

REACH GATHER GROW

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First Edition, May 2020

**Published by:
The River Church
8393 E. Holly Rd.
Holly, MI 48442**

**Scriptures are taken from the Bible,
English Standard Version (ESV)**



THE RIVER CHURCH

Printed in the United States of America

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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 1

REACH



PASTOR RYAN STORY

1. What is the best hiding spot you have ever had in "hide and seek" tag?

"Hide and seek" is like "Reach." We need to go out of our way and fervently seek those who are lost. It is not a game. It is a matter of life and death.

In this week's lesson, we are going to be focusing on the first of three vision statements of The River Church: Reach. The truth is that every person who knows Jesus is because someone told him or her about Jesus. Every single Christian is reached because someone reached them.

2. When you hear the word "reach," what comes to your mind?

Luke 19:10 says, ***"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."***

3. What does this verse have to do with reaching?

I would like to discuss three groups that we need to focus on reaching.

Reach those close to you.

John 1:35-42 says, ***“The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, ‘What are you seeking?’ And they said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and you will see.’ So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas’ (which means Peter).”***

4. Why did Andrew find Peter?

John 1:43-51 continues, ***“The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael said to him, ‘How do you know me?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.’”***

Nathanael answered him, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered him, 'Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'"

5. What does Jesus tell Nathanael he will see?

6. Why is it important that we reach people close to us?

7. Who are some people close to you that need to be reached? What are you doing to reach them?

Reach the world.

Acts 1:6-8 records one of Jesus' last commands, ***"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.'"***

LESSON 1 REACH

8. Where does Jesus say to be His witnesses?

9. What do those three areas represent?

10. Why is reaching the world with the Gospel important?

Revelation 5:9 adds, ***“And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.’”***

11. What if we have not reached every people group on this planet?
Can this verse come true yet?

Reach yourself.

To have a passion for reaching those far from God, you first have to have a relationship with God. A sad reality for some people who go to church is that they do not have a relationship with Jesus. Many have a relationship with the church, they would claim they are Christ-followers, but they lack a relationship with our Lord and Savior.

12. How would you explain what it means to be a Christ follower?

2 Corinthians 13:5-6 says, ***“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test.”***

13. Why would Paul warn the church of Corinth with these verses?

14. What are some ways that you can ***“test yourself?”***

15. Is it considered embarrassing to check your walk with Christ? Why or why not?

16. What is the difference between “checking yourself” and doubting your walk with God?

LESSON 1 REACH

The order of this lesson might have caught you off guard. However, each area is crucial. It is hard to give something away that you do not possess. Once you give your life to the Lord, you are commanded to tell others.

Pray for God to show you who He wants you to reach. Pray regularly for them. Make a plan of what you will do: text, email, phone call, invite to a gathering or special event, send a letter or tract, invite to lunch, or just go for a walk together. This is important, so put thought and effort into it. Then watch God step in and do miracles.

LESSON 1 REACH

TESTIMONY #1

REACH, TESTIMONY 1

LaRae Wing

Like most kids who are church-ed their whole lives, I came to realize my need for a Savior at a young age. At the age of eleven, while sitting in a Sunday morning Church service, the actuality of needing the Savior's forgiveness of my sin pressed heavily on my heart. In my little girl's reality, I realized that I did bad things and needed to ask God to forgive me, and of course, I wanted to go to Heaven. So I prayed a simple prayer and felt God's love and forgiveness. Shortly thereafter, I was baptized and continued to learn about the Heavenly Father who loved me and wanted me to trust Him.

That simple faith continued to grow, but the magnitude of that decision did not really sink in until I went away from home to college. There I began to understand that my faith was truly my own. It was a difficult journey. I felt very alone with my belief in God. My Mom and Dad were not around to encourage me. My three roommates were upperclassmen and not believers. I had no connection with any Church in the area. These things, combined with my shy and quiet nature, made me miserable, yet drove me to my knees.

But my God...

That September, on my first day of classes, I said a silent prayer and walked into my first class feeling terrified, until I saw Jane, the girl that I had shared a room with at orientation week during the summer. We immediately reconnected and thus began a journey that continued throughout my four years of college. As I continued through that first day, Jane and I ended up in five out of six classes. God was definitely directing my path. He knew that I needed a friend who was a Christian and so He sent Jane. We became almost inseparable despite having different room assignments.

That first semester Jane and I struggled to find a community to worship with, but we did a Bible Study with an on-campus group. I felt myself growing into a deeper relationship with Jesus as my prayer life grew more consistent. Even while this was happening, my roommates tormented me because I was a freshman, because I was shy, and most of all, because I was a Christian.

But my God...

A few weeks before the end of the first semester, a room for four girls became available. Jane and I took the chance and applied to move into that room together. It was definitely a long-shot because upperclassmen go to the top of the list, but we put our names on the list anyway. Two weeks later, we got the call that we had been approved to move into room 206 and that two other freshmen, Sally and Karen, would be joining us. It was a total surprise to us, but not to God. He had a plan beyond what we could think or imagine. Our new roommates were both Christians and seeking a church also. We immediately bonded, found a Church that loved college students, and became known as *The 206 Girls* on campus. We are still friends to this day.

At that little Church I learned that sharing Jesus and serving others was my most important mission in life, that sharing God's love was the source of my joy, and that despite the pressures of college life, there were always opportunities to point people to Jesus and show others His love through service.

There have been many "But my God" moments throughout my life, but none so foundational to my spiritual growth and understanding as those that happened during my freshman year in college.

"But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:19 (NKJV)

TESTIMONY #2

REACH, TESTIMONY 2

Jason Summers

It was the winter of 2001. I was in eighth grade. I attended Hartland Middle School at Ore Creek in Hartland, Michigan. I started feeling a little sick around the first of the year. Not really thinking much about it, I thought to myself, "It is winter and is the season for the flu." So, I knew I was just going to have to "ride it out." It really took full effect beginning around late January to early February and lasted all the way to the end of February. On top of that, I was craving McDonald's chicken nuggets! Yes, I was craving McDonald's chicken nuggets out of all things! After several trips to our family doctor and the U of M hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan, along with testing, I was diagnosed with testicular cancer.

I had grown up Catholic and went to Sunday school and Wednesday evening catechism. However, I never felt that I had a relationship with God. You are taught to pray to this saint if you lose something, or you can pray to Mary or to Jesus. You almost feel as if you have your menu of options depending on the situation. I did not know anything different, but it just felt funny. Then when I was in the sixth grade, I was approached by our Priest to become one myself! I thought this was a little weird, considering I was only in the sixth grade.

Fast forward to two years later, after completing six months of cancer treatments, I underwent surgery. I was only supposed to be under the knife for 6-8 hours when, in fact, I was out for about 10-12 hours. The reason for the extended surgery was that the surgeons found a lump in my abdomen that the cat scans never detected. In that time frame, while I was under, I saw these brilliant beams of light! It was almost as if I was looking at this picture-perfect sunset on a cloudy day with the sun just beaming in the spectacular array through the

clouds. All of a sudden, this man that looked like Jesus (exactly how you are picturing Him in your head right now) was standing in front of me. He gave me a hug, and I looked him in the eye, and I asked, "Lord is this my time?" He said, "No, son, you have too many people praying for you, and I have plans for you. Now go in peace."

After that, He vanished, and then I started dreaming about those "now that's what I call music" cd commercials oddly enough! The Lord does work in mysterious ways, right? I then knew the Lord was a personal God. I gave Him my life. It was then that I truly felt saved! People over that six-month span told me to remain positive, and that is half the battle. Others asked how I did it? It was through staying positive and holding to my favorite Bible verse: ***"I can do all this through him who gives me strength"*** (Philippians 4:13 NIV). In conclusion, believe in the Lord and yourself, and you can conquer anything!

TESTIMONY #3

REACH, TESTIMONY 3

Brianna Grunwald

My testimony, how can I type that in 350-500 words? Let me try and sum it up in three: He found me.

Growing up, we went to church every Sunday. It was not anything more, and not anything less. Right after I turned seven years old, my parents got a divorce, and our regular church-going family halted to a stop. As I hit 5th grade, I began to ease my way back into the church with my friends. The church was fun for me. Yet, it was not anything more, not anything less. I bounced around tons of different churches until I found The River Church in small-town Holly, Michigan. It was a church where I could sneak into a 6th - 12th grade event when I was only in 5th grade. I loved being sneaky!

I was a force to be reckoned with in fifth grade. All throughout elementary school, I got in loads of trouble because I hung around the wrong crowd. I was an outreach kid, a van kid, and a trouble maker. However, many showed me the love, grace, and mercy that Jesus showed them. People began to pour into me and fight for me every Wednesday night at this outreach event. The church kept reaching for me so that Jesus could find me. After a consistent year of going to Fusion every single week, I was finally old enough to go to camp. It sounded fun, so I gathered some friends, packed way too many bags, and endured the two-hour bus ride to camp.

Day one, two, and three of camp, my heart remained hard. I did not focus on the hour-long chapels, the worship music, or the conviction that I felt in my heart. I focused on my friends, the gross games, and the chaos that I could create later that night for my cabin leaders. By

day four, though, I walked out of the chapel feeling conviction in my heart and knowing that I was lost in my soul. Do you remember the last night of chapel at camp when the pastor is digging so deep into your heart, and everyone is crying in a corner? It was that night. I began walking back to my cabin, stopped, and turned back around to find myself back inside the chapel and sitting down with the student pastor to confess my sins. Now, at that age, I did not realize I was confessing, but rather spitting out choppy, sob-filled sentences about my mess of a life. I know you know exactly what I am talking about. Please do not pretend you have never been there! Yet, I remember him explaining salvation to me and feeling the weight of a thousand tons being lifted off my shoulders when I confessed with my mouth and believed in my heart that Jesus Christ is Lord.

I remember hearing the Gospel and reciting the "salvation prayer" hundreds of times as a kid. This time, though, I felt the love of the Lord overflow in my heart. Remember when I told you that I was a nuisance from birth to middle school? I never got in trouble since middle school. Even though I was not completely devoted and committed to serving the Lord until about 8th grade, He changed my heart and my soul that night in the corner of the chapel. He took a mess, a broken child, an outreach kid, a stubborn girl, and He changed her heart. I cannot imagine where my life would be without the God who sought me out and found my soul. He found me, and He will find you, too. You just have to let Him.

TESTIMONY #4

REACH, TESTIMONY 4

Pastor Roy Townsend

I have been blessed with the influence of senior adults in my life. I grew up on a street that had several elderly people as neighbors, and I grew up with the influence of my grandmother, who we called Granny. These individuals shared an unquestionable love for me, and due to their age and wisdom, they were willing to tell me what I needed to know. I was fascinated by their lives' stories, and they were fascinated by my interest in their lives. Looking back, I can see how special it was to have these senior saints who loved me.

Granny was a special kind of soul. She was loved by her children and grandchildren immensely. She was a grandma from a by-gone era. She believed that her main purpose in life was to love God and love her children (grandchildren). She worked around the farm and household, always wore a dress, loved to cook food for anyone, and lived out a life of sacrifice for her family. She really did not have much in the way of worldly possessions, but she was one of the richest people that I have ever known when it comes to loving relationships. She demonstrated that love and care for her family by making sure that her loved ones had heard the truth of Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world.

I had an extra-special relationship with Granny because I would spend the night on the weekend and attend church with her on Sunday. So, from a very young age, I heard the truth that every one of us sins, and because of that sin, we cannot get to Heaven on our own merits. However, not to worry because Jesus Christ came to Earth and died on a cross for my sins. So, if I believe in Him and ask Him to forgive me, I could spend eternity with Him in Heaven. She

was so clear in her love for me and her love for Jesus that I really wanted to accept this gift from Jesus Christ.

At the age of five, I jumped up into her bed early on a Sunday morning and asked her to help me accept the gift. We prayed, and I asked Jesus to forgive me based upon my belief in Him. Since then, I have had my ups and downs in my spiritual walk, but I believe that Jesus Christ wanted me, and I am not ashamed of Jesus or what He has done in my life.

The love of my family, these senior saints, and Granny was a foundation for the love of Jesus Christ, and when times get tough I find encouragement in these verses, ***“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”*** (Romans 8:38-39). Nothing will be able to keep me away from God's love. I find great encouragement in these verses. I thank you God for sending your Son to save the world from its wrongs.

TESTIMONY #5

REACH, TESTIMONY 5

Emilou Irwin

My life has always been in the church ever since I was a baby. So I thought that it would make for a boring testimony, but everyone has a story! My mom has actually been the rock in our family and the consistent one. It makes it hard for me to read James, even though it is my favorite book of the Bible, because it shows what a godly family should be. That leads to how my life had been hard with my dad. He was not always a godly father and was not always being the one to lead us into the Word or taking us to church. Yet, I have always loved the church and being apart of it. The nursery is my favorite thing. I just love loving on those kiddos!

When I lived out in Arizona, my grandpa became the pastor of his church. I decided that I wanted to get baptized by him. So I took lessons with one of the ladies at his church; she became a very sweet friend of mine. She walked me through what it meant to get baptized and taught me a bunch. I still remember a lot of it. After that, I got baptized with my family and cousins all around me.

I have always been homeschooled by my mom, so it has been really nice because I got to do all the extra things and always get to study the stuff I wanted. I got to study my Bible when and wherever I wanted.

We have always moved around, and it was always hard. This last time (five years ago), moving from Arizona to Michigan was the hardest because my life was "perfect," or so I thought. I was mad at my parents and God for almost a year. I was in a rut and could not see past it all. It also did not help that we found out and moved in 14

days. However, as time went on, I grew to love it here and grow in my faith in a small group, as it was called back then. I am so grateful for Ryan Story and Anita. Ryan later did a group called leadership, and it was my favorite. It was where we would go really deep into Bible chapters and verses. We all loved it and grew so much. We were required to do homework and extra things. We all had fun mostly when we would do stuff together. We also had a leadership camp that they still do. It was deeper, and it always my favorite camp because it was all of the kids that really wanted to be there!

God's plans are better than mine. I look forward to seeing how He continues to use me.

THE LEAST OF THESE

REACH, DEVOTION 6

Kenny Hovis

Five years ago, I had an opportunity to go on a prison trip to Ohio. I did not know what to expect. I had some anxiety, fear, and a little trepidation in anticipation of encountering the inmates. So many things run through your head. You could very easily talk yourself right out of going if you just let your mind run wild. Little did I know, but that trip would change my life forever in many ways.

While on this trip, I encountered men that were waiting only a few months before being released, to men that were going to be in prison for the rest of their lives. I did not have any idea how much I prejudged people and their worthiness of receiving the gift that I had so freely been given until then.

In Matthew chapter 25, we find the parable of the sheep and the goats. Jesus is telling His audience what the Kingdom of Heaven will be like. In the parable, the king is talking to the righteous and lists off a number of charitable actions that they had performed. In verse 36, He says, ***“I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”*** The second half of that verse is on the back of the shirts we wear into prison. I had read the verse many times, but now the reality was right in front of me. Was I willing to look past what horrible sins these men may have committed to sharing with them the only thing that could give them hope?

I met a man, and he started telling me his story. He had been raised in a family that attended church regularly, but in his late teens and early twenties strayed away. He was arrested, sentenced, and sent

to prison. He wanted to get plugged back into his religion. I told him my story on how religion let me down. Religion could not save me. God sent His Son to die for all of our sins so that when we accept His redemptive work on the cross, we could be restored to a right relationship with God. What God really wants is a relationship, not religion. I prayed with him and encouraged him to develop his relationship with God, not to focus on his religion. I do not know what happened to him or the decisions he made or did not make.

As he walked away, I realized I had just shared the truth of the Gospel with someone that the Bible categorized as ***“the least of these.”*** I just stood and stared. The truth that I had just shared was the truth of which I needed to be reminded. We all are the least of these. Without the relationship I told this man about, all of us would be in prison, without clothes, hungry, sick, and thirsty, without hope of being rescued.

This is why in Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus gives us the Great Commission. He is commissioning us to reach the world by giving the hopeless hope; the homeless, a home; the sick, a cure; the hungry, the Bread of Life; the thirsty, living water; the prisoners, freedom. We are to reach them so we can teach them about that freedom from our sin, and create in them an insatiable hunger to grow in their newfound hope and faith, so their desire is to repeat the process with others.

Like I said, the prison trip I went on changed me. My prayer is that God gives me the opportunity to share how I have a relationship with Him, and that when He does, that I am bold enough to speak the truth of the Gospel. It changed me and is the only thing that changes people to what God meant them to be.

John 3:17 says, ***“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”***



LESSON 2

GATHER



PASTOR RYAN STORY

1. What is wrong with this statement: "I am going to church?"

When people do not understand why they are doing something, they tend not to know what to do after that. If you tell a teenager to wear a coat when it is cold outside, they might not understand why parents would ask such a ridiculous request. However, when they are waiting somewhere in the cold, or they get sick, the student might understand the why behind the reason. In this lesson we are going to look at what the early church did when they gathered together. There are nine activities that the early church did when they gathered together. When we understand why the early church did all nine of these things, we may know how we can be more active members of the body of Christ.

One of the clearest passages describing the gathering of the early church is found in Acts 2:42-47. It says, ***"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."***

Here are the nine observations.

They were devoted to teaching.

Verse 42 says, ***“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”***

2. What does it mean to be devoted to the apostles’ teaching?

3. Who was an apostle?

4. Do we do that during a weekend gathering?

John Calvin said, “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, there a church of God exists, even if it swarms with many faults.”

They focused on fellowship.

Verse 42 says, ***“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”***

5. What is fellowship?

6. Why is fellowship critical to a gathering?

7. Do we do that during a weekend gathering?

They regularly experienced the breaking of bread.

Verse 42 says, ***“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”***

Verse 46 adds, ***“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.”***

8. What does ***“breaking of bread”*** mean?

LESSON 2 GATHER

9. Why is communion important?

They were praying.

Verse 42 says, ***“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”***

10. Why do we pray?

11. Do you pray before you come to a weekend gathering?

There was a sense of expectation.

Verse 43 says, ***“And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.”***

12. When was the last time **“awe”** came over you during a gathering?

13. What were the ***“wonders and signs”*** that were being done?

14. Do we see God doing things at a weekend gathering?

They had all things in common.

Verses 44-45 say, ***“And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.”***

15. What does it mean that all the church had all things in common?

16. Why is unity important?

17. Do we have all things in common at The River Church?

They had an element of being “sold out.”

Verses 44-45 say, ***“And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.”***

18. Why did the early church give away their possessions?

19. Why is giving an essential thing for the church to do?

20. Do we do that at The River Church? Do you?

They were regularly together.

Verse 46 adds, ***“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.”***

21. Is it important to worship God with a group?

22. Is it possible to “be a Christian” and walk alone?

Gene Getz said, “Though true Christianity uniquely involves a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, it is also a corporate experience...Christians cannot grow spiritually as they ought to in isolation from one another.”

They would send out servants.

Verse 47 says, ***“Praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”***

23. Why did God add to the early church's numbers ***“day by day?”***

24. How can we make gatherings purposeful each weekend?

D.L. Moody said, “Church attendance is as vital to a disciple as a transfusion of rich, healthy blood to a sick man.”

R.C. Sproul added, “There are those, particularly in our day, who are so disenchanted with the visible church that they steadfastly refuse to join any local church. Such a posture is misguided and involves overt disobedience to the commands of Christ. Though it is possible

LESSON 2 GATHER

for a believer to be confused about this for a season, someone who persists in such a posture is, in all probability, not a believer. It is the duty of every Christian to join a visible church.”

LESSON 2 GATHER

FAST FOOD

GATHER, DEVOTION 1

Roger Allen

Flying into Tel Aviv for the first time is an exciting experience. For a less than a seasoned traveler, the glide on the flight path is one of awe and wonder. I am never disappointed at how different a destination looks when I see it for the first time. Not looking like I had imagined it, Tel Aviv is a very clean and neat place compared to many. Boundaries are well marked and delineated. The biggest surprise for me was all the seemingly endless agriculture within the city limits. Each city block had large gardens and greenhouses in the back yards of many homes and businesses. It did not take long to realize how this would influence how we would eat for the next ten days. Only the freshest produce was offered and prepared in the healthiest way. If there is one thing I can say about food in Israel, "It is very consistent." From one establishment to the next, food always was prepared the same way: Falafel, Hummus, Shwarma, Lentil Soup, along with tomato and cucumber salad, white cheese, and of course, olives. Excited to try all the new foods, I could not wait until dinner. Trying every new dish I could find, it was not long before I found my favorites. Yet, after about the eighth day, my excitement was starting to dim, and I began to yearn for what I knew best. It is funny to think about what I would have done for some over-processed, chemically infused fast food.

Exodus 16:2 says, "***And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.***"

Times become tough for a leader when the excitement of those that they lead becomes dim. Insubordination and even insurrection are possible when people believe they have been let down or led astray.

For Moses, experiencing the power and glory of God, it must have been a tough pill to swallow when the people began to complain. Witnessing the very same wonders and miracles as he did, you would think that they would have the same faith. Yet, because their expectations were of another nature, they became disillusioned. Moses could probably assume that they may mutiny or even worse, remove him and Aaron from the leadership in any way possible. Once again, the Lord lifts his hand and sustains the people of Israel. So, Moses and Aaron begin to instruct the people that they will see the glory of the Lord and be prepared. Yet, they continue to complain about their unmet expectations. I realize I am taking a leap here, but by chapter nine I believe he has had as much as he can handle and basically tells his brother, "You deal with them, because I am fed up with their constant complaining!"

Luke 6:28 says, "***Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.***"

How often have you tried to do the right thing only to find you are not appreciated? You feel you have sacrificed your hard-earned time, money, and resources only to be rebuffed. Imagine Moses trying so hard to help his people, and time and time again to find that their trust in him and ultimately, the Lord, was short-lived. However, even with the abuse Moses would receive, we see him intervening in prayer for his people. He is constantly urging the Lord to show grace and mercy even when it was not warranted. That is what good leadership is all about, standing in the gap and taking it on the chin for those you lead. It is a servant who is willing to give more than they receive for those that are entrusted to them.

Philippians 2:3 adds, "***Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.***"

For those of us in leadership roles, we should realize that we too are capable of becoming disillusioned by our own desires. Even visiting a place of “milk and honey” where the food is good, we can find a reason to complain. It does not take long to realize, like the Hebrew people of Moses’ time, we too can return to enslavement. Because we do not always recognize the ways of the Lord or have faith in Him, we can easily return to what we know best, whether it is good for us or not. That is why godly leadership is so important.

When we gather together as a Church, we can strengthen, direct, and encourage each other. It is a great time to worship and be recharged together. We need each other and the reminders of how blessed we are. When left to ourselves or with harmful voices, we can become discouraged and complainers.

By the way, can I have two Crunch Wrap Supremes, two Crunchy Tacos and a large Baja Blast to go?

"I CHOOSE TO PRAISE"

GATHER, DEVOTION 2

Wes McCullough

*I count on one thing
The same God that never fails
Will not fail me now
You won't fail me now
In the waiting
The same God who's never late
Is working all things out
Is working all things out*

*Yes I will, lift You high in the lowest valley
Yes I will, bless Your name
Oh, yes I will, sing for joy when my heart is heavy
For all my days, oh yes I will*

I choose to praise...

"Yes I Will" by Vertical Church

As I write this, the summer of 2019, it has been more than four months since my wife went to Heaven. Our seventh anniversary is five days from now. I met and married her knowing her medical prognosis was pessimistic, and our time together could be much shorter than a lifetime. After years of waiting and looking, it was clear to me that God was telling me to marry her. I never second-guessed God's plan.

Five years into our marriage, cancer showed up again. It had spread significantly. We were told most patients in this situation have two to five years left. I had to say goodbye less than two years later.

I am thankful that I had several months to prepare for the possibility of losing Heather. While my hope stayed high, I could see the decline in her condition. I knew God could miraculously heal her, but He might not. My understanding has always been that life does not always go the way we want it, but God is in control. He has a plan that is beyond our understanding and perspective. This understanding has really helped me through my heartbreak. It has protected me from anger towards God. I have submitted to His will.

If you are facing or dealing with the loss of a loved one, I can testify that there is peace and freedom in surrendering it all to God.

“For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock.” Psalms 27:5

“Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:6-7

IDENTITY

GATHER, DEVOTION 3

Taylor McCullough

Christian, what is your identity?

An identity that comes from the world, what others may think or say about you, cannot compare to the identity you gain when you have been born again.

If you are saved, you have been set free. John 8:36 (NIV) says, ***“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”***

You are chosen. Paul tells us this in 1 Thessalonians 1:4 (NIV), ***“For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you.”***

You are a child of God. Galatians 3:26 (NIV) adds, ***“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”***

One of my favorite songs to sing is *“Who You Say I Am”* by Hillsong Worship. The lyrics are incredible because it speaks the truth of our identity in Christ Jesus. I am filled with joy and hope as I declare,

“Who the Son sets free, is free indeed.

I’m a child of God - yes, I am!

I am chosen, not forsaken.

I am who you say I am.

You are for me, not against me.

I am who you say I am.”

You are not going to be chosen by everyone.

I do not know about you, but I need this reminder. It can be easy to fall into the trap of placing worth in how others view or identify you. What others say or think about you can mistakenly become what drives your actions. It is an exhausting and frustrating way to live. The identity that the world may give you is worthless compared to the price that Jesus paid for you on the cross. This world will make you feel unwanted and unchosen but remember that the highest King has welcomed and chosen you. This world will make you feel like you do not belong, but remember you belong as a child of God.

I pray that you never let the enemy hold you back from having confidence in who you are in Christ.

AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

GATHER, DEVOTION 4

Pastor Pat Rowland

What I know is true about me, is possibly true about you, that is I have an opinion. It is not on everything, but my opinions, right or wrong, have led me to prefer things be a certain way. For example, I prefer the temperature of the room is a little cooler. I do not like it hot. I also do not like it freezing cold. It has to be just right. I prefer my eggs scrambled with sausage or ham (not both), with peppers and onions in them. I do not like fried eggs, and I want my hash browns brown. I could go on, but I will hold back. My point is, just like me, you have a certain way you like things.

It has been my experience throughout the years in the church as an attendee and as a Pastor that there are certain preferences to worship that vary from person to person. While some prefer a more traditional style of worship with hymnals and a choir, someone else will prefer a more modern style with house lighting and a full band singing upbeat choruses. From generation to generation, and from the community to community, styles of worship vary, and we all have our preferences. These preferences have divided local church communities and the generations within that church for as long as there has been music as an expressive part of worship gatherings.

Several years ago (at a different church), I had a conversation with a dedicated follower of Jesus that was convinced motion stage lights and anything above 90 dBs in the church was not worshipping; instead, it was a concert (or performance). The words or heart behind the leaders was not a factor; it was the production that set it apart according to them. When we are locked into our worship preferences, our focus is misaligned on ourselves as the audience. The act of

worship is not what the church does for an audience of thousands, but for an audience of One. Our songs are not performances by a band for us to evaluate but are the words we sing to God who is the only recipient of our worship. He is the audience, not us. We all worship before an audience of the One and Only God!

We read in 1 Chronicles 16:23-25, ***“Sing to the Lord, all the earth! Tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and he is to be feared above all gods.”***

I picture worship from a perspective of all those in the gathering as they are standing on a stage, singing, and it is God who is the only audience member. We all worship before an audience of the One and Only God! It is not for us to determine which style is worship; it is for us to bring ourselves to God as an offering for worship. Worship is our chance to bring honor to God. Plain and simple, it is honoring God.

Psalms 145:10-12 says, ***“All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your saints shall bless you! They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power, to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.”***

You should go and read all of Psalm chapter 145. It is a beautiful passage of worship by bringing honor to God through our daily lives as a testimony of God's greatness. It is a testimony that is to be shared from generation to generation.

Do not allow your worship to be limited to a one-hour weekly gathering or limited to your personal style preferences. Seek to bring God honor in everything.

GATHER TOGETHER AND SING, SING, SING

GATHER, DEVOTION 5

Debbie Gabbara

“When you meet together, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, as you praise the Lord with all your heart.” Ephesians 5:19 (CEV)

Worshiping in a song is an important part of gathering together, and one of my favorite parts of the gathering. I love music, all kinds. You might be surprised if you wandered through my phone to find, hymns, country, and rap (not to worry, it is clean Christian rap). You would also find some southern gospel: a few classical pieces, and lots of contemporary Christian artists. Music soothes my soul, lifts my spirits, makes me happy, and brings me into quiet, reflective worship. There is something about singing in worship to the Lord that takes our hearts to a special place.

Some cherished memories from my childhood include my dad and his friends playing music in our home. They would get out their guitars, and my mom would sing beautiful hymns. My dad did not sing, but one of his friends would often sing in harmony with my mom. One of my mom's favorite songs was “*Old Rugged Cross*.” My mother loved music, and she loved Jesus! The cross was dear to her, and she clung to it through a lifetime of illness. The words of that old hymn always bring me to tears as I think about seeing my mom and dad again one day when I get to Heaven.

Old Rugged Cross

*On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross
The emblem of suffering and shame*

*And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain*

*So I'll cherish the old rugged cross
Till my trophies at last I lay down
And I will cling to the old rugged cross
And exchange it some day for a crown*

*To the old rugged cross I will ever be true
It's shame and reproach gladly bear
Then he'll call me some day to my home far away
Where his glory forever I'll share*

*And I'll cherish the old rugged cross
Till my trophies at last I lay down
And I will cling to the old rugged cross
And exchange it some day for a crown*

The music in gatherings has changed since I was a girl. Drums and electric guitars have joined the piano on stage and the sound of the songs is now very different. One thing has not changed, the songs we sang then and those we sing now tell of a God who loves us unconditionally and has always and will always be there for us. I found one of my all-time favorite worship songs in my phone, ***“Lord, I need you.”*** It always reminds me that no matter when I have struggled, or what I have gone through, on good days and bad, my hope is in Jesus.

Lord, I Need You

*Lord, I come, I confess
Bowing here I find my rest
Without You I fall apart*

*You're the One that guides my heart
 Lord, I need You, oh, I need You
 Every hour I need You
 My one defense, my righteousness
 Oh God, how I need You*

*Where sin runs deep Your grace is more
 Where grace is found is where You are
 Where You are, Lord, I am free
 Holiness is Christ in me
 Lord, I need You, oh, I need You
 Every hour I need You
 My one defense, my righteousness
 Oh God, how I need You*

*So teach my song to rise to You
 When temptation comes my way
 When I cannot stand I'll fall on You
 Jesus, you're my hope and stay
 Lord, I need You, oh, I need You
 Every hour I need You
 My one defense, my righteousness
 Oh God, how I need You*

*You're my one defense, my righteousness
 Oh God, how I need You*

In Matthew 18:20, Jesus tells us, ***"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."*** Attend a gathering somewhere this weekend and follow the instruction given to us in Psalms 47:6, ***"Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises!"***

STREAMING IS NO SUBSTITUTE

GATHER, DEVOTION 6

Richie Henson

We live in a world that is increasingly less “in person.” In fact, major studies show that more people would rather converse via text message than a phone call or face to face meeting. That cultural shift towards an impersonal relationship makes it easy for us to sit on the couch, throw on the live stream, and say that we have gone to church. Although this seems like a great and easy way to attend church, it is a cheap substitute for the life-altering gathering of believers.

Hebrews 10:24-25 says, ***“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.”***

The point of the gathering is not to sing the songs and hear the message. Those are surely aspects of our gatherings, but they in and of themselves are not the purpose. As stated in Hebrews, the purpose of gathering together is to stir each other up to love and good works. Singing together provides an opportunity for this encouragement. The Gospel-centered preaching of the Word of God provides an opportunity for this encouragement. However, alone, they are not enough. Much like the early church, we need the community provided by togetherness to encourage us to continue fighting the good fight. Without each other, we are unable to make it out of our Sunday pump up into the trenches of Wednesday.

Being able to stream a gathering is a huge help to many people. There are some who are unable to attend a gathering. It may be due to a

work schedule, vacation, or an illness. For people in these positions, streaming a gathering is a wonderful alternative to not experiencing a gathering at all. However, for those of us who are able to attend a gathering, we should take every opportunity to participate in the fellowship of believers to encourage and be encouraged that we may go out into the world to live in the purpose God has called us to.



LESSON 3

GROW



PASTOR TY WOZNEK

Growth is an expectation of the Christian life. It is the drive to be more like Jesus today than the day before. At times this is a fun experience. Some lessons we would rather not repeat. Each step of the way we see the truth of who we are, who God is, and the amazing empowerment we get from the Gospel. In our time together, we will look at what it takes to grow.

1. Describe a time when you did something wrong, knew better, but forgot.

Growth takes purpose.

Effective growth takes both reminding ourselves of what we already know and learning new things. The things we know can become boring. We often do not want new information, getting us stuck with the past. The difference-maker is a purpose. Defining our purpose or answering the “why?” propels growth. When people take on a physical challenge, there is often a “why” behind it. The same holds true spiritually as well. In such challenges, we relearn the fundamentals as well as learn new skills to help achieve our goal.

Read Philippians 3:12-16, ***“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.”***

2. What drove Paul to pursue growth?

Growth takes cheerleaders.

People have enough critics, but seldom enough cheerleaders. The difference is choice. Cheerleaders choose to help their team succeed. We need people who will encourage and even push us to grow. It is rare for a person to grow on their own. The Christian life was not intended to be a solo adventure. One of the strengths of a Growth Community is being each other's cheerleaders. That is a choice each of us in our Growth Community needs to make. One of the strengths of the Apostle Paul was his cheerleading other Christians to grow.

Read Philippians 2:19-24, ***“I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy’s proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.”***

Now read 1 Thessalonians 4:1, ***“Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.”***

3. How was Paul a cheerleader?

Growth takes testing.

We have a choice to actively grow or not. Either way, God will test us. In Judges, God left nations to test Israel to see if they would follow His ways. In Job, God allows Satan to test Job to show that Job would stick with God. God's testing allows us to see how far we need to go, like in Judges (That did not go so well for Israel). God's testing also allows us to see how far we have come, like Job (Satan was proved wrong, and in all those trials, Job never sinned with his lips!). In all testing, God's aim is to make us like Jesus. While not enjoyable, we grow from it. Thankfully, the Bible gives a healthy mindset for testing (One more thing, Israel did not pursue growth. Job did.).

Read James 1:2-4, ***“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.”***

Read 1 Peter 1:6-9, ***“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”***

4. What is the value and the result of growing through trials?

Growth takes life.

Read Ephesians 2:1-10, ***“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”***

Read: John 6:63, ***“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”***

We need the Gospel to grow. Prior to being in Christ, the Bible describes us as dead. Being in Christ, the Bible describes us as being alive! Instead of our sin being the defining aspect of our life,

it is God's work in our lives. The power of the Gospel enables us to live, not just avoid Hell and the consequences of our sin. In the movie, *"The Rookie,"* the main character has a turn around where baseball is no longer a job, but a privilege to play. Near the end of the movie he says, "You know what we get to do today, Brooks? We get to play baseball!" We get to grow and be like Jesus. We get to be a blessing to others. Growing in Christ is not a burden.

5. How does the Gospel impact our growing in Christ?

Growth takes rest.

Too much rest and a person is lazy. Too much work and a person burns out. While doing God's will shows the love of Jesus, so does stopping and just spending time with Him. A trainer once told me the biggest mistake people make in physical training is working too much, and not getting enough rest. By working less, they would get stronger, he said. Growing in Christ is similar. To grow, you must have time with Jesus. Some call this a Sabbath principle, solitude, or resting in Jesus. Regardless of what you call it, you need planned times where it is just Jesus. It is not a time for another Bible lesson, sermon, podcast, song, or ministry assignment. It is just Jesus. Throughout the year, set aside time where it is just you and Jesus. This is hard to do. We love to be busy and fear quietness. Too often, we miss what Jesus is trying to tell us because we are too busy to hear it.

Read Psalm 46, ***"To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamo."***

A Song.

***God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.***

***Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah***

***There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.***

God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;

God will help her when morning dawns.

***The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.***

***The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah***

***Come, behold the works of the Lord,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.***

***He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.***

‘Be still, and know that I am God.

I will be exalted among the nations,

I will be exalted in the earth!’

The Lord of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah”

6. Why is it important that we “cease striving?”

Define your growth plan.

Growth takes purpose, cheerleaders, testing, life, and rest. An effective growth plan empowers you to handle life's challenges by leveraging these things. Planning to grow spiritually does not require a ton of planning. If you can not write your spiritual growth plan on a plain sticky note, it is too complicated. You will not do it. Get a sticky note or a small index card to write out your growth plan. Once you achieved your plan, grab another sticky note and write a new one. Here are some questions to think through:

7. Why do I want to be more like Jesus this year? This answers why you want to grow.

8. Who are my cheerleaders to be more like Jesus? Who am I cheerleading? This answers who will help you to grow.

9. What test am I not doing so well in that I want to pass? This answers what area on which God may want you to work.

LESSON 3 GROW

10. What resources do I need to “pass the test?” This answers how you are going to grow.

11. How will I spend time with Jesus? This answers how you will gain the spiritual rest you need to grow.

Suggestion for Growth Community Leaders:

- If your group knows each other well, working through these questions as a group is doable.
- If this is only the third meeting of your Growth Community, maybe break into smaller teams of two or three to work through these.
- Another option is to have people work through these and write out their spiritual growth plan. In the end, gather together and have a few share.

Once in a while, ask or have a time of sharing how things are going with their growth plan, or even a new one. This is a way to be a great cheerleader for each other.

LESSON 3 GROW

TRUSTING YOUR WORRY AWAY

GROW, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Ben Kirkman

Have you noticed how worry has a way of sucking the joy out of your life? Sometimes we can be so consumed by worry that it is literally hard to breathe. It does not have to be a huge crisis that we are worrying about; even the minute daily details can leave us miserable if we are not careful. Have you been there? Are you suffocated by worry right now?

About five years ago, I found myself being consumed by worry. I could not get past it. I was inundated with what seemed like an unbearable amount of pressures and worrisome situations. I vividly remember staring out the window feeling like someone was squeezing the air out of my lungs; I could not breathe. I was trying to figure out how I could get myself out of the grip of worry. My thought process was, "I am a man. I can figure my way through these difficult situations." I was letting the weight of all my worries build-up, and I was suffering in my own stubbornness.

As I stared out the window (I may have been banging my head on the glass), God said, "Hey, I did not design you to be consumed by worry! Quit trying to carry the difficulties of life on your own. Give your burdens to me. Trust me to help you through them." I instantly stopped banging my head on the window and started praying. I poured my worries out to God; I gave Him every single one of them. I cannot even explain to you the immediate peace that God gave to me. I could breathe again, and the weight of my worries was gone. The difficult situations were still there, but God taught me I did not have to face them alone. He was with me every step of the way; I just needed to give them to Him and trust Him with the outcome.

Since that life-changing day, God has greatly helped me deal with my problem of worrying; He reminded me of the instruction and promise of Philippians 4:4-7 to help me understand how to deal with worry. Do not get me wrong, I still battle with worrying, but He has helped me grow to a place where I at least know how to battle it.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

We have an almighty, all-powerful God that is greater than any worry we may have. He wants us to trust Him with our worries. His desire is that we go to Him with all of our problems. Do not let worry suffocate your joy. Give your worries to God. He will help you through them. Remember: ***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”***

NO REASON TO FEAR

GROW, DEVOTION 2

Josh Lahring

For the most part, I tend to be a very negative person. When things happen in life, the first thing I see in my mind is the worst possible scenario that will happen. I have been like this since I can remember being a child in elementary school, having anxiety about everything. I remember hating change, having to do new things, or go to new places. I lived in fear of the unknown. This is still a huge struggle I fight to this day. Within the past few years, God has transformed my heart, and it came down to realizing that I did not fully trust God in all things. Fear ruled my heart.

Reading about Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt has played a huge part in changing my attitude and trusting God. The Israelites had just witnessed God free them from their bondage in slavery when they came to the Red Sea with seemingly nowhere to go.

Exodus 14:10-12 says, ***"When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, 'Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians?' For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.'"***

Their mindset was:

- Leave us alone.
- Leave us in our slavery.
- It was better there than where we are now.

Growth can be difficult. We get comfortable even though life might be unpleasant. We do not want to step into the unknown. Attending a Growth Community and opening up to others seems scary.

Do you ever feel this way? Would you rather be back in the past of your life when it was the “good old days?” Are you mad at God for leading you somewhere as it now seems to be falling apart? We say, “I thought you cared for me, God? Why am I here? What is happening? Where are you, God?”

Exodus 14:13-14 adds, ***“And Moses said to the people, ‘Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.’”***

If Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior, you have no reason to fear. You can stand firm for you have seen the salvation of the Lord. There is no better place than where you are now, out of slavery to sin and in the hand of God. Stop the complaining, stop the bickering, stop defying leadership in your life, and start being silent and remembering that the Lord will fight for you. All of His promises are true. We have to live as though we believe that.

The Lord is walking with you. Not only that, He has placed believers around you that need you and can help you. Step into an unknown future with the God who knows and holds the future.

SHRINK?

GROW, DEVOTION 3

Isaiah Combs

Once a year, my wife and I line up our five kids and draw a line to measure our kids' heights against last year's line. It is always exciting to see their faces when they turn around and see that they have grown from last year. My wife and I get excited with them. We love that our kids are healthy and growing.

I believe 100 percent that this is the way God looks at our spiritual growth. He gets excited to see His children growing from when we first came to know Him. We were babies in Christ, and over time, we grow through prayer, reading the Word, and gathering with the saints in a Growth Community.

We read in 1 Peter 2:2-3, ***“Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the lord is good.”***

Could you imagine if this year we walked up to the wall where the marks from the past years are, we put our kids up there, and they had shrunk from last year? We see that none of them had grown, but shrunk. It would be a really disappointing day for our kids and for us.

I believe 100 percent this is how God feels when we put off our spiritual growth. He wants us to grow and become spiritually strong, but we become content growing to a certain point, and we think we have arrived, or we just stop making our growth a priority altogether.

There is an old song that we used to sing in kids' church. The song's words are: *“Read your Bible pray every day, and you'll grow, grow, grow.”*

Then the second half of the song's words say, *"Forget your Bible, forget to pray, and you'll shrink, shrink, shrink."*

It is a pretty fun song to sing with kids to teach them the importance of growth and the importance of reading your Bible and prayer.

Growing in the Lord is important, and it is not a seasonal thing. Make your spiritual growth a priority in your life. Get in a Growth Community. Get in the Word and spend some time in prayer. Do not put off or forget because you will *"shrink, shrink, shrink."*

POWER OF A CHANGED LIFE

GROW, DEVOTION 4

John Rigg

On a recent trip to an Ohio correctional institution with the HIM Prison Team, I was able to witness something incredible. One afternoon, as the team was greeting each of the prisoners entering the yard, one of the inmates approached me, shook my hand, and said, "How's it going, man? Thanks for coming in to see us! It's good to see you guys again!" At first, his "good to see you guys again" comment did not strike me as unusual, as it is common for inmates to see the team multiple times over the course of their prison sentence. However, I soon realized that the man who was greeting me was an inmate that we had seen two previous times this year, in two different institutions! This was the third time.

To understand just how incredible this encounter was, we need an understanding of how the Ohio Correctional system works. When a prisoner first enters into the correctional system, they are assigned to a facility based on their security risk and behavior. Level 1 is for the lowest risk inmate, and level 4 is for the highest risk ones. This man was being transferred from facility to facility because of his improved behavior and reduced security risk. He had been in three facilities in one year, and from what I have been told, this is highly unusual! So, what is going on with this guy? He is growing, and his growth is evident.

It was not long ago that this man surrendered to God's will and gave his life to Christ. Now, with the grace and mercy of God, the power of the Gospel is apparent in his life. For the first time, he is growing spiritually and has begun the process of becoming like Jesus.

So, what makes this gentleman's salvation appear different than others? Why does he seem to be growing, and others do not? The Apostle Peter gives us some insight into spiritual growth in his second letter.

“Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue.” (2 Peter 1:2–3 NKJV).

Notice that by God's ***“power he has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.”*** Anyone can live a life of godliness as long as they are using God's power and seeking ***“the knowledge of Him.”*** For us today, this knowledge is obtained by the regular reading of the Word of God. If we ever expect to grow spiritually, we must have knowledge of the One we are trying to grow with, for, and like!

As I continued my conversation with my inmate friend, it became really apparent to me exactly what was happening.

1. He had received and believed in the power of the Gospel message, and the Holy Spirit now lives in him (John 14:16-17).
2. He is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).
3. His former nature is fading away (Ephesians 4:22-24).
4. He is reading the Word (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
5. He is willing to walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26).

Like I stated earlier, I witnessed something incredible that day. It was the power of a changed life. Whoever thought this prison inmate could or would ever change? I bet the Ohio prison system did not expect him to change, but it is apparent, he has changed. They may

not recognize his growth as spiritual, but I did. He is growing, all because he was willing to submit himself to God's power and His Word.

So, whose power are we using to grow? Are you only using your own power, or are you willing to grow through God's power?

GROWING IN LOVE

GROW, DEVOTION 5

Larry Gabbara

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”

John 6:63

Jesus is the Living Word. His words were spoken for us to learn and grow. People come to know Jesus through the Word of God. The Word of God is the Christian believer's food to feed us through our minds, to learn the will of God. Growing in the Lord should be the purpose of our lives.

Job 23:12 states the concept well, ***“I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.”***

Deuteronomy 8:3 adds, ***“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.”***

Billy Graham, in an article from 2015, gives us nine ways to grow in our faith: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The Bible calls those traits the “Fruit of the Spirit.” Dr. Graham goes on to explain that when we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, the Bible says we receive supernatural help from the Holy Spirit. God expects us to have faith, and if we live according to that faith, God

will be pleased. From that, we will be blessed. If we lack in faith, God will be displeased.

Hebrews 11:1 says, ***“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”***

Hebrews 11:3 continues, ***“By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.”***

To grow in grace is to mature as a Christian. We are all saved by grace through faith. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, ***“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”***

We are sanctified by grace. Grace is a blessing we do not deserve, something that we did not earn. It is a true blessing from God because He loves us!

In 2 Peter 3:18, we read, ***“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.”***

We have “Grow” events throughout the year. In the summer, all of our locations have summer grow events. At our Holly location, we get together on Wednesday nights during June and July for dinner, a devotion, and then softball. It is heartwarming to see the church family getting together for food, a devotion, and fun. This is a picture of how the church should grow together.

To grow is to mature and learn, just like a baby, we never should stop growing in our faith. Living for the Lord is why we are here; the Lord created us so that we could grow to love Him.

THE GOAL

GROW, DEVOTION 6

Debbie Kerr

“But grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” 2 Peter 3:18a

I remember the night I was saved like it was yesterday. I was only 11 years old, but it was very real and powerful. I was baptized at the age of 12, and the following year, I dedicated my life to Christian service. All the spiritual boxes were checked, except for the growing part. I was raised in a great Bible-teaching church. My Pastor was one of the best verse-by-verse preachers in the country. My parents decided to make the 30-minute drive several times a week so we could learn and grow from the best. The Bible teaches, ***“To whom much is given, of him much will be required”*** (Luke 12:48). Based on how I had been taught, I fell into this category, what I do not know, or fail to apply is not from a lack of knowledge or teaching. I remember as a young teenager sitting on the front row of my church with my Bible, pen, and notebook in hand at every service. I was so excited to learn God's Word and grow in my faith. I have always had a desire to know the truth and walk in it. I am still a student of the Bible because I love it, and I need it every day. It can never be exhausted, nor will I finish the course because the Bible is the living Word of God, fresh off the page each day for exactly what I need.

Today, I am thankful to belong to The River Church and the strong emphasis that is placed on spiritual growth. If you are not in a weekly Growth Community, I highly recommend that you join one. The Apostle Paul warns us, ***“Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you the Day drawing near”*** (Hebrews 10:25). The

walk of the believer is not to be done alone. We need each other for encouragement, accountability, friendship, and prayer. Studying God's Word each week with other believers will not only encourage you but also boost your faith, and equip you to share the Gospel.

It is important to remember when studying God's Word, context is key! Many times we treat Bible verses like a bowl of mixed nuts. We pick out the ones we like and ignore the ones that we do not like. All of the Word is useful and purposeful for correction, instruction, and encouragement in our daily growth. When we take a verse out of its context, we will most likely change the meaning, causing confusion and doubt. If you do not have a desire to grow in the Lord, I encourage you to pray and ask God to place that desire in your heart.

The goal for every believer should be:

- To know God's Word
- To apply God's Word
- To memorize God's Word
- To teach God's Word



LESSON 4

BACK TO REACH



NOBLE BAIRD

Here at The River Church, you will often hear the words: Reach, Gather, and Grow. Trust me, if you were in our weekly all-staff meetings you would hear these words way more often! However, we do not say them because we are some crazy cult trying to get you to chant along with us or some religious organization that has this as part of a liturgical inheritance. We say these words because it is our vision and the heartbeat of all that we do as a Church. As many of you know, our vision is founded out of Matthew 28:18-20; where Jesus called us as His followers to go into the world, preach the Gospel message, and make disciples for Him. Yet, the cycle does not simply end at Grow; you see as you complete the circle and go from Reach to Gather and Gather to Grow, we must go Back to Reach.

To understand this whole concept of going Back to Reach, I would like to take a look with you at Acts chapter 3.

1. Who is the author of Acts and to whom is he writing?

2. What has just happened in the first two chapters?

In Acts 3:1-10, we have an amazing story of Peter and John's journey to the temple. Beginning in verse one, ***"Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. Seeing Peter and***

John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.' And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, 'I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!' And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God, and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him."

3. What time of day was the "ninth hour?"

4. What was the lame man wanting and asking to receive?

A little over three years before this encounter at the temple, Peter and John were in the same boat as this lame man. They had their normal daily routine, trying to make ends meet, yet had a feeling of hopelessness and searching for something more. That is when a real Savior reached into their lives and gave them hope. They then gathered together with ten other men and countless other brothers and sisters in Christ, to grow daily learning about their Heavenly Father and the teachings of Christ. This then brought them to this point in Scripture where they were now going out and reaching those

who were getting by every day just making ends meet without hope and purpose as they once were so that they could share the same love and hope that they were given.

5. Do you remember who reached into your life and lead you to Christ?

Back in September of 2018, my wife and I celebrated our first wedding anniversary in Chicago. If you have never gone, it is one of my favorite places to visit! One thing that has always amazed me about Chicago is how diverse it truly is. You can jump on the Brown Line at Washington and Wabash, travel to Chicago Avenue just four stops away and you will see all different religions, races, hear various languages, and encounter rich and homeless all on just that quick of a train ride. So, as my wife and I were walking around the city, she asked me what we could do. I honestly told her that I had no cash on me, but that we could buy them some food or get some gift cards to a local restaurant. We decided to do just that, we took the leftovers from all of our meals and started giving them to those who were asking for food. It did not matter if you were entering the “gate” to the mall, or the “gate” to get onto the CTA (Chicago Transit Authority), there was always a homeless person sitting outside asking for help.

6. Have you ever been to a city and experienced this?

LESSON 4 BACK TO REACH

7. If so, how did it make you feel and what did you do?

If I am honest with all of you, my first time in Chicago back in 2010, it was very weird and uncomfortable to see all the homeless men, women, and children. Of course, you want to help, but you cannot possibly help every person.

Unfortunately, people often see an overwhelming need and dismiss it as being too much. You might not be able to do everything, but you can do something.

Reach, Gather, and Grow are essential. They lead and prepare one for Back to Reach. This involves the giving of our time, resources, and even self. God is not asking you to do something He has not equipped you to do, but He is expecting you to do what you can do.

8. How are you serving in the Church?

9. What skills, talents, and interests do you have that should be used somehow for Him?

At the next gathering, fill out the gathering notes card and give it to Guest Services. Remember, we do not “go” to Church; we are the Church.

LESSON 4 BACK TO REACH

OPEN THE GIFT

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 1

Mark O'Connor

Sometimes it is difficult for me to remember the days when I used to walk into a church, listen to a sermon, and go back to the week to live as I wanted. I used to be the guy who would walk in half an hour late because I did not like the worship experience. In my defense, I also did not know how important worship was and is to our relationship with Jesus. “Just give me the meat and potatoes,” I used to say to my wife.

I was young and immature in my faith. I was young and immature in life as well. As I continued to grow in my walk with the Lord, I began to realize that it was less and less about me and more and more about Jesus. It was not until I was directed to take a spiritual gifts test. I did not know that there was such a thing. I wish I still had that test because I am sure that public speaking was not on it. God will definitely put you where He wants you to be. You will find He has a reason for every situation.

You have all been given gifts. They are talents and abilities that we are called to use to glorify Christ. Learn from my experience. God will use you. He will use your talents. He will use you in ways you cannot imagine if you let Him.

In 1 Peter 4:10 (CSB), we read, ***“Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve others, as good stewards of the varied grace of God.”***

As we wrap up this edition of Reach, Gather, and Grow, I encourage you all to evaluate the gifts that you have. You can be in a Growth

Community, and that will definitely play a big part in your growth. Your real growth will be stunted if you do not realize that we have to serve others the way that Jesus served us. It is uncomfortable to put yourself out there. Trust me, I understand your thoughts. I am about as introverted as a person gets. By the time I wrap up my day on Sunday evening, I am mentally and emotionally spent.

God has given me gifts and it my duty to use them. He will carry me through despite myself, and the same is true for you. Making the commitment to serve others and in the church is the thing that finally took me to a place where I truly felt that I was in the relationship that Jesus wants to have with me. If you are not already, find a place to serve. If you do not know what that looks like for you, try as many different ministries as you need until you find the right fit.

SERVANT MINDED

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 2

John Hubbard

I think that everybody knows that as the church and as believers of Christ, we are called to serve. As I looked up verses on serving in the church, one verse stood out to me. In Romans 12:11, it says, ***“Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.”*** This was an eye-opener for me. Not only am I called to serve, but I am also called to be ***“fervent”*** in serving. We are instructed to serve passionately, to serve with a burning fire in our soul. I am not called to sigh, roll my eyes, and drag myself to AWANA, Tuesday night gathering, worship or band practice, the nursery, or insert-your-ministry-here, all while wishing I was watching Netflix on the couch. Serving should not be a time of counting down the minutes until it is finished.

Our serving might look different if we were serving with the attitude described in Colossians 3:23-24, ***“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”*** This is an important part of serving. Serving is an incredible opportunity for us. I think we may sometimes forget that serving is our opportunity to worship Christ by loving people the way that He did and does. This is not something we should take lightly. When serving in ministry feels mundane, do not be discouraged. Do not lose your passion. When you feel like your serving goes unseen as you change uncountable numbers of dirty diapers in the nursery week after week with no thanks for your service, do not lose heart.

Remember what Hebrews 6:10 says, ***“For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his***

name in serving the saints, as you still do.” Ultimately, God wants us to serve Him fervently. He sees our efforts; He sees our heart and our attitude when we serve. When you are scooping food for the recovery gathering dinner on a Tuesday night, ask yourself how you can do this with passion. How can you use every interaction to love people the way Christ did and worship Jesus with your passion? When you are setting chairs up for an event, how can you do that passionately and fervently for the Lord? Will you pray for the people who will soon be sitting in those chairs? When you are serving in an unseen area, how can you remind yourself that you are ultimately serving an audience of One? Do not lose heart. He sees your service. Serve Him passionately.

Finally, 1 Corinthians 15:58 says, ***“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”***

NUDGE

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 3

Michael Fox

When I was 18, our youth group needed a bus driver. For some reason, it was something I felt like I could do, so I studied, took the test, and received my CDL license. I am really thankful for the Holy Spirit's leading and the "nudge" I probably received to begin serving. Over the years, it has become a small joke where I try to hide the fact that I have this license, so I do not get asked to drive. However, I actually do enjoy doing it, and looking back it has been a great way for me to serve over the years.

I began my journey as a Christian when I was twelve, and as I began to learn about God, study the Bible, and listen to those around me with wisdom, a common theme began to surface: Serve. In middle school, a friend of mine invited me to church. I was reached. Then I began to attend church, I gathered. As time went on, I attended Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and youth group. I began to grow. Here at The River, we talk a lot about the vision of the church which is Reach, Gather, and Grow. I can look back and see my journey and the path through this process, and I am thankful for those people in my life that helped shape me.

As believers, we are also called to go "Back to Reach." That is what I believe I did when I went and tested for my bus license and began to serve in that ministry. Over the years, I have served in many different areas. There are many to choose from for you as well. A natural response after salvation is serving God, furthering His kingdom, and finding ways to carry out His will for us. John 12:26 reminds us that God calls us to serve Him, and He will honor us for it: ***"If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him."***

In 1 Samuel 12:24, we are reminded to be faithful in serving, and remember what God has done for each of us: ***“Only fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you.”***

Finally, Joshua 22:5 says, ***“Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God, and to walk in all his ways and to keep his commandments and to cling to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.”***

GOD'S HOLY NUDGE

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 4

Danielle Hardenburg

“As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” 1 Peter 4:10 (KJV)

It is confession time: I am a planner. I like things organized and little ducks in straight little rows. I am a rule follower, and I honestly thought I had my whole life planned out since junior high. Actually, I do enjoy challenges and learning new things as long as I can completely anticipate the outcome or foresee any speed bumps along the way (I am only half joking, maybe one quarter). Clearly, you can imagine how often God uses these things to refine my heart and my fleshy control freak tendency.

God has been so patient, and He has stretched me. Honestly, my salvation was found in the middle of a complete mess where I could control nothing. I am so thankful He took me to that place, but I do not want to rap my redemption story. I want to impart what happened afterward, and I truly think many of you can relate.

I had this constant urge to get out of my comfort zone and find some way to learn more, give more, and experience more of whatever God would bring my way no matter the cost. I was a young mom who was very unsure of how to do these things or how I could possibly find the time. However, I knew if I kept praying for God to use me in some way, He would direct my feet. I began to serve in a few family ministries and doing life with some folks in a Growth Community. It was not easy for me in the beginning. I had passing thoughts like, “Am I really able to teach children about God? How could I go to

someone's house I do not even really know and talk about Bible things when I do not have it all sorted out? Will they see my mess? Will they see how much I do not know and ask me to leave?" Well, the answer to all that was yes (less the throwing me out part). But I found that I was in the wonderful company of people all looking to experience whatever God had for them.

Acquaintances soon became friends, and they took the time to teach me, pray with me, and encourage my family each week. They were people like me, trying to grow and sort it all out, too. God placed on my heart the importance of growing together by intentionally being a family of believers who are serving and praying for each other. I wanted then and still burn for families to be supported by a community who do life together. That is where God has directed my passion. I am so blessed to be a part of a ministry that is not only fun but also a group of women who all are seeking for families to grow stronger in their faith. These women who serve have a great passion for reaching families during one of the busiest seasons in life by loving and caring for their little ones. These women are moms, wives, students, daughters, and grandmothers who serve and give their time to our church family so that they may grow in God's Word each and every week during Growth Communities, gatherings, workshops, and even serving together.

NO ONE NOTICES?

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 5

Dani Reynolds

We may think that no one is watching because no one is around while we are serving, but God sees, and God knows what you are doing. He is the most important one to please. Matthew 6:1 says, ***“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”***

One of my classes in 7th grade was music. Ugh, I did not like that class. I seriously could not understand anything in the class. I would cut up, be silly, and make jokes about how easy this class was. However, deep down inside I was panicking because I had no clue and I did not want others to think I was dumb or anything. So instead of asking the teacher for some help, I took it upon myself to cheat off of a friend's test. I got a “C.” Man, I was so proud that I did not get caught and I got a passing grade. I felt like, “Boom, you do not know me, I totally get this class.” No one knew. Well, guess what? God knew! At that time of my life, I did not know that God knew, but He knew.

After the test, I started to feel guilty, I still did not understand what the class was doing, and I could not pass another test because it was based off the first test. I was in some serious trouble here. I did not want to tell the teacher that I cheated. I did not want everyone to know that I was not getting the class. I did not want to be known as the slow girl, but I surely was not able to go any further. So, after God flooded my heart with the truth of what I did, I went to the teacher, explained my situation, admitted that I cheated, conveyed that no one else knew and that I was clueless on what to do next. Thank

goodness my teacher had some grace in his veins and did not have me suspended or fail me for cheating. He explained to me that I would be allowed to retake the test. I retook it and received a "B." It was crazy good news.

I realized that just because I thought no one saw anything or knew that I cheated, God knew. Although it appeared I got away with something and I was not viewed as the slow one in the class, God knew. I believe He put the Holy Spirit in my heart to convict me into telling the truth. I would have never done that if I knew someone was watching me. I tried to play the part of understanding the class. I never wanted to need anyone's help. I tried to convey that I could do anything by myself and everyone would then look at me with respect and amazement. I was surprised to be reminded that God saw and sees everything. He knows everything. He knows your heart. I think back and wonder what would have happened if I would have spoken up and asked questions. Maybe I could have helped someone else in the class who was struggling as well. I am sure there were others who did not understand all the material. I am sure I was not the only one.

I read an article (bible.org) that said biblical integrity is not just doing the right thing. It is a matter of having the right heart and allowing the person you are on the inside to match the person you are on the outside. I did not want my teacher or classmates to think of me as the dumb one, so I cheated, but what I also did was show that I was a cheater. It was the wrong choice. I am thankful that God and the teacher forgave me.

Psalm 139:1-6 says, ***"Search me, O God, and know my heart O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted***

with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it."

How awesome to know that God is watching you at all times. I think we as people would act and feel different if we knew God Almighty knew what we were doing. God has called us to serve one another. Sometimes we get to serve when folks are watching, and sometimes we get to serve when no one is watching (of course, except for God).

LOVE OF CHRIST CONTROLS

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 6

Josh Lahring

When I graduated from high school, I decided to go to college for music. After a year of that, I thought, "How am I ever going to have a career that would provide for a family from music?" I then transferred to computer science the next year and made it three weeks into the classes when God made me realize that He had something else for me. I was more interested in planning out my future and how to provide for myself than I was about serving and trusting Him. I was not living with God as my master and provider. Instead, I was my own master. I obeyed that calling and it completely changed the course of my life. I moved away to go to a Christian college to study music and Bible theology. I did not want to move; I did not want to go to a new college. I hated change, and through the years I had no idea what was going to happen with my life. I just kept following the path before me knowing that I was doing what God asked of me.

Serving the Lord is not just a matter of once a week. It is not just coming to a gathering and being involved in a ministry. It is your entire life. Every day, every hour, we are to serve the Lord. If Jesus is Lord of your life, are you obeying Him? Are you giving Him glory in everything you do? Are you serving Him in the things you do?

When I decided to go to Bible college, I was not just changing the course of my life. Instead, it represented all my treasures, gifts and talents being given for God's glory and not my own.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, ***"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all,***

therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

Who or what are you living for?

Who do you obey?

Who do you worship and glorify?

Who do you serve?

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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