

A person in a light-colored jacket stands on a rocky mountain ridge, looking out over a vast sea of clouds. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The clouds are thick and textured, filling the middle ground. In the distance, more mountain ranges are visible under a hazy sky.

Discovering Your Pathway

NB NEWBREAKCHURCH

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Week One - Introduction

Icebreaker:

What's your name and what do you do for a living?

What brought you to Newbreak, and how long have you been here?

What's your favorite local restaurant?

Getting Started - Are you new to faith, new to Newbreak, new to Life Groups, or all of the above? Discovering Your Pathway (DYP) is designed to equip you in your journey as a Christ-follower, and help you find your place here at Newbreak. As you discover your pathway through our ten week course, you will interact with others who are on this journey with you, and you will understand our shared role in bringing God's good news, hope, and grace to our local communities.

Our Newbreak Story - Back in the 1970s, Pastor Mike Quinn began ministry with his wife Teresa at a small church in Ocean Beach, California. Located on the corner of Ebers and Cape May, it was a beautiful historic church originally built in the 1930s. Unbeknownst to the Quinns, that church would eventually become one of Newbreak Church's campuses. But the journey to that point was decades in the making.

In 1986, Pastor Mike answered the call to become Lead Pastor of La Jolla Christian Fellowship -- a church of just 13 people in La Jolla. This church took a long time to grow numerically -- remaining under 200 people for 14 years. But it was during these years that the church grew formationally as God began to shape the heartbeat of what would become Newbreak Church. With a strong focus on outreach and Life Groups, this young church began to flourish as they cared for one another, celebrated each other, and served the community.

In 1994 the church relocated from La Jolla to Tierrasanta, launching a Saturday night service as Canyon View Christian Fellowship. The church immediately began serving its new community and attendees bonded together in small groups. The church grew exponentially and in 2005, Pastor Robert Wachs was hired to serve as Executive Pastor, supporting Pastor Mike in the ongoing growth and direction of this flourishing community.

As a church planter at heart, Pastor Mike held the vision of growing attendance to over 1200 people so as to then send out 200 people to launch new churches in other San

Diego communities. In the mid-2000s, that dream became a reality with the planting of a Scripps Ranch campus. Then in 2009 came three new campuses and a new name, Newbreak Church. In 2020, the Covid pandemic opened the door for an online campus and in December of that year, Pastor Robert Wachs became Lead Pastor and Pastor Mike moved into his role as Legacy Pastor.

Today, Newbreak is filled with people from many different walks of life who have a passion for serving their communities and cultivating authentic relationships that draw them closer to Jesus and each other. We are excited for what God is continuing to do through all of us at Newbreak and we are so glad you are joining us in this journey. Welcome!

Newbreak's Vision Framework

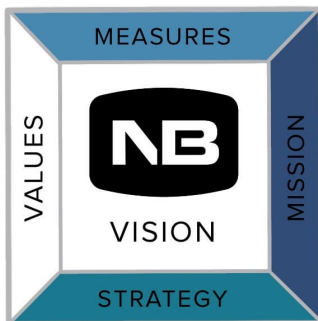
After completing His earthly ministry, Jesus commissioned all those who would follow after Him to make disciples and glorify God ([Matthew 28:19-20](#)). Our unique way of doing this at Newbreak is represented by our Vision Framework. The four sides of the frame represent our mission, strategy, values and measures. Together they frame our vision, which is a picture of where God is taking us as a church.



Our Vision:

... is the **picture** of **where** God is taking us as a church.

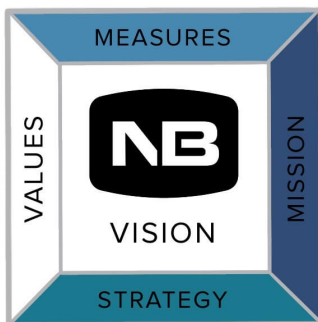
Developing Christ-Centered Leaders Who Change Their World.



Our Mission:

... is the **compass** that guides us in **what** we are doing.

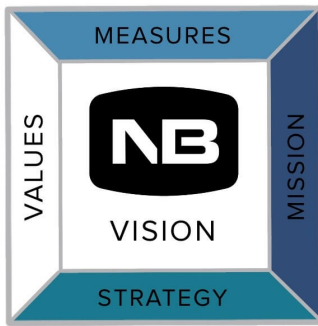
Connecting people with God through authentic relationships to serve communities.



Our Values:

... are the **flame** that burns within our church to reveal the shared convictions and strengths that fuel the **why** behind our actions

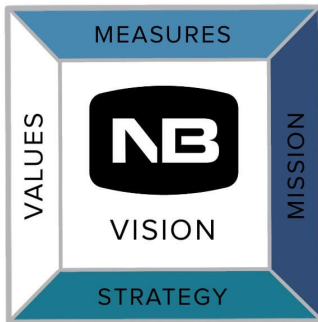
** Keep it accessible! * Make it better!
* Do it together! * Give it away!*



Our Strategy:

... is the **flashlight** that shows **how** we engage our people in our mission

- **Begin** the week in worship
- **Belong** together in Life Groups
- **Be** the church by serving



Our Measures:

... are our **target** and reflect **when** we are successful in accomplishing the mission.

Newbreak's twelve measures are organized under the three phrases of the mission statement as follows:

Connecting People with God

- Experiencing God's Grace
(Ephesians 2:8-9)
- Embracing Biblical Truth
(2 Timothy 3:16-17)
- Practicing Spiritual Disciplines
(1 Timothy 4:8)
- Developing Spiritual Stewardship
(Genesis 1:27-28; 2:15)

Through Authentic Relationships

- Reciprocating Gracious Accountability
(Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)
- Committing to Family
(Romans 8:14-17)
- Building Servant Leadership
(Mark 10:34-45)
- Expressing Christ-like Character
(2 Corinthians 3:17-18)

To Serve Communities

- Sharing our God-Stories
(Romans 10:13-15)
- Being Socially Aware
(Luke 4:18-19)
- Demonstrating Grace
(Colossians 3:14)
- Cultivating a Generous Heart
(2 Corinthians 9:6-15)

Life Group Covenant

We believe that being a part of a healthy spiritual community is one of the best ways to grow into devoted followers of Jesus Christ. In order to foster that kind of community, it's a good idea to establish some common expectations, based on Scripture, and to put them into words.

We Agree to the Following:

Clear Purpose - We want to grow spiritually healthy lives by developing a spiritually healthy community. Authentic relationships are central to Newbreak and we develop these by praying for each other regularly, serving together, and pursuing opportunities to get to know each other better.

Group Attendance - Relationships take time and investment. We get to know each other by meeting together regularly. We commit to this spiritual journey with our fellow group members. And if attendance is not possible, we will let the group leader or another member know.

Value Time - We value each other's schedules, so we start on time and end on time.

Safe Environment - What's said in the group, stays in the group. This is tremendously important. If we can't count on true confidentiality, we won't feel free to share honestly. We listen carefully, applying grace without offering quick answers, snap judgments, or simple fixes. That way we can all feel heard, valued, and loved.

Be Confidential - If something a fellow group member shares is concerning, we will avoid gossip by going directly to that member and voicing our concerns privately (Matthew 18:15-17).

Open Chair - We look for opportunities to invite people to this Life Group and welcome people when they join us.

What We Believe

"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Continue in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers." – **1 Timothy 4:16**

These Core Beliefs are intended to be the basis of fellowship. There will always be peripheral doctrines upon which committed followers of Christ disagree, but the core beliefs are non negotiable.

The BIBLE is the inspired Word of God

The Old and New Testaments are verbally inspired by God, the only written revelation from God to man. The Bible is infallible and is the only authoritative rule of faith and conduct for mankind ([2 Timothy 3:16](#); [2 Thessalonians 2:13](#); [2 Peter 1:21](#)).

There is one TRUE God

God is called by many different names because of the different dimensions of His personality, but God is One ([Deuteronomy 6:4](#)). God is super-dimensional and eternally self-existent ([John 8:54-59](#)). God is all knowing, all present, and all powerful. He is the creator of the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1-2). While God is One, He has revealed Himself through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit ([Luke 3:21-22](#); [Matthew 28:19-20](#)).

Jesus Christ is the SON of God

Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of God. The Scripture declares His virgin birth ([Matthew 1:18-23](#)); His sinless life ([Hebrews 7:26](#); [1 Peter 2:22](#); [1 John 3:4-5](#)); His miracles ([Acts 2:22](#); [Acts 10:37-38](#)); His death on the cross ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#); [1 Peter 2:24](#); [1 Corinthians 15:4](#)); His bodily resurrection from the dead ([Matthew 28:1-6](#); [1 Corinthians 15:4](#)); and His exaltation to the right hand of God the Father.

All men are SINNERS in need of a SAVIOR, Jesus Christ

Man was created in the image of God ([Genesis 1:27](#)). However, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God ([Genesis 3:6](#)), their sin had several consequences. First, there was a curse that was pronounced on them and all their descendants ([Genesis 3:14-19](#)). Next, they were sent from the Garden of Eden ([Genesis 3:23](#)), the process of physical death began ([Genesis 2:17](#)), and man died spiritually ([Romans 5:12-19](#)). Sin separated humankind from God ([Ephesians 2:11-18](#)) and left us in a fallen or sinful condition ([Romans 3:23](#)).

But God loved the world so much that He sent Jesus to save the world ([John 3:16](#)). The only means of salvation is Jesus Christ ([Acts 4:12](#); [John 14:6](#)). He died on the cross to pay the penalty of our sins ([1 Peter 2:24](#)). When we put our faith in Christ, it triggers a spiritual chain reaction: We become the temple of the Holy Spirit ([1 Corinthians 6:19](#)); we are given eternal life ([John 3:16](#)); we become children of God ([Galatians 4:4-7](#)); our sins are forgiven and forgotten ([Hebrews 8:12](#)); and we are born again ([John 3:3](#)).

Salvation is through faith in CHRIST ALONE, and is given by God's GRACE

When asked the way to the Father, Jesus replied, "I am the way and the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except through me" ([John 14:6](#)). We gain access to God and His grace through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross ([Romans 5:1-8](#)). There is nothing we can do to earn God's favor. Eternal life is a gift ([Romans 6:23](#)). We are saved by grace through faith, and even our faith is a gift of God ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)).

The HOLY SPIRIT is given to all believers

The Holy Spirit is given to all believers to empower us to share what God has done for us ([Acts 1:8](#); [Romans 8:9](#)). The nine fruit of the Spirit ([Galatians 5:22-23](#)) are the by-product of a Spirit-filled life and evidence of spiritual maturity. The gifts of the Spirit are different manifestations of the Spirit to build up the body ([1 Corinthians 12:1-11](#)). We are instructed to diligently seek the gifts ([1 Corinthians 12:31](#); [14:1](#)), but they must be exercised in an orderly way ([1 Corinthians 14:26-33](#)) in the context of love ([1 Corinthians 13:1-13](#)). There are also various experiences of the Spirit which the Scripture refers to as "fillings, baptism, and leadings" ([Acts 1:8](#); [2:1](#); [Matthew 4:1](#); [Romans 8:14](#); Ephesians 5).

In regard to our beliefs at Newbreak we say:

- In our **ESSENTIAL** beliefs, we have unity.
- In our **NON-ESSENTIAL** beliefs, we have diversity.
- In all our beliefs, we show **CHARITY**.

Newbreak is an independent community of believers connected to a network of other missionally minded churches within the Assemblies of God.

Where We Are Going

Built around our mission statement of "connecting people with God through authentic relationships to serve communities," each lesson explores one or two topics intended to help us measure our growth and development as we seek to live life on mission. These measures will also help us to know when we are successful in accomplishing our mission at Newbreak.

Our curriculum is broken down into weekly large group lessons that are expounded upon in five daily devotionals to do at home. Please take time each day to connect with God by prayerfully considering the Scripture passages, teaching, and questions in each daily devotional. We'll talk about some of the readings and the questions during the group each week. Be sure to write down any questions you may have for your Life Group leader.

One of our goals this semester is to serve together in the community. At Newbreak, we call this our SERVE Challenge. We'll be discussing and praying about where to serve throughout the semester.

Course Overview

- Week 1 - Introduction
- Week 2 - Experiencing & Demonstrating God's Grace
- Week 3 - Embracing Biblical Truth & Practicing Spiritual Disciplines
- Week 4 - Expressing Christ-Like Character & Building Servant Leadership
- Week 5 - Reciprocating Gracious Accountability & Committing to Family
- Week 6 - Developing Biblical Stewardship & Cultivating a Generous Heart
- Week 7 - Sharing Your God Story & Being Socially Aware
- Week 8 - Sharing Your God Story with the Group
- Week 9 - Serve Challenge
- Week 10 - Group Party

Day 1- When God is Silent

A Devotional in Old Testament History

Today's reading is out of Genesis 15:1-6. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

In our passage below, we are introduced to a childless man named Abram. In Genesis 12, God promised Abram that he would make him into a great nation and all the families of the earth would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). The problem was that his wife was barren and they were both very old, far beyond child-bearing years. As time passed, his faith began to wane. Notice how verses two and three each begin... "But Abram said," (Genesis 15:2) → "And Abram said." (Genesis 15:3). It is not explicit in English, but the way the Hebrew language (in which the Old Testament was written) communicates is that these are two different conversations over a period of time. In Genesis 15:2, Abram pleads with God. Why had God's promise that was made years ago not come to fruition? It is like him saying, "God I trust You, but I don't understand You or this plan."

No doubt God heard Abram. But guess what God says? ... nothing. Crickets. God doesn't respond! No amount of time is given. This could have been days, weeks, months, or even years of silence! God is still silent. However, God finally does respond after who knows how long (see Genesis 15:4-5).

Abram walked with God even when there were times of silence. We often over-romanticize people in the Bible as if God spoke to them every day. The narrative seems to suggest it was not often! Maybe you are experiencing a similar season to Abram? Even though things were taking longer than he thought, God's promise to him hadn't changed. In fact, God took the chance to reaffirm His commitment to him. This interaction with God deeply impacted Abram and he believed the Lord while his wait continued. We have much to glean from this interaction, seeing how to embrace the time and tension between a promise, a plan, and its provision.

Take a moment and reflect on the passage again and answer the questions below.

Genesis 15:1-6 (ESV) *After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."² But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"³ And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."⁴ Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh*

and blood will be your heir.”⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”⁶ Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Reflect

1. What about this passage captures your attention? Why?
2. Abram felt the tension between promise and provision. Have you ever felt this tension? What was that like?
3. What truth about God does this passage encourage us to hold on to?

Act

- ☐ Try keeping a prayer journal. This will help you track your prayers and thoughts while also recording the ways you see God at work in your heart and life. Whether God is speaking vision into your life or simply affirmation into your heart, it is worth noticing and paying attention to.

Pray

Lord, thank you for calling me for your good purposes. I am eager to live out the plans you have for me! Please reveal a vision for my life that I can be excited about. Help me trust you even when I can't hear you or feel you. I know you are always near. Empower me to find guidance and strength in your written word. And Please help me listen to the ongoing leadership of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Day 2- God is My Shepherd

A Devotional in Old Testament Poetry

Today's reading is out of Psalm 23:1-6. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage.

Another one of the types of writing we find in the Bible is poetry. How cool is it that God wanted to communicate to us in all different forms—including the power of poetry? Songs and poetry can speak to our hearts and souls in ways that other forms of communication can't. The book of Psalms in the Old Testament is a beautiful collection of 150 songs/poems written by various authors (with the majority of them written by King David). What makes these so powerful is that the various Psalms express a really broad range of emotions and are so raw & honest before God. So no matter what emotion you're currently experiencing, or how you're feeling spiritually—there's a Psalm for that! In the Psalm below, David compares God to a shepherd that provides care, protection, and guidance for his life.

Take a moment and reflect on the passage again and answer the questions below.

Psalm 23:1-6 ¹ *The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.* ² *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,* ³ *he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.* ⁴ *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.* ⁵ *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.* ⁶ *Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Reflect

1. What are the different things we learn that God promises to do for David (and thus us!) throughout this Psalm? Which of these promises do you most need to lean into right now in your life?
2. David writes the first half of this psalm from the perspective of "I'm a sheep, God is the Shepherd" and the second half as "I'm a servant, God is the King." What do you get out of these metaphors about who God is and how He cares for us?

3. In verse 4, we see that God doesn't promise to keep us out of the "dark valleys" of life, but that He will be with us when we walk through them. How have you seen this already in your life? In what way(s) do you most experience God with you?

Act

- ☐ Try reading Psalm 23 every morning to start your day this week and then meditate on the promises in it throughout the day. Look for ways throughout the week that God can "shepherd" you.

Pray

Lord God, thank you for being my Shepherd and my King. When I feel worn out, help me lie down in green pastures and find refreshment for my soul in You. When I feel scared of the dark valleys, help me walk through them with You, knowing that I'm never alone. Thank you that your love follows me all the days of my life—may I follow after you all my days, too. Amen.

Day 3- Guard Your Heart

A Devotional in Wisdom Literature

Today's reading is out of Proverbs 4:20-23. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

In Biblical times the local well was the most important source of life in that region. People would drink from it and also use it to help care for their animals. Protecting that water source was of utmost importance. People would guard the well by putting a big rock over it (or something similar) to protect it from being polluted. If a sheep fell in the well, it would poison the water and turn it from a spring of life to a spring of death.

In a similar way, the author of Proverbs encourages us to pay special attention to "guarding" our hearts. In the Bible, our heart represents the innermost part of who we are. It is the wellspring of our lives. Whatever goes in there impacts the way that we think, what we say, and how we live our lives. If we fill our heart with things that are good, lovely, and pure (Philippians 4:8), our lives will reflect that. If we allow things into our hearts that are negative influences, our thoughts and actions will reflect that too. Thankfully God is able to cleanse our hearts and give us the wisdom we need to protect our hearts. Take a moment and reflect on the passage again and answer the questions below.

Proverbs 4:20-23 ²⁰ *My son, pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words.* ²¹ *Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart;* ²² *for they are life to those who find them and health to one's whole body.* ²³ *Above all else, **guard your heart**, for everything you do flows from it.*

Reflect

1. What about this passage speaks to your heart? Are there any things that you don't understand?
2. Why do you think the author specifies in verse 23 that we are to "above all else" guard our heart?

3. What are some practical ways that you can guard your heart this week?

Act

- ☐ Make a list of the things that you need God's help with to guard your heart. Spend a few moments today lifting each one of those things before God in prayer.

Pray

*Lord, thank you for the words of wisdom in Proverbs 4. I need your help to protect my heart today. Please help me to pay special attention to what I allow into my heart today. Thank you for your grace and willingness to help cleanse my heart.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Day 4- Following Jesus Daily

A Devotional in the Gospels

Today's reading is out of Luke 9:23-24. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

It's easy to view "Christianity" as simply a religion or a set of doctrinal beliefs. But when we examine the life of Jesus in the Gospels (the stories about His life), we find that He never called people to simply join another religion. Rather, He called us to a journey in relationship with Him. Time and time again we see Him using the language of "follow me," which means Jesus is always on the move, and we're meant to walk with Him. That still applies to our lives today! Take a moment and reflect on the passage again and answer the questions below.

Luke 9:23-24 ²³ Then He said to them all: *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it."*

Reflect

1. What do you think Jesus meant by "take up their cross?" Is "our cross" different for each of us, or the same? What would you say your cross is?

2. Why do you think Jesus was intentional to say the word "daily?"

3. What do you think Jesus is referring to when He talks about "denying ourselves" and "losing our life" for Him?

4. Have you given up anything in your life to follow Jesus yet? (If not, that's OK, we'll explore in this group what that might look like.) If so, explain

Act

- ☐ Begin to view your journey of following Jesus as a daily one (not just a one-time decision, not just when we're in trouble, not just on Sundays). What could you begin to do every day to connect with Jesus? (Hopefully, the devotionals in this guide will help you with that!)

Pray

Lord, thank You for calling me to follow You. Show me how to walk with You daily, how to let go of the things I need to let go of, take the steps of faith You call me to, and carry my cross as You did. I ask You to do a powerful work in my own spiritual journey and in our Life Group as we explore this together. Amen.

Day 5- Clothe Yourself with...

A Devotional in the Epistles

Today's reading is out of Colossians 4:12-14. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage.

Another type of writing we find in the Bible are Epistles or letters written by disciples to other churches. These often provide us with some practical ways to live out the teachings of Jesus and give us a glimpse into the kinds of issues and questions that the early Christ-followers struggled with. Colossians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a church in Colossae and contains many beautiful reminders of the promises of God and also some instructions on how to follow Jesus in our daily lives. Take a moment and reflect on the passage again and answer the questions below.

Colossians 3:12-14 ¹² *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.* ¹³ *Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.* ¹⁴ *And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

Reflect

1. In Paul's list of what to get rid of (3:8-10) and what to start "clothing ourselves" with (v12-14), what is one that you really want to focus on having God develop in you?
2. In v10, Paul mentions that we have put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge in "the image of your Creator." How do you think the above passage relates to that truth?

3. How could our relationships change if we committed to living these words of Paul out consistently? In our marriages, our parenting, in the workplace, and in our neighborhood?

Act

- ☐ Pick one of these “virtues” from Paul to focus on today. You can choose a new one each week or each month and ask God to develop that virtue in your life. Write out some characteristics of what this could look like in your life and be sure to track the results of how you’re seeing God develop it in you!

Pray

*Lord God, I want to reflect more of your image. Please develop these qualities in me, that I can show people what you’re like. May each of my relationships improve as I live these out. Forgive me when I fall short in them. Open my eyes to see how far you’ve brought me in these already.
May I glorify you in all of my words and actions this week!*

Week 2- Experiencing & Demonstrating God's Grace

Icebreaker: What was your favorite and/or most interesting job?

Share your thoughts: What comes to mind when you hear the word “grace?” (Maybe the few words people pray before they eat a meal? Or how a ballerina performs on stage? Something else?)

Experiencing God's Grace: From beginning to end, becoming and growing as Christ-followers depends on the undeserved favor God shows us. Each and every day, we have opportunities to accept or reject His mercy, His forgiveness, His kindness, and the power He provides us to do His will.

Ephesians 2:8-9 ⁸ *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—*⁹ *not by works, so that no one can boast.*

The concept of God's grace is a common theme throughout all of Scripture. The fullness of grace is experienced in the New Testament with the coming of Jesus into the world (John 1:17). The word “grace,” in the New Testament comes from the Greek word “charis,” which means “favor, blessing, or kindness.” This is what God offers us, and what we should strive to extend to others.

We are reminded in Ephesians 2:8; “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” That is the beauty of God's grace. It is not something that we do for ourselves, but rather something that we experience from God.

There are many people who believe that they are “too messed up,” to be embraced by the grace of God. The truth is, God does not give or withhold His grace based upon the size or extent of our sins. God is in the business of pouring out His grace upon us. We've all done things we aren't proud of, said things we wish we hadn't, and been places we wouldn't dare go again. Regardless, God's grace is lavish, extravagant, and available for each and every one of us.

No matter what you've done in life, understand that the grace and love of Jesus are waiting for you with open arms. You don't need to reach a certain level of “goodness” before you can experience it. God will meet you right where you are.

Demonstrating Grace: In addition to showing us undeserved favor, loving us unconditionally, and forgiving us freely, God also gives us unique gifts that we can use to extend these kindnesses to others; choosing not to be judgmental or condemning, but showing others the same gracious compassion He gives us.

Colossians 3:14 ¹⁴ *And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

Once we experience His love and His grace, we will never be the same. Likewise, when we share and demonstrate this grace toward others, they will never be the same. That is the way grace is meant to work: that anyone who experiences it is changed wholly and completely, forever.

Day 1 - Free From Performance

Today's reading is out of Ephesians 2:8-10. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

Have you ever wanted God to do something, or give you something, so badly that you decided to run a quick spiritual inventory upon yourself, and ended up creating a “do better” list? You know the list. It sounds something like “I’m going to pray more, give more, serve more, read my Bible more, go to church more,” etc. More and more and more--it can become guilt-driven and exhausting. But in God’s Kingdom, more is not the answer. Jesus is the answer. And the grace that He has for us is not based upon what I do for Him, but what He has done for me!

The author of Ephesians knew this better than so many of us. Paul was first introduced in the Biblical narrative as Saul - the super-religious guy who persecuted the church by approving the arrest and killings of Christians in the early Church. His life changed when he stopped striving for “religion,” and experienced the grace and love of Jesus Christ. That is the freedom we can receive every single day.

While you read this passage today, remember that the person who penned these words was one who learned that there is not enough work, talent, performance, or deed to equal the freedom found in the grace of Christ Jesus. Read this passage again and answer the following questions.

Ephesians 2:8-10 ⁸ *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—*⁹ *not by works, so that no one can boast.*
¹⁰ *For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Reflect

1. There are quite a few powerful statements in these two verses. Which statement speaks to you the most? Why?
2. What does it mean to be saved by grace through faith? Is faith something that comes naturally to you, or is it something that takes more effort?

3. Paul, the author of Ephesians, writes that this grace is not received by works. Why do you think grace must be received freely and not earned?

4. This passage ends with the encouragement that we are God's handiwork and there is a purpose for our lives. How does grace play a role in the purpose of your life?

Act

- ☐ Is there an area of your life in which you need God's grace? Take some time today to slow down and ask God to reveal the reality of His grace to you.

Pray

Lord, I thank You that You love me just as I am, where I am, and how I am. It is in that love that I find Your extraordinary grace. Teach me to experience that grace, that love, and that freedom daily this week. Amen.

Day 2 - We Are A New Creation

Today's reading is out of 2 Corinthians 5:17. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

Whenever we see the word "therefore," we should ask this question; "What is it there for?" The Scripture verse we are looking at today begins with that mysterious word. Paul, who we briefly talked about yesterday, also wrote this letter to the Corinthian church. And he wrote the word "therefore," in the beginning of this verse because he wants us to remember the previous thought he was sharing. In the previous verses, Paul describes that when we experience the grace of God and the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, we put to rest our old life (v. 14-15).

Therefore, when we put our old life to rest, we experience a new life in Christ. You are a New Creation! This new creation is brand new; new-car smell new. You become everything that God desired you to be; washed clean and as pure as anyone could ever imagine. This is the new life that is available only by the grace of God, and the rest of our Christian life is a journey of allowing God to transform us into this new creation. Let's reflect on these powerful words from Paul describing how Jesus made him new, to discover what God wants to do in your life.

2 Corinthians 5:17 *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*

Reflect

1. What portion of this verse speaks to you the most? Why?
2. The verse above states that if anyone is "in Christ," they are a new creation. What would it (or does it) look like for you to live your life closely connected to Christ every day?
3. "The old has gone, the new is here!" What part of "the old life" are you most thankful to leave behind?

4. In your current season of life, what are you looking forward to most in this "new life" found in Christ? Why?

Act

- ☐ If you are new to faith, take a few moments and envision, and even write down, what this "new life" in Christ might look like for you. If you have journeyed with God for a while, reflect and write about the areas of your life where God has brought newness and growth.

Pray

Jesus, I thank You again for Your grace. I am not perfect, and I have made mistakes. Today, I receive Your great grace and I ask that You continue to remind me that my past is not who I am. Who I am is found in You! Amen.

Day 3 - My Identity is In Christ

Today's reading is out of Ephesians 1:4-14. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

When it comes to our identity, oftentimes we feel the pressure to identify ourselves through our jobs, financial status, grades, appearance, and what others think about us. We even introduce ourselves in this manner: "My name is _____, and I am a dentist, engineer, stay-at-home parent, etc." The problem is--what happens to that identity when we experience failure? Or are unable to do that job anymore? How would we perceive our value and introduce ourselves differently?

Do you know how Jesus would introduce you? "Hey everyone, this is _____, and she is my child." How powerful is that? Jesus doesn't identify us by our job titles, nor our appearance, nor our accomplishments, nor our failures. He identifies us first and foremost as children of His kingdom. Our identity was never meant to come from what we do, but rather from who we are. Since we belong to Christ, our identity can be found entirely in Him. Let's read again about what God says our identity is and reflect on how to live that out.

Ephesians 1:4-14 ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. ¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Reflect

1. According to the passage, what are some of the things that God does for us?

2. What does it mean to you to be “adopted into God’s family?”

3. Why do you believe God marks us with a seal and a promise? (V. 13)

Act

- ☐ Write down the phrase “Accepted and not rejected” somewhere where you will see it regularly. Allow this to be a reminder of your identity in Christ.

Pray

Jesus, in Your great grace, You chose to accept me, adopt me, and forgive me. I will continue to thank You for that love daily. Today, I ask that You would remind me that I am accepted and not rejected, I’m set free and not in chains, I am adopted and not orphaned, and I am living in Your grace. I thank You for Your love, Your guidance, and Your forgiveness. Teach me how to love others as You love me. Amen.

Day 4 - Called To a Life of Forgiveness

Today's reading is out of Matthew 18:21-35. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

As we grow in our relationship with God, we also grow in our understanding and experience of His grace. God's grace flows through His unending forgiveness into our lives and one of the many ways to experience and practice this type of grace is through extending forgiveness to others. Forgiveness is one of those words that really hits home. In fact, as you're reading this, you may be thinking of the wounds or hurts from the past that still cause pain. Perhaps you might be thinking about a person who consistently criticized you, or a painful and traumatic experience from the past, or a loved one's betrayal. These wounds can leave us with lasting feelings of anger, bitterness, resentment, and worse. The truth is, when we refuse to practice and take steps toward forgiveness, we are the ones who pay most dearly.

It's important to understand what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not the same as trust. Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Forgiveness is not forgetting, excusing, or condoning. Forgiveness does not heal everything in a single moment. Forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentments and desires for revenge. Forgiveness is setting someone free, and then finding out that that person is you. So how do we forgive and handle conflict biblically? Today's passage reminds us of the power and importance of forgiveness in our lives, and in the lives of others. Take a few moments to read this passage again and consider what God is speaking to you.

Matthew 18:21-35 ²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' ³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I

canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Reflect

1. Peter, one of Jesus's earliest followers, begins with the question; "How many times shall I forgive?" Why do you think Peter would ask such a question? Do you find yourself asking that same question? Why or why not?
2. In verse 27, we read that the servant's debt was canceled and the servant was set free. We've all had a debt forgiven if we've begun our relationship with God. What does walking in the freedom God's forgiveness provides look like for you?
3. Have you been able to forgive someone else who has hurt you? How did you get to that place of forgiveness? If you haven't been able to forgive, what is holding you back?

Act

- ☐ Write down the name of someone you would like to forgive. Take this opportunity to pray for them. Ask God to soften your heart so you can begin the journey of forgiveness.
- ☐ As you are writing, is there anyone that you would like to receive forgiveness from? Write their name down and pray for them today. Ask God to remind you of His forgiveness and grace toward you.

Pray

God, I am not perfect, but You are! And today, I need to understand the depths of Your forgiveness and grace. I pray that I can become a person who embodies the heart of love and forgiveness that You share with all of us. Teach me to extend this grace and forgiveness toward others. Remind me that forgiveness is not forgetting, it is letting go of resentment and revenge and holding on to You as You lead me toward Your heart. Amen.

Day 5 - Learning to Make Peace

Today's readings are out of Romans 12:18 and Matthew 5:9. Begin today's devotion by reading these verses in your Bible.

In our western culture, when we hear the word "peace," we often think of an absence of conflict. As we continue to read and learn more about God's Word, we find that while conflict was present, there could still be peace. This is because the biblical concept of peace is based upon the meaning of the Hebrew word, "Shalom." Shalom refers to a way of life in which there is wholeness and wellbeing. Shalom is essentially a life in which justice, peace, goodness, and righteousness abound for all people. Shalom is life as God intended it to be. This is the peace we get to bring into our world today. Jesus came to bring and restore us to peace with God (John 16:33; Romans 5:1). And now we are invited to be peacemakers together with Jesus.

Shalom-making involves everything we do. It guides us to bring and build unity and peace across any cultural, socio-economic, and ethnic divide. Shalom-makers don't build higher fences to keep people out. Shalom-makers build wider and longer tables to welcome the people of the world together, so that we can all experience the grace and goodness of God. Let's read these important words from Scripture about peace-making and reflect on how to live them out.

Romans 12:18 *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

Matthew 5:9 *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

Reflect

1. "If it is possible..." Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt as though making peace was not possible? Why?
2. What does it mean to "live at peace with everyone?" How can you be a peacemaker in your area of influence?

3. According to Matthew 5:9, what is the blessing of becoming a peacemaker?

Act

- ☐ Ask God today to show you the areas of your life where He is calling you to bring peace.
- ☐ What are some things you have the power to do to promote peace when conflict arises in your closest relationships?

Pray

God, we live in a world where it is difficult to find peace. As we see what is happening in the world that You created, it is difficult for us at times to find out where we can begin. Remind me today that peace ultimately comes from You, and for me to be a peacemaker, I must rest in all that You are. Reveal more of Your grace, Your love, Your forgiveness, and Your peace in every area of my life today. Amen

Week 3- Embracing Biblical Truth & Practicing Spiritual Disciplines

Icebreaker: What is one of your favorite books you've ever read (as an adult or child) and why?

Share your thoughts: What types of things do people typically do to develop a relationship (whether it's a friendship or a romantic relationship) with someone? How could these translate to deepening our relationship with God?

Embracing Biblical Truth: Intentionally devoting time daily to reading and studying what the Bible teaches builds and shapes our beliefs, knowledge, and understanding of God's Word so that we can interpret the world and events in it through the lens of Scripture.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 ¹⁶*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,* ¹⁷*so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

If you ever travel internationally—especially to somewhere exotic where you don't know the land, the language, or the customs—it is helpful to have a guide, or at least an awareness that you are in unfamiliar territory. Acknowledging that you are a tourist helps you to better navigate your way around, and even appreciate the country on its own terms. You will learn so much more by taking the posture of a foreigner as you explore all that the new destination has to offer.

Although our Bibles are translated into our language, the biblical text is far more “exotic” than many of us appreciate. To actually understand the ancient text of Scripture, we have to span the differences of time, culture, and language. These “gaps,” make the Bible foreign in many aspects. However, the Bible is the perfect blend between the exotic and the relevant. The ancient text challenges us to travel back in time to a different world, to experience narratives and stories that inspire and provoke us. The message of the Bible remains timeless, but with just as much relevance for us now, as when it was written. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 reminds us that all Scripture is from God and useful to us.

Practicing Spiritual Disciplines: We experience God directly and grow in our individual relationship with Him by routinely engaging in practices such as praying, fasting, daily devotions, solitude, Sabbath-keeping, Scripture memorization, etc.

1 Timothy 4:8 *Physical training is of some value. But godliness has value for all things; holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."*

Engaging God's Word is just one of the ways we can grow in our relationship with Him. There are plenty of other spiritual practices: prayer, Sabbath-keeping, fasting, etc., that draw us closer to God's love, and turn the truths of Scripture into experiential realities in our lives! The more we practice the spiritual disciplines, the closer we grow to God and the greater the Holy Spirit can work in us and develop the fruit of the Spirit in our lives (Galatians 5:22-23). The more ways we're willing to try experiencing God through spiritual disciplines, the more opportunities He has to reveal Himself to us. This is the point of spiritual disciplines, to put ourselves in a posture that's open to God moving and working in, and through, us.

Day 1 - Scripture is Alive!

Today's reading is out of Hebrews 4:12. Begin today's devotion by reading this verse in your Bible.

Although the Bible is a complete library of 66 books from Genesis to Revelation written thousands of years ago, it is not considered dead or outdated. It is living! Like God Himself, God's spoken word (Scripture) is "alive," as Hebrews 4:12 says. The writer of Hebrews also tells us that God's word is "active." That means it has the power to bring change to our hearts every time we open it up. God's word energizes our lives with His truth, and challenges us to live in a way that reflects His kingdom in this world. Like a tourist, lean into your questions and curiosity as you come along the journey of discovering who God is, who you are, and the purpose of life. Read these words from Hebrews again and reflect on how God's Word can impact your daily life.

Hebrews 4:12 *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

Reflect

1. How do verses 1-11 bring further insight to Hebrews 4:12?
2. What do you think it means that Scripture "judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart?"
3. How does seeing Scripture as "alive and active," inspire you to make the Bible a central part of your daily life? What benefits might come from this?

Act

- ☐ Commit to reading the Bible daily. Not sure what to read? The [YouVersion Bible app](#) has so many reading plans, you're sure to find one that interests you. Partner up with someone else in your life group or ask a friend or family member to join you for accountability and conversation.

- ☐ Dedicate times devoted to Bible study. When we study Scripture, we are asking and answering deeper questions about the text by digging into the literary, historical, and theological context of the passage. For an introduction on "How to Study the Bible," you can take a course Newbreak created by scanning this QR code.



Pray

*Father, help make the life-changing truths of Scripture appear to me not only as just words on paper, but actually make a practical difference in how I live.
Amen.*

Day 2 - How to Hear from God

Today's reading is out of Romans 10:17. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

We may think that hearing from God is a rare phenomenon that only happened to people in the Bible. To be sure, when was the last time the clouds parted and a loud, thundering voice gave you specific directions? But this isn't the only way God speaks. In fact, if we are paying attention, we can all hear from Him. Indeed, He not only speaks through His living Word (Hebrews 4:12), but also through the Holy Spirit. When we give our life to Jesus and follow Him, we receive an incredible gift--the Holy Spirit, who in turn helps us recall and apply the gospel (John 14:26). Getting the gospel message in us bolsters our faith and tunes our ears to the frequency of the Holy Spirit's voice. He always wants to speak to our hearts through inspired thoughts, inner promptings, or even divine whispers! Let's reflect more on how to grow in our ability to hear from God. Read this verse from Romans again, and take some time to consider the reflection questions.

Romans 10:17 *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.*

Reflect

1. There is always going to be consistency between Scripture and God's ongoing communication with us through the Holy Spirit. How does Scripture help us interpret what might be God's voice from our own, or other deceptive voices? What do we do when it isn't so clear?

2. Here are the some of the ways God speaks to us:
 - Scripture
 - Prayer
 - Circumstances
 - Dreams
 - Open doors
 - Our pain
 - Other believers
 - Nature

Based on this list, which way(s) have you heard from God in your life (including ways not listed)? In which ways do you want to start paying more attention?

Act

- ☐ Consider prayer as a dialogue, not a monologue. The next time you pray, take time to listen if God is saying anything to you. Be patient with the process, as learning how to tune into the Holy Spirit's promptings and whispers takes time!
- ☐ Set aside 15 minutes to read a passage of scripture and invite God to speak to you. Consider John 10:1-21, and before reading, ask God to speak to you. Read through the passage 2-3 times and then take a few moments to write down anything God seemed to highlight for you.

Pray

Holy Spirit, please bring the message of Scripture to mind throughout my day, and help me to tune my ear to Your voice. Help me understand the words I read and invite You into this process. Amen.

Day 3 - Connecting with God Through Prayer

Today's reading is out of Matthew 6:9-13. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

Prayer is one of the most well-known and versatile spiritual practices. Maybe we think of prayer as asking God for things. This is one kind of prayer (Philippians 4:6). But there are also prayers of meditation, contemplative prayer, prayers of guidance—21 different kinds of prayer as helpfully laid out in Richard Foster's book entitled [Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home](#) (a fantastic resource). But what do all of these kinds of prayer have in common? They are all a form of keeping company with God. Through prayer we posture our soul to commune and communicate with God—speaking to be heard; listening to hear; and simply enjoying the mysterious but real company of our ever-present Lord. If you don't know what to pray, try praying the prayer Jesus gave us in Matthew 6:9-13. Let's reflect on that prayer below.

Matthew 6:9-13 ⁹ *This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."*

Reflect

1. Were you familiar with this prayer growing up? Do you understand the meaning of this prayer, or is it confusing to you? What part of it sticks out to you the most and why?
2. Jesus teaches us to pray to God as "Father." How does addressing God as Father affect your whole approach to prayer?
3. How do you think your approach to your daily life will change by praying "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"?

Act

- ☐ Explore a few different kinds of prayer; like the ones mentioned in Foster's book on prayer. Discover which types of prayer you gravitate toward, and how to make them a part of your life.
- ☐ Meditative prayer is a great way to combine Scripture and prayer. Write down Psalm 23:6 and repeat it out loud or in your heart several times a day. For more information on meditative prayer, scan this QR code.



Pray

Lord, give me the desire to pray so that it is not a chore, but a vibrant and consistent part of my walk with You. Help me to connect with you during times of prayer and grow my desire to hear your voice as I open my heart to you. Amen.

Day 4 - Spiritual Disciplines of Activity

Today's reading is out of John 15:4-5. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

The spiritual disciplines have classically fallen under two main categories: disciplines of activity, and disciplines of letting go. Today we focus on the active disciplines which include, but are not limited to:

- **Bible Study** - Digging deeper into the Word to understand the original and inspired meaning, by considering the grammar, context, and theology of a text or passage.
- **Worship** - Praising God for His greatness and worth utilizing music, nature, or art.
- **Prayer** - Connecting with God through communication and companionship.
- **Confession** - Owning our wrongdoings, and seeking and receiving God's forgiveness, so as to restore our conscience to God's renewing work.
- **Scripture memorization** - Impressing God's truths upon our hearts so that we can carry His promises with us wherever we go.
- **Gratitude** - Giving thanks to God for His goodness and faithfulness.

For more on the spiritual disciplines, we encourage you to read Richard Foster's [Celebration of Discipline](#). Let's read Jesus' words again about staying connected to Him and reflect on how to do this in practical ways.

John 15:4-5 ⁴ *Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*
⁵ *I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

Reflect

1. Jesus encourages us to "remain in" Him. This practice of abiding is the heart of spiritual disciplines. How do you see the disciplines of activity (listed above), as helping you abide in the love of Christ?

2. In John 15:5 Jesus draws the connection between our abiding, and the fruit we produce. What benefits, or “fruit,” do you see in your life when you are actively practicing the disciplines?
3. Consider the list of active disciplines above. Which one comes most naturally to you? Why?
4. Which one is the most challenging to practice? Why?

Act

- ☐ Over the next week, choose one of the disciplines listed above to practice each day. Feel free to share this experience with your life group members next week.
- ☐ Practice the discipline of Scripture memorization by memorizing John 15:5 this week.

Pray

God, lead me into deeper discovery in the ways in which I connect best with You. Then inspire me to make these abiding practices in my life. Show me how these practices draw me closer to You and help me grow in my desire to connect with You every day. Amen.

Day 5 - Spiritual Disciplines of Letting Go

Today's readings are out of Psalm 46:10 and Psalm 37:7. Begin today's devotion by reading these verses in your Bible.

As we mentioned yesterday, the spiritual disciplines have classically fallen under two main categories: disciplines of *activity* and disciplines of *letting go*. Today we focus on the disciplines of letting go which include, but are not limited to:

- **Sabbath** - Taking a day to stop working on life, to enter in and enjoy the gift of life with God and loved ones.
- **Solitude** - Stepping away from the hustle and noise of routine life (for hours or days), to seek God, refresh, and recharge.
- **Stewardship** - Loosening the grip we have on our possessions to give willingly, and sacrificially fuel and fund the people and projects locally, and globally that bring God's gospel and grace to the lives of people.
- **Simplicity** - The art of needing less, being free from the desire for more, and staying focused on what really matters.
- **Fasting** - Giving up something for the sake of reorienting our lives to God as our Provider. Sometimes fasting is done to seek God's intervention or to gain clarity over a big decision.

Let's read these important challenges from God again on slowing down and reflect on how to live them out.

Psalm 46:10 *He says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."*

Psalm 37:7 (NLT) *Be still in the presence of the Lord and wait patiently for Him to act.*

Reflect

1. Which of the spiritual practices of letting go, listed above, are you most interested in learning about or practicing? Why

2. What does it look like for you to “be still” before God? Which of the spiritual practices of letting go helps you to do this?
3. Consider the disciplines of letting go above. Which one comes most naturally to you? Why?
4. Which one is the most challenging to practice? Why?

Act

- ☐ Sabbath-keeping is a discipline we think might not be possible in our busy lives. Give it a try this week. Choose one day this week that you can shut off your electronics, set aside your regular work, and choose restful activities that help you take a step back from your everyday life.
- ☐ Try fasting one meal this week. Use that time to read your Bible, pray, or serve a neighbor or co-worker.

Pray

Father, help me simplify my life so that I can let go of the things on my calendar that complicate and distract me from Your presence and plan. Amen.

Week 4- Expressing Christ-like Character & Building Servant Leadership

Icebreaker: If you could spend a day with any famous person (living or in the past), who would it be and why?

Share your thoughts: When have you seen the qualities of Jesus in someone else? What are some ways you could know if you're becoming more like Jesus?

Expressing Christ-like Character: As we grow as Christ-followers, we become more like Him in exhibiting qualities such as kindness, humility, joy, gentleness, patience, self-control, love, peace, forgiveness, etc.

2 Corinthians 3:17-18 ¹⁷*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.* ¹⁸*And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

The more we spend time with someone, the more we begin to look like them and talk like them. This is also true of our relationship with Jesus. The more we walk with Him, the more He transforms us to look like Him. Our desires start to become His desires. This daily journey of walking with God and becoming more like Him is referred to as discipleship.

Through discipleship, He begins to shape us and teach us how to surrender more of our lives to Him. As we allow God to work in our lives over time, God transforms us so that we begin to express Christ-like character.

One way to evaluate if we are becoming more like Jesus is by asking ourselves: "How do others observe Jesus in me?" It's one thing to believe we are expressing Christ-like qualities in our own life, but another for people around us to actually see it. As much as we would like to flip a switch and magically become more like Jesus, this is a daily process of growth. While some things change in our lives right away, other parts of our lives take time. That's why in 2 Corinthians 3:18, the Apostle Paul wrote, "And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image." This process isn't always easy, but as we walk with God and learn to submit every part of our lives to Him, He helps us every step of the way.

Building Servant Leadership: We all influence the thinking, behavior, and development of others. And we choose to engage those opportunities by following Christ's model of serving others to help them grow into who God calls them to be.

Mark 10:34-45 ³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." ³⁶ "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. ³⁷ They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." ³⁸ "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" ³⁹ "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." ⁴¹ When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴² Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

One main way God wants to develop Christ-like character in us is by helping us become servant leaders. Jesus addressed this time and time again with His disciples. In Mark 10:43-45, Jesus says, "But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Christ set the example of what it looks like to serve others first. He could have led with force and power, but He chose to lead with humility and love. As we follow Jesus, remember that people would rather follow someone who is always real, than someone who is always right. When we learn to develop Christ-like character and model servant leadership, people will see Jesus living in and through us!

Day 1 - Walk by the Spirit

Today's reading is out of Galatians 5:16-21. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

When it comes to our physical and spiritual growth, we often try to start by "cleaning up" our behaviors. While this is important, it's not necessarily the best place to start. Rather than beginning on the outside with our external behaviors, invite the Holy Spirit to start His transformation inside of us. He can change us from the inside out, and to see that change, we are called to walk through life following the Holy Spirit's leading. Let's reflect on what this looks like.

Galatians 5:16-21 ¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Reflect

1. At the end of vs. 17, what is the reason we desire to do things that are in conflict with the Spirit?
2. Keep reading vs.19-21, and you'll notice that Paul shows us some things which our flesh desires. What are some things you observe about this list?
3. When we walk with the Spirit, Paul says that we will not desire to do the things listed above. What are some ways that we can actively and consistently walk with the Spirit?

Act

- ☐ Each day this week, pray through your calendar and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you through every stage of your day.
- ☐ Write down what you hear and what you experience as you walk each day with the Spirit.

Pray

Holy Spirit, open my eyes to opportunities to respond to others the way You would desire. I'm ready to listen to You as I interact with my family, neighbors, co-workers and anyone I come in contact with. Transform my heart so that I can continually become more like You. Amen.

Day 2 - The Fruit of the Spirit

Today's reading is out of Galatians 5:22-25. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

What happens when you water an apple tree? The tree produces apples! The tree doesn't have to think about it or try harder; it just produces the apples. And we can see it with our own eyes. Similarly, when we walk in-step with the Holy Spirit, He produces fruit in our lives that the people around us can see and experience ("taste"). Today, we explore what expressing Christ-like character actually looks like. While this isn't an exhaustive list, it is a great starting point.

Galatians 5:22-25 ²² *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,* ²³ *gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.* ²⁴ *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.* ²⁵ *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*

Reflect

1. According to verse 24, who must we belong to if we want to see the fruit of the Spirit in our lives?

2. Paul uses the word, "fruit." Not, "fruits," plural. The fruit. It is a package deal, all of which should be evident in our life. We can't just choose to only grow in love, but refuse to be patient. Which of the fruit do you feel like the Spirit has made most evident in your life?

3. Which fruit would you like to see God develop more within you? What are some ways you can be proactive in developing this fruit?

4. Who in your life is displaying the fruit of the Spirit? What can you learn from them?

Act

- ☐ Pick one fruit each day you wish to focus on developing, and put it into practice throughout your day.
- ☐ At the end of the week, ask yourself; "Was I more patient this week than I was last week?" Maybe even ask someone you trust, and see if their response is the same as yours.

Pray

Holy Spirit, I want to see more evidence of Your fruit in my life. I recognize that I need Your help to show people Your love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I want more of You in my life. Amen.

Day 3 - Seek First God's Kingdom

Today's readings are out of Matthew 6:33 and James 1:22. Begin today's devotion by reading these verses in your Bible.

When Jesus talks about God's Kingdom, He is inviting us to know Him and live by His values and purposes. That means we are called to move beyond just knowing about God, but to follow Him wherever He leads. When we show God our obedience, God will show us His power! Let's reflect on these challenges from God and how we might live them out.

Matthew 6:33 *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

James 1:22 *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*

Reflect

1. What do you think it looks like in your daily life to "seek God's Kingdom first?"
2. What does, "all these things will be given to you," mean? (Hint: Look at the preceding verses: Matt 6:25-33)
3. James tells us that reading the Bible is an important habit. Why do you think he says that we deceive ourselves if we only read the Bible, but never put it into practice?
4. What are some practical ways to become a better "do-er," of God's Word, and not just a "hearer," of God?

Act

- ☐ Memorize Matthew 6:33 and repeat it throughout your week. Ask God to show you ways to put Him first, (at home and at work).
- ☐ Make a list of things that may be causing worry in your life, (job, family, decisions, etc.), and ask God to replace that worry with confidence and trust in Him.

Pray

Jesus, I choose to replace my worry with trust and confidence in You. I know that You will supply the things I need today. Fill my mind and heart with YOUR thoughts and YOUR desires. I choose to serve and obey You in everything I do. Amen.

Day 4 - Growing in Humility

Today's reading is out of Philippians 2:3-11. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

In the culture we live in today, we don't often put the words "servant" and "leader" together. We tend to have a very lowly view of a servant, and a very high view (sometimes prideful even) of a leader. One of the most important aspects of becoming more like Jesus is learning about two key character traits which do not get celebrated often in our culture: servant leadership and humility. These traits are the embodiment of everything Jesus is about.

Read and reflect on this important description of Jesus written by the Apostle Paul.

Philippians 2:3-11 ³ *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,* ⁴ *not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.* ⁵ *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

⁶ *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;* ⁷ *rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.* ⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!* ⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,* ¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,* ¹¹ *and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Reflect

1. Verses 3-5 give us a great picture of how we can live in humility. What does it look like to value others above yourself?
2. According to this passage, what did God do as a result of Jesus' living in humility?
3. What do you think holds most people, including yourself, back from pursuing humility?

4. Scripture talks about how easy it is to love those who love you. The same is true with humility. It is easier to be humble when the people around you are humble. In what area of your life is it most difficult for you to practice humility, and what is one step you can take to further practice humility in that area?

Act

- ☐ Humility is the key to bringing unity amongst our diversity. Tomorrow pick one way you can put others' interests before your own.

Pray

Jesus, thanks for being the perfect example of living a life of humility. It's not easy to choose humility and I want Your strength to do this well. Amen.

Day 5 - Serving Others

Today's reading is out of John 13:4-5 and 12-17. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages in your Bible.

Jesus didn't just tell people how important it is to serve others, he modeled it first. In fact, at the time, everyone expected Jesus to overthrow the Roman government and establish a physical kingdom on earth. Instead, Jesus came to establish His kingdom within people's hearts. Jesus knew He could rule over everyone because, after all, He was God. But rather, He chose to serve humankind. In God's Kingdom we learn that true leadership is servant leadership. Let's read again this beautiful story of Jesus' servanthood and reflect on what it means for our lives.

John 13:4-5, 12-17 ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.
¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³ "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Reflect

1. Washing guests' feet as they arrived was a job set aside for the lowliest of slaves. With that in mind, why do you think Jesus chose to model this? How does this impact your view of God?
2. What do you think Jesus was wanting to teach His disciples about leadership?
3. Serving those you consider to be beneath you seems counter-cultural. Yet some of the best leaders choose to lead this way. Why is serving others so important and powerful?

4. Read verse 17 again. Jesus modeled serving, and now passes it on to us. What does it look like to serve others at home? Work? Community?

Act

- ☐ Here are some ways to practice servant leadership.
 - Show interest in others by asking questions about their lives.
 - Accept small irritations with good humor.
 - Find ways to acknowledge others and make them shine.
 - Be courteous and delicate, even when being provoked.
- ☐ Which of these can you implement more effectively in your circles of influence? Add your own and practice serving others in that way.

Pray

Jesus, give me opportunities to serve people throughout my day. I know that when I serve others, they get to experience Your love, grace, and joy. I pray people would truly see You through me! Amen.

Week 5- Reciprocating Gracious Accountability & Committing to Family

Icebreaker: What was one of your favorite group/team experiences (at work, school, sports, military, etc.) And why?

Share your thoughts: How would you describe “real commitment” in a relationship? How do you think “accountability” plays a role in relationships?

Reciprocating Gracious Accountability: Intentionally building and developing genuine relationships with others allows us to encourage, challenge, and support each other as we grow.

***Ecclesiastes 4:9-10** ⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: ¹⁰ If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.*

What comes to mind when you hear the word accountability? For many, accountability often brings up thoughts of “consequences,” “blame,” “being called to the carpet,” and perhaps even “punishment.” If you’ve ever felt fearful or uncomfortable at the thought of accountability, it’s understandable why. However, gracious accountability from a Biblical standpoint is not something to be feared. It’s not a form of punishment for those who can’t quite make it on their own, nor does it make a person somehow less godly than others. Quite the opposite, in fact. God wants us to pursue gracious accountability in our relationships because it helps us grow. Simply put, “gracious accountability” involves developing authentic relationships with other Christ followers who challenge, encourage, and speak truth into our lives, for the purpose of promoting greater spiritual growth.

When it comes to accountability, Solomon challenges us with these important truths found in Ecclesiastes 4:9-10:

- To grow and thrive spiritually, we need to have intentional and genuine accountability relationships.
- Accountability involves other people. In other words, I’m accountable to myself by being accountable to others

Committing to Family: We each belong in a family and God wants us to commit time, effort, and energy to intentionally invest into those relationships.

Romans 8:14-17 ¹⁴ *For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.* ¹⁵ *The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.”* ¹⁶ *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.* ¹⁷ *Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

It’s also important to remember that we each belong to God’s family (our spiritual family), in addition to our family of origin. The Apostle Paul reminds us of this truth that we are adopted into God’s family in Romans 8:14-17. He calls us to value these relationships and commit to develop them. God wants to use us to help our brothers and sisters in Christ become the people God created them to be. That only happens when we spend time together, knowing each other and being known by each other.

Together with our spiritual family, we make up the Body of Christ, and we are the Church!

Day 1 - The Greatest Commandment

Today's reading is out of Mark 12:28-31. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

The dictionary defines the word "priority" as "something that is very [important](#) and must be [dealt](#) with before other things." Think of a priority as something that must be given special attention. Jesus lays out a top priority to guide us in cultivating life giving and authentic accountability relationships. This top priority is what Jesus called "The Greatest Commandment." Let's look at what Jesus said and reflect on it below.

Mark 12:28-31 ²⁸ *One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"* ²⁹ *"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.'"* ³⁰ *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'* ³¹ *The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."*

Reflect

1. Read Mark 12:28-31 several times. As you reflect on it, invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you. What's one word that stands out to you?
2. According to verse 30, how are we to love God? What does it look like to love God this way?
3. In verses 30-31, Jesus tells us to love God, our neighbor and ourselves. Which of the three is easiest for you to love? Which is the hardest? Why?

4. Think about your life before Jesus. What were some of the ways you were hard to love? How does that empower you to love people who are challenging in your life today?

Act

- ☐ Find one way to love and bless a co-worker, classmate, or family member this week.

Pray

Heavenly Father, reveal to us the things that hold us back from loving You and others more. Show us ways that we can serve and bless those around us. And give us the patience to love those whom we find difficult to love. Amen.

Day 2 - How to Family

Today's reading is out of 1 Corinthians 13:1-13. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

Can you come up with a definition that accurately describes what love is? It's not an easy task. Truth be told, most of our definitions often feel incomplete. In 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul writes one of the most famous descriptions of love. In his description, notice that he doesn't give us a dictionary definition of love, but instead tells us what love looks like. That's because love must be expressed. When it comes to our spiritual family or family of origin, these verses will teach us how to best express Jesus' love in those relationships. Let's reflect further on the kind of love God calls us to have in our relationships.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 ¹ If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Reflect

1. In verses 1-3, what does Paul say should be the underlying motivation for all that we do? Why is that motivation so important?

2. Look through the descriptions of love in verses 4-7. List the things love “does.” Then list the things love “does not do.” Which description of love stands out the most to you?
3. How have you experienced God demonstrating this kind of love in your life?
4. Which of the descriptions of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-13 would you like to reflect more this year?

Act

- ☐ Take some time this week to memorize 1 Corinthians 13:4-6. Turn it into a prayer you begin each day with. Ask the Holy Spirit to use you to demonstrate His love to those in your life.

Pray

Jesus, thank You for demonstrating what true and unconditional love looks like. While we may not get it perfect all the time, help us live out sacrificial love in our family and accountability relationships. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 3 - Truth and Love

Today's readings are out of Galatians 6:1-2 and Ephesians 4:15. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages in your Bible.

Have you ever baked a cake and left out some ingredients? The cake just doesn't come out right, does it? It's helpful to think of truth and love as the two necessary ingredients for mutual growth in any accountability relationship. Authentic accountability relationships thrive when both people are humble and teachable enough to receive "truth in love" conversations. Conversations where there's no truth and no love are simply lies which lead to rumors and gossip. Truth with no love is harsh and judgmental in nature. Love with no truth is flattery, and no one grows as a result of it. Truth and love together though can lead to authenticity, healthy accountability, and thriving relationships. This is why finding a balance of both is paramount. Let's read and reflect more on how to live this out in our relationships.

Galatians 6:1-2 ¹ Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. ² Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Ephesians 4:15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Reflect

1. What are some of the principles that these verses lay out which guide us in having truth conversations with others?
2. According to Ephesians 4:15, what are the outcomes of speaking the truth in love?
3. Have you ever had to confront someone about their sin or speak truth into a situation? What could you have done differently according to the guidelines above?

4. The word for “love” in this verse is a self-sacrificial love that works for the benefit of the one who is loved. What are ways you can practice this type of sacrificial love in your family and accountability relationships?

Act

- ☐ Ask God to bring someone into your life who can encourage you, pray for you, and speak truth into you. Take the first step to invite them into your life.
- ☐ Meditate on the guidelines above and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal where you fall short. Invite Him to heal and bring change to those areas.

Pray

Holy Spirit, give me the courage to speak the truth in love in my relationships, and the wisdom to know when to speak and when to withhold my words. Most importantly, speak truth into my heart so that I can be the best representation of Jesus to those around me. Amen.

Day 4 - Learning to Practice Confession

Today's reading is out of James 5:16. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

You may have heard of the saying, "confession is good for the soul." While this may not be a direct quotation from the Bible, the Bible does talk about the power of confession on multiple occasions. Proverbs 28:13 tells that when we confess and forsake our sins, we will find mercy from the Lord. So why are we hesitant to practice more confession in our lives? In our relationships, confession is a "super-power" because it unites, repairs and brings healing. When we sin, everything within us screams, "cover it up. Turn off the lights. Bury the evidence. Destroy the tapes. Make up an alibi. Run!" But in James 5:16, James paints a picture of the church as a family that's honest and open enough to be real. When that happens, healing takes place.

James 5:16 *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*

Reflect

1. According to James 5:16 what are the outcomes of practicing confession with one another? (Hint: there are several outcomes.)
2. What are some of the reasons why people are hesitant to practice confession with one another? What fears come to mind when you think about confession?
3. Jesus died so that our sins can be forgiven. Read John 3:16-17. How do these verses bring hope and healing to your life?

Act

- ☐ Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind any sin that you need to confess to someone. Pray for courage to confess that sin to a trusted friend for accountability.
- ☐ Ask the Holy Spirit to heal the shame and guilt that we carry because of our sin and mistakes. Memorize 1 John 1:9.

Pray

Heavenly Father, I confess my sin and shortcomings to You. Thank You for forgiving me. I receive Your forgiveness today. Cleanse me and make me new.

In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 5 - Doing Life Together

Today's reading is out of Acts 2:42-47. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

Cultivating strong family relationships isn't easy, but it's worth it. We see a great example of this in the early church in Acts. These first Christ-followers lived life together as a family unit, and it was a powerful witness to the world around them. Their life together was marked by a deep love for God, a commitment to one another and a willingness to sacrifice for the benefit of others. As a result, it brought about positive change to society and advanced the message of Jesus to the entire known world at the time. Read and reflect on the passage below to see how they lived together. Then, begin to dream of what your family could look like if you took steps in this direction.

***Acts 2:42-47** ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Reflect

1. According to this passage, what were the practices of the early Christ followers? Which of the practices inspire and excite you?

2. Which of these practices do you find is the easiest for you to be devoted to? Why? Which is the hardest? Why?

3. How does this passage and the practices it describes color the picture you have of family life?

4. Sacrifice for the sake of the family is part of the journey of a Christ follower. Here are some of the ways we can sacrifice for our family: our time, our right to always have and do the things we want, our money and resources, our personal agendas that don't fit the family's goals. What is God asking you to sacrifice for your family at this time?

Act

- ☐ Prayerfully make a list of the practices (traditions, habits, rhythms from Acts 2) that you need to incorporate into your family. List out the ones you need to let go of.
- ☐ Commit to praying for each member of your family today. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal ways in which you can serve them.

Pray

Father, thank You for welcoming me into Your family. Help me remember that I don't have to do life alone. So, guide me as I cultivate deep and meaningful relationships. Use those relationships to spur me on in my spiritual journey and use them to reach the world for You. In Jesus' name, amen.

Week 6- Developing Biblical Stewardship & Cultivating a Generous Heart

Icebreaker: What is one of your favorite gifts you've ever given someone else? Why was it so memorable?

Share your thoughts: What things of value in your life have you had to entrust to someone else? What kinds of things do you think God entrusts us to care for?

Developing Biblical Stewardship: God gives each of us resources of time, talent, and treasures that He wants us to manage and use to accomplish His plans and purposes in the world.

Genesis 1:27-28 ²⁷ *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* ²⁸ *God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."*

Genesis 2:15 ¹⁵ *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*

We don't tend to use the word "steward" very often in our everyday language, but it's simply the idea of someone who is entrusted with the care of something else. Property owners entrust stewards to manage their property. When people draft wills to handle their property after they pass away, someone is often called the steward who can care for their property and possessions.

In a similar way, biblical stewardship begins with the principle that God owns everything. In Psalm 24:1, the psalmist says, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." In God's kindness, He has given to us the responsibility of caring for and stewarding His resources. From the very beginning of God's creation, God gave to Adam and Eve the task of tending His creation. Genesis 2:15 says, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." They were given the responsibility to "take care of" the land and His creation

But it's not just "creation" that God calls us to steward; He has also entrusted each of us with specific talents, resources, and opportunities. At Newbreak, we like to think of it in terms of four major areas of our lives that God trusts us to steward wisely: our time, talent, treasure, and testimony.

Cultivating a Generous Heart: God wants us to give freely of all that He has given us and helps us to grow in our desire and ability to use our resources to further His kingdom and make a difference in the lives of others.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 ⁶ Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever." ¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. ¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

The more we learn to understand God's call of stewardship in our lives, and the more we learn to recognize His gifts to use and enjoy them, the more we are freed up to practice this thing called "generosity." Since God is the source and provider of everything, we are free to be generous with our resources because we know that He will give us the things that we need. Think of it this way: we can't outgive God.

There are many different ways that we can practice generosity. We can use our gifts and talents to help others and we can use our time and our treasure to support the work of God. One word that gets used at churches when talking about the generosity of our treasure (finances/resources) is the word "tithe." A tithe is defined as "one-tenth." When we talk about tithing at church, we are referring to the Biblical practice of giving one-tenth of the first part of our income to the church we call home.

The practice of tithing was first introduced in the Old Testament when God-followers were called to sacrifice the first and best of their livestock and crops to God. Jesus then affirmed this practice in the New Testament (and called people to sacrifice even more!) When we tithe, we are demonstrating that God is first in our lives and that we can trust Him, not ourselves, to provide for our needs. God can do more in blessing our 90% than we can in keeping 100%.

In 2 Corinthians 9:6-15, Paul encouraged the church to be generous in their giving towards the work of God. In verse 6, Paul reminds us today that, "whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." Paul knows that when we learn to be generous with our resources (sow generously), we get to see God provide in ways that we would never have expected (reap generously). This is why Paul encourages us not to give out of guilt or reluctance (vs.7) but out of confidence that, "God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." (vs.8).

Day 1 - Stewarding Our Time

Today's readings are out of Ephesians 5:15-16 and Psalm 90:12. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages in your Bible.

One of the most iconic Twilight Zone episodes was about a man who never could get enough time to himself. He eventually found a stopwatch that could stop time so he could do everything that his heart desired. Have you ever thought about what you would do if you had more time? The truth is that each of us gets the same 24hrs/day and 168hrs/week. The question, always, is how well we steward our time based on the current life season we are in. Since time is so valuable, how we spend our time says a lot about what we value. In today's devotion, read the passages below and consider how you can use the time that God has given you in the best ways possible.

Ephesians 5:15-16 (ESV) ¹⁵ *Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise,* ¹⁶ *making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.*

Psalm 90:12 *Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*

Reflect

1. In Ephesians 5:16, Paul tells the believers to, "make the best use of the time." It has the idea of seizing opportunities and moving with urgency. What are some ways that you can seize opportunities for God today in your life?
2. According to Psalm 90:12, why did the author ask God to help him to number his days? What is the connection between what Paul said in Ephesians 5:15-16 and Psalm 90:12?
3. If you were to live this day like it was your last, how would you live it differently? What time-wasters would you cut from your life?

4. What are the things that you spend the most time doing right now in your life? In what ways can you invite God into what you spend your time doing?

Act

- ☐ Keep detailed track of how you spend your time today. What do you spend the most time doing? Is this how you want to spend your time? If not, identify 1-2 things you can change and begin putting them into practice.

Pray

Lord, please help me to be a good steward of the time that You have given to me. Show me how to invest it wisely and not squander it on worthless pursuits. I want to use my time today for You. Amen.

Day 2 - Stewarding Our Talents

Today's readings are out of Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Peter 4:10-11. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages in your Bible.

God has made each of us unique and everything God created in us can be used for His purposes. We've all been blessed with talents, spiritual gifts, and passions that can be used to impact people and our world for the Kingdom of God. The first question that needs to be asked is, "What unique talents and passions has God given to me?" Once you discover those things (which may take some time) the next most important question to ask is "How can I use those talents and passions for God?" One of the exciting parts of being a Christ follower is seeing God use our gifts to serve other people. Take a few moments and reflect on the Scriptures for today and then answer the following questions.

Romans 12:6-8 ⁶ *We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.*

1 Peter 4:10-11 ¹⁰ *Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. ¹¹ If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen*

Reflect

1. In Romans 12:6-8, Paul lists seven spiritual gifts. Out of the seven listed, which ones are new to you? Which one(s) do you think you might have?
2. In 1 Peter 4:11, Peter says that whatever you do, do it with the strength God provides. According to the verse, why did Peter say that? Have you ever asked for the strength of God in your life?

3. How can I recognize the unique gifts and talents God has given me? What do people who know me well say I'm good at?
4. How can I learn to see using my gifts and talents as a way to worship God, and a way to show others who He is?

Act

- ☐ Take the spiritual gifts assessment and share the results with someone else. You can access the assessment by scanning this QR code.
- ☐ Ask close friends and/or mentors what they think your spiritual gifts are.



Pray

God, will You show me what my unique gifts are and how I can contribute to the life of the Body of Christ? Help me to cultivate them, to grow in them, and to use my talents to serve You and others. Amen.

Day 3 - Stewarding Our Treasure

Today's readings are out of Matthew 6:19-24, Proverbs 3:9-10, and Malachi 3:8-10. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages in your Bible.

We all have some "treasure" through our finances (even though it often doesn't feel much like "treasure"!) that we are entrusted to be generous with and use to make an eternal impact. Are we willing to offer that to God for His purposes? We have the opportunity to use our finances to build the Kingdom of God through two main practices: tithing and giving of offerings. Giving a tithe (literally 10% of the first of our income) shows God how much we trust Him to provide for us. He promises a blessing if we are faithful in that. He promises to bless us with even more (and that "more" isn't always necessarily financial, but plays out in lots of ways). God knows how difficult this can be for many of us and so He invites us to even "test Him" in this and see for ourselves if what He's saying isn't absolutely true.

As we see God's faithfulness in blessing us with more when we are obedient to Him, we are going to want more opportunities to use what we have to bless others. When we use our income this way, it's called offering. This is where we say, "God, you have provided so much for me. I want to help provide blessings for others. Use me to show Your love to other people."

Read today's verses again and answer the following questions.

Matthew 6:19-24 ¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also....²⁴
"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money

Proverbs 3:9-10 ⁹Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; ¹⁰ then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with wine.

Malachi 3:10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.

Reflect

1. In Matthew 6:21, Jesus says, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Why do you think Jesus connected the heart with treasure?
2. Where are you currently on your tithing journey? How are you growing in your generosity to God?
3. When was the last time that you sensed God put on your heart to give to another person, or cause, and you responded? How did you feel when you acted in faith to be generous?
4. Was there a time in your life when someone was generous with you?

Act

- ☐ Ask God to provide you with an opportunity to be generous to others.
- ☐ Decide the next step (which may be your first step) in your tithing journey and start this week.

Pray

*Lord, please help me to release control over my finances and my resources to You today.
I want to trust You more in this area of my life. Amen.*

Day 4 - Stewarding Our Testimony

Today's reading is out of 1 Peter 3:15. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

Did you know that you are also a steward of your testimony? Each of us have God-stories that He is writing in our lives and our stories can make a huge impact in the lives of others. While people may argue about doctrines, particular beliefs, and the finer points of theology, no one can dismiss or discount your story. And yet, for most of us, the idea of sharing our God-stories with others can feel intimidating. We might think of a car salesman trying to sell someone a car. No one likes that process. But God never meant for it to have to feel that way. When we tell others what God has done for us, we don't have to do any work, or convincing. We just tell people our story and let the Holy Spirit do the "work" in their hearts. In today's devotion we will discuss how we can share our God-story with others.

1 Peter 3:15 *But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*

Reflect

1. According to 1 Peter 3:15, what are the two ways that we should share our God-story? Are those two terms synonymous with how most people feel today when they hear the good news?
2. Why do you think Peter uses the term "hope" to describe our faith in Christ? How do you think bringing hope through your God-story will impact your job, school, home, or neighborhood?
3. How do you think people would respond differently if they heard how God has worked through your life with gentleness and respect vs. judgment and harshness?

4. Have you ever shared your God-story with someone? If so, how did it go?

Act

- ☐ Pray for opportunities to share your God-story or even parts of it with others.

Pray

Lord, show me who to share my God-story with today. Help me to have confidence in who You see me to be. Equip me to lean into the hope that You have given to me so that I may share it with others. Amen.

Day 5 - Stewarding Creation

Today's reading is out of Genesis 1:27-28 and 2:15. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages in your Bible.

Many people throughout the centuries have asked the question, "What does it mean to be human?" The Bible answers that question by stating that to be human means to be made "in the image of God." The term "image" refers to something that is similar but not identical to the thing it represents. The idea is that mankind was made like God and in some ways images or represents God. In other words, we are walking and talking reflections of God in this world.

One way that we are like God is that we have dominion over God's creation. God has given us the responsibility to care for and steward the earth and everything in it. It's not hard to see how humanity has mishandled this divine call of God in our lives. We have a responsibility to help steward the creation and it starts with each of us. This isn't about where you stand on hot-button topics like "climate change" or "alternate energy sources". Re-read these verses from Genesis and then reflect on our roles in stewarding creation.

Genesis 1:27-28 ²⁷ *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* ²⁸ *God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."*

Genesis 2:15 *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*

Reflect

1. In Genesis 1:27-28, God created Adam and Eve in "His own image." How does this truth provide humanity with special and intrinsic value?
2. Do you consider the earth and everything in it as a gift from God? What are some aspects of the creation that you particularly appreciate?

3. Have you ever met someone who has a sincere passion to protect the environment? What was their reasoning for their care and concern?
4. In what ways can you be a steward of God's creation? Have you ever considered this as a purpose in your life? (See Genesis 2:15)

Act

- ☐ Ask God to give you a heart to steward His creation today.
- ☐ What is one thing you can do this week to make a difference for good on the earth today?

Pray

Lord, Your creation is so amazing and I can see Your creativity and beauty everywhere! Please help me to be a good steward that cares for the creation around me today. Amen.

Week 7- Sharing Your God Story & Being Socially Aware

Icebreaker: If you had the necessary resources and could meet any need in the world, what would it be and why?

Share your thoughts: In what ways do you think God is at work in our world? Why do you think He'd want to include us in that work (and not just do it Himself)?

Being Socially Aware: By listening to, engaging with, and learning about what is going on in the communities in which we live, and around the world, we can direct our efforts to serve the needs of others.

Luke 4:18-19 ¹⁸ *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,"* ¹⁹ *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

God is up to something in our world. He's on a mission, and He has been since human beings first fell away from Him in the Genesis story. God is on a mission to put our world back together, to heal the brokenness, to lead every person who would ever live back "home" into a loving eternal relationship with their Creator, their Heavenly Father. The Apostle Peter summed it up beautifully:

"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

Jesus reiterated God's mission (not in John 3:16 only), when He read from the prophet Isaiah in Luke 4:17-18. He proclaimed freedom for the prisoners, offered sight to the blind, and set the oppressed free.

And this is a mission that Jesus called all of His followers to join Him in--not just the pastors, missionaries, church staff, etc. We all get to be a part of His life-changing, world-changing mission to bring the Good News of the Gospel and God's amazing grace to our world. God will change us while we live out this mission, and will lead us to find purpose, fulfillment, and joy that we never knew possible! It's a huge part of our

Newbreak mission ("Connecting people to God through authentic relationships to serve communities") and it's one of the key parts of our strategy ("Be the church").

Sharing Your God Story: We each have examples of the way God works in our lives and the things that He has done -- both when we first come to faith and throughout our daily lives -- and we learn how to put words to those experiences so we can share them with others.

Romans 10:13-15 ¹³ for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." ¹⁴ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

This mission begins with knowing our own story of how God has rescued us and then learning to tell it through our words and our actions. The more often you share what God has done in you and for you, the easier it is to share His awesome love with others. You have a unique story to tell. Get good at it!

Then God calls us to be aware of people and their needs, and learn to see others how God sees them. Missiologist, practitioner, and author Hugh Halter says it like this in his book [Flesh: Bringing the Incarnation Down to Earth](#): "People are not pagans to be converted, projects to be preached at, or demographics to be reprogrammed. Humans should never be generalized, categorized, dismissed, judged, or underestimated. Every person is a story, rich with history, experiences, creative potential, strengths and weaknesses, clarity and blindness."

So in this week's study, let's learn together how to get really good at joining Jesus in His mission!

Day 1 - Knowing Your God Story

Today's readings are out of John 4:39 and Romans 10:14-15. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages in your Bible.

We all have a story of what God has done in and through our lives. Here at Newbreak we call this our "God-story." It's important for us to really learn our God-story because our story can do so many things (we mentioned some of them in the "Steward our Testimony" devotion). The better we know it, the deeper we can understand God's grace and work in our lives, which is incredibly encouraging! Our God-story can encourage other Christ-followers to hear what God is doing and look for His power in their own lives. Learning to share our God-story with others can also draw people who don't know God yet to Him so they can know His grace and love.

Your first thought may be "my story isn't special enough to change someone's life." The truth is that your story is more powerful than you can imagine, because God's works are always powerful! We just have to learn how to view it, understand it, and articulate it. In Acts 22:1-21, the Apostle Paul tells his story to a large group of people. Take a moment to read this passage in your Bible.

Here are some of the core components of his story: Paul tells of his background growing up, his attitudes and activity before coming to faith in Jesus, his actual moment of conversion and the days following and finally, the new direction in life he took and the work God is doing in his life. We can learn to share these same components in our story: our life before Jesus + how we found a relationship with Jesus + how He has changed our lives after. Let's read from God's Word and reflect deeper on how to understand our own God-stories.

John 4:39 *Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did."*

Romans 10:14-15 *How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*

Reflect

1. What speaks to you most from these passages? How is God challenging or encouraging you with them?

2. Where, and to whom, would you say God has “sent” you right now in your life?
3. What are the barriers that most often keep Christ-followers from sharing their God-stories with others? Which barriers keep you from it?
4. If you had to tell your God-story in one sentence, what would it be?

Act

- ☐ Using the format explained above, take some time to write out your God-story (don't worry about making it “perfect,” just write whatever God leads you to!), and be prepared to share it (at least parts of it) next week at Life Group.
- ☐ Begin asking God regularly for opportunities to share your God-story with someone in your life who is ready to hear it.

Pray

Lord Jesus, thank You for Your powerful work in my life, and for the stories You continue to write. Grow my understanding of Your stories in my life that I might be able to share them well with others so they can see what Your grace looks like. Grant me the opportunities to share my God-story with others, and grant me all of the words, courage, and grace I will need to do it. Amen.

Day 2 - Living Out Your Story

Today's reading is out of Matthew 5:13-16. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

When it comes to reaching the people in our world with the life-changing grace of Jesus, it takes far more than just our words. The Gospel must be lived out through our actions. This is exactly what Jesus' whole life was about--proclaiming it and living it! And it's exactly what He calls us to do. In fact, He gives us multiple metaphors and commands and stories to make sure we really get this idea. The way we live out God's power and story is meant to cause others to hunger and thirst to know more about Him. St. Francis of Assisi summed it up like this: "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." Let's reflect further on these two important metaphors from Jesus and learn how to live them out in our daily lives.

Matthew 5:13-16 ¹³ *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."* ¹⁴ *You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.* ¹⁵ *Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.* ¹⁶ *In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."*

Reflect

1. Why did Jesus use the metaphor of salt for how we are to live? What characteristics of salt can you think of that connect to this idea of showing people who God is?
2. What did Jesus mean by His metaphor of light? What would it look like for your life to be "light?" How does that draw others to God?
3. Who is someone you know personally that you believe reflects Jesus' ideas of living as salt and light really well? What can you learn from them?

4. What one area of your life do you feel most called to work on to make it reflect the character of Jesus (more “salty” and “lighter”) to others in a more powerful way? (Your words? Generosity? Patience? Attitude at work? Humility?)

Act

- ☐ Develop some “in the moment” reminders of ways you can live consistent with your beliefs. Here are a couple ideas:
 - Learn to pause and ask, “What would Jesus do in this situation and how would He do it?” before responding/reacting.
 - Get this Matthew 5 salt/light passage “in you.” Memorize it; make it the lock-screen on your phone; print it and have it at your desk or bed.
- ☐ Pray about, and look for, opportunities to be salt/light to someone in your life this week. Ideas:
 - Surprise them with a generous/thoughtful/unexpected gift.
 - Speak words of encouragement to someone.
 - Serve someone with no strings attached.
 - Bring some joy/fun/humor into a situation where someone needs it.

Pray

Lord Jesus, help me to answer Your call to be salt and light to my world so that others might find hope and grace in You. Help me to not just learn Your ways, but put them into practice so people can see what they look like. Help me learn to respond in situations in the ways that You would. May my actions in front of others lead to some powerful and beautiful conversations about faith and grace and who You are. Amen.

Day 3 - Listening to the Needs (B.L.E.S.S.)

Today's reading is out of Matthew 20:30-34. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

René Laënnec, the inventor of the stethoscope, once said to a group of doctors, "Listen to your patients—they are telling you how to heal them." The same is true for you and me when it comes to meeting people's needs. We often think that serving and evangelism begin with us speaking first and bringing our ideas. But what if we learned to begin with listening? Jesus was notorious for leading with questions when He met people, and for taking the time to truly listen, asking what they wanted, even though He certainly knew the answer.

Consider these five "missional practices" (that form the acronym B.L.E.S.S.) that can help us develop a rhythm of listening to and serving people. These are simple enough that anyone can do them--and you could even pick one each day to carry out! They're meant to reflect the practices and rhythms we see in Jesus' life, like in this story of two blind men on the roadside.

- **Belong** -- learn to see where God placed you currently (your street, neighborhood, school, workplace, etc.) as your mission field; focus on belonging there and praying for God to show you where He's at work.
- **Listen** -- ask questions of the people around you so you can discover their needs, hurts, values, celebrations, etc.
- **Eat** -- share meals (or coffees) with people to build relationships and trust
- **Serve** -- as you're listening and eating with people, you'll discover ways you can serve them, and be the hands and feet of Jesus in tangible ways for them.
- **Story** -- listening, building relationships, and serving opens the door for opportunities to share your God stories.

Let's read again this beautiful story of Jesus living out these principles and reflect on how we can do the same.

Matthew 20:30-34 ³⁰ *Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"* ³¹ *The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"* ³² *Jesus stopped and called them. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.* ³³ *"Lord," they answered, "we want our sight."* ³⁴ *Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.*

Reflect

1. Jesus was obviously on His way somewhere before He got interrupted by these guys. Why do you think He stopped for them?
2. If Jesus already knew they were blind, why do you think He asked them what they wanted instead of just healing them?
3. Which of the B.L.E.S.S. practices come easiest/most natural for you? Which one(s) will be the most challenging for you? Why?
4. What would you say right now are a few of the top needs of the people around you? What ways come to mind that God could use you to meet those needs?

Act

- ☐ Try putting B.L.E.S.S. into practice this week! Pray first, then choose someone God brings to mind to invite out to eat with, and listen to, and see how God leads the conversation and what He might bring out of it.
- ☐ Based on what you've heard/seen already within your neighborhood/workplace/school (pick one), take some time to write out the answers to these questions: What do they celebrate? What do they care deeply about? Where are they hurting? What do they need most?
- ☐ Get to know a few of your neighbors this week. Find out their kids' names, hobbies and interests, and their favorite restaurant. Remember, your neighbor is everyone you interact with and not just the person who lives next door.

Pray

Lord Jesus, open our eyes and ears and teach us to see the people around us the way You saw people, to notice those that we normally pass by, to learn to listen to needs and what's really going on in people's hearts. Show us how we can be Your hands and feet in the places You've put us. Thank You for including us in Your mission to reach this world with the grace of God. Amen.

Day 4 - Serving the Poor

Today's reading is out of James 1:27 and 2:14-17. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages in your Bible.

The entire story of Scripture shows a God who loves and meets the needs of all people--all ages, backgrounds, economic statuses, etc. God invites us to partner with Him in this work. God wired us each uniquely to reach different groups of people that we're particularly passionate about. However, there is one group of people that all Christ-followers are called to love and meet their needs--the poor and marginalized. Jesus' life reflected this (He even says clearly in Luke 4:17-19 that this is His mission, and it's a common theme through the entire Old and New Testaments.)

In fact, Richard Stearns points out in ["The Hole in our Gospel"](#) that there are over 2000 verses about poverty and justice throughout Scripture! It's certainly something God cares deeply about--and we are called to also. Our culture likes to say, "God helps those who help themselves," but the real truth in Scripture is: "God helps those who can't help themselves. And He does it through us." Let's read through these calls from God to love the poor and reflect on how to live that out.

James 1:27; 2:14-17 ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world... ¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

1 John 3:17-18 "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

Proverbs 19:17 Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done.

Reflect

1. Which of these three passages speaks to you the most? Why?

2. Why do you think God has such a heart for the poor and such an urgency to have us meet their needs?
3. What do you see as the biggest barriers that keep most Christ-followers from helping the poor? Which ones are your biggest barriers?
4. What does God do in us and teach us when we step out to help others in need?

Act

- ☐ Be intentional to let God expand your heart for the poor and marginalized and expand your understanding of the issues they face. Consider reading books like [“The Hole in our Gospel”](#) and [“When Helping Hurts”](#) and studying passages of Scripture about it (like the ones listed above and Matt 25:31-46, Luke 4:17-19).
- ☐ Ask God to show you some tangible ways you can start to meet the needs of the poor and marginalized who are right around you.

Pray

Lord Jesus, give us the heart You have towards the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized in our world. Help us always find ways to serve and bless them in Your name. We pray this helps them know the grace and love You have for them, and we pray that it deepens our relationship with You as well. Amen.

Day 5 - Building God's Kingdom

Today's readings are out of Matthew 6:10, John 20:21, Acts 1:8, and Matthew 28:19-20. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages in your Bible.

Throughout this week we've looked at God's heart to reach everyone in our world with the Gospel and meet their needs in tangible ways--and this is a huge focus for us at Newbreak Church! That's why we began what we call "Kingdom Builders." Kingdom Builders (KB) is the way that we fund the people and projects both locally and globally to bring the life-changing gift of God's grace to their world. KB involves giving of our financial resources to these important God-led causes close to home and around the world, serving through mission trips and local outreaches, and praying consistently for all of our missionaries and partners. We invite everyone who calls Newbreak their church home to join us in this and become a vital part of it. We believe we'll get to see the powerful works of God all over our neighborhoods and our world as we unite together around these causes! Let's read through these inspiring calls from God to reach our world and reflect on how we can play a role in that.

Matthew 6:10 *your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

John 20:21 *Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."*

Acts 1:8 *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

Matthew 28:19-20 ¹⁹ *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,"²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Reflect

1. What do these verses say to you about the role God has for you in His Kingdom?

2. How does meeting the needs of people help “God’s Kingdom come” and “God’s will be done” here on earth?
3. Why do you think God chooses to work through us to meet these needs, instead of just doing it by Himself?
4. Take some time to read about our projects at www.newbreak.church/kb Which project(s) speaks most to your heart currently?

Act

- ☐ Pray about how God is leading you to join us in impacting the world through Kingdom Builders:
- How might He want you to start giving towards it?
 - Are there any mission trips He might be calling you to step out in faith and go on?
 - How can you make these projects and partners a regular part of your prayer life?

Pray

Almighty God, we pray along with Jesus that Your Kingdom would come and Your will would be done here in our city, in our country, and in our world, as it is in Heaven. Use us individually and as a church to help bring Your life-changing message of grace to everywhere we can. Leave us in awe of Your powerful works as we join You in this mission. Amen.

Week 8- Discussing Our God Stories

During today's meeting we will share our God stories with one another. Sharing our God Story is something we highly value at Newbreak. The Gospels and the Book of Acts are filled with examples of people sharing their God Stories with others. On one occasion, Paul shared his God story with a large group of Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 22:1-21). When we look at the passage, we see 3 key components to his God Story:

1. Paul's life before he came to faith (Acts 22:3-5)

³ *"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today."*⁴ *I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison,*⁵ *as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.*

2. Paul's conversion and the days following (Acts 22:6-11; 12-16)

⁶ *"About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me."*⁷ *I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?'"*⁸ *"Who are you, Lord?" I asked. "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting," he replied.*⁹ *My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me."*¹⁰ *"What shall I do, Lord?" I asked. "Get up," the Lord said, "and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do."*¹¹ *My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.*

3. Paul's life after he came to faith (Acts 22:17-21)

¹⁷ *"When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance"*¹⁸ *and saw the Lord speaking to me. 'Quick!' he said. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.'*¹⁹ *"Lord," I replied, 'these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you.'*²⁰ *And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him."*²¹ *"Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'* "

We can learn to share these same components in our story: our life before Jesus + how we found a relationship with Jesus + how He has changed our lives after. So be prepared to share your God-story, and to listen to others, and to celebrate together the powerful ways God works in people's lives!

Day 1 - Prayers of Thanksgiving

Today's readings are out of 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 and Philippians 4:6. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages.

There have been countless studies in the psychology world on the effects of gratitude on our brains and our lives. These studies have found that gratitude reduces stress hormones, helps manage sleep disorders and insomnia, and it literally rewires your brain to be happier. So it turns out that it's not God who is changed by our thankfulness—we are! Gratefulness in your life leads to greatness in your life. So there are lots of reasons that God prioritizes prayers of gratitude—and why we're meant to make that a regular rhythm in our prayer life!

Let's read again from God's Word and reflect deeper on how thankfulness should pervade our Christian life.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NLT) ¹⁶ *Always be joyful.* ¹⁷ *Never stop praying.* ¹⁸ ***Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.***

Philippians 4:6 *...in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

Reflect

1. Why would thankfulness be part of "God's will" for us? What is He hoping we'll get out of it?
2. We all know we should be more grateful so what keeps us from being more thankful and having more of an "attitude of gratitude"?
3. What do prayers of gratitude remind us about God?

4. How could becoming a more thankful person end up affecting your relationships and the people around you? How will you be a more effective Christ-follower if the people around you see you as a thankful, grateful person?

Act

- ☐ Keep a gratitude journal during the week to remind yourself of all that you have to be thankful for, and all the ways God has shown up in your life, and all the ways He has provided for you.
- ☐ Consider starting every single prayer time you have this week with gratitude first, before you get to the asking. Commit to making gratitude a regular rhythm in your life—instead of just a feeling.

Pray

Lord God, thank you for all you have provided for me, for all you have done for me, for all you have carried me through, and for who you are. Thank you for your unconditional love and boundless grace. My gratitude goes beyond what my words can express, so I just tell you with all my heart and soul—thank you for everything. Help me keep my thoughts focused on what I'm thankful for, instead of just things I want/need. May gratitude overflow in my life! Amen.

Day 2 - Prayers of Confession

Today's reading is out of Psalm 51. Begin today's devotion by reading this entire Psalm.

The amazing part of God's grace is that no matter how bad we mess up in our lives—we're never too far from His grace. God always welcomes us back into relationship with Him, no matter how badly we try to break it (like in the Prodigal Son story). Prayers of confession are still an incredibly important part of our spiritual lives. Confession is about coming clean before God, admitting what we did is wrong, asking for His grace again (He always says "yes"), reconnecting with Him, and committing to living differently moving forward.

This is similar to how a parent will forgive their child and continue to love them even after they mess up—but how the parent still longs for the child to "come clean" with them so they can be reconciled. It's important to commit to regular prayers of confession so we can stay closely connected to our Heavenly Father! Psalm 51 is a powerful example of a prayer of confession written by David after he committed tragic sins that hurt a lot of people in his life (2 Samuel 11). Let's read from God's Word and reflect deeper on David's prayer of confession in Psalm 51.

Psalm 51:1-2,10 ¹ *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.* ² *Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin...* ¹⁰ *Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

Reflect

1. If God already knows what you did, why do you think it's important to "come clean" to Him about it?
2. In v3-6, David talks about his awareness of his own sinfulness. Why is this so important for us to be self-aware with our sins before the Lord?

3. In v10-12, David asks God to make him “clean” and to find joy once again. How does that prayer bring you hope even when you’re feeling weighed down in guilt & shame?
4. What can happen to us spiritually over time when we have unconfessed sin in our lives?

Act

- ☐ Commit time every day to confess your sins to God. Remember to refrain from making any excuses or justifications for your mistakes. Instead, be fully honest with yourself and with God. Lastly, remember to always end that prayer time by claiming His grace and full forgiveness in your life and getting up with a “clean heart”!

Pray

Lord God, I want to come clean before you. I confess the sin in my life today—my actions, words, thoughts, decisions, and attitudes that weren’t honoring you. I confess the things you asked me to do that I didn’t do. I confess any areas of my life that I’ve been trying to hide from you. Forgive me Father, cleanse me, renew and restore me, and help me to receive your grace, ready to make more God-honoring choices next time. Thank you for your unconditional love, grace, and forgiveness. Amen.

Day 3 - Prayers of Asking

Today's reading is out of Philippians 4:4-9 and John 16:24. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages.

The most common form of prayer (that even non-believers practice sometimes) is prayers of asking God for things. This is also called a prayer of petition. Did you know that God loves these kinds of prayers and even invites us to ask Him for anything? No request is too big or too small for God! Our Heavenly Father listens to our prayers and knows the concerns in our hearts. Whether it's asking God for help with your job, finding a new place to live, or asking for a parking space, God cares about each request.

The Apostle Paul reminds the church in Philippi that no matter what is making them anxious in their lives, they can go to God and ask for His help. We can go to God with each request and He promises us to give us His peace in exchange for our concerns.

Read and reflect on the passages below and invite God to speak to your heart.

Philippians 4:6-7 *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

John 16:24 (Jesus) *“Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”*

Reflect

1. What speaks to you most from these passages? How is God challenging or encouraging you with them?
2. How can turning our worries into prayers help change our perspective when we're feeling anxious?

3. Paul spends vs.8-9 talking about changing our thought life. How can changing our thoughts and focus affect the rest of our lives?
4. Paul mentions that the “peace of God” (v7) and the “God of peace” (v9) will be with us when we share our requests to God with thanksgiving. What’s the difference between the two? How does each phrase encourage you?

Act

- ☐ Commit your heart to prayer every time you are faced with worries or anxieties that come to your mind this week. You can even consider writing them down, mark when you’ve prayed about them, and then write down later how God answered each one. Conclude each prayer by asking for God’s peace to take over in your heart/mind/soul.

Pray

Lord God, please take all of my anxieties in this moment, and replace them with your peace. Thank you for all of your promises of joy, peace, and hope. Fix my thoughts on You, and help me to get better at quickly moving on from distractions to re-focus on You. Continue to remind me of all the ways you are faithful in my life. Amen.

Day 4 - Prayers of Discernment

Today's reading is out of Proverbs 3:5-6 and James 1:5. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages.

A key part of being a disciple is learning to seek, discern, and follow God's will in all of our decisions and actions. This is a journey that takes time and lots of prayer. One of the most important types of prayer that we can pray as Christians is a prayer for discernment and wisdom from God. We see many times in the Gospels that Jesus sought God in prayer for discernment before taking His next step in ministry. For example, in Mark 3:13-14, Jesus spent time alone with God in prayer before He chose the 12 disciples to follow Him.

We also see the early Church seeking God's wisdom throughout the book of Acts when deciding who to appoint for leadership roles in the ministry, what steps to take on the mission field, and much more. Let's learn how to do this with some direction from the Old and New Testaments!

Proverbs 3:5-6 ⁵ *“Trust in the Lord with all of your heart, and lean not on your own understanding, ⁶ but in all ways, acknowledge Him, and He will make your path straight.”*

Romans 10:14-15 ¹⁴ *How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?¹⁵ And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”*

Reflect

1. In James 1:5, what does it mean to you that God promises to give “generous” amounts of wisdom to you?
2. Why do we tend to “lean on our own understanding”, as Proverbs says? What makes it hard to trust God instead?

3. What would it look like to “acknowledge God” in “all ways” in your life?

4. What do you think it looks like for God to “make your paths straight”?

Act

- ☐ In whatever decisions you’re currently facing—commit to seeking God’s wisdom daily in as many ways as you can think of. Here are a few ideas to get you started:
 - Praying the above verses daily (and nightly).
 - Seeking the wise counsel of trusted Christ-followers in your life (another idea that comes from Proverbs).
 - Search Scripture for verses that might apply to your current situation.
 - Spend time in prayer listening (not just talking) to God, paying attention to what thoughts come to mind and to your conscience.
- ☐ Begin asking God regularly for opportunities to share your God-story with someone in your life who is ready to hear it.

Pray

Lord God, help me acknowledge you in all my ways. I need your wisdom in this situation—thank you for promising to provide generous amounts of it! I pray that you help me to see, hear, and follow your wisdom, and trust your ways more than my own, even when they don’t make sense to me at the moment. Make my paths straight, that my life can honor you. Amen.

Day 5 - Prayers of Blessing

Today's reading is out of Numbers 6:22-27. Begin today's devotion by reading this entire passage.

One of the most underused forms of prayer is a prayer of blessing. Prayers of blessing invite God's favor and power into our life and the lives of others! We see these types of prayers recorded throughout Scripture (Psalm 121:7-8, Romans 15:5-6; 16:25-27, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Hebrews 13:20-21). Our God loves to bless us and this type of prayer is also focused on passing on God's blessings to others. There are many great times to pray for a blessing over someone's life. We can pray a blessing over someone's home, ask God to bless a new couple getting married, or pray God's best over the life of a child.

For today's devotional, we'll look more closely at a beautiful prayer of blessing found in Numbers 6:22-27. God asked Moses to tell his brother (and right-hand man) Aaron to pray a blessing over the Israelites. You may have heard this prayer before but we encourage you to look at it again with fresh eyes and an open heart. We invite you to read over this passage again and seek to understand God's heart for each of us.

Numbers 6:24-26 (NLT) ²⁴ *May the Lord bless you and protect you.* ²⁵ *May the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you.* ²⁶ *May the Lord show you his favor and give you his peace.'*

Reflect

1. What's your favorite phrase from this prayer? Why?
2. What do you think it means for God to "smile on" someone?
3. We can pray these blessing prayers for others quietly without them ever knowing it. But it can also be powerful to pray them out loud for others. What do you think could come out of doing that?

4. What can prayers of blessing teach you, or remind you, about God?

Act

- ☐ Find someone this week to pray a prayer of blessing over their lives. This could be a neighbor, co-worker, or someone who just moved into a new home in your neighborhood. Challenge yourself to pray it out loud with them and see what God does with that!

Pray

Lord, I pray your hand of blessing on [this person in my life]. Help them to see your hand at work on them, to know you more deeply, to follow you more closely. Bless them in all the ways they need it most right now. Remind them of your great power and love. Pour out so many blessings on them that they'll be amazed and have no choice but to acknowledge you in them! And may these blessings increase my faith and the faith of all who know them. Amen.

Week 9- Serving Together As A Group

Serving others was significant in the life of Jesus and it was life-changing for others. Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Here at Newbreak Church we like to say that it is in serving others that we get to "Be the Church." When we serve others, we are the hands and feet of Jesus in our neighborhoods, our schools, at the local homeless shelters, and in caring for the widows and elderly.

This is why serving together as a Life Group is so vital to our growth and development as a Christian. When we serve, God transforms our hearts to look and feel more like His. We also become a conduit for God's love to touch the hearts of others. That's why each Life Group serves together each semester. When we give up our lives to Him and for others, we find that we receive so much in return.

Let's spend the rest of our time together today discussing how the Serve Challenge went. Here are some questions to help us get our conversation started;

1. What did you learn about God through your Serve Challenge?
2. What did you learn about yourself?
3. What was your biggest takeaway from serving together this semester?
4. How did serving together as a group help you to deepen relationships within this group?
5. If serving others became a consistent part of your life, how do you think that would impact your relationship with God?
6. What are some ways that you can serve in the future? (both individually and as a group)

Day 1 - Purpose in our Trials

Today's reading is from James 1:2-4. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

In the old days, to get a more purified and valuable product of silver, the blacksmith would use extreme heat to melt the silver down and separate the impurities (or dross) from the precious metal. The fake stuff would float to the surface and the blacksmith would scoop it off and it would leave only pure metal. The blacksmith would know when this process was complete when he could see his face reflected in the silver. In a similar way, God uses trials and hardships in our lives to help remove the impurities in our hearts and make us more like Him.

In fact, James tells us to have joy (vs.2) when we face trials because we know that God uses them to actually benefit our lives. In God's hands, trials have the ability to strengthen us, build resolve, create a persevering nature, and produce needed change in our lives. His goal is to make us mature and a complete person in Him.

Let's read again from God's Word and reflect deeper on how God uses our trials to shape us and produce change in our lives.

James 1:2-4 ² *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,* ³ *because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.* ⁴ *Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

Reflect

1. What speaks to you most from these passages? How is God challenging or encouraging you with them?
2. What was the last big trial that you faced or are currently facing? How did you see God in the midst of the suffering? What did God produce in your life through the trial?

3. After reading this passage and doing this devotional, how has your perspective changed on trials?

Act

- ☐ Practice the discipline of Scripture memorization by memorizing James 1:2-4 this week.
- ☐ Take a few moments today and pray for someone who is going through a trial. Use this passage to guide your prayer for that person.

Pray

Lord Jesus, you are the Master Blacksmith and I'm so thankful that you know exactly what you are doing in my life. Please help me to keep a divine perspective on trials when they come and show me the areas of my heart that I need your help in. Teach me to persevere and purify my heart so that when you look at my life, I look more and more like you. Amen.

Day 2 - Favoritism vs. Love

Today's reading is out of James 2:1-13. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

Ever heard the old saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover?" This is often what we do with people that we meet in life. We look at what's on the outside and then make judgments based only on what we can see about a person's value. Although this is very common outside the church, James wants to encourage us to think differently as Christians.

In James 2, James warns against showing favoritism and discrimination in the church. He uses an example of favoritism that all of us have probably seen and experienced before (vs. 2-3). Suppose a homeless man comes into the church on a Sunday morning and needs help finding a seat. He's wearing ragged clothes, has a distinct body odor, and really needs a shave. At the same time a well dressed and successful lawyer walks in the room and needs your help. Would you treat the two men the same way? Or would you be kinder, more loving, and more welcoming to the "more put together" person?

James invites each of us to look beyond the surface (vs.5-7) and recognize the intrinsic value that each of us share. This to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (vs.8). At the core of our common identity is the truth that each of us are made in the image of God and have intrinsic value and should be treated with equal dignity and respect. Showing favoritism or discriminating against another based on race, gender, or socio-economic position is completely against the heart of God.

Let's read again from God's Word and reflect deeper on the passage below.

James 2:1-9 (NLT) *¹My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others?² For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes. ³ If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, "You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor"—well, ⁴ doesn't this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives? ⁵ Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you dishonor the poor! Isn't it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court? ⁷ Aren't they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear? ⁸ Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: "Love your neighbor as yourself."⁹ But if*

you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law.

Reflect

1. What speaks to you most from this passage? How is God challenging or encouraging you with it?
2. Why do you think the Bible so strongly condemns favoritism? What do you think this says about the heart of God?
3. What are some practical ways that you can “love your neighbor as yourself” today?

Act

- ☐ Spend a few moments in prayer about the topic for today. Ask God to help you see people how He sees them and then respond accordingly.

Pray

Thank you so much for the way that you love each of us equally, Father. We are made in your image and are fearfully and wonderfully made by your hand. Please help me to treat other people as you would treat them today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Day 3 - The Power of the Tongue

Today's reading is out of James 3:1-12. Begin today's devotion by reading the passage in your Bible.

In Aesop's Fable, "The Donkey in the Lion's Skin," a donkey finds a lion's skin left in the forest by a hunter and decides to put it on to scare other animals. The donkey became so pleased with himself that he let out a loud "hee-haw" and gave himself away. The message of the story is clear: a fool may deceive with his dress and appearance, but his words will soon show who he really is.

What comes out of the mouth says a great deal about what we really believe in our heart (Matthew 12:34). Not only that but our words are powerful. We can encourage, strengthen, and inspire others with our words, or we can cut people down. Even after we become Christians, we may battle to control the tongue. The good news is that with God's help, we can practice self-control with our words and use them to lift others up instead of striking them down. We can use our words for God's glory or for our own benefits (vs.9-12).

Reread James 3:1-12 and answer the questions to help you reflect deeper on the passage.

James 3:2-12 ² *We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check* ³ *When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.*⁴ *Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.* ⁵ *Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.*

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶ *The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,* ⁸ *but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

⁹ *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness.* ¹⁰ *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.* ¹¹ *Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?* ¹² *My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

Reflect

1. What speaks to you most from this passage? How is God challenging or encouraging you?
2. James compares the power of the tongue to a bit that controls a horse (vs.3), a small rudder that directs a large ship (vs.4), and a tiny spark that can light a great forest fire (vs.5). Why do you think it's so hard to control the tongue?
3. When was the last time you were able to hold your tongue? When do you find it harder to control your words?
4. Is it easier to control your tongue when your heart is right with God? How can you consider this more before you speak with someone, especially if the conversation is important?

Act

- ☐ Take an inventory of your words for today. Take note of how many times you used your words to build others up or put others down. Make a point of thanking the Lord every time you are able to hold your tongue.

Pray

Lord Jesus, thank you for helping me to see the importance of the words that I speak. Help me to be sensitive to your Spirit for what I should speak today and when to be silent. Forgive me for anything that I said that wasn't seasoned with your love today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Day 4 - Doing Life With God

Today's reading is out of James 4. Begin today's devotion by reading this passage in your Bible.

One of the greatest gifts of God is the gift of life-long companionship with Him. Gone are the days of walking alone and trying to figure out life without His support and wisdom. This journey in life becomes so much more meaningful when we view our family, our occupation, and our future as part of God's unfolding plan. Each moment is sacred because God is working in our lives. He's also working through our lives to bring hope and healing to the world around us. When we live with this heavenly perspective, our "normal" everyday life looks different.

This is why James encourages us to live in total reliance on God and to live with a posture of openness to His direction for our lives. God desires that we trust Him with all of our hearts, lean not on our understanding, acknowledge His Lordship in our lives, and He will direct our steps (Proverbs 3:5-6). God wants us to reject "self-rule" and instead accept His guidance into the future.

Let's read from the selected passages again in God's Word and reflect deeper on what they teach us about God and our own lives.

James 4:13-16 ¹³ Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." ¹⁴ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.

Reflect

1. What speaks to you most from this passage? What did you learn about God from this passage?
2. James described the brevity of our lives in vs.14 as a "mist" that appears for a little while and vanishes. How does this idea change the way that you think about your own life? What will you do differently based on this perspective?

3. When was the last time that you asked God to show you His will for your life? What area of your life are you the quickest to submit to God's control? Which area of your life is the hardest to submit to His control?

4. Is there an area of your life that you are holding back from God? What fears/concerns are stopping you from trusting God with your entire life and future?

Act

- ☐ Identify your usual process for making big decisions. Write down a new process, based on the information above, on how you will tackle transitions and decision making in the future.

Pray

Lord Jesus, help me to develop a greater desire to know you more and to learn what it means to follow You with my life. Help me to develop a greater sense of trust and awareness of your touch in my everyday life. Thank you for your patience as I learn what it means to do life together in Christ. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Day 5 - Helping Bring Back the Wayward

Today's readings are out of James 5:19-20 and 1 Peter 4:8. Begin today's devotion by reading these passages in your Bible.

Have you ever gone on a hike and gotten lost? You started out on the right path but eventually wandered off and found yourself not where you wanted to be. Feeling lost is one of the most unnerving feelings we can experience. At some level, it doesn't really matter why you left the well worn path (distraction, a desire to make your own path, etc). What matters most is getting the help you need to get back on track and finish what you started.

At some point in your Christian life, you may discover that you or someone you really love has wandered off the path. In moments like that, what people need to know most is that someone cares that you're lost and wants to help you get back on the right path. This is where the wisdom of James 5:19-20 comes in. Whatever causes one of our brothers or sisters to struggle in their faith, we have an obligation and call to help bring that person back "and cover" a multitude of sins. We have an obligation to help those struggling and lost to find healing in their relationship with God and acceptance back into relationship. When we do this, we are restoring the wanderer just as God did with us. He was loving, gentle, and compassionate with us. We have the opportunity to do the same with others.

Let's read from God's Word and reflect deeper on how to understand our call to help bring back the wanderers.

James 5:19-20 ¹⁹ *My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back,* ²⁰ *remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

1 Peter 4:8 *Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*

Reflect

1. What speaks to you most from these passages? How is God challenging or encouraging you with them?

2. According to verse 19, James is encouraging us to help bring a person back who has “wandered” from the faith. Why do you think he calls this process “covering a multitude of sins?” Have you ever done that for someone? Has someone done that for you?
3. What are some challenges and blessings of living out this Scripture in your life?

Act

- ☐ Ask God to reveal to you if there are any areas in your life where you are wandering from His path for you? Address these areas as the Holy Spirit reveals them to you. Ask God to give you the courage to approach a good friend or loved one where they may be wandering. Always do this with love, so that they see you only want God’s best for them. Remember that only the Holy Spirit can change the heart and mind of a person. Your job is only to deliver the message in love. God does the rest of the work. Offer to pray with this person, focusing on God’s loving mercy and grace.

Pray

Lord Jesus, help me to be a person who is moved with compassion and love for those who are struggling in their faith. Help me to show love and not condemnation. I want to be like you in how patient, loving, and truthful you are with me. Amen.