

REACH GATHER GROW

reach gather grow

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PREFACE

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

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

This mission seems quite clear from Jesus' words:

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

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



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



LESSON ONE

REACH

PASTOR TY WOZNEK





When it comes to reach, I have witnessed all sorts of ways to motivate people to share the Gospel. Perhaps you have heard some or all of them, too.

1. Which one of the following works for you, which one repels you, and why?

Statistical Sledgehammer: This approach uses statistics to drive home the point, like “2% share their faith with unbelievers.”

Hell Horror Show: This approach points to the truth of Hell, and that forever is a really long time, and do you want your friends and family to suffer that?

Positive Punch: This is the flip side of the Hell Horror Show, as one points to the truth of Heaven and Jesus making all things new.

Command Cruncher: The Bible tells us to share our faith because we must, in order to live a life of obedience to Christ.

Wonder Whip: Because of the amazing love of God, we should tell others about Jesus.

Guilty Grump: It is the use of any means or story to make you feel so small and guilty, you will need an electron microscope to be found.



Herculean Hero: It is the use of any means or story to show how people have heard and come to know Christ. You probably get an equally large anxiety attack thinking you are not capable.



LESSON ONE | REACH

At one time or another, I did them all, was guilty by them all, and often felt empty by them. Truthfully, the Bible includes them all as well. Getting people to serve is often easy, but getting people to reach is a challenge. I noticed this more and more, ever since I was seven.

2. Why is reaching people often allusive to God's people?

3. Are you feeling guilty, anxious, or motivated about reaching people at this point?

A mentor once said to me as a teenager, "You cannot give what you don't have." Let us set aside all the emotions you and I have that come along with reaching people. In our time digging into Scripture, let us see what it takes to reach people for Jesus. The Bible describes many things we need to have. We will look at a few of them: Good soil, the right vine, a good power source, and compassion.

Good Soil

The parable of the soils is a well-known story told by Jesus. There are four types of soil given. Only one is really good, bearing much fruit. Read Luke 8:9-15.

Our church's vision separates reach and grow. This is helpful in our desire to share the Gospel with the whole world. In this parable, grow is directly related to reach. Read Luke 8:15 again. If we are not





sharing the Gospel, our growth plan is not working. To bear much fruit, we must have good soil.

4. How do we get planted in good soil?

The Right Vine

In John chapter 15, Jesus gives us a beautiful picture of a vine and a vinedresser. There are two key ideas in His illustration. First, we need to bear much fruit. Second, Jesus is the one who does the work. Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. The key is abiding in Jesus. Read John 15:4-5.

(Before and after these verses, Jesus warns us that branches that do not bear fruit will be tossed away. This is not teaching that we lose our salvation as Romans 8:38-39 makes it clear that nothing can. However, there is an expectation that we bear fruit. God can call us home to Heaven a little early.)

5. To reach people, we must have Jesus. How do we abide in Jesus?

One of the Growth Communities I was a part of loved bacon. That year my house constantly smelled of bacon, and it never got old. When you cook lots of bacon, the smell is everywhere. It permeates everything. It smells good, tastes good, brings delight, and is everywhere present. You could say, "Bacon abides in my house." When the Bible says to abide in Jesus, think bacon. We need to be





so connected (abiding) in Jesus that when people see us, Jesus stands out. Like bacon, abiding in Jesus brings joy (“... **that your joy may be full!**” John 15:11).

A Good Power Source

In helping a friend move an office, there came the time to turn the computer back on. It did not work. We went through everything, and everything was plugged in, except for the power strip. To operate, the computer needed to be plugged into the right power source. We must have the right power source to reach people. That would be the Holy Spirit. Read Romans 8:12-17.

Romans chapter 8 is in the middle of Paul's beautiful explanation of the Gospel; he boldly states, “**For I am not ashamed of the gospel**” (Romans 1:16). Part of the Gospel is how we reach people and live. Without the Gospel, and hence without the Spirit, we are stuck (Romans 7). The term Paul used is being in the flesh. Being in Christ, we have the gift of the Spirit, and as such, “**we are more than conquerors**” (Romans 8:37). If we are in Christ, hence in the Spirit, we should be led by the Spirit.

The Spirit is a mysterious part of being a Christian. Jesus understood that we would have some trouble explaining the Spirit. In John 3:8, He says, “**The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.**” What we do know is when we trust in Jesus death, burial, and resurrection, we get the Spirit. We also get a choice to live according to the Spirit, or according to the flesh. The difference is being intentional with how we live as Christians.





6. How are you “plugged in to” the Spirit? Are you listening to the Spirit, or ignoring Him?

Galatians 5:22-26 and Ephesians 5:15-24 are good “tests” to see if you are “plugged in” to the Spirit. This is where reach and gather connect in our vision.

Compassion

In Mark chapter 6, Jesus is tired and in mourning. News just broke about His cousin, John the Baptist, who was murdered by the king. His disciples just returned back with reports about what they had done. To add to the tension, crowds in the book of Mark were described as a hindrance to Jesus’ ministry. He often told people not to share what He did in order to avoid crowds, but people could not keep their mouth shut about Jesus. Going away for a time of rest, a crowd formed, and the second greatest miracle in the Gospels occurs - the feeding of 5,000 (plus women and children). Read Mark 6:33-44.

7. Why did Jesus choose to have this incredible historical event happen?



How do we make reach happen? When I have felt guilty, empty, anxious, overwhelmed, or inadequate when being motivated to reach people with the Good News of Jesus, I found I forgot what I have. I have good soil for God’s Word to bear fruit. I have the right vine in



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Jesus, who does the work for me. I have the Spirit, God Himself, to lead and empower me. I have compassion because Jesus loved me. I want to love others, as well. If you are saved, you have these things too!

When we realize what we have:

Statistical Sledgehammer becomes an opportunity.

Hell Horror Show builds compassion.

Positive Punch stokes up excitement.

Command Cruncher becomes a way to show love.

Wonder Whip becomes joy and delight.

Guilty Grump reminds us to get in the game!

Herculean Hero reminds us of what God can do if we follow Him!

So, realizing what we have, read Matthew 28:19-20 and answer the following:

8. Who is the Spirit leading you to reach?

9. How can your Growth Community help you to reach them?







LESSON ONE | REACH



JOHN STONE'S TESTIMONY

REACH, DEVOTION 1

John Stone

I was blessed to grow up in a Christian home. My parents sacrificed to make sure we were at church on Sunday, Awana on Wednesdays, and later, youth group every week. I was a typical “good” church kid. I had the right friends and did not get into trouble. Looking back, this was a very dangerous position in which to be.

I do not remember how old I was or who was speaking the night I gave my life to Christ, but I can vividly remember the overwhelming need to be right with God like a massive weight pressing down on me. Until that night, nobody had ever told me there was even a possibility that God could be angry with me or that I could die in my sins. I was on a self-righteous religious road to Hell. I thank God for reaching down and rescuing me from myself and from a life of futility. I praise Him for His undeserved grace and for allowing me to be one of His children.

Colossians 1:10-14 has become a very special passage to me, ***“So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”***



TRENT HALL'S TESTIMONY

REACH, DEVOTION 2

Trent Hall

When I was seven years old, I loved going to Awana every week for the game time. One Wednesday night, I got something more than just the game of the week. I came home and talked to my parents about what it meant. I asked if they could help me understand and obtain salvation. Later that night, my walk as a Christian began. I know I am a Christian because ever since that night, I have felt the Holy Spirit work in my life, and I have seen God provide for me.

In middle school, I helped out with the kids' church as a tech guy and enjoyed seeing the kids start to click and begin their walk. I also helped with day camp as a middle school helper. My 8th-grade summer, however, changed a lot of things. We switched churches, and I grew a lot. I made friends that were in high school and had role models of what a Christian teen looks like at school and good examples to step up my faith. High school was rough for me. In 11th and 12th grade, I became popular and hid my faith from my friends and limited it to Sunday morning, but the summer of 12th grade changed all that with my last summer camp. My attitude that week was that I was only going to have fun. Then God woke me up. During the last chapel I felt Him call me back. For a few weeks after that, I did not want His call, but when I decided to re-devote my life, He then called me to become a pastor that preaches the Gospel. Since this, I have gone to Bible college for two years and gotten my degree.

In Bible college, God showed me a lot and changed a lot of my life. He showed me how to love more as He does. I have also come to a deeper understanding of how faithful God is and will always be. A verse that has always comforted me is Zephaniah 3:17 which says,



“The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.”





MARCO POLO

REACH, DEVOTION 3

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

I remember every summer playing a game in our swimming pool called “Marco Polo.” You probably remember the game, too. One person closes their eyes and yells, “Marco.” Everyone else has to respond, “Polo.” If they caught someone (touched them), then that person was “it.” They had to be the one searching. All I knew was that Marco Polo was a famous explorer.

It appears his father was a traveler, too. *National Geographic* (May 2001) reported that Marco's dad and uncle traveled to Mongolia (part of modern-day China) in 1260 (I did not realize the game “Marco Polo” may go back that far). The men met with their emperor (Kublai Khan), who expressed an interest in Christianity. The emperor sent a letter back with them to the Pope requesting as many as 100 wise men to spread the Gospel among his subjects.

It took the brothers three years to get back home. Two years later, they set out to return to Mongolia. They did not have 100 missionaries with them. The “Church” felt it could only spare two men, and even those two turned back shortly into their journey.

I wonder what would have happened to China if “we,” as the Church, would have gone to Mongolia in the 1200s?

What opportunities are we missing or even ignoring today?



Jesus is speaking in Matthew 9:37-38 where we read, ***“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.’”***



REACH | DEVOTION 3

All of us are “called” and challenged to share the Gospel. It may be overseas, at a large church event, or in the prisons, but it is also in our daily walk with whomever Jesus places around us.

Look for opportunities to share the Good News, Jesus saves!

I love Romans 10:15, ***“And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’”*** We have been sent. It is time to preach. Walking out the Gospel is a good start, but we also need to speak. Tell someone what God has done for you.



GANDHI'S NON-TESTIMONY

REACH, DEVOTION 4

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Mahatma Gandhi has been quoted as having said, “Carefully watch your thoughts, for they become your words. Manage and watch your words, for they will become your actions. Consider and judge your actions, for they have become your habits. Acknowledge and watch your habits, for they shall become your values. Understand and embrace your values, for they become your destiny.” It is great advice, but I have always wondered about Gandhi’s destiny.

Heritage Baptist Church (Waxahachie, Texas) posted an article about Gandhi’s spiritual journey. It said that missionary E. Stanley Jones once met with Gandhi. Jones asked Gandhi, “Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming His follower?”

Gandhi replied, “Oh, I don’t reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It’s just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

It appears that when Gandhi was practicing law in South Africa, he appreciated the teachings of Jesus and decided to attend Church. He had seriously considered becoming a Christian, but an elder of the Church refused for him to enter the building. The elder said, “There’s no room for Kaffirs [an insulting term for a black African] in this church. Get out of here, or I’ll have my assistants throw you down the steps.” Gandhi turned away, physically and spiritually.

Gandhi, a Hindu, admired Jesus and often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount. He lived a good life and was a good example of humility. Hopefully, he was able to look past “Christians” and see Jesus for who He truly is and what He did for us.



I do not know Gandhi's destiny, but I know no one is able to earn it. It is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 6:23) that is not based on morality. Romans 10:9 gives us what defines a Christian, ***"Because, 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."***

We, as Christians, need to be reminded that our lives might be the only Bible some people read.

Most people know John 3:16. It is interesting to grasp 1 John 3:16, ***"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers."***

God loves us and expects us to love Him. One way to show Him love is to love others. As Jesus said, ***"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"*** (John 13:35).



HOW CAN WE REACH THE WORLD?



REACH, DEVOTION 5

Kenny Hovis

So many times in our Christian walk, we feel inept to do that which we believe God has called us to do. Our past, lack of ability, knowledge, courage, or even faith often cripples us rendering us ineffective (in our opinion) for the cause of Christ. That is not a good place to be. How can we (me, a lawn jockey from nowhere) be an effective tool for God when thoughts like this are so common? It is good to look at a few people in the Bible.

Moses did not believe he had the speaking capabilities to convey God's message to Pharaoh to let the nation of Israel leave. God provided an answer. It says in Exodus 4:12-13, ***“Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.” But he said, ‘Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.’*** That was not good enough for Moses, and God gets frustrated with his lack of faith. So He gives Moses a helper in Exodus 4:15 in the form of his brother, Aaron. God speaks confidence into Moses by saying, ***“You shall speak to him [Aaron] and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do.”*** In other words, God will equip us if He is calling us.

We can make a list of some others who were not qualified:

- Gideon doubted God's decision-making process and the ability to make an adequate army to defeat the Midianites.
- Samson thought he could withstand the temptations of Delilah and still carry out God's will.
- David was an adulterous murderer.





- The prophet Hosea was married to a prostitute.
- The Samaritan woman at the well had such a past that she was ostracized from her community.
- Peter and Andrew were uneducated fishermen.
- Matthew was a tax collector and hated by his own people.
- Thomas doubted that Jesus was the Messiah.
- Paul murdered the believers in the early church.
- Timothy was young.
- John was old.

We need to face it; the Bible is filled with broken, inept, incapable people who, on their own, could not change a spiritual light bulb! (Definitely, put me in that category.) God does not need us to carry out His plan for humanity. However, when we submit to the super infusion of God's will into our lives through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, He makes us capable. If we were capable on our own, we would not need God. Then who would receive the glory?

It is time to attempt to answer the question, "How do we reach the world?" In the words of a friend, "We open our mouths and trust God." The things we identify that hold us back are the exact things that God wants to use to glorify Him. He rescued us from our past. We should be shouting it from the rooftops. Our insufficiencies in faith, knowledge, and courage are all changed as a result of Him being all-sufficient. It is only by taking the focus off of ourselves being incapable, and place unwavering faith in the fact that God is completely capable, that we become enabled to do what we are called to do!

In Matthew 28:19-20, we find what we call "The Great Commission." It is a short synopsis of how we are to reach the world. In my mind, I can condense it down to the first word of verse 19, "**go,**" and the last sentence of verse 20, "***And behold, I am with you always, to the***





end of the age.” He does not tell us to go do it on our own abilities, but that He will be with us to do what He has commanded us to do: Reach the world!







SNATCHING

REACH, DEVOTION 6

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

For the last couple of weeks, I have started my day by reading the Book of Jude. Normally, I read through a section and move forward, but I found a freshness in Jude that caught my attention.

It is only 25 verses, but it is rich with history, prophecy, object lessons, and practicality. Several things jumped out to me.

Paul's opening greeting of his books regularly says, ***"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."*** Jude also greets with ***"peace"*** but says mercy instead of grace and adds love. ***"Mercy, peace, and love"*** (verse 2) bring a new perspective.

In verse 3, he appeals us to ***"contend for the faith."*** I do definitely see how this relates to our reach theme this week (or even grow), but a phrase that shows up later hit me harder.

Jude bluntly says that Jesus brought the people out of Egypt (verse 5). He references ***"angels who did not stay within their own position of authority"*** (verse 6), Sodom and Gomorrah (verse 7), ***"the archangel Michael contending with the devil"*** over the body of Moses (verse 9), Cain, Balaam and Korah (verse 11).

I loved the analogies he uses in verses 12-13: ***"waterless clouds swept along by winds"*** and ***"fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted."*** He also references ***"wild waves"*** and ***"wandering stars."***





He refers to Enoch as a prophet and references the Lord coming with ten thousand of His holy ones (verse 14). I imagine this is the reference for the song, "He Could Have Called Ten Thousand Angels."

As I have had my heart jump so many times in the Book of Jude, I then was hit with verses 22-23, ***"And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh."*** The phrase ***"snatching them out of the fire"*** jumped out to me. Jude already referred to ***"eternal fire"*** (verse 7) and ***"utter darkness has been reserved forever"*** (verse 13), but the word "snatch" challenged me.

Have you ever burned yourself on the oven or stove? It is horrible. We are proactive in making sure our children do not get burned. Yet, we have loved ones headed into the fire while we sit back and watch. We need to snatch them out of the fire.

By the way, this word "snatch" is also used twice in John 10:27-29, ***"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."*** As followers of Christ, we are safe, but what about those around us?

We need to fight for others. We need to snatch them out of the fire. I am challenged by the heart of Charles Spurgeon, "If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay. If Hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go unwarned and unprayed for."





Who are you reaching out to so you may snatch them out of the fire?





LESSON TWO

GATHER

PASTOR PAT ROWLAND





Everyone loves a vacation! It is time away for a little rest and relaxation with people you love. A vacation takes some planning and thought.

1. What would be your ideal vacation?

A mountain retreat, beach get-away, or cross country RV trip could come to mind. For many people that ideal dream vacation would be some type of luxury cruise.

2. If you have been on a cruise ship, what makes it an ideal vacation?

Cruise ships are designed for one purpose, entertainment. A vacation cruise ship goes out of its way to make sure its passengers have a worry-free, happy, and fun experience. From the endless buffets to the abundant activities, you want for nothing on a cruise. They will even keep your kids busy so you can have some time with your wife. Cruise ships will make sure you have the time of your life. Why? It is because they want you to tell all of your friends about your amazing vacation.

Sometimes people tend to think of a Church as a cruise ship, in that it is supposed to meet my every need and go out of its way to make me happy. Some would consider the ideal Church to be a place of complete enjoyment, perfect customer service, and an experience they could not help but tell their friends.





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It is true that a Church will meet people's needs, and attending will raise your level of joy. However, the church is not for our entertainment; it is for our equipping and encouragement. It is not a place to be served; it is where we are privileged to serve. It is not just something we tell people about; it is where we invite them to be a part.

A better illustration of a ship for describing the Church might be an aircraft carrier. An aircraft carrier is always on a mission, and its purpose is not to carry passengers to beautiful destinations. Its purpose is to be a place for launching people into mission. Planes will land to be refueled while pilots debrief, and receive orders for their next mission. It is a dock for training and development while always being on alert and ready for action.

3. Do you feel like your expectations of Church identify more with it being a cruise ship or an aircraft carrier?

We gather in worship each week with expectations as well as needs after having a week where we faced demands and deadlines, schedules and stress, people and pressure. It is safe to say that the other six days of the week take from you, so you need the seventh to give something back to you.

4. How do you feel come Sunday?





5. What do you desire from a time of worship?

Worship defined simply means giving your “worth” to something or someone. It is giving of your time, your money, talents, or attention to something you greatly value. At its core, worship is about giving, not about what you get back from it, and anything can be worshiped.

There are three clear distinctions of Christian worship.

**Christian worship is focused on the God of the universe,
the one true triune God.**

The very first of the Ten Commandments, given to the people of Israel from God, is, ***“You shall have no other gods before me”*** (Exodus 20:3). Later in Exodus 34:14, God reminds them again that He desires their worship, ***“For you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”*** Of all the things to which you give worth, God is to be the highest of our giving.

6. Do you feel there are things in your life that compete for your worship of God? If so, what?

Christian worship is to bring God glory.



Worship is to be active, not just verbal or in our thoughts. Because of all that God has done for us and our worth of Him, we are to express that in how we live. Paul, writing instructions to the church at Corinth



LESSON TWO | GATHER

says, ***“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God”*** (1 Corinthians 10:31). Our everyday ordinary life purpose is to bring God glory. Bringing glory to God is something we are to do individually seven days a week as an act of worship.

7. Have you ever considered what you do every day and in every way is your worship?

8. Does that change the way you act or see things Monday through Saturday?

Focusing on the aspect of worshiping God in everyday life begins to have a multiplying effect on our faith and relationship with Christ. Paul refers to it as ***“being transformed.”*** In 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV), we read, ***“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”*** As we focus on bringing glory to God every day, we become more like Christ. It also has an increasing effect on our Sunday worship.

**Christian worship is to be corporate worship,
which is what we typically think of as worship.**

It is important that as believers, we come together weekly to gather for a time of worship.





9. What do you value about corporate worship?

The gathering has been part of the Christian Church since its beginning. In Acts 2:42-47, we read about the fellowship of the believers in the early Church. They ***“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship.”*** We gather first for the purpose of teaching and the proclamation of the Gospel, just as the early Church did.

10. Do you see the preaching of God’s Word as part of worship or separate from it?

It is important that God’s Word is central, meaning that a worship gathering must always include the proclamation of God’s Word. Most of the time, that includes a Pastor’s teaching from Scriptures, but it also includes the singing. The words of a worship song matter and they should be in line with biblical instruction.

11. The early Christian church also devoted themselves to ***“fellowship.”*** What does fellowship mean to you?



The fellowship of the gathering is not just what we get from it; it is also what we give to it. As chapter two closes out, Paul points out



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that when the early Church met together, they ***“praised God and enjoyed the favor of all the people”*** (Acts 2:47).

In God's creation, He said it is not good for us to be alone (Genesis 2:18); we are created to work in community. The fellowship of the Church, or the body of Christ is an association in a shared mission. We are part of something bigger than ourselves because of our relationship with God, but also because we are part of ***“fellowship.”*** Corporate worship reminds us that we are not in this alone.







LESSON TWO | GATHER






SCROOGE?

GATHER, DEVOTION 1

Max Sinclair

One of my favorite Christmas stories is a Charles Dickens classic, “*A Christmas Carol*.” The plot of the story follows an old man who is full of regret. He does not enjoy Christmas and is consumed with his own greed and self-importance. This man is Ebenezer Scrooge, and with that, we get the very term for any who do not have the Christmas spirit by referring to them as a scrooge. While watching the Disney version of this Christmas classic, I remarked to my wife how I totally understand why some become a scrooge during the holiday season. At one point in the original adaptation, Ebenezer loses the one whom he loves at Christmas. His father was abusive, his partner at the counting-house was corrupt, and all of these things had a profound effect on Scrooge. He was, at this time, all alone.

How does this Victorian-era classic on the importance of selflessness have anything to do with gathering? Well, according to Hebrews 10:24-25, the author states, ***“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”*** One can rightly assume that Scrooge was “neglected.” Scrooge was not welcomed; he was not given a “wellness check,” and no one cared about Scrooge because Scrooge did not care about anyone else. The importance of gathering is not about us. Instead, it is about God, it is about placing the Lord on His throne, and yet in those moments, we take the gathering and see what we can get out of it. In “*A Christmas Carol*,” Ebenezer was a miser who tried to swindle everything out of people to get what he wanted. Do we sometimes become a “scrooge” to God?





As of late, I have really felt like a “scrooge” to the Lord. I cry out to Him asking for what I want: I want to grow closer to Him, I want to live by faith, and I want to be successful in my ministry. All of which are not bad things, yet my heart behind it is corrupted. I want to grow closer to Him so others can marvel at how my walk with Him is better than theirs. I want to live by faith so that I can be seen as this pillar of the community that does not struggle. I want to be successful in my ministry, so I can be a rock star preacher. All of those are me being greedy for the things of the Lord. Yet, when we gather, it is a good time for us to remember who it is that is in charge. The Apostle Paul states in his letter to the church of Rome, ***“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”*** (Romans 12:1). Our job as Christians is to live sacrificially, not to live with a consumeristic mentality. After this season of Christmas, I urge you that while we gather not to be a “Scrooge” to the Lord, but yet be those who live in the constant sacrifice to His will.



WHY CHRISTIANS GATHER



GATHER, DEVOTION 2

Pastor Gareth Volz

Most Christians make it a regular practice to attend a worship service at least once a week. I remember growing up that my family was at church every time the doors opened. On Sunday morning, we attended Sunday School at 9:45 am, followed by the morning worship service at 11:00 am. Sunday evenings, there were youth gatherings at 5:45 pm, followed by the evening worship service at 7:00 pm. Tuesday was Boys Brigade at 7:00 pm. Wednesday was Prayer Meeting at 7:00 pm. Thursday was Choir practice at 7:00 pm. My parents always made sure that we attended any service we could.

Many people go to church because it was the way their parents raised them. I am thankful for my parents and how they raised me, but that cannot be the only reason I go to church each week. Have you ever stopped to think about why you go to church each week? In addition to what their parents taught them, some people will say it is what God expects, citing Hebrews 10:25, ***“not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some.”***

Christians gathering together is the right thing to do. However, I do not believe God wants us to do it just because it is the right thing to do. I believe God wants us to gather together for the right reasons. In Romans 10:1-3, Paul said that the Israelites were zealous toward God, but their zeal was not based on knowledge. They were trying to please God by completing a checklist on what they did for Him. The church at Laodicea did things for God, but Jesus described them as ***“lukewarm,”*** neither hot nor cold toward God. Because of their attitude, He wanted to spit them out of His mouth (Revelation 3:15-16).





So then, what are the right reasons we gather together? First of all, we gather together because we love God, and He is worthy of our worship. As we come together to worship God, we should prepare our hearts to worship Him. Our focus should be on Him, and we should come with thankful hearts for His sacrifice on our behalf, His provision for our lives, His protection over our lives, and His constant presence in our lives.

We also come together to worship God so that we can edify one another. The word edification comes from the root word edifice, meaning building or structure. We come together to build up one another and to encourage one another in the faith. Paul told us in Ephesians 4:11-13, ***“And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”*** The idea is that when Christians gather together, we build each other up and encourage each other in the faith, we become more mature in the Lord, and the church body becomes a strong witness for the Lord.

Another reason we gather together is that Christ is there with us. Jesus said in Matthew 18:20, ***“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”*** Think of that; Jesus is right there in our midst when we gather together to worship Him. When we sing, He is right there, listening to our songs of praise. When we read His Word, He is right there listening to us. When we pray, He looks at our hearts and hears our words. When we truly worship Him, He is right there with us.

Wow! When we gather together in true worship, Jesus is right there in our midst. That should cause us to make sure our heart attitude





is right when we gather together to worship, and that our focus is on Jesus, and Him alone. We might be able to fool people, but not God. He wants us to worship Him in truth.

We need to make sure that when we gather together each week that we have one focus – Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen (Romans 11:36)!





A MATTER OF THE HEART

GATHER, DEVOTION 3

Holly Boston

About six years ago, I accepted this position on staff as Director of Women's Ministry. At about that same time, our Church began defining our mission as Reach, Gather, Grow, and Back to Reach, taken from the Great Commission in Matthew chapter 28. Since then, we have revisited this topic every September and January. These months are typically when believers reassess their priorities and set goals.

As I write, it is January 6th. I recently returned from vacation and set out to begin preparing for another year of study. I reached in the box and pulled out the new book: Reach, Gather, Grow. Full disclosure: I rolled my eyes and thought, "Not again." To add to my weariness, I needed to write this devotion on gathering. I began seeking God's guidance in writing about an "old" topic in a fresh way. God is so good and so very faithful. He managed to teach me a new truth.

Six years ago, I was frustrated. Our pastor was frequently preaching on "What the church is not." He frequently reminded us that we are members of one body, each having a specific gift we are meant to use to grow His Church. Though these truths are very important, I found myself thinking, "This is not deep enough" or "I am not being fed." I was not growing spiritually, but my attitude was growing worse. Through the teaching of our mission, God taught me that my Sunday gathering is not meant to be my time in the Word. My Growth Community and Bible study is the primary place to grow.

Several years later, I began to get frustrated again. This time I started to resent the interruptions during "my" gathering time to assist



ladies with their needs. The Lord stepped in and pointed me to a second truth. We are called to ***“meet together,” “encouraging one another”*** (Hebrews 10:25), and ***“count others more significant than yourselves”*** (Philippians 2:3). Ouch! It was difficult for this selfish believer to receive and yet another important truth.

The third truth is the icing on the cake. Over the last week, I have started revisiting our mission, and God faithfully brought me to a passage. Psalm 84:1-2 says, ***“How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.”***

My commentary suggests this Psalm was written by a Jewish man who was unable to go to the temple (Church). In those days, Jews were expected to travel three times a year to the temple. It was not like today, where believers can enter the throne room of God any time, any place. The presence of God was believed to be only in the temple. Scripture teaches us that for some, this required months of travel by foot, through desert conditions while navigating dangerous animals and situations. This puts a lot in perspective. I have been convicted about those times when I did not want to leave my warm home to drive ten miles to the gathering time that fit my schedule. I am really hoping someone else can identify with this. As you read on, you realize this man views the temple as his home, like ***“the sparrow finds a home”*** (verse 3) and values this time greatly, ***“For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere”*** (verse 10). Clearly, the longing of this believer’s heart was to be in the house of God.

I realized I have a lot in common with this gentleman. My flight on Christmas Eve landed at 4:45, and my first concern was whether or not we would make it to the last gathering. Many of the people at church were strangers as friends were traveling, and I was





surrounded by the unfamiliar faces of out of town guests. Honestly, I enjoyed my uninterrupted opportunity to worship my Savior, and it was so good to be home.

It is true that a word of encouragement on Sunday morning is important, but the gathering was not meant to be my sole opportunity to grow in His Word. It is true that we are called to gather with and encourage those around us, but not at the expense of our personal worship time with God. Hence, I needed to find balance.

Believer, what is the desire of your heart? Is gathering with the saints a priority? Do you fall in the category of believers who do not want to get up early on their one day off, do not want to battle the snow or fight the traffic, or would rather serve because you learn just as much online or have to get your child to travel sports? There are many excuses, but when all is said and done, we rob ourselves when we choose not to worship and fellowship with God.

Free Commercial: if you are racing (or floating) into gathering after prayer and worship, you have missed Him!





CELEBRATING THE GOSPEL

GATHER, DEVOTION 4

Pastor Ben Kirkman

There are many misconceptions about what people think a Church gathering should be. We will not be addressing any of those right now. Instead, I want to point out one of the greatest opportunities that gathering together as followers of Christ presents to us, one thing on which our gathering together should always be centered. When we gather, we have the opportunity to celebrate the Gospel together.

The Gospel is what gives us life and hope. The Gospel is what changes and heals broken lives. The Gospel is a gift from a loving God to people who have a need they can never meet on their own. Romans 1:16 says, ***“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”*** The Gospel is good news for people that are born into some really bad news. Every person is born a sinner, and as a sinner, they are separated from a perfect, holy, and righteous God. As sinful people, we have no hope of having a relationship with a perfect God. However, God in His mercy and grace made a way for us to be forgiven of our sins and declared righteous. He made it possible for the relationship to be restored. In I John 4:14, we read, ***“And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.”*** John 3:16 adds, ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”***

Jesus left perfect Heaven, came to this imperfect world and was born of a virgin. He was completely God and completely man at the same time. Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life, yet was executed on a cross, bore God's wrath, and took the punishment we deserve for



our sin. He was buried, and three days later, He rose from the dead, defeating death and sin and giving us hope. We can repent of our sins and call on Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and He will justify us and restore our broken relationship with the Father. Faith in Jesus and His finished work on the cross is the only way to stand right before a holy God. Jesus made it possible! That is the Gospel.

When we gather together as believers, we have the privilege of celebrating Jesus and the Gospel. When we gather together, we need to be mindful of what the Lord has done for us and make it a priority to celebrate our amazing God. Psalm 34:1-3 says, ***“I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!”***



WE ARE THE CHURCH




GATHER, DEVOTION 5

Sierra Combs

I will never forget the moment my nephew reminded me about a very simple truth of the Bible. Of course, it was a truth I very well already knew (and was reminded of constantly by my brother-in-law), but it was memorable all the same. Driving in the car while on vacation, I mentioned something about missing church that weekend. My nephew, who was only about five or six at the time, was extremely quick to jump in and tell me, “We don’t go to church; we are the church.” His father (my brother-in-law) taught him well! It made me laugh then and still does now when I think about it, but it really is a truth that is so easily forgotten. We do not just go to church; we are the Church. If you are a born again follower of Jesus Christ, you are a member of the body of Christ. That is an awesome concept! Often times, people get caught up focusing on the building, denomination, program, or worship style, and lose sight of why we gather together. The body of Christ has been gathering together since the Church was established thousands of years ago, as seen in the book of Acts.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us of the importance of gathering together when he tells us to ***“stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near”*** (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Though our gatherings may look a little different than they did back in Israel in the first century, the reasoning behind it stays the same. Going to church does not in any way make you a Christian, but a true follower of Christ should desire to be regularly gathering with their brothers and sisters in Christ. It is here where we can encourage





others and be encouraged. Aside from the fellowship, we gather so we can corporately worship God and be taught the truth from His Word. As a child who attended church on a weekly basis, I remember oftentimes wishing I could skip and just sleep a little longer. As an adult, even though I am far more tired and sleep-deprived than I was as a kid, I cannot wait for the weekends when I get to come and gather with my brothers and sisters in Christ!





PURE JOY

GATHER, DEVOTION 6

Shawna Johnson

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” James 1:2 (NIV)

Wait, what did that say? Let me try that again, ***“Consider it pure joy”*** is fine, but ***“whenever you face trials”*** is challenging. Is this saying I am supposed to be joyful not only through my trials but because of them?

We all face struggles and conflicts. Trials are inevitable. Yet, how do we ***“consider it pure joy?”***

James 1:3 (NIV) continues, ***“Because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”*** Trials can be a blessing because we can come out better for it on the other side!

For the first time in my walk with the Lord, I am beginning to understand this concept. I will let you in on a not-so-secret part of my life. I am not always firm in my faith; I waiver.

This last season, I struggled with depression (another first for me). I began to question myself, and eventually, it turned into questioning God, and even His people. I knew that He was good, and He knew what I was going through, but even still, my faith was wavering. Once I gained the courage to ask for prayer and seek counseling, I was surrounded by reminders that my feelings were not His Truth. No, our feelings do not equal Truth.





God's Truth is:

I am created in His image! ***“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them”*** (Genesis 1:27).

He cares about me so much; He even knows the ridiculous details, like how many hairs I have on my head! ***“Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows”*** (Luke 12:7).

He knew me before I knew me - and knows me better! ***“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them”*** (Psalm 139:13-16).

I am, in fact, a child of God. ***“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”*** (John 1:12 NIV).

Finally, that in Him, I am whole. ***“For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.”*** (Colossians 2:9-10 NIV).

I was able to be reminded of all of this because I am surrounded by a community that loves the Lord and loves me.





I wish I had continued to read. I wish I continued to go to gatherings. I wish I continued to pray. However, when I did not, they did. Community is important. God's Word is important. When we are down, they both can remind us of this, ***“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful”*** (Hebrews 10:23 NIV).

Now, on the other side of this trial, I can help someone else be reminded of who they are in Christ! Gathering with the church family is important! After all, it is what He calls us to do! ***“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another”*** (Hebrews 10:24-25 NIV).





LESSON THREE

GROW

PASTOR MANNING BROWN





From the moment we are conceived, our body is in a state of growth. While in the womb, God has designed us to grow to prepare us for the moment of birth. At the moment of birth, our bodies are designed to then grow, as a separate, living being yet still dependent on others for care, love, sustenance, and nurturing. Growth is life, and just as this applies to our physical self, it also applies to our mental, emotional, and spiritual self.

1. What are some of the seminal moments in your life?

2. Why are those moments important?

Growth means maturing. Where the immature person may grouse and grumble about his or her current situation (and believe me, I have certainly had my moments where I have done so), someone who is mature will look for opportunities in whatever situation he or she might find opportunity. As a young second lieutenant, one of the many bits of advice I received was to “bloom where you are planted.” While it is a statement to encourage excellence no matter what situation you are in, it is also a statement about maturing or always growing.

3. At what age did you first consider yourself a “grown up?”





4. Do you consider yourself as still growing?

The Bible is not silent on this issue. The New Testament is replete with examples of how, as Christians, we are to be ever-growing, striving toward maturity. A prime example is Paul's admonishment to the church at Corinth. He was quick to discipline the church in Corinth for their lack of maturity in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3; ***“But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For a while, there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?”***

This admonishment was a result of their in-fighting and agenda-setting. This got in the way of them growing in Christ. It can be frustrating working with an individual or a group when there is no real desire to get something done, or trying to teach them a concept. I taught as an adjunct professor at a Christian college several years ago. I would get frustrated when some of my students, rather than read the material, would satisfy themselves by studying via “the bold type” method - reading section headlines instead of the entire text. I readily admit that I was not the most motivated student as a first-semester freshman at the university I attended. My GPA that first semester was a lack-luster 1.7, even though I was a solid “B” student throughout high school; being in college presented me with a growth problem. I had no real motivation (so I thought) to get out of bed for an 8 a.m. math class on the other side of campus. Well, getting a zero-point on a five-credit class got me motivated, especially when I showed my father, who was footing the bill for my higher education.





He simply looked over the top of his glass, looked me square in the eye, and said, “If you think I am going to continue to pay for this, you are sadly mistaken.” From that point on, it became a personal challenge to prove to myself (and my father) that I was ready for the “meat” of my education; milk was not going to cut it.

There are certainly particular experiences that can literally “grow us up overnight.” Seminal moments in my life include getting married, joining the military, having children, and in particular, the first time I deployed to Iraq. I found myself in literally a foreign setting, with the reality of war around me. It changed my outlook and how I would conduct myself as an officer for the rest of my career in the military. However, even in these singular moments of growth, they were (and are) steps in a growth process. Later in 1 Corinthians, Paul reminded his audience of this fact. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:11, ***“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.”***

5. Who or what events in your life do you feel lead you to your decision to accept Christ as your savior?

6. After getting saved, how did you feel?



To “become” implies change, and in Paul’s case, he is referring to his spiritual growth, no longer thinking as a “baby Christian,” but rather a Christian who has grown to manhood. In Ephesians 4:11-16, Paul wrote, ***“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists,***



the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

7. Who inspired you most in your walk as a new Christian and why?

8. Do you feel like your walk with Christ is helping you grow? Why or why not?

In other words, growth is not growth for growth's sake. As Christians, we are to strive for growth so that we can be used by God in the furtherance and propagation of the Gospel; to proclaim Christ. Just as no child is able or can be expected to function as an adult, a believer who remains as a child spiritually will not be able to function as a mature Christian. Remaining spiritually immature leaves one prone to false doctrine. With growth (or some would say "age")





comes wisdom. To be effective in carrying out the Great Commission (making disciples), we must be spiritually grown in order to do so.

9. What can you do differently?

10. How can you help a fellow believer to grow in their walk?





LESSON THREE | GROW



STUDY THE REAL THING

GROW, DEVOTION 1

Debbie Kerr

“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” Ephesians 4:15

Growing up is a painful and seemingly long process. When I was a young girl, I would complain to my mom that my legs hurt, and she would say, “You are having growing pains.” For me to grow up, my body had to work hard and endure the process, especially through the awkward phases. When we first come to faith in Christ, we are like newborn babies. We can only handle and assimilate a small amount, but as we begin to grow, we begin to tolerate solid food. This part of our spiritual journey can be discouraging because we need help to gain our balance to walk worthy of our calling. We fall and get back up again by the grace of God. Peter encourages us in 1 Peter 2:2, ***“Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow into salvation.”*** In order to grow spiritually, we need to develop an appetite to study and apply God’s Word. It takes time and discipline, but it is the most valuable investment of time we will ever make.

When we decide we are going to make it a daily discipline to study God’s Word, beware the enemy will put every obstacle in our way to keep us from it. That, right there, should tell us how powerful and life-changing it is! We need to be intentional and dedicated to growing in the Word. I once saw a great object lesson on this. There was a huge jar filled to the top with beans, the person then tried to fit a tennis ball in the top of the full jar, but there was no room left. Then they emptied the beans from the jar and put the tennis ball in first then added the beans. Guess what? It all fit perfectly! The lesson is this: when we fit



God into the first part of our day, we will accomplish so much more. Conversely, when we try to add Him in at the end of the day, there will likely be no room left.

I recently joined a Bible reading accountability group. We use an app on our phone for the Scripture reading along with a ten-minute recap and application of the passages. In three months' time, I will have read the entire New Testament chronologically. I look forward to my time in the Word every morning; it has truly become the very best part of my day. When we get into God's Word, His Word gets into us. Even if we do not comprehend everything we read, the Bible says we will be washed by the water of the Word (Ephesians 5:26). It is the only book that is 100% true, accurate, alive, and has the power to change us into His image!

Hebrews 4:12 says, ***“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”***

In 2 Timothy 2:15 (KJV), we read, ***“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”***

Did you know you will not recognize a counterfeit by studying it?

You only recognize a counterfeit by studying the real thing!

Study the Truth!





FIRM FOUNDATION

GROW, DEVOTION 2


Taylor McCullough

“The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, it as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches, and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.” Luke 8:14-15 (NIV)

A seed needs good soil to grow properly. Sometimes, things happen that hinder a seed from growing up to achieve all that it could, because not everything can be controlled (for example the weather). Persevering through the storms and droughts is a factor of growth.

Like a seed, we too need good soil. Our soil is our foundation in Christ. We need to be actively fed from His Word, and keep Him as our foundation. Like the weather, there are many aspects of our lives that we cannot control. Unforeseen things such as getting sick, being let go from a job, or someone we are close to leaving us, could all have the opportunity to hinder our growth. That is if we allow it to. There are things that happen in this life that help shape us into who God has called us to be. When something occurs that catches us off guard; our foundation is so important. We need to focus on Christ so that we are not tossed to and fro by the waves of this life.

In Ephesians 4:14-15, Paul discusses the importance of growing in Christ, to avoid being overcome by the waves, or led astray. He says, ***“So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather speaking***





the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

Growing in His Word and becoming more Christ-like should be our goal daily. When we are rooted in Christ, we become strong by His strength, to persevere through what is out of our control.





DESIRE TO GROW


GROW, DEVOTION 3

Pastor Gareth Volz

I remember being a kid and wanting to grow up. I was never satisfied being the age I was. When I was four, my best friend at church was starting kindergarten, but I was not old enough. I wanted to go to school just like he did. When I was in elementary school, I could not wait to be in junior high. My school played a nasty trick on me; they decided when I was in sixth grade to change the grade structure of the school from K-6 to K-8. I was so bummed. Then when I was in eighth grade, they added ninth grade. It felt like a conspiracy. Finally, I got to high school and could not wait until I turned sixteen so I could drive. I never seemed to be satisfied with the age I was. I always wanted to grow and be more mature. I wanted to be like my father, uncles, and grandfather.

Every Christian should have a desire to grow and be more mature in the Lord. The Christian who is growing in the Lord will become more and more like Jesus Christ. Just as physical growth begins at birth and is expected by our parents, so spiritual growth begins when we are born again in Jesus and is expected by God.

As we grow physically, we realize there are privileges and responsibilities that come with maturing. We get to drive, vote, go to college or trade school, work, and earn money. We also have to pay for housing, food, transportation (cars cost money), and things that are important to us. Physical growth requires exercise and practice, no matter what our interests (sports, music, and work skills).



In the same way, spiritual growth gives us privileges and responsibilities in the Lord. Hebrews 5:11-14 makes the analogy of



spiritual growth to physical growth, saying we should not remain as a babe in Christ feeding on milk, which are the elementary doctrines of the faith, but growing in Christ and feeding on the solid food doctrines of the faith.

As we mature in Christ, we are given privileges and skills by God's Spirit. We grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus (2 Peter 3:18). We are able to discern good from evil (Hebrews 5:14). Yet, we must also desire to grow in Christ. We are told to add virtue to our faith, and knowledge to our virtue, and self-control to our knowledge, and steadfastness to our self-control, and godliness to our steadfastness, and brotherly affection to our godliness, and love to our brotherly affection. If these qualities are seen in our lives, then we are growing in the Lord, and God can use us to do His work (2 Peter 1:5-8).

One way we can measure our spiritual growth is to check and see if our lives show an increase in the fruit of the Spirit. We should be known for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

As we grow physically, we become stronger through exertion and resistance exercises. Likewise, spiritual growth is developed through hard times and life's trials. James 1:2-4 tells us we should, ***"Count it all joy my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."***

Do not just attend a gathering once a week. Join a Growth Community and study God's Word with fellow believers. There we can help and encourage one another in spiritual growth. Jesus knows our hearts, and He has promised to oversee our spiritual growth when we desire





to become more like Him. Philippians 1:6 declares, ***“And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”***





GROW IN THE WORD



GROW, DEVOTION 4


Larry Gabbara

I am an ex-catholic. It sounds funny to say. We were taught to believe in God, the cross, death, and resurrection. I was never taught about salvation or a personal relationship with Jesus. As a born-again Christian, I learned the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but the way it was driven home was through studying the Word.

We grow in the Word in many ways: attending gatherings, becoming involved in Growth Communities, and spending quiet time with Jesus.

Once we are saved, the Holy Spirit comes into us. We must open our hearts and minds, but to truly grow in the Lord, we need to study and learn continually.

Peter challenges us, ***“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen”*** (2 Peter 3:18).

Serving is another way that we grow. Being involved in the foodservice part of our Recovery Ministry, I have seen growth within myself and in our volunteers. I have built relationships with the volunteers, and seeing them work together to serve all those who come for dinner each week is such a blessing to so many. It is incredible how we all have grown. I read a quote by Mark Opperman, “Every person who receives Jesus as their forgiver and leader needs to keep growing in their faith.”

In Acts chapter 9, we read about the conversion of Saul. God blinds him on the road to Damascus, and he repents of his evil ways. After



three days, he is able to see again, and his life is forever changed as he begins to grow to trust Jesus as his Savior. Paul's early life after his conversion shows us how he grew in his faith.

The Bible points out the dramatic conversion of Saul to Paul. Saul's conversion is one that shows that we all can grow in the Lord. Paul says that he was the chief of sinners. He persecuted, imprisoned and, even agreed to the killing of followers of Christ. Acts 8:3 records, ***"But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison."***

Things changed for Paul after he was a believer. Acts 9:23 says, ***"When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him."*** Soon the Jews were plotting to kill him for following Jesus. Bible scholars believe the phrase ***"many days"*** means a span of about three years. During those years, Paul grew in his faith and became what God wanted him to be.

Are we growing? Are we cooperating with what we feel is God's will in our life? If we want to continue to grow, we need to keep seeking to know Jesus and follow Him in all our ways.





GROWTH RINGS


GROW, DEVOTION 5

Roger Allen

“And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” Galatians 6:9

There are times when our Christian growth appears stagnate, much like when our goals in life plateau. If we fight through the will to quit, we find ourselves stronger and leaner on the other side. Pushing through obstacles that could be a detriment, we embrace the courage that is required to persevere. Our upbringing, economic background, physical, or emotional status can often be enough to deter us from reaching the finish line. I liken it to the growth of a tree, from germination to maturation, the strength of the tree is determined by the scars of its past. Where accidents, disease, and drought take a toll, you will find an inner strength to the tree that has faced adversity and survived. Luthiers, woodturners and carpenters, all prize old-growth trees for these reasons. Character (tone), strength, and beauty are to name a few.

Taken from the arborday.org website, we find a description of what a cross-section of a tree might look like. With each ring representing another year of growth, we quickly see the totality of life on this particular tree. As with us, the spring of life typically brings fast growth. Plenty of rain and sunshine, the tree finds little resistance to impede its burgeoning growth. Equally, the tree progresses rather quickly during its early years, as do we. However, it is not long before we see the scars of an indeterminate force, much like the world around us; it has left an impression on the trunk of the tree. In response, the tree has girded up the side bearing the most pressure, creating in it an indelible mark. Suddenly a new pressure has arrived; competition





from its neighbors has reduced the nutrients that are required for rapid growth. Just like us as we leave home and begin to build our lives, outside influences have begun to take their toll. Entering mid-life, we once again see a rapid and sustained transformation. Hopefully, for the tree, it will mean thicker growth rings, and for us, a more stable and sustainable lifestyle. Yet, no life is exempt from the disasters that life brings. In this example, it is a fire that has done the deed to the tree, and for us, it may be the death of someone we love. It could possibly be divorce, the loss of a job, or some other situation out of our control.

One of the most sought after pieces or “blanks” of wood are burls. Burls are pieces of wood that, through the process of stress, have deformed the tree in such a manner as to make bulbous outgrowths on the trunk of the tree. Prized for their colors and unique grain, they are sought after by bowl turners worldwide. Beautiful and individual, I cannot help comparing them to those who have lived a life of such stress, yet persevered. Their beauty appears from the inside and affects their outward beauty, too. They illuminate a room with their presence. Through personal trials, they have held on to their love of the Word and have been obedient to the Lord. Knowing their trials bring forth perseverance and steadfast love, their growth is quite evident.

James 1:2-4 says, ***“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”***

In the parable of the soils (Matthew 13:18-23), we find seeds that are sown on different mediums along the path. When sown to good soil, the seed begins to flourish and grow despite adversity. Think





of ourselves as that seed, when the evil one comes, that you too will be able to withstand wiles of the devil and his minions because you have gladly received God's Word. By receiving the Word and the growth that comes with it, your weakness will be made strong. Desire the growth that trials bring. Let the scars that life brought not deter you, but strengthen you in your faith. God intended them and your unique differences to be used for His glory, and through a desire to grow, you too will hear ***"well done, good and faithful servant"*** (Matthew 25:21).







GROWING TOGETHER


GROW, DEVOTION 6

Richie Henson

The Bible is full of metaphors concerning the concept of growth. Trees, seeds, and children are all mentioned to describe growth. In many of these metaphors, it can be easy to think of growth as a personal goal or achievement. However, it must be noted that although personal growth is important, said growth has a purpose beyond ourselves. That is, we are personally growing in order to aid the entire Body of Christ.

In Ephesians chapter 4, Paul expresses that Jesus gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers in order to build up the body towards the unity of faith. This unity is then described as the catalyst for the maturity of the body. Paul explains this maturity is needed in order to withstand human cunning and craftiness that may sway us from the truth. Paul then drives the practicality of the point home in Ephesians 4:15-16, ***“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”***

This passage paints a specific picture concerning the way in which the Church may grow into its purpose. Paul says we must speak the truth in love, and in order to do this, there must be a community. As the Church engages in a true community that creates a margin for the truth to be spoken freely, it provides growth into Jesus and away from self. Likewise, as the Church grows into Jesus, the parts of the body gain clarity on their roles and purposes, allowing the body to function properly in love.





GROW | DEVOTION 6

It is of great importance to grow personally; however, it cannot be understated that in order for the Church to mature, there must be a growth of the community. As individuals get stronger in their personal faith, it must be passed and translated to others through the community for the express purpose of being a stronger, more mature body. In doing so, the Church will be able to fulfill Jesus' purpose of spreading the Gospel to all nations.







LESSON FOUR

BACK TO REACH

PASTOR NOBLE BAIRD





As we wrap up our vision series, it is important for us to remember the mission of the Church. Now, notice when I write “Church,” it is a capital “C.” I do this because our mission as The River is the same mission as all of us who are called followers of Christ to have, which is: to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

1. Can you list any passages of Scripture where we are called to this mission?

When we began this series, we talked about reach. This is truly the starting point of our faith. It is the acknowledgment and conviction of sin, the understanding that we cannot save ourselves, the confession of Christ as our Savior, and the belief in our hearts that He truly is who He says and who Scripture says He is. Paul writes in Romans 10:9, ***“Because, 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.”*** Reach is the concept that at one point in each of our lives, someone reached us with the Gospel of Christ.

2. Can you remember that person who reached into your life and shared with you the Gospel of Christ?

After reach, we took the next step to gather. This is where we come together on a weekly basis to worship our Heavenly Father as a body of believers. We do this through worship, prayer, tithing, hearing from God’s Word, and simply spending time with one another. I love how the writer in Hebrews speaks of gathering. In Hebrews





10:23-25, it reads, ***“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”*** Here, we are reminded of not only why we gather, but of the importance of us making it a priority in our lives.

3. What do you look forward to in gatherings?

4. Is gathering a priority or an inconvenience for you?

Last week, we covered grow. Now, if you are reading this study guide, then I would assume it is out of the desire to fulfill this third part of our vision. Grow is simply our daily time with God. For some, this takes the form of a cup of coffee and God’s Word every morning. For others, it is an app on your phone with a daily notification and supplemental reading. Or, if you are like me, it is reading your Bible at the gym while you are getting your morning dose of cardio! Regardless of where you are getting your quiet time with the Lord, I truly hope it is a priority for you. Jesus called us in Matthew 28:19-20 saying, ***“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 followers of Christ, the only way that we will be able to teach others what Christ





has commanded us (make disciples) is if we are truly taking time to read, understand, and truly grow in His Word.

5. What have you been reading in your personal time with Christ?

6. Do you find it difficult to daily spend time in God's Word?

Now, naturally, upon seeing the cover for this book and seeing our vision say "Reach, Gather, Grow," it would be understandable if one thought they were done and the cycle was completed. However, this could not be further from the truth. As this is a cycle, our next step is to go back to the beginning. Going back to reach can be a very intimidating and uncomfortable step. Yet, it is truly the culmination of all that we have studied and prepared for up to this point.

I am not sure if you are like me, but I have always hated tests. I truly believe that life would be better in a world without tests! The anxiety, pressure, hours of study, on top of the inevitable brain-fart, have always made tests one of my greatest enemies.

7. Do you love tests?





LESSON FOUR | BACK TO REACH

8. Do you have fun stories of an epic failure or surprise comeback, when it comes to taking a test?

In Acts, Luke writes what I feel is the second part and follow-up to his first book, Luke. Jesus had victoriously risen from the grave, and He had begun to reveal Himself to His disciples and His followers. Then, after forty days, He left one last challenge to His followers. Luke records what happened next, Acts 1:6-8 reads, ***“So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.’”*** Jesus bestows to His disciples and truly to us as His followers an incredible designation, ***“you will be my witnesses.”***

9. What does it mean to be a witness?

10. Has there been a time in your life where you wished that you had not been a witness to someone or something?

When Jesus calls us to be a witness, He is not simply calling us to do this when it is convenient. He is calling us to do this on a daily





basis. So, naturally, the next question we may ask is how. How can we practically be a witness to Jesus on a weekly and daily basis? The book of James truly helps paint a picture of just how we can accomplish this.

Now, I have always had a love-hate relationship with the book of James. The reason being, it is just jam-packed with some seriously slap-you-in-the-face truth! James writes in James 2:14-17, ***“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”*** Now, know my heart and understand what James is saying in this passage. There is no debate on the fact that if we confess and believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and have truly asked Him to be Lord of our lives, then we are saved. However, if we go around with a bullhorn and try smacking people upside the head with our Bibles, we are turning so many people away from the truth of Christ and ultimately lose an opportunity to show His love. What James is referring to in this passage is the importance of putting our money where our mouth is.

11. What are some practical ways, in which we can share the love of Christ with our actions?



12. When was the last time you did this?



LESSON FOUR | BACK TO REACH

I truly feel that this concept of going back to reach can be wrapped up with this final passage from James. He writes in James 1:22, ***“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”*** Church, we are called to be a witness of our loving Savior, every single day of our lives. Every morning we wake up, we have a new chance to share His love. As we end, I want to challenge you with this question.

Are you truly being a witness of Jesus Christ in your words and your actions, or are you simply being a follower who acts only out of convenience and comfort?







LESSON FOUR | BACK TO REACH



WHY BACK TO REACH?



BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 1


John Rigg

While serving in South Africa with the ministry Key of Hope, someone took my wife and me to a place just west of Port Shepstone called Oribi Gorge, about 75 miles south of Durban. Words cannot describe what we heard, saw with our eyes, and touched that day. The gorge carved out of sandstone, is approximately 19 miles in length, 1,300 feet deep, and over three miles at its widest point. We experienced sensory overload that day as this surprisingly quiet place was stunning to observe and a thrilling place to set foot.

From that day forward, whenever we had the chance to expose someone to the wonders of Oribi Gorge, we went out of our way to do so. Seeing the wonder in their eyes as they, too, were overwhelmed by what they heard, saw, and touched brought us great joy!

In a similar way, the apostle John describes what he and his fellow disciples had heard, seen, and touched concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. In 1 John 1:1 (NKJV), he says, ***“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life.”***

In this letter, John explains to the recipients just why he was writing to them. He and the disciples that were with him had been changed forever by their encounter with Jesus Christ. They were bearing witness that the gift of eternal life and a restored relationship with the Father had been given to them. John wanted them to know that this was also available to them as well.





He continues in verses 2-3 (NKJV), ***“The life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”***

Sin has broken the relationship between God and mankind. Nevertheless, God the Father has atoned for sin through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus on the cross and made it possible for anyone to have a right relationship with Him once again through faith, for now, and forevermore.

In verse 4 (NKJV), he adds, ***“And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.”***

The joy that John had received from the Lord was what he wanted others to know. John understood that the world could not offer complete or lasting joy because the source of worldly joy is only temporary (2 Peter 3:10).

As much as my wife and I wanted others to experience the grandeur of Oribi Gorge in South Africa, the joy that would be produced from our visits could only be temporary. Only a proper relationship with the Lord can produce a joy that is full, complete, and eternal.

So, why do we emphasize going back to reach?

Why is it important that you and I commit to reaching others with the message of the Gospel?

It is so that their ***“joy may be full.”***



SCHEDULED FOR SUCCESS

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 2

Wes McCullough

The River Church is very active in its ministries. Gatherings, Community Center, Growth Communities, and prison ministry are a few of them. God keeps opening doors for us as a church, and we are called to be the salt and light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16) and to ***“go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation”*** (Mark 16:15). Everyone within the River Church community has ample opportunities to be used by God.

My first involvement in ministry was as a 14-year-old in the church band. I played every week until I left for college. During my college years, because of the pool of instrumentalists and my quiet nature, I was very inactive in ministry. After graduation, I went home, and I have been involved in church practically every weekend for the last eleven years.

My experience with the ministry has taught me this principle: if you want to attend church consistently, have some responsibilities. Get involved with the nursery, become a greeter or volunteer with children or students. Get scheduled regularly and take on the responsibility of serving your church family and guests visiting the church.

God has a plan to use you. If you open yourself to be the hands and feet of Jesus, you may be the answer to someone's prayers. It may seem a trivial deed to you, but it could be monumental to someone else. Chances are you will be blessed as well.

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3:17



“Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people.” Ephesians 6:7 (NIV)

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies — in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” 1 Peter 4:10-11





A JAR

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 3

Josh Lahring

About 16 years ago, when I came to know Christ, I was so thrilled about the things of God I wanted to serve Him with my life in any way I could. I started serving at my local church, helping with tech and music. I was studying music at U of M Flint and decided to transfer to a Bible college. I wanted to learn more about the Bible and someday hoped to be in full-time ministry. A few years went by, and college was not helping my desire to study the Bible. It just did not interest me like I had thought it would. Eventually there came an opportunity to be in full-time ministry, and I was as excited for that as when I first started serving in the Church. I loved to be busy for the Lord. However, year after year, I was more drained, exhausted, stressed, anxious, and depressed. I struggled to find the desire I once had and wondered why I was even in ministry.

Through many people God brought into my life, and hearing the Gospel preached, He revealed what my problem was. I had left the glory and wonder of the Gospel. I left the cross as if it were just where I started in my faith, and I would move on without the needed growth. Through being broken down to nothing is when I realized how glorious the Gospel is.

Paul wrote, ***“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us”*** (2 Corinthians 4:7).



I was a shattered jar, and all I had left was that beautiful treasure that was inside. In my brokenness, it shone brighter than it ever had before. I recall my years as a believer when I spent time thinking I



had to serve in Church and live life a certain way to be worthy of the grace I received. However, God does not need my works or anything from me as the best of my works are as filthy rags. He wants us to see that the power belongs to Him. He is the one who saves, who transforms, who renews, and who sanctifies. It is all by His power alone.

Romans 5:6-11 adds, ***“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”***

I am weak, broken, and sinful. I need the Gospel every day, every hour, with every breath I take. Christ died for me while I was dead in my sins. He came and lived a perfect life to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law that I could never obtain. He willingly went to the cross for me and bore all my sins, past, present, and future, so I could be justified by His blood. He bore the wrath of God that was upon me, and I am now reconciled and at peace with God, clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Oh, how much I rejoice in this good news.

You can easily force yourself to do the Church vision (I have done it for years). We reach by going to events, gather by going to gatherings, and grow by being in a Growth Community. However, you will never truly live out the Great Commission without the Gospel being the





engine that drives you and gives you a deep burning desire to live for Christ. With the Gospel at the heart of your actions, reach becomes brokenness over the lost, gather becomes a desperate desire to be with believers to praise the One who saved you, and grow becomes a daily dependency on growing in the knowledge of the Word of God. My friend, never leave that cross and never forget the power of the Gospel that saved your soul.







THE LETTER

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 4

Debbie Gabbara

“What a week it has been! My mind and my heart have gone through so many emotions and seen so much this week. Lord, thank you for allowing me to come here.”

Those are words that I wrote in a letter to myself more than two years ago. Just seeing the envelope causes my heart to begin to remember. The letter was written at the end of one of the hardest, most rewarding weeks of my life. It was a week that was spent in Guatemala, sharing the Gospel with families that live in the second-largest garbage dump in the world. We were sharing the hope of Jesus in a place where hope is hard to find. On our last day there, our assignment was to write a letter to ourselves of things that we never wanted to forget.

Reading the letter floods my mind with memories of the wonderful people we met in the dump. There were the beautiful children singing out the memory verse we helped them to learn. With sadness, I recall that an extra sack lunch was the coveted prize for reciting the verse without any mistakes. Food is scarce in the dump. I remember the family that we helped by building bunk beds for their children. The sweet man who made gifts for our students and the precious baby that we all took turns holding will forever be in my mind. Together we scraped and painted a medical building, renovated a house, and taught Vacation Bible Schools. We worked side by side with the incredible people in Guatemala City who live surrounded by mountains of garbage. God allowed us to step into their lives for just a brief moment, and this letter reminds me of the boldness that I prayed for on that trip. It was a boldness to tell them of a Savior that loves them.



I spent many years studying and growing in God's Word. Now it was my turn to "go." In Mark chapter 15, Jesus tells us to ***"go into all the world and proclaim the gospel."*** I went to Guatemala with a desire for others to know that Jesus came to save us from our sins. He lived a perfect life and died on a cross. On the third day, He conquered death and rose from the grave and went to Heaven to prepare a place for us. Jesus came for the people living in that dump in Guatemala, and He came for you and for me.

"Lord, don't let me forget this feeling of serving you while serving others. Thank you for giving me the desire to 'go.' Please do not let me become complacent when I get home. There are people all around me who need you. There are people living in the garbage of this world. Give me the boldness that You gave me here in Guatemala to not just tell them, but to show them with my life what we taught those precious kids today:

You are the God who created us,
 You are the God who sees us,
 You are the God who saves us,
 You are the God who provides for us,
 You are love!"

Mark 16:15 says, ***"And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.'"***



FULLY

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 5

Jill Osmon

I have often thought about why we do not serve in the Church. What makes it so difficult to commit? We commit to so many things, some important, some unimportant things. However, when we look at the big picture, we find it difficult to serve weekly or even once in a while. Why?

We live in a culture that is busy; we are constantly engaged in something like social media, bingeing TV, or video games. We are used to giving a little of ourselves to a multitude of things. Do we give ourselves fully to anything these days? In 1 Corinthians 15:58 (NIV), Paul says, ***“Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”***

We find it difficult to fully give ourselves to anything, yet that is what God is asking from us. Not all of us are called to “full-time” ministry. Therefore, I think for some, they see this verse and think, I have to work and take care of my family. I cannot give myself fully to the work of the Lord. We miss the true meaning of this verse. We are all called to proclaim the Gospel, that is the work we are to fully give ourselves to, and that looks different for everyone.

We serve because that is what God calls us to do, and when we are serving, we are to give ourselves fully. That may be money, time, our skills, all of these, one of these, or whatever we have that God has given us. We are to give fully to the Lord.





BACK TO REACH | DEVOTION 5

Giving only a fraction of ourselves is an insult to God, and it makes us unsteady and moveable. It elevates the earthly, and that can only bring our faith down. When our faith is down, we allow ourselves to excuse our lack of serving because we are busy with earthly things.

We need to challenge ourselves when we are serving to give ourselves fully. It strengthens us, we can stand firm, and our work will not be in vain.






FEED MY SHEEP

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 6

John Hubbard

My ultimate goal in life is to be more like Jesus Christ. Jesus made it clear in His life and His ministry that He loved people. He met people where they were, and He met their needs. There are so many examples of this that I could go on all day. The third time Jesus appears to His disciples after His resurrection, He tells Peter repeatedly to ***“feed My sheep”*** (John 21:17).

As we grow in our walk with Christ, part of our job is to help “feed the sheep.” We need to be reaching out to those who need help. We need to be reaching out to a lost and broken world. When Jesus performed a miracle by feeding the 5,000 in Mark 6:30-44, He showed another example of how to reach out to a broken world. The Scripture says that Jesus and His disciples withdrew to a quiet place to rest. They were exhausted and needed to get out of the chaos for a moment. The crowds heard where they were, and they followed Jesus. Instead of being annoyed at this group of people who followed Him and constantly expected something of Him, Jesus felt compassion for these people. Mark 6:34 says that Jesus saw the crowd and had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Then Jesus fed them. Mark 6:34 says, ***“And He began to teach them many things.”*** Jesus feeds His sheep twice in this Scripture - once by feeding them spiritually (teaching them), then again by performing a miracle to meet their actual physical needs for food.



This is a theme we can see throughout Scripture, starting in the Old Testament when God provided manna to physically feed His people in the desert and then said to them, ***“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" (Deuteronomy 8:3). Jesus also quotes that verse when being tempted by Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:4).

Jesus knew the importance of meeting people's very real physical needs. He saw a broken and hurting people, and He made sure that they were not hungry. I love that beautiful picture of our Savior; He cares about our human needs, hurts, and pain in this life. Jesus also knew that just meeting their physical needs was not enough. If he had just given the people a four-course dining experience and sent them on their way, they would continue to wither in this broken world. He knew that part of "feeding the sheep" is feeding them spiritually. God's grace and mercy are the only things that can save anybody in our broken world.

So, how about us? Are we feeding His sheep? Do you need to get more involved feeding His sheep? Come serve a free meal on Tuesdays at our recovery gathering. We provide a free warm meal for people every week because we know it is important. After we feed them physically, we have our gathering with worship, a message, and table groups where we feed His sheep spiritually. Get involved in a Growth Community! Maybe get brave and lead one! This is an excellent way to spiritually feed His sheep. Did you know we have a food bank? It is open on Saturdays, and we provide free food to those who are hurting in the community. There is also the Community Center in Holly, where we provide clothing, food, and the Gospel message to His sheep. I am grateful for a Savior who cares about all of the needs of His sheep.







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.

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