REACH, GATHER, GROW

IN ACTS: THE EARLY CHURCH



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Reach, Gather, Grow in Acts: The Early Church

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THE RIVER CHURCH

REACH | GATHER | GROW

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PREFACE

Jesus gave His Great Commission to the Church in Matthew 28:19-20, ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*** In essence, He told them to Reach the lost, Gather with the saints, and Grow in the Lord through the Word.

"Reach, Gather, Grow In Acts: The Early Church" examines the fulfillment of Jesus' command as the Church began to take root in Acts chapters 1 and 2. Immediately after the Lord's ascension, the disciples preached the Gospel with thousands getting saved. They choose to spend time together in gratitude as they broke the bread together and prayed. They also spent time together in the Word. Additionally, they gave financially. They helped each other with any financial needs.

"Reach, Gather, Grow In Acts: The Early Church" contains four study guides for personal study or group discussion and twenty four devotions enhancing your daily growth. *"Reach, Gather, Grow In Acts: The Early Church"* will challenge you to evaluate your local assembly and your personal walk to see if your corporate and personal ministry align with the Lord's directive.

LESSON ONE

REACH

PASTOR PHILIP PIASECKI

Sometimes I wonder what people 100 years ago would think if they saw us using our cell phones. This tiny device not only connects us with the entire world but also takes pictures, plays music, has games on it, and the list goes on and on. Our phones are capable of doing so much, but they can be rendered useless so quickly when that battery dies. Without the phone's source of power, it cannot do any of the things that it was designed to do. As believers, we have been called to reach a lost world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but without the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, this is a task that we will fail at accomplishing.

1. What was the worst situation in which your phone died?

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For most believers, it is not new information that they are supposed to be sharing their faith. I believe that most Christians would say they understand that it is an understood expectation, yet so many people let doubt keep them from fulfilling what God has called them to do. Instead of sharing, their mind fills with thoughts and questions about what could possibly go wrong in the situation and why it is probably best that they not share. This leads to a life that ignores what Jesus called us to in The Great Commission in Matthew chapter 28.

Matthew 28:18-20 says, ***"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"***

2. What mental blocks do you find yourself running into, preventing you from sharing the Gospel?

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3. What would you say the first step to ***"make disciples"*** is, as commanded in Matthew 28:18-20?

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Acts 1:8 says, ***"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."***

The problem is that many of us are trying to share Jesus by our own strength, instead of relying on the power of the Holy Spirit to guide us in each and every moment. It is like trying to use your iPhone with the battery dead. We were not meant to reach people on our own. Acts 1:8 clearly says that we will receive power from the Holy Spirit, and this power will allow us to be ***"witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."*** So, we have to understand Who the Holy Spirit is and how He will empower us first before we can go any further with understanding what it means to reach the world.

4. What are some of your general understandings of Who the Holy Spirit is and what He does?

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God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit each are fully God, yet distinct in their role. Although this is not a lesson on the Trinity, it is important to understand that the Holy Spirit is not a thing; He is a person. He is the Spirit of God that indwells us when we become believers after fully putting our faith in Jesus. In relation to reaching the world with the Gospel, each part of the Trinity plays their own unique role. God the Father is the source of the mission. He planned salvation and sent Jesus to make a way for people to be reconciled to Him (John 3:16). Jesus, the Son, is the Savior who carried out the mission by dying and rising again to bring

salvation to the world (Acts 2:22-24). The Holy Spirit is the power of the mission, enabling believers to live out and share the Gospel effectively (Acts 1:8).

5. How does a better understanding of who the Holy Spirit is in light of Acts 1:8 help you understand the role of the Holy Spirit in your ability to reach others?

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6. What would it look like practically to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to share the Gospel?

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In 2 Timothy 1:7-8, we read, ***"For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God."***

7. How can this verse encourage you to share the Gospel?

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God did not give us a spirit of fear. He gave us His Holy Spirit, and through His Spirit we should feel love and compassion for those around us who do not know Christ. Instead of being afraid to tell them about the true Gospel, it should inspire us to share because we really understand how important it is, and we love them enough to put ourselves through a potentially uncomfortable conversation. We are called not to be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord. I try to be courageous and pray every day that God would give me opportunities to share my faith and that the Holy Spirit would

strengthen me to be faithful enough to take those opportunities. It is so convicting to think of times that I have been ashamed and missed opportunities to share my faith. I challenge you to think about how something as simple as not leaving out the fact that you went to Church on Sunday, when a coworker asks you on Monday how your weekend was, can open the door wide open to share the Gospel.

8. What are some practical ways you can open the door for Gospel conversations with people in your lives?

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When the Holy Spirit gives us opportunities, we need to be faithful in those moments. We need to be faithful to present the full Gospel. It is true that God loves the unsaved person, but that is not the full Gospel. A person only understanding God's love for them, does not save them. We have to be faithful to help them understand why Jesus had to die for them. The Romans Road is an incredible roadmap for sharing a true and faithful Gospel.

Romans 3:23 says, ***"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."***

Romans 5:8 adds, ***"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."***

Romans 6:23 says, ***"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

Romans 10:9 records, ***"Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."***

There is the bad news (we are sinners separated from God) along with the Good News (God made a way for us to be saved) in these verses. They clearly take the person who needs to hear the Gospel

through the basics of what it really means to be saved. Obviously, these verses can lead to more questions. This is again where we rely on the power of the Holy Spirit. Trust that He will guide you in your conversation. Do not hesitate to tell someone that you are not sure how to answer their question, but that you will gladly look it up and share with them.

9. Do you feel that these verses give you what you need to clearly share the Gospel? Why or why not?

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In 1 Corinthians 3:6-7, we read, ***"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."***

10. How does this verse in 1 Corinthians encourage you in your pursuit to share the Gospel?

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We are reminded that at the end of the day, it is God who gives the growth. All we can do is be faithful to the calling to reach the world around us with the Gospel of Jesus. As we rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to boldly share our faith with those around us, I promise that we will see God do some incredible things. It may not always work out how we want it to, but we can trust that the Lord is always moving. I know I want Him to use me. I hope you want Him to use you as well!

If you are studying in a group, I want to challenge you to split up into groups of two and practice sharing the Gospel with each other. This may be out of your comfort zone, and that is a good thing. God has called us to do this, so we need to practice and prepare so that we are ready when He puts an opportunity in front of us. If you are

studying this on your own, ask a friend or family member who is a believer if they would help you practice sharing the Gospel as well. You never know when you may be presented with an opportunity to share the Gospel. Do not miss the next one!

NOTES

SPIRIT-LED MINISTRY

DEVOTION #1 - CHRIS FREZZA

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Acts 1:8

These are the words of Christ to His disciples after He rose from the grave and before He ascended to Heaven to join the Father. They are among His final words to them, telling them what was to come at the appointed time. I think it is essential for us to notice the order of the events here. Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for sin. He rose from the dead, conquering the grave and establishing the new covenant with us. Now, He is giving His disciples a preview of what will happen next. They would become part of the Church's founding. However, notice that He did not direct His disciples to go out and preach or to baptize people immediately. The first event that had to happen before the disciples could begin the work Jesus had set before them was to receive the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit indwells every believer. Once we repent of our sin, place our trust in Christ for salvation, and devote our lives to Him, He gives us His Holy Spirit to live within us. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, Paul writes, ***"Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."***

The Holy Spirit lives within us to continually guide us in living as Christ lived on Earth. Jesus describes the Spirit to His disciples in this way in John 14:25-26, ***"These things I have spoken to you***

while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."

In Acts 1:8, Jesus emphasized to His disciples that a true ministry must be led by the Holy Spirit. The disciples' need to be filled with the Holy Spirit is the same as our need today. As believers and as a church, we must be led by the Holy Spirit before we can minister to others. Theologian John Stott said it this way, "Before Christ sent the church into the world, he sent the Spirit into the church. The same order must be observed today."

As we focus on reaching our community, we must first focus on our relationship with God. Christ must be the center of your life, and love for His people must be the motivation behind doing good works for the Church. We can truly only fulfill these things by His Holy Spirit leading us. "Reach" is not about how much you can do or how much you can serve. It is about letting the Spirit of Christ lead you in His love toward the world. If you see the lost in your community the way Christ does, then you will be filled with compassion for them as He is. Take a moment to pray and ask God to help you see the church, your community, and all people the way He sees them. Then He will lead you to carry out whatever good works He has set apart for you to do.

GO RIGHT HERE

DEVOTION #2 - MARC-E DELCAMP

Often, when I think of a vacation, I think of going to my grandparents' house. They live on about 200 acres of farmland in the middle of nowhere, Pennsylvania, in the beautiful Appalachian Mountains. To get there from Michigan takes about a day's worth of straight travel.

Today's verse is about reaching others. Acts 1:8 says, ***"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."***

For some context, in Acts 1:8, Jesus had died, risen, and was about to ascend into Heaven. Yet, before He did, He told His followers that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and that they were to be His witnesses. He states four places: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the world.

I think the order of these places is important:

- First, Jerusalem – the city they were in.
- Then, Judea – their local area, like a county.
- Next, Samaria – the northern part of the country.
- Finally, to the ends of the world – reaching everywhere.

For us, it goes to the city (neighborhood, school, and work), state, country, and then the world. When we think of reaching the world, I believe we often assume we need to go on a mission trip to some far-off country to make a difference. However, Acts 1:8 tells us to start right where we are.

- Does your neighbor know Christ?
- Does your community know Christ?

It starts in our own communities. If I wanted to reach my grandparents' community with the Gospel, the first step I would take would be to reach my own community.

I encourage you, if you have never shared the Gospel with your neighbor, do it today. Maybe you have never even talked to your neighbor; start that relationship. Let us spread the Gospel in our communities first. From there, we can reach our county, state, our neighboring states, our country, and eventually the whole world.

WE REACH BECAUSE HE FIRST REACHED US

DEVOTION #3 - GRANT GRIMES

"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know - this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."
Acts 2:22-24

The Apostle Peter begins his address with a powerful and authoritative declaration, one that is remarkable for a man who once denied Jesus and came from a humble background as a fisherman. ***"Men of Israel, hear these words,"*** he commands, boldly proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the very people who had crucified Him not long before. Sharing the Gospel can be daunting. We may feel unqualified or fearful, but Peter's example shows that all it takes is boldness, direction, and the truth of Jesus Christ.

Peter directly confronts his audience, accusing them of delivering Jesus to the cross despite witnessing His perfection and God's blessings upon Him. This is the difficult truth of the Gospel: we are all sinners. As 1 John 2:2 states, ***"He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."*** Jesus took upon Himself the penalty of sin, offering a way for humanity to be reconciled to God through the cross.

Yet, the story does not end at the cross. Jesus did not remain in

the grave. He was raised to life, conquering death itself. Sin could not hold Him, and this victory is the foundation of our faith. This is where the phrase, “We reach because He first reached us,” finds its significance. The mission of the Church is to go and reach the lost, not as a burden but as a privilege and responsibility for every believer. Every Christian remembers a time when they were lost in sin, yet Christ called them into the light.

Peter was not a trained public speaker. He did not have the full Scripture as we do today, and he faced great opposition in sharing the Gospel. Yet, he proclaimed the love of Christ anyway. When we consider the people in our own lives who need to hear the Gospel, the list may seem overwhelming. However, our calling is simple: go to them and say, ***“Hear these words.”*** Jesus was crucified for our sins, and He offers eternal life to all who confess and turn to Him as Lord. As Acts 2:24 proclaims, ***“God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.”***

My prayer is that after reading this, you will feel the calling to go and reach the lost in your life. The Gospel is spread to one sinner at a time. Go reach because you were reached.

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

DEVOTION #4 - PASTOR JOHN CARTER

At The River Church, the Gospel is at the core of our mission in reaching those who are lost. As Peter stood before the crowds at Pentecost, he boldly proclaimed the truth about Jesus Christ, including His divinity, His sacrificial death, and His triumphant resurrection. These verses serve as a powerful example of what it means to share the Gospel with clarity, conviction, and urgency.

Acts 2:22–24 says, ***"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know - this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."***

Peter's sermon was not filled with empty philosophy or self-help advice. It was rooted in the reality of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. He called people to recognize their sins, understand God's sovereign plan, and respond to the truth of salvation. This is the same call that echoes in The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20, where Jesus commands His disciples to go and make disciples, teaching them to observe all that He commanded.

Our mission to reach the lost starts with proclaiming Jesus, just as Peter did. The world is filled with people who do not know the truth, many of whom are searching for hope in temporary things that cannot bring satisfaction. Many of us understand this transient pursuit and

know the emptiness and hopelessness that comes from it. Yet, we, like Peter, are called to proclaim Christ boldly. Our own experience with Jesus has hopefully transformed us, so we must be centered on His calling on our lives as it pertains to the Gospel (His life, His power, and the victory He secured over sin and death). Reaching the lost requires both truth and love. Peter was very direct in his message, but he was not speaking to condemn; he was speaking to call people to repentance and a new life. When we share the Gospel, we must also do so with compassion, remembering that Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Every person we encounter is someone whom Christ died to redeem.

Additionally, we must trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to convict hearts. Peter's words at Pentecost were anointed by the Spirit, and thousands came to faith that day. When we step out in obedience, sharing the Gospel with family, friends, coworkers, and strangers, we can trust that God is working to draw people to Himself. It is not rooted in our eloquent words or our crafty delivery but rather in the genuine convictions of our relationship with Him.

We, at The River Church, are dedicated to Reach the lost, to Gather together with the Saints, and to Grow in God's Word. Let me encourage you to be committed to boldly proclaiming the Gospel wherever God places you. It may be in our neighborhoods, workplaces, or across the world. We have been given the same message Peter preached: Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

Take a pause today and consider the following questions as we examine the Gospel and our ability to be a part of it with Christ.

1. When was the last time you shared the Gospel with someone who did not know Christ?

2. Do you struggle with fear or hesitation when it comes to evangelism? How can you rely more on the Holy Spirit for boldness?

3. Who in your life is searching for hope? How can you intentionally share Jesus with them this week?

If these questions leave you feeling unsure or if you have more questions about sharing your faith, do not hesitate to reach out. We are here to walk alongside you in this journey. You can text "riverchurch" to 97000, and one of our staff members will connect with you. Our goal is to equip and encourage you to confidently share Christ with others. You are not alone in this mission. We are in it together!

Please join me in a short prayer, thanking God for His amazing gift of salvation. *"Father, thank You for the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. Give us boldness to proclaim the Gospel with clarity and love, just as Peter did. Open the hearts of those who do not know You, and use us as vessels to reach the lost. May we always be faithful and obedient to your commandments in our life, trusting in Your power to save. In Jesus' name, Amen."*

ONCE AND FOR ALL

DEVOTION #5 - SIERRA COMBS

"And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" Acts 2:38

"December 9, 2017 - Today we made our way to the Southern Steps of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The original southern steps to the first century Temple. The steps Jesus would have walked, sat, and taught. We sat on the steps and read from Acts 2, where Peter preached here in this very spot at Pentecost, and 3,000 people who came to the temple would have stopped to clean themselves in the ritual baths, or mikvehs as they are called in Hebrew (there were TONS of these around the steps, I even stood and sat in a few!). And instead of ritually getting clean, they heard Peter's words and were cleansed once and for all by accepting Christ the Messiah. This was one of my favorite moments of the trip, maybe even my life. I mean, come on! How is this even real?!"

There are some moments you never forget. This was one of them. I am blessed to have been to Israel twice, and trust me when I say that there is nothing that has blown my mind and emblazoned my heart more than some of the places I found myself on those trips. The Bible comes to life! When I look back on my travel journal entries, I can feel that initial excitement running through my veins. I remember on this first trip in December, our guide brought us to the above-mentioned Southern Steps and asked us to sit down. Being my first time, I really did not know the significance of where I was sitting. Then he opened his Bible, and in a moment, I was transported back in time.

To set the framework, he read first from Deuteronomy 16:16, where the Israelites were commanded to make a pilgrimage to a central place of worship three times a year, ***"Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Booths."*** During the first century, this place would have been the Temple in Jerusalem, and hundreds of thousands of Jews would have travelled from all over the ancient world to meet God in this special place for these very special feasts. They would travel in droves by foot, donkey, and camel, often for weeks on end, and yet the hardships of the journey were quickly forgotten as they approached Jerusalem. Soon, they would be able to worship the Lord just as He commanded! However, before they could ascend to the Temple Mount, they would need to cleanse themselves of not just the physical dirt that they acquired along the way, but also purify their minds and souls before they could meet with the Lord in the most holy of places. This is where the mikvehs came in. I have read that there are over 700 Jewish ritual baths that have been discovered so far throughout Israel. About 200 of them can be found in Jerusalem, and over 50 are located on the ascent to where the Temple once stood. These are the same mikvehs I walked down into on my first visit. To think about how many people (including the disciples and even Jesus Himself) submerged themselves in these baths throughout the centuries is incredible.

Now, let us go back to those Southern Steps! Our guide opened to Acts chapter 2 and read verses 1-41. I encourage you to do the same right now. Here we find a great multitude of Jewish pilgrims who have traveled to Jerusalem for the required appearance at the Feast of Weeks, also known as Pentecost. However, instead of the usual walk up, cleanse, and be on their way, they found something else. It was here at this moment that God poured out His Holy Spirit on all believers for the first time. It was here where the Apostle Peter preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, loudly proclaiming His death, burial, and resurrection. It was here that Peter called the multitude to repent, believe in Christ, and be baptized. It was here where 3,000 of those men and women were saved. It was here that the Church

was born. Also, it was here, 2,000 years later, where I sat on those very same steps and wept with thanksgiving for all the Lord has done. The 3,000 who were saved at Pentecost were told to repent and be baptized. How fortunate that there were at least 50 built-in baptismals right where they stood!

As I walked down and back up the steps of those ancient ritual baths, I was overcome with the thought of the new life we all walk into when we are born again. God, in His great love, chose to send His Son Jesus to reach out to us and offer us forgiveness and salvation. There is nothing more amazing than that. Our journeys all vary, and we all come from different places, but one thing is certain: we are all covered in the dirt of sin and shame, and there is no amount of ritual cleansing that will take care of it. However, the Lord in His kindness washes us clean, once and for all.

A SIMPLE MESSAGE

DEVOTION #6 - PASTOR CHUCK LINDSEY

"Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" Acts 2:38 (NKJV)

The Apostle Peter heard the words of Jesus to go into all the word and preach the Gospel with his own ears. He did not hear it as a suggestion or as a sentiment. He heard it as it was, a directive from the Lord God Himself. He accepted the task from his King as his own personal mission and task in this world. It was not left to others, it was not set aside for later, and it was not dismissed as unimportant. He took the words of the Lord for what they were intended to be for all Jesus' people: the one mission of our lives as His people.

It is clear that Jesus' mission found its way into Peter's heart, in that, nearly every time we see Peter speaking, post the ascension of Jesus into Heaven, he seems to be sharing the Gospel. Acts 2:38 is just one such case. He does not get lost in arguments or religious subtlety. Peter is clear. His message is simple. He tells the gathered crowd to ***"repent,"*** which means to feel bad about sin and turn to God for His forgiveness. He tells them to be ***"baptized in [into] the name of Jesus Christ,"*** which everyone on that day understood that baptism was to forever identify as a follower of Jesus Christ publicly. He then gave the promise of the Gospel message, ***"the remission of sins."*** This is the complete and total forgiveness of all past, present, and future sin. It is the complete cleansing that can only come from God's forgiveness. Finally, Peter conveys the promise that anyone who does so will ***"receive the gift [from God]***

of the Holy Spirit." This is the incredible promise that God Himself would come and live within each follower of Christ, enabling us to live in a way that pleases God.

Please note the simplicity of the message. Please note the clarity of it. Please note that Peter did not need to anticipate every argument or objection before he conveyed this message. He was equipped with the Gospel message and was ready for God to use him. How about you? Do you know the Gospel? Are you ready for God to use you? We do not have to know everything (who can?), and we do not even have to anticipate every objection. We just have to know the Gospel, be available to God, and He will use us.

LESSON TWO

GATHER

PASTOR ROY TOWNSEND

I was given some pretty good advice one time, and I often pass along that advice to people. I was told that unfulfilled expectations lead to the biggest disappointments. It happens to me over and over again. I will be talking with a group of people about a movie, and the group is just raving about the movie. I had been considering watching this movie, but the way they are saying that this is the best movie ever, makes me want to go right now to watch the movie. So, I am going into this movie with the expectation that it is going to be incredible. Well, many times I have left the movie with unfulfilled expectations. The weird thing about this process for me is that the movie may be a pretty good movie, but because I left the movie with unfulfilled expectations, it was a big disappointment.

1. Have you ever had an experience like the one above? Have you ever had big disappointments because of unfulfilled expectations (movies, cars, restaurants, or relationships)?

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2. Do you believe that people come into a church gathering with expectations? Could some of those expectations leave people disappointed because they are unfulfilled expectations? Please explain.

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3. Could some of the expectations of a church gathering be negative, so that not fulfilling them turns the situation into a positive one?

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We, as a church, are often concerned about helping new people with their expectations for a church experience or a church gathering.

This is part of the reason that we teach the Church's mission and vision to our local body of Christ twice a year. For this study, we are going to review Scripture in the book of Acts regarding the church gathering as it was formed. Acts 2:42-47 reads, ***"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."***

4. Is there something in this list that you would say, "Yes, that aligns with my expectations when the church gathers today"?

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5. Is there something in this list that you would say, "Uhm, I am not sure this aligns with my expectations, or I do not often see this when the church gathers today"?

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The first thing that jumped out was that ***"they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching."*** As I studied this, the word which is translated as devoted in the original language means continually devoted. Pastor Kent Hughes writes, "It is very important that we note this term continually devoting because it governs the other characteristics of the church where the Spirit reigns. It denotes a steadfast and single-minded devotion to a certain course of action."

6. Does a church devoting itself to the Apostles' teaching (Words of God, Scripture, or Bible) fit in with your expectations for a church gathering?

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The second area speaks to the fellowship. This might be a word that is confusing to us today. Most people believe that fellowship is only when the church eats together. This section of Scripture adds to ***"fellowship"*** the concept of eating together, but we must not just stop there in our understanding of this concept. This fellowship included food and a very specific sharing or giving with one another. This sharing could be in physical need or sharing in experience. Acts 2:44-46 reads, ***"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts."*** The early church did life together, but today we may fall into the trap that coming to a church gathering and participating together in life for a couple of hours is the true meaning of fellowship. We need to be clear that as believers and followers of Christ, we should have regular life contact with others within the local body of Christ.

7. When you attend a gathering of the church, do you expect to see the sharing of experiences, life, and in meeting the needs of others?

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Pastor Kent Hughes explains it this way, "Fellowship cost something in the early church, in contrast to our use of the world fellowship today. Fellowship is not just a sentimental feeling of oneness. It is not punch and cookies. It doesn't not take place simply because

we are in the church hall. Fellowship comes through giving. True fellowship costs!"

8. Do you expect there to be a real cost in your fellowship?

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Next, we see in verse 42 the concept of ***"breaking of bread and the prayers."*** This was the call of the first church to the worship of God. The early Church, whether after a meal or when the church gathered, would take the wine and the bread to remember the sacrifice of what Jesus Christ did for our salvation. Today, we refer to this as communion or the Lord's Supper, and Christ gave these instructions to ***"do this in remembrance of me"*** (Luke 22:19). Also, prayers would be offered to God when the church was gathering. Prayers of worship and adoration, prayers of confession of sins, prayers of thanksgiving, and prayers of petition would all be included in this time when the church gathered. In verse 47, it relays that the early Church was ***"praising God."*** We know that the early Church offered praise or worship through song. Colossians 3:16 states, ***"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God."***

9. Is worshiping through prayer, communion, and song a generalized expectation when participating in a church gathering? Do you think that most people see worship through music and song as having the same importance as prayer and communion? Why or why not?

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There is a final statement about what happened when the early Church met and lived life together. In Acts 2:47, this section of

Scripture ends with this statement, ***"And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."*** For The River Church, we would call this reaching the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When the church gathers, there should be a call to salvation in Jesus Christ and an encouragement for the church as they leave the gathering to reach their individual, familial, vocational, or geographical community with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

10. As we have studied this section of Scripture, what can you learn to point our expectations for church gatherings?

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NOTES

COME TOGETHER

DEVOTION #1 - MARK PITTENGER

I absolutely love Church at the Fair! It is one of my favorite events at The River Church. The church coming together, all nine locations, united in worship, is a picture that will never get old for me. It is such a beautiful thing to see so many people come together in the name of Jesus! Our regular Sunday gatherings are a picture of this as well. It does not matter if it is 3,000, 300, or 30 people; it is always great to see unity within the church.

In the book of Acts, we find a powerful example of the early church gathering together in unity. Acts 1:12-14 tells us, ***"Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers."*** They were steadfast in their commitment to prayer and supporting one another in their devotion to God. They were gathered together in ***"one accord"*** as a community of faith.

However, some people think that gathering together is not a necessity. They say things like, "I can be a Christian and not attend church regularly. I do not need to go to church to have a relationship with God." This way of thinking has grown stronger with the boom of online services since the COVID pandemic. A poll of 15,000 people, done in March of 2024, shows that the percentage of U.S. Christian

adults who attend church weekly is 30%, while those who say they seldom attend church is 27%! Those numbers are very close and very alarming. Likewise, the website *"churchtrac.com"* posted an article that shows that 16% of Christians have not returned to in-person services since the pandemic.

While these are alarming statistics, they also mean that we have work to do. We have to do our very best to live in a way that reflects Jesus to a world that is rapidly growing away from Him. Hebrews 10:23-25 tells us, ***"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*** This passage directs us to hold onto our hope, stir up each other, and gather together! It also states that the habit of some is not to gather together, meaning that the issue we are facing is not a new one for God (Ecclesiastes 1:9). We can hold onto our hope, knowing that God has control over this.

I challenge you to reach out to someone who has not been to a Gathering in a while. Maybe, they just need an invite from a friend. Maybe you have not been to a Gathering in a while. Please understand that I am not bashing online services in any way; however, nothing beats gathering with other believers. Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:20, ***"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."*** We need to encourage others to come together!

A PEOPLE TOGETHER

DEVOTION #2 - PASTOR JUSTIN DEAN

A Gallup study found that 56% of Christians say they attend church less than once a month, with 33% saying they seldom or never attend. How can we be built up for God's purpose as the body of Christ when over half of our body is simply gone? As believers, it is crucial that we regularly gather together as the body of Christ.

How often do you attend a Gathering? Why?

Acts 1:14 says, ***"All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers."***

One of the key words in this verse is the word ***"together."*** They could all pray individually, but something unique was happening because they were doing it together. Our spiritual walks are not meant to be an individual hike, but a trek together.

We are called sojourners, or travelers, as we travel through our lives in a fallen world on our way to glory in Heaven with God. In biblical times, everyone knew that traveling alone was one of the quickest ways to get yourself robbed or killed. If they could help it, they would never travel alone but together in a group or in multiple groups. With that in mind, it should inform us of how we should walk our spiritual journeys, not alone but together.

When was a time in your life when you were glad you were not alone? What happened?

It is crucial that we make gathering together as believers a major priority in our lives. We must be careful that we do not allow things like our kids' sports, work, business, or anything else to take priority over gathering as the church. If we say that our relationship with God is important to us, then gathering as God's people must be important to us. We cannot go alone.

Has there ever been a time in your life when you gave up gathering with the church? What happened? How did it work out?

Take some time to pray and thank God for the community of believers. Ask God to continue to deepen your relationship with Him and with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

DEVOTED

DEVOTION #3 - PASTOR GARY WRIGHT

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Acts 2:42

I read an article online about being devoted. The writer of the article said, "When you are devoted to something your life is transformed." She continued saying, "Devotion is not for sissies. It takes surrender of your personal wants and desires and turns it into something that holds greater meaning for you. It oozes passion and longing, you might even say you form a love affair with whatever you are devoted to."

In Acts chapter 2, Luke is writing about the early church. The believers of the early church were devoted. Luke lists four things that the early church was devoted to. They were devoted to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread (communion), and prayer. The reason the early church was devoted to these things is that they were first devoted to Jesus. They believed that Jesus died to pay the price for their sin. They believed He rose again. They believed He was their only hope. Because of their faith in Christ, they fully surrendered their lives to Him. The word "surrender" means that these early believers gave up their wants and desires to follow Jesus. Their passion and longing in life was Jesus. They were devoted!

Because of this devotion, the early church gathered. They were hungry to learn more about Jesus through the Apostles' teaching. The church was devoted to fellowship. The word ***"fellowship"***

means partnership. The believers worked together to serve Jesus in the church. Because of their love for Jesus, they worshiped Him through communion and prayer.

Today, when we gather to worship, it is for the same four purposes that the early church gathered together. We must remember that the reason we gather in the first place is our devotion to Jesus and our gratitude toward Him. Gathering as a body of believers should not be about checking a box, earning favor with God, or out of some sort of tradition. Gathering together should not be out of obligation. Our purpose for coming to a gathering should not be a chore.

It is a privilege!

Galatians 2:20 adds, ***"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."***

THE BEAUTIFUL GATHERING

DEVOTION #4 - PASTOR JOSH YATES

"All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity - all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved." Acts 2:42-47 (NLT)

The world around us is becoming so much more divided than we ever have been. We have lost the ability to disagree and still care for each other. When disagreements arise in the world around you, you are considered not just wrong, but morally wrong. Disagreements today mean that you may lose a job, face public attacks, or lose relationships. People who you thought loved and cared for you will cancel you in a minute. It is a sad state of affairs.

While I pray that you will not experience something like this, I am sure that some of you reading this have. Ultimately, none of this should surprise us. Jesus told us that we would have trouble in this world and that we should expect it. He also said that He has overcome the world and we can take heart in Him (John 16:33).

How will you respond in times of disagreement and potential personal attack? How have you responded? It can be really easy to get frustrated, angry, and attack-minded. It can also be just as easy to turn inward, not share anything of yourself with anyone, and try to protect yourself from any further pain. I am tempted to respond in both ways at the same time when this occurs in my life.

Where can we learn how God would have us respond in days like this? How can we learn to love our neighbor when that neighbor wants to demean, demoralize, and destroy us?

We gather together as the Church.

We gather together to worship our God. Why do we do this? It is to get our focus off of all of the stuff that is happening around us, to us, and through us in order to see the God that holds it all. We come to be reminded of Who is actually in control and realize that He holds us. This is not about numbing the pain in our lives. It is about remembering what reality is. God is in control, and He loves us. He is worthy of my worship, and worship redirects my gaze back to Him.

We gather together to look more like Jesus. We learn how to react to people and circumstances like He did. We do this as we wrestle with the things we face together. When we share our burdens together, we have the opportunity to hear from different perspectives, and God uses those people in our lives to mold us and shape us. We learn to love as Jesus did and share that love in the Church and in the world.

I just love it when the church gathers together. I truly believe that there is nothing like it in any other place, organization, club, or whatever else there is in the world. What a beautiful place the Church is. It is such a mosaic of people that we would probably never know because of our common need for a Savior and the Savior that we share, Who has pulled us from each of our pits.

We gather to worship. We gather to learn how to reach people for

Jesus. We gather to grow in our walks with Jesus. None of us is perfect, but we gather to worship the One who is.

What a beautiful thing that is.

FELLOWSHIP THAT MATTERS

DEVOTION #5 - DAVID HUDGENS

During my late twenties, I served as a student ministry director, which was a time of significant personal growth often sparked by my own ignorance and resistance to the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in my life. From that time, one lesson remains particularly vivid in my memory.

Not long after joining the staff of a former church I served, I quickly realized the youth group needed more, as they lacked a true desire to grow spiritually and connect with one another. To address this, I redesigned our weekly gatherings to encourage fellowship. I transformed our meeting space with areas for eating and relaxing, added a gaming system, and planned times for singing and teaching. I was confident these changes would create community amongst these teens. Yet, months passed without any noticeable growth or enthusiasm among them.

I was stumped. I prayed for answers and tried various adjustments, but nothing worked. Then, during a conversation with my dad, I had a breakthrough. After sharing my frustrations, I exclaimed, "There must be something wrong with me and what I am doing that is leaving these kids without anything in common!" His gentle reply was simply, "Bingo." This moment made me realize I had focused too much on creating a cool, fun environment and neglected our true foundation, that is, our connection to Christ.

Acts 2:42-44 says, ***"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many***

wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common." The early Church thrived because they devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. Their unity led to awe and deep community.

I recognized that I had been trying to create authentic Christian fellowship without grounding our gatherings in God's Word. As a result, I shifted my focus and began prioritizing the study of Scripture in our meetings. I encouraged discussions about our faith, prayer, and living out our beliefs, fostering an environment where students could explore their struggles and grow together.

As we devoted ourselves to these practices, something beautiful emerged. Students engaged more deeply, sharing their lives and praying for one another. Our gatherings transformed into genuine times of fellowship centered around Christ. They began to feel a sense of belonging that went beyond the gimmicks of fun and entertainment that I had previously placed my trust in.

I learned that an authentic Christian community is rooted in our commitment to Christ and His teachings. When we gather with the intention to grow spiritually, we invite the Holy Spirit to work among us, transforming our hearts and lives. In that youth group, I witnessed lives change - not through my own schemes, but through the powerful act of coming together in faith. The awe we experienced was like that of the early Church, as teens experienced answered prayers along with strengthened relationships.

As we reflect on our own church community, let us remember that our connection to Christ is what unites us. We are called to be devoted to His teachings and to encourage one another in love and good works. By doing so, we create an environment where the Holy Spirit can move, transforming not just our gatherings but the lives of those we serve.

Let us prioritize what truly matters - our relationship with Christ and our commitment to living out His love. Together, as we devote ourselves to teaching, fellowship, and prayer, we can experience the richness of Christian community, marked by genuine connection and transformation.

GATHERING TOGETHER

DEVOTION #6 - ELIJAH EDWARDS

Who do you gather together with on a regular basis? Is it friends, family, coworkers, or people you do not really know? I want us to think about that for a moment and then follow up with these questions: Why do we gather with them? Is it because we are around them all the time? Is it because we share similar interests with them? Is it just because we like them? No matter if you are the most introverted person in the world or the most extroverted, you need a group to be with. We enjoy belonging to something.

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

1. What are the people in this passage doing together?

These verses are a wonderful picture of the power of Jesus and what He did for us all. This is a beautiful image of a group of people, saved by Jesus, each of their lives turned to Him, coming together and sharing life together. When we talk about gathering together, this is what it is supposed to look like. It is more than just showing

up on Sunday morning and being done there. It is about connecting, sharing, and loving with a group of people who have all declared Jesus as Lord. Each person in the group, no matter what different backgrounds they come from, gathers together to praise God, eat together, help each other, and add more to their lives.

2. After reading these passages, how can you approach gathering differently?

3. How has gathering with believers changed your life?

Finally, we need to ask ourselves, “Do I gather with fellow believers in the same way it is written in Acts? Do I enjoy gathering together or am I being selfish? Do I need to change how I think about gathering?”

LESSON THREE

GROW

PASTOR MITCHELL HOLMES

One of the best life lessons I have ever learned is that we are never too old to stop learning. Life is a classroom and, as Christians, we are expected to constantly be prepared for a new lesson. The Lord is the potter and we are the clay. The Lord molds us and shapes us for His purposes and grand designs, and that process never stops until the day that we are called home to be with our Father in Heaven.

1. What is a life lesson that you understand now that you did not understand five or ten years ago?

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As we continue the process of being molded and taught life lessons, we continue to grow. This is the final step in the cyclical mission statement of The River Church. As with all the steps, this one is never-ending. Just as we are to continue to Reach lost people with the hope and Good News of the cross, and Gather together as brothers and sisters in Christ, we must also never fail to be constant to Grow ourselves spiritually. It is incredibly important that as we get older and move from stage to stage of life, we constantly grow in our walk with the Lord because different aspects of God's character will resonate with us at different times of our life. Our calling as ambassadors of Christ, and where the Lord chooses to place us, will almost certainly change as we grow and develop. Our ability to impact people with the Gospel will widen as we deepen our relationship with God.

2. What are some ways that a believer who has developed their relationship with the Lord over 60 years might differ, in terms of calling, compared to a brand-new believer?

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Additionally, as we grow in our spiritual walk, we get much better at applying teachings from God's Word to our lives. For me, one

that has taken a long time to understand is the timing of the Lord. I pray that in 30 more years on this earth, I will be a lot better about patiently waiting on God's perfect plan. In Acts 1:5, we read, ***"For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."*** Before Jesus' ascension to be with the Father, He tells His disciples of the coming Holy Spirit. He instructs them to wait on this promise from the Father. I have to imagine that the time between Jesus' ascension and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit was a difficult time for some of these followers of Christ. Trying to trust and believe in the promises of God, while also struggling with impatiently desiring our own timing, is a difficult dichotomy for us to navigate.

3. Describe a circumstance in which you had a difficult time waiting for God to move.

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4. When you have such feelings, what helps you get through these difficult times?

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Now, along with the promise of the Holy Spirit, Jesus tells His followers more in verse 8, ***"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."***

5. How has the Holy Spirit empowered you in your life?

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6. At the end of Verse 8, Jesus commands His followers to be His witnesses ***"to the end of the earth."*** What does that look like in your life? How has the Holy Spirit grown you to be uniquely equipped to be a witness to those in your sphere of influence?

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After the ascension of Jesus, the disciples went to the upper room where they devoted themselves to prayer. Acts 1:14 states, ***"All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers."*** These are men who, just eight verses prior, were asking if God was now going to restore the kingdom of Israel. These men did not yet have the Holy Spirit and did not fully grasp the Lord's plan to save His people. They were still focused on earthly expectations instead of God's sovereign will. In the midst of the confusion and unrest that they must have been feeling, they immersed themselves in prayer. They drew near to God and rested in His promises. What a blessing it is to not have to piece everything together on our own. As Christians, we have an incredible gift: we know that our Heavenly Father is working all things together for those who love Him.

7. How consistent is your prayer life? How can you better take advantage of the blessing that it is to rest in the promises of God?

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As we move into Acts chapter 2, we see the Holy Spirit come to those that the Lord called (verse 39). The Holy Spirit coming to dwell within God's people at Pentecost was an incredible victory and a true testament to the power of the Holy Spirit. The movement of the Spirit through Peter led to 3,000 conversions to Christ. There were many who mocked the disciples, assuming that they were drunk on wine, after being filled with the Spirit. Despite this, Peter shared the

Gospel of Jesus boldly (verses 14 through 36). Peter had confidence, a peace that passes all understanding, which is a gift that the Holy Spirit brings to believers. This confidence and peace, when we have the backing of Almighty God, can be incredibly empowering when we are called to do something in the name of the Lord.

8. What things hold you back from boldly speaking about Jesus?

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After this mass conversion, Acts 2:42 records, ***"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."*** This was an incredible picture of the blessing that it is to grow in our relationship with the Lord together. Yes, our walk with Jesus is individual, but it is meant to be done together with brothers and sisters who share the same love for the Lord and the same worship of their Creator. We can stir one another up ***"to love and good works"*** (Hebrews 10:24), among many other things.

9. Acts 2:42 tells us that the followers of Christ devoted themselves to learning Jesus' teachings, engaging in fellowship, breaking bread, and praying. Which of these do you feel the Holy Spirit laying on your heart to be more intentional about prioritizing in your life?

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10. Acts 2:47 ends by telling us that God added to their numbers daily. What are some practical ways that you can be a part of God's work in bringing others to faith in Him?

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NOTES

GUNG-HO

DEVOTION #1 - JEANNIE YATES

Have you ever met someone who was really gung-ho (eager, enthusiastic, zealous) about something? Maybe it was their New Year's resolution, a new fitness routine, or a multi-level marketing campaign, and they would just not quit talking about it. It took over their entire life. They got the clothing with special logos, the matching hat, a decal for their car, and made their social media posts all about this new endeavor. The next thing you know, they are inviting you out to lunch to talk all about how to get you to participate, too. The dictionary defines devoted as "giving all or a large part of one's time or resources to a person, activity, or cause." These gung-ho individuals become completely devoted to their cause, and it is evident to everyone around them.

Right off the bat, in the book of Acts, we hear about the believers' devotion. Acts 1:14 says, ***"All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers."*** In fact, we read about the early Church's devotion to prayer three different times in the first few chapters of Acts (Acts 1:14; 2:42; 6:4). Pastor David Platt comments, "Here are these disciples. Jesus has left them. He's ascended to heaven. And he's just given them this global commission. 'Go and make disciples of the nations. Be witnesses to the ends of the earth.' So they gather together. And the Bible doesn't say they devote themselves to planning. They don't devote themselves to whiteboarding out a strategy to get the gospel to the ends of the earth. They devote themselves to praying."

We devote ourselves to a lot of things. Some of them are good things like our family, careers, friendships, and humanitarian efforts. However, as I began to really focus on this verse, I had to ask myself, “Am I truly devoted to prayer?” I invite you to ask yourself that same question. Of course, we pray, right? Some of us even have the t-shirt, hat, coffee mug, and bumper sticker to remind us to “Pray on it, pray over it, pray through it!” We might take time to start our day with prayer, pray before a meal, pray over our needs or our concerns for loved ones, and we might end our day with a prayer before bedtime, but is that what it means to be devoted to prayer? Now, I want to take the question I asked earlier and dig a little deeper: Am I eager to pray? Am I enthusiastic about prayer? Am I approaching the throne of my Heavenly Father with zeal? Am I choosing to make prayer a focus of my time and resources?

Here is the really incredible thing: this early church did not just individually devote themselves to prayer; they did it together ***“with one accord.”*** They were devoted to praying with a unified front. They were committing to pray with each other, for each other, for the advancement of the Gospel, and the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we focus as a church on what it means to “Grow in the Word,” I hope that we will be challenged to truly devote ourselves to prayer together. In the words of the Apostle Paul, I pray that we would focus our hearts to be ***“rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer”*** (Romans 12:12, NASB).

THE LONG RUN

DEVOTION #2 - DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

"So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us - one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection." Acts 1:21-22

A lot happened in 50 days. Jesus was celebrated in His Triumphal Entry, but then arrested, beaten, and crucified. The disciples deserted Him, including betrayal, denial, suicide, and hiding. While all looked doomed, Jesus rose again! He was alive and spent almost six weeks on a victory tour giving many proofs that He was alive and God's plan was in place. Once He had fulfilled His tour, He ascended back home to Heaven.

It was now time for the disciples to get to work. They felt one of their first assignments was to fill the spot Judas vacated. They looked for someone who was more of a marathon runner than a sprinter. They wanted someone who had been consistent and present during the three and a half years of Jesus' public ministry.

There is a lot to be said for faithfulness. Paul lists several qualifications for a spiritual leader (Elder, Pastor) in his letter to Timothy. In 1 Timothy 3:6, we read, ***"He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil."*** The parable of the sower and the seed in Matthew chapter 13 warns of those who receive the Gospel or Word but quickly fall away.

The disciples wanted someone who had passed the test of time. They looked for someone who had experienced Jesus firsthand, from His baptism through His teachings, and to the empty tomb. In thick and thin, they walked with Jesus. They were there for the highs and the lows.

Too often, people think salvation is the finish line. They accept Jesus as their Savior, but do not realize the need to grow in their faith.

Are you intentional in growing in your spiritual journey? It does not happen accidentally by being stagnant. Choose to spend time daily reading the Word of God, praying, and pausing to listen to the Lord. Follow through by attending weekly Gatherings in person, participating in a Growth Community, and finding ways to serve.

Please do not settle for a fruitless life. Strive forward. Focus on growth. Look to be more submissive to God's will today than you were yesterday. Set goals and include others so you can help them and they can keep you accountable. Together we are better, but that does not mean we ignore the regular private appointments we set with God.

ACCOMPANYING OTHERS

DEVOTION #3 - CHRIS MONTVILLE

"So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us - one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection." Acts 1:21-22

Those who have been with us from the beginning of our journey sometimes have the best perspective on our lives. They know you. They have seen you walk through seasons of life and know the person you are. It is vital to have people like this in your life. We want those who will know when we are acting like ourselves or if we are acting out of character.

This week in our Reach, Gather, Grow series, we are focusing on Grow. When we first come to Christ, we accept His payment for our sins through His death, and believe that He rose from the dead, conquering sin and death. In that sense, we become a ***"witness to his resurrection."*** As we discussed in our Reach week, we are called to go out and share what we have witnessed with the world. However, I want to think more about this. Acts 1:21 says, ***"So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us."***

Who are those people who have accompanied you from the beginning of your journey? Have you accompanied anyone from the beginning of their journey?

If you are new in your walk with Christ, it is important that you have someone who has been walking with Christ for a long time and is present in your life, who is able to pour into you. In other words, you should have a mentor.

If you have been walking with Christ for some time, who is someone new in their faith that you could come alongside? These relationships are vital in our growth. When I was a new believer, I thanked my mentor constantly for how much he helped me grow. However, he would always tell me that I also helped him grow as I asked challenging questions that made him consider how to apply his faith in different ways. It is beneficial for both parties.

The apostles knew it was vital to have mature believers leading the people, which is why they wanted to appoint another mature believer to take Judas' place. Our faith walk is no different. We need mature believers around us pouring into us. If you have had this in the past, you know how important this is. If you have not had this type of relationship before, I cannot express to you how beneficial it is.

I want to encourage you today to reach out to someone who could use your help, or someone whose help you could use. I know it can be scary and maybe a bit awkward at the start (it was for me!). Regardless, build those connections, strengthen the body of Christ. We need to grow, but we cannot grow alone.

DEVOTED TO THE RIGHT THINGS

DEVOTION #4 - JOSH THAYER

We all want to grow spiritually, right? However, sometimes, spiritual growth feels like one of those New Year's resolutions that starts strong and then fizzles out by February. Maybe we read our Bible for a few days, pray a little more, and then life gets busy, distractions come, and suddenly we are back where we started.

So, how do we actually grow? Acts 2:42 gives us a simple but powerful answer, ***"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."***

This verse describes the early church right after Pentecost, where thousands of people came to faith in Jesus. What did they do next? They devoted themselves to four key things:

1. **The apostles' teaching (God's Word)** – They soaked up Scripture and learned the truth about Jesus.

2. **Fellowship (Community)** – They did life together, encouraging and sharpening each other.

3. **Breaking of bread (Worship and Communion)** – They gathered to remember Jesus and celebrate His sacrifice.

4. **Prayer** – They stayed connected to God, bringing everything before Him.

Notice the word ***"devoted."*** They did not treat these things as optional. They were committed. They built their lives around these habits, and as a result, they grew spiritually.

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

Jesus calls us to be disciples (followers who grow) and to ***"make disciples"*** (help others grow). That means spiritual growth is not just about us. It is about bringing others along on the journey.

So, how do we grow spiritually? We need to stay devoted to the Word, community, worship, and prayer. Also, we should not keep it to ourselves. We need to help others grow, too. Spiritual growth is not about trying harder; it is about staying connected to Jesus and His people.

Here is the challenge: Are you devoted to the right things? What is one step you can take today to grow? Maybe it is committing to a Bible reading plan, joining a Growth Community, or deepening your prayer life. Whatever it is, take that step and trust that God will grow you as you stay connected to Him. Let us grow together!

SACRIFICE

DEVOTION #5 - LORENA NORRIS

Imagine what it must have felt like to be one of Jesus' followers after He ascended into Heaven. They had just gone through the heartbreak of watching Him die, the overwhelming joy of seeing Him alive again, and then, just like that, He was (physically) gone. I can only imagine the mix of emotions, excitement, confusion, and maybe even feeling a little lost. What now? How do we move forward without Jesus here to lead us?

However, Jesus did not leave them alone. He had promised them something, the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit showed up at Pentecost, everything changed. They were united, bold, and commissioned to a new way of life, one centered completely on Jesus, His teachings, and sharing the Good News.

Acts 2:42 gives us this amazing snapshot of the early church, ***"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."*** This was not a casual thing. They were not just squeezing God into their schedules. This was not a devotion only on one day of the week. They were all in! They were committed to daily growing in their faith, praying together, sharing meals, and caring for one another.

Here is the part we do not talk about enough: being devoted to Christ means being devoted to what He loves. What does Jesus love? He loves His people. He did not just save us so we could be independent. He saved us because He knew we could not do life on our own. He saved us into the family of God. That means devotion is not just about memorizing more Scripture, praying more

frequently, or having perfect attendance at Growth Community. It is about showing up for your brothers and sisters in Christ. It is about encouraging them, serving them, and loving them.

However, let us be real, true devotion takes sacrifice. In Scripture, the word “devoted” (anathema) can also mean set apart for destruction. In other words, sometimes things in our lives have to go in order for something else, meant for God’s glory and our good, to take place. Maybe it is pride, comfort, bitterness, or just the busyness of life pulling us away.

So, ask yourself, what needs to be set aside so that you can be fully devoted to Christ and His Church? What is holding you back from living like the early Church, fully committed to Jesus, His Word, and the Church family He has placed you in?

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

DEVOTION #6 - KATIE PETTIBONE

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Acts 2:42

We need a community for all different aspects of life; for love, prayer, wisdom, accountability, friendship, and discipleship. I could go on and on. Yet, most importantly, it is important who we spend our time with. From past experiences, I like to ask myself these questions to keep accountable:

- Does this community honor the Lord?
- Do I honor the Lord when I am with them?

I remember a time in my life when I did not have a community that led me to Christ, and it was a hard time for me. I was what you called a "sitting on the fence" Christian. I was living life my own way, hanging out with friends who did not honor the Lord, and more. The people you surround yourself with will always have an impact on your life, whether it is good or bad.

As a young adult, I am blessed to have a God who showed me this early on. He separated me from a group of friends that did not push me to Him, which, in hindsight, I am thankful for. I was alone for a while, and it was the darkest time in my spiritual life, but God met me where I was. Little did I know, the only issue I had was that I was unwilling to fully give my all to Him. I would not have realized this if He had not separated me from those friends. I remember calling my mom one day, and I was a mess. It had been a while since I talked

to anyone about my personal relationship with God. There were lots of tears, and I could not get words out through those tears. However, my mom heard my cries and came right over to my place, spoke truth into my life, and prayed over me. She reminded me that I am a child of God and I need to love Him with all my might. I wrote Mark 12:30 all over my apartment, ***"And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."***

I am blessed to have a mom who is so full of God's love and wisdom and who was able to pray with me during the time I needed her most. Since then, I have learned a lot about community and all of its benefits when we surround ourselves with the right people. Yet, I know that some people do not have that. That does not mean that there is not a community out there that will love you like my mom did for me. There is a community right here at the church that will intercede in your life and will pray with you, give you accountability, and with the strength of the Holy Spirit, give you scriptural wisdom when you cannot see it. I am blessed to be a part of a church where I have so many friends, Growth Community members, and more people who will have my back when I need them.

This makes me think of a story in the Bible. When Peter went to jail, a community of people were praying for Him, which then led to an angel freeing Peter.

Acts 12:11-17 says, ***"When Peter came to himself, he said, 'Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.' When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, 'You are out of your mind.' But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, 'It is his angel!'***

But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, 'Tell these things to James and to the brothers.' Then he departed and went to another place."

Peter was going through a tough time, and He had a community of people praying for Him the entire time.

I am very encouraged to be a part of a church that offers so many opportunities for community. They include Sunday gatherings at nine locations, Growth Communities across so many different towns, from Young Adults to Married Couples, and even places like Recovery Tuesdays at Waterford. There are so many opportunities for people to connect and be there for one another. We serve such an amazing God who gives us the gift of community. We have to make sure we are spending time in that community. Ask yourself these questions:

- Does my community honor the Lord?
- Do I honor the Lord when I am with them?
- Do I have a community I can go to for prayer and connection? If not, why?
- How can I be more of an encouragement to my community?
- Pray for your community and ask for prayer in return

If you need a community and you are having a hard time connecting with one, please visit theriverchurch.cc/connect and fill out the form! Someone from The River Church will help you get connected.

LESSON FOUR

GIVE

PASTOR NOBLE BAIRD

Money! Do I have your attention now? Your attention may be focused; however, money might bring up good or bad emotions or a mixture of both! There is no doubt that the topic of money is a hot-button topic in the church as a whole. For centuries, this topic has been abused in the church the same way as it is abused in the world. I believe this is one of the foundational issues that we are able to discuss and approach in relation to money and giving. However, that is why we must begin by taking a biblical look at giving. If we biblically understand the Lord's guidance and desire for giving, we will come to a healthy and even excited heart for giving.

1. What emotions or thoughts come to mind when you read the words "money" and "giving"?

_____
_____
_____

2. If you have an example and feel comfortable, please share a difficult experience with giving.

_____
_____
_____

3. Now, please share a good experience with giving!

_____
_____
_____

As we continue through Acts chapters 1-2, we come to Acts 2:44-45, ***"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need."*** How simple, radical (to our American culture), and beautiful is this picture of the start of the Church?! They were so united together in Christ that they had this Spirit-led desire of compassion. This compassion culminated across every facet of life for these believers. We see them learning together, sharing meals, taking

communion, and in this passage, we see them making sure that financial and physical needs are met. Now, it is very important not to misinterpret this Scripture as a call to redistribute wealth, nor is this a call to allow believers not to work and to simply live off the Church; Paul warns against this in 2 Thessalonians chapter 3. However, we do see the Church coming together to simply do life together in every capacity, for the glory of the Lord!

4. Has there been a time when you were struggling financially and the Lord provided? What was that experience like?

_____
_____
_____

5. Why is it important for believers to do life together?

_____
_____
_____

In 2 Corinthians 8:1-7, Paul shares about the church in Macedonia and their experience with giving, ***"We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints - and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. But as you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you - see that you excel in this act of grace also."***

This passage is not used to shame believers into giving. On the contrary, Paul shares this story of the believers' hearts toward giving

as an encouragement to the church in Corinth. We first see that the church gave according to their means; they are not expected or demanded to give outside of their financial ability and stewardship. Then, we see that they not only gave according to their means, but they gave above and beyond of their own desire. Yet, in all this, we see their hearts focus on the Lord. They are experiencing great affliction and poverty; however, we read that they do this out of a desire, in that they are a part of the fellowship of the body of Christ.

Again, this lines up with what the church was doing in Acts 2:42-47. Remember, Paul's heart in sharing this was not one of shame, but encouragement as he states in verse 7, ***"But as you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you - see that you excel in this act of grace also."*** He encourages and admonishes the church in Corinth for their growth in their faith, speech, knowledge, and love. Then, he simply lays out the plan and encourages them to excel in giving financially, as their brothers in Macedonia are doing. It is not that they do it out of guilt or obedience to Paul, but obedience to the Lord and for the mission of the Gospel of Christ.

6. Has there been a time when you felt the Spirit leading you to give above and beyond?

_____

_____

_____

7. Is it easy to continue to give to the Church when money and finances are tight, or is giving one of the first things that we cut?

_____

_____

_____

So, what does this mean for us as a body of believers, saved through our confession and belief in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? If we are to be holistically obedient to the Word of God and the mission of the Gospel, we should desire to give financially to

the Lord. Regardless of what church you attend, we should be giving back to the Lord first with our finances. Secondly, be encouraged by God's Word and the example given by the churches in Macedonia. While they experienced hardship and financial uncertainty, they remained steadfast in their obedience and desire to give back to the Lord. Finally, as followers of Christ, we must do life together. We are not meant to do this life alone, nor should we! John 1:12-13 reminds us, ***"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."***

Giving and money are never fun topics to discuss. However, it is my prayer and hope that through laying the foundation of God's Word and looking to obedience in Him, it is a topic we can joyously discuss and take part in!

8. What is one way we can aid the needs of our brothers and sisters in the Church?

_____
_____
_____

9. What is one way you can encourage our brothers and sisters this week?

_____
_____
_____

TRUST GOD AND FIND JOY

DEVOTION #1 - JOANNA MONTGOMERY

Giving is often a hard topic for Christians to talk about. Leaders in many churches will not talk about it at all, while in other churches, it seems like that is all they talk about. Growing up, I lived in a family that valued giving to the work of the Church. My entire childhood and teen years, I was well aware my parents were faithful in their giving, so it never crossed my mind that I would not give financially as well.

However, why? If we work hard for our money and live a life where we pay our bills and do not live excessively, why would we give our hard-earned money away? Do you find yourself thinking, “If you are quite wealthy, it is fine to give, but if you are barely able to put anything into savings (or sometimes not able to put anything into savings), why would you want to give to the church?”

This is something that absolutely does not make sense to our human mind, and if you talk through it and ask others about it, you will see that it still does not make sense! The rewards of trusting God and living in faith are completely amazing when you are faithful in this seemingly unimportant matter, and no one, other than those who love Christ, will understand it.

Christ exemplified living simply and trusting God. God has not asked us to walk away from our source of income, and trust that there will be wheat on the side of the road for us to eat and feed our families. He does, however, ask that we trust in Him. One of the best ways we can demonstrate trust is to give a portion of what we earn to be used to further the Kingdom of God.

The early church willingly gave up their possessions and chose to

support one another as there was need. Acts 2:44-45 records, ***"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need."***

At this time in the history of the Church, the people were tormented, hunted, and persecuted for their beliefs. People who were following Christ would come together, support each other, and show the love of Christ to their fellow Christians. The amazing thing is they did not have to do it; they did it out of love for each other, and because they were able to meet everyone's needs that way.

We have an opportunity to bless others by giving. Often, there just is not any money after bills are paid to even think about giving money to the Church. If we submit to trusting God and give an amount we believe we can honestly afford to give, God can, and does, bless it. The immediate blessing is to our heart. To give brings joy, or it should. If giving brings us misery, then we should not give; instead, pray that God will guide us to His will. We should not give expecting God to bless us financially, although sometimes that does happen. We do not give expecting to get it back with or without interest, like a loan. We give because it requires faith and trust in God. We are able to draw closer to God when we are doing things to please Him. Trusting Jesus to take care of our needs definitely pleases Him.

I encourage you to give. A wonderful thing happens to your heart and mind when you know you are blessing others. If you do not have much, you most likely will not give much, but that is not the objective. The objective is to trust God. If you have not made a habit of giving to further the Gospel, start small and give what you know you can afford. If you can only give fifty cents or one dollar, then that is what you should give, and give it with a happy heart, thanking God for giving you extra to bless others with.

God does not need our money. God wants our hearts. Giving what we have, knowing God is aware of our needs, will bring joy. I truly do not understand how it works; I just know that it does. I encourage you to find a blessing and trust in God's provision through your giving. Give what you know you can, ask God to bless it, and He will.

SEE A NEED, CARE FOR A NEED

DEVOTION #2 - STEPHEN BILLINGS

"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need." Acts 2:44-45

One of my favorite parts of being a Children's Director is having a front-row seat to witness the Church in action. As a leader within the Church, I have the opportunity to serve alongside many individuals who undertake many different tasks for the sake of the Gospel and to the glory of God!

It brings me great joy when those I am serving alongside bring a need to my attention. They identify something requiring special attention, repair, or extra care, and are seeking assistance in addressing it. Recently, this occurred within our nursery ministry. A volunteer approached my wife and me regarding the need to update toys, furniture, and bouncers in our infant rooms. Not only was the need brought to our attention, but volunteers, as they found out about the need, offered to donate supplies. Over several days, I observed volunteers rallying around the nursery's needs and, by the grace of God, transformed the nursery into a space that will better serve our babies.

I was deeply blessed and encouraged that a few volunteers recognized a need and stepped up to address it. In today's passage, Acts 2:44-45, we see a similar dynamic. Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, had just occurred, and those who declared Jesus as their Lord were uniting together to form the early church.

To help the church as it began to grow, and to care for the needs of all those who started to follow Jesus, the believers chose to have unity in ***"selling their possessions"*** to meet the needs of those among them. Just as the early Church banded together to care for one another, we, as believers in Jesus, are called to do the same. We are to recognize a need and seek to address it for the sake of the Gospel and to glorify God.

Today, spend time in prayer, asking God to reveal the needs of fellow believers. Then, ask the Lord for wisdom on how to best address those needs.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

DEVOTION #3 - KARSEN THEEDE

"Two are better than one," is a phrase straight from the Bible (Ecclesiastes 4:9) and something we hear in our day to day. The idea that multiple people are better than just one is not a new idea, but I feel that in our modern time, this idea has been lost. It may be because of the rise of social media, how we can pretty much buy anything and have it shipped to our door, or how we can have food delivered and not have to leave the house or see anyone. We now live in a time where loneliness is at an all-time high, so the importance of community is also at its highest. So, as the Church, what does that mean for us? In a world full of people needing community, what does it mean for God's community?

We are going through Reach, Gather, Grow in the book of Acts chapters 1-2. Acts 2:44-45 states, ***"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need."***

As Christians, we are called by God to gather together so we can worship, learn, serve, and grow closer to one another. We must go out and be with people who are like-minded so we can grow in our relationship with God. We can see that in verse 44. The next verse brings up what happens when God's community is strong. When Christians gather together regularly and pray with one another, they will start to realize and hear the needs of those around them, from the minor to the major needs. Then the community can gather around the people who are in need and find a way to provide for their needs, whether that is selling possessions, as said in verse 45, or providing

time to care for them. This is why it takes a community to provide for a need. God has blessed everyone with different abilities. For some, this is money, and for others, it is their time or prayer, but all gifts are needed to provide for those who are in need. As Christians, we must gather together and help to provide for those around us.

GIVING WHAT WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN

DEVOTION #4 - ZACH HONNEN

When I was young, I remember attending a church where the offering basket was passed down the aisle every Sunday. I would watch as people dropped cash or checks into the basket before passing it along. Eventually, I wanted to contribute too. I felt left out, not being able to give something to God. So, I decided I would put my action figures into the basket.

Before I could, my mom noticed and gently took the action figures from me as I was trying to put them in, explaining that I could keep them. She also took that moment to teach me about giving - why we give and how it helps the mission of the Church continue. From then on, I started giving in small ways - pennies, quarters, or a few dollars whenever I earned money.

1. What was your first experience with giving in church?
2. What do you think it means to give in and outside of the church?

Acts 2:44-45 says, ***"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need."***

3. What are some key details that you notice in this passage?

In this passage, we see several important distinctions. The first is the phrase ***"all who believed."*** This distinction matters because this kind of generosity, having all things in common, can truly only work among believers. The idea of sharing and giving without expecting anything in return is a uniquely Christian concept.

Often, when people give, they see it as an investment, expecting something in return. However, as Christians, we give to meet needs, not for personal gain. Another key point to understand is that this giving was not forced. It was not required but voluntary.

Giving is meant to come from a place of faith, reverence, and worship of God. We are not called to be forced to give or to be showy or boastful in our giving, but to give worshipfully. The greatest example of giving is demonstrated in Mark 12:41-44, ***"And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, 'Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'"***

This woman gave out of her poverty; she gave in faith, from a place of worship and surrender to God. As we give to the Lord, let us not do it out of compulsion, pride, or reluctance, but out of a place of true worship and trust in our God.

4. Would you say you are faithful in your giving?
5. Would you say you give from a place of faith or fear?
6. Is giving something that you see as worship or work?

If you struggle with giving out of fear or giving out of boastful pride, take time to seek the Lord and ask for His forgiveness and help. C.S. Lewis wrote, "I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare."

OPEN HANDS

DEVOTION #5 - JILL OSMON

"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need." Acts 2:44-45

In Acts chapter 2, we read about Pentecost, a Jewish harvest festival that takes place fifty days after Passover. It is here that the early Church begins to take form, and what stands out to me in these verses is the emphasis on coming together. They are breaking bread and caring for one another.

The idea of community is becoming increasingly foreign in a world that is shifting toward individualism, where self-centeredness is on the rise. In contrast, the early Church thrived by depending on both God and one another. One key way they did this was by supporting each other and meeting any needs that came up, demonstrating the power of God's transforming love.

Romans 12:13 (NIV) says, ***"Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."***

One commentator I read said, "The Jews had a tremendous custom of hospitality during any major feast like Pentecost. Visitors were received into private homes, and no one could charge for giving a bed or a room to a visitor or for supplying their basic needs. The Christians took this tremendous feast-time hospitality and made it an everyday thing."

One of the defining characteristics of the early Church was its ability to extend hospitality beyond large gatherings and special events, incorporating it into daily life. Christians were recognized for their generosity, inviting others into their homes, meeting needs, and sharing what they had with those around them. This spirit of hospitality became a hallmark of what it meant to be a Christian.

It is unsurprising that in our culture today, that is not how the world would define a Christian. Offering genuine hospitality often requires us to step out of our comfort zones and be vulnerable, extending ourselves in ways that can feel draining. It means prioritizing others over our own plans and being present, even when we are busy or tired. At times, we may find ourselves hesitating because of the effort it takes to welcome others into our lives, or because we fear the emotional investment it might require. Yet, when we examine the life of Jesus, we see that hospitality was not just about offering a meal or a place to stay. It was about opening our hearts and our lives to others, regardless of the cost. In the end, true Christian hospitality is not just an action; it is a reflection of a heart willing to give and to love, even at the expense of our own comfort.

As a church, my prayer is that we stand out, not by focusing on ourselves, but by showing the world what it means to care for one another. May we be known for living with open hands by offering our love, resources, and lives to those around us.

COMMUNITY OVER POSESSIONS

DEVOTION #6 - DEBBIE GABBARA

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need." Acts 2:44-45 (NIV)

In Acts chapter 2, we see the early Church come alive as 3,000 people were saved after Peter's powerful message. United in purpose, the believers shared their lives, resources, and love for Jesus. They valued community and service over possessions.

Jesus' disciples spent three years watching and learning from Him. Throughout the Gospels, we find Jesus emphasizing the joy that comes from giving of ourselves and our resources for others.

- In Matthew, Jesus instructed the disciples to give freely as they had freely received as He was sending them out to share the grace message of the Gospel as it had been shared with them.

- In Mark, through the parable of the widow's offering, we come to understand that the amount that we give is not as important to God as the heart attitude with which we give.

- In Luke, Jesus teaches us that wealth is not measured by what we possess. The act of giving is seen as a reflection of our faith and trust in God's provision.

- In John, we are reminded that before we ever pursued Him, Jesus gave His life for us.

Like those first-century believers, our church family has witnessed God move in incredible ways through the generosity, talents, and resources of this body of believers.

Because of faithful giving:

- Thousands of families hear the Gospel through our Egg Drop and Trunk or Treat events.

- Countless volunteers serve and welcome hundreds of kids to a basketball program that teaches not only sports but, most importantly, how much Jesus loves them.

- The Send a Kid to Camp auction helps send kids to camp to hear about the saving love of Jesus while bringing fun and connection to the church body.

- Volunteers and staff spend weeks preparing to bring a Sunday morning gathering to the Oakland County Fair to share the love of Jesus in the community every July.

Rocking babies, leading worship, serving in the food pantry, and teaching the Word are all acts of giving that glorify God and fill our lives till it is overflowing.

Acts 4:32 (NKJV) says, ***"Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul."***

Hebrews 13:16 (NKJV) adds, ***"Do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased."***

OUR VISION

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

REACH

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

GATHER

The goal of weekend gatherings at The River Church is to glorify Christ in all we do! Whether it be through singing, giving, serving, or any of the variety of ways He has gifted us and called us together, Jesus is at the center of it all. We celebrate that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it's not only a refresher, it brings life-change!

GROW

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

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