the process of sending comfort and consolation.

Recently, my son came home with an assignment from Awana on how to serve others so that they may hear the Gospel. He said he could grab the microphone at Kroger's and tell everyone about Jesus. I appreciated his enthusiasm but directed him toward service. I asked him how I could serve mom and he said to buy her a car. We laughed but then talked about how serving around the house by making his bed, cleaning his room, and doing the dishes screamed love.

LESSON SIX | BACK TO REACH

9. How are some ways we can serve others so that they are more prone to be open to the Gospel?

It is important to check our eyesight. We need to see those around us the same way Jesus does.

BE THE CHURCH

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 1

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) is a well-known writer, philosopher, politician, postmaster, scientist, inventor, humorist, statesman, and diplomat. He never ran for president as he was already 83 when George Washington was elected as the first president of the United States. He was clearly a founding father as he held many other positions in developing our country.

Ben Franklin said, “We need God to be our friend not our enemy. We need Him to be our ally not our adversary. We need to make sure we keep God’s concurring aid. If a sparrow cannot fall without God’s notice, how can our nation rise without His aid?” He knew we needed God. Our nation could only “rise” by God’s blessing.

I like how he references Matthew 10:28-30, which says, ***“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.”*** These verses emphasize how valuable we are to God but also how present He is in the world. God did not create everything and then pull up a lounge chair waiting for the end of times. He is involved in our daily lives. We need Him. Our country needed Him back then and still needs Him today.

The Declaration of Independence expresses the value of people in supporting biblical liberty and free enterprise. Freedom comes from Jesus Christ. John 8:36 says, ***“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”*** Galatians 5:1 adds, ***“For freedom Christ has set***

us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Finally, 1 Peter 2:16 says, “Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.”

Please do not take your freedom for granted. Appreciate your freedom and use it for Him.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 2

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) served as the third president of the United States. He was also a lawyer, architect, philosopher, and had previously served as the second vice president of the United States.

President Jefferson said, "Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever." Jefferson's faith has been challenged recently, but it appears he was wise enough to fear God. Our founding fathers knew God was just.

In Psalm 9:7-8, David says, ***"But the Lord sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness."***

Due to the concept of wanting our nation to be known for justice, people have been promised a fair trial with witnesses. The Sixth Amendment of the United States Constitution says, "In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defence."

This concept of witnesses is seen in the Bible. Deuteronomy 19:15 says, ***"A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established."***

The importance of witnesses is recorded in both the Old and New Testaments.

Matthew 18:16 adds, ***“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”***

Deuteronomy 32:4 is a great reminder of who God is, ***“The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.”***

CHARLES FINNEY

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 3

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Charles Finney (1792-1875) never was the president of the United States and never aspired any other political position. He was an American Presbyterian minister and leader in the Second Great Awakening in the United States. It was an amazing revival throughout the land.

Finney said, “The church must take right ground in regard to politics. Politics are part of religion in a country as this, and Christians must do their duty to the country as a part of their duty to God. He will bless or curse this nation according to the course Christians take in politics.”

Finney was known for preaching the Gospel and seeing thousands upon thousands respond, yet he knew Christians needed to impact politics. We have a duty to our country as part of our serving God. Matthew 22:21 says, ***“They said, ‘Caesar’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’”*** This passage does not tell us to ignore or disobey the government unless it conflicts with obeying God.

In situations where the government has crossed the lines, we need to remember the words of Acts 5:29, ***“But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’”***

We are called to respect our governing authorities and take it a step further. In 1 Timothy 2:1-4, we read, ***“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be***

made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

We need to be peaceful, godly, and dignified in our actions. Prayer and a thankful spirit need to be at the core of it all.

DINESH D'SOUZA

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 4

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Dinesh D'Souza is a political commentator from India who now lives in the United States. He is a well-known debater concerning politics and Christianity. Coming to America for college, he made an interesting observation, "Christianity enhanced the notion of political and social accountability by providing a new model: that of servant leadership. In ancient Greece and Rome no one would have dreamed of considering political leaders anyone's servants. The job of the leader was to lead. But Christ invented the notion that the way to lead is by serving the needs of others, especially those who are the most needy. Mark 10:43 quotes Christ: 'Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...for even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve.'"

He noticed our country spoke of servanthood and not political power. We have a country that often refers to those in authority as public servants.

Romans chapter 13 starts by saying, ***"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."*** We are reminded that our governing authorities are established by God. Verse 4 adds, ***"For he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."*** In this verse, our governing authorities are referred to as ***"God's servant"*** and as the ***"servant of God."***

The most inspirational example of servant leadership is seen in Jesus Christ. In John chapter 13, after washing the disciples' feet, He says, ***“When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, ‘Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you’*** (verses 12-15).

If you are in a position of authority, lead by serving. It was commanded by Jesus in word and deed.

NEW CREATION

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 5

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Benjamin Franklin said, “Introduce into public affairs the principles of Christianity and it will change the face of the world.” Christianity not only changes the life of an individual, but it can also change a nation. There are several verses about the affect righteousness has on a people:

“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!” Psalm 33:12

“By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown.” Proverbs 11:11

“When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan.” Proverbs 29:2

“When the wicked increase, transgression increases, but the righteous will look upon their downfall.” Proverbs 29:16

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” Psalm 127:1

On a side note: Our founding fathers held to the fact that God created everything, not to the assumption of evolution. It is seen regularly in the writings, even the Declaration of Independence.

Genesis 1:1 says so much, ***“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”*** It is also important to understand the value

of Genesis 1:26-27, ***“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.’”*** Our founding fathers knew we were created by God. This should help how we treat each other and how we view ourselves.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, we are reminded of what it means to be a Christian, ***“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”*** Our founding fathers expected people to act differently because of their faith.

GOD SAVE THE U.S.A.

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 5

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

A lot happened in 1892. Benjamin Harrison was president. We had the first appearance of the “Pledge of Allegiance.” There were a number of interesting products that had their start. The Coca-Cola Company was incorporated. The first escalator, clothes dryer, toothpaste tube, portable typewriter, and concrete-paved street were introduced into society.

With that all going on, the Supreme Court said, “This is a religious people. This is a Christian nation.” Our country celebrated its 116th birthday and it was still a “Christian nation.”

Do you know what the Supreme Court’s opening declaration is for every session? They say, “God save the United States of America.” That is so cool.

They even enforced the concept (the fourth of the Ten Commandments) in keeping the Sabbath day as holy. They incorporated the “Blue Laws.” Blue Laws are also known as Sabbath laws. They are designed to restrict or ban some or all Sunday (“Christian Sabbath”) activities for religious reasons. This was for the purpose to encourage worship and rest. It has affected places not opening on Sunday (or at least waiting until noon) and the sale of alcohol.

In Michigan, some of the Blue Laws are as follows, “The sale of alcohol is banned from 2 a.m. to 7 a.m. every day. The only exception to this rule is New Year’s Day, in which case alcohol sales are permitted until 4 a.m. Alcohol sales were likewise banned on Sunday until 12 p.m., and on Christmas from 12 a.m. until 12 p.m., until a repeal in

late 2010. Specific localities may petition[to whom?] for exceptions for either on-site or off-site consumption.”

Exodus 20:8 says, “***Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.***”

There are so many indicators that America was founded as a Christian nation and we need to help regain that blessing.

BE THE CHURCH

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