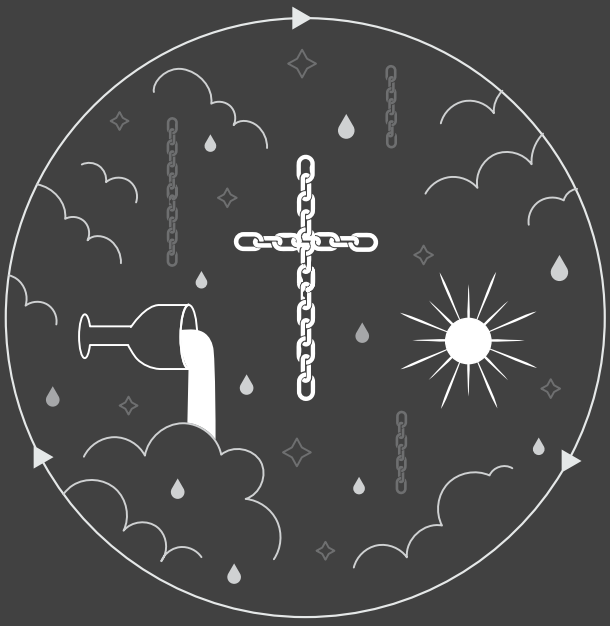
REACH, GATHER, GROW

IN PHILIPPIANS



DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM:

CAMERON ALDRICH
PATRICK BICKNELL
STEPHEN BILLINGS
SIERRA COMBS
JUSTIN DEAN
NATHAN ELLIOTT
DEBBIE GABBARA
KENDALL HINE
MITCHELL HOLMES
ZACH HONNEN
DAVID HUDGENS
BEN KIRKMAN
JAMES MANN
CHRIS MONTVILLE
PHILIP PIASECKI
FERDINAND SANDERS
JOHN STONE
CATHY STORY
RYAN STORY
JOSH THAYER
KARSEN THEEDE
ROY TOWNSEND
KEATON WASHBURN
KYLE WENDEL
JOE WILSON
GARY WRIGHT
JEANNIE YATES
JOSH YATES

DESIGNED BY LORENA HABER
FORMATTED BY SHAWNA JOHNSON

Reach, Gather, Grow in Philippians

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PREFACE

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus commands the mission for the church, ***"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."*** Some of Jesus' last words on Earth were for His followers to spread the Gospel, gather together for worship, and grow together in spiritual maturity.

In the book of Philippians, Paul follows these same guidelines as he directs the church in Philippi to Reach, Gather, and Grow. It is challenging and at the same time comforting to see the several examples in Philippians of how Paul strives to implement Jesus' mission for His church.

"Reach, Gather, Grow in Philippians" contains four study guides for personal or group discussion and twenty-four devotions for further insight. *"Reach, Gather, Grow in Philippians"* will remind you of the importance of your role as part of the church and will help you view the book of Philippians from a new and fresh perspective.



PHILIPPIANS 1

Greeting

[1] Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

[2] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving and Prayer

[3] I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, [4] always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy,[5] because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. [6] And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. [7] It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. [8] For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. [9] And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, [10] so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, [11] filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

The Advance of the Gospel

[12] I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, [13] so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. [14] And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

15 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others
from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am
put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim
Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to
afflict me in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every
way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and
in that I rejoice.

To Live Is Christ

Yes, and I will rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers
and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for
my deliverance, 20 as it is my eager expectation and hope that
I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as
always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or
by death. 21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If
I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet
which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between
the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is
far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on
your account. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and
continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith,26 so
that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus,
because of my coming to you again.

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ,
so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may
hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one
mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,28 and not
frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign
to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that
from God. 29 For it has been granted to you that for the sake
of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for
his sake, 30 engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and
now hear that I still have.

PHILIPPIANS 2

Christ's Example of Humility

1 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Lights in the World

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. 17 Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. 18 Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

Timothy and Epaphroditus

19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. 20 For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.21 For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a sonwith a father he has served with me in the gospel. 23 I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, 24 and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.

25 I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, 26 for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. 27 Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. 28 I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. 29 So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, 30 for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

PHILIPPIANS 3

Righteousness Through Faith in Christ

1 Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

2 Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. 3 For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— 4 though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Straining Toward the Goal

12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. 16 Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

17 Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. 18 For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

PHILIPPIANS 4

1 Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Exhortation, Encouragement, and Prayer

2 I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.3 Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

God's Provision

10 I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. 11 Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

14 Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. 15 And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only.16 Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. 17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. 18 I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. 19 And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20 To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Final Greetings

21 Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. 22 All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

23 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

LESSON ONE

REACH

PASTOR RYAN STORY

Remember those *"Magic Eye"* pictures that were so popular in the 1990s? For some of you, core memory was just unlocked with wonder and excitement. You are welcome. For some of you, the core memory that was just unlocked is that of frustration and disappointment. I am on the disappointed and frustrated side of things. I still think that there is no hidden image there. I genuinely think it is all a big scam. Yes, my trust issues are showing.

The *"Magic Eye"* pictures are all about how you look at them. From what I have been told, in order to find the hidden image, it is about where you focus. If you focus on the right spot, at the right angle, your eyes will do the rest. Again, I am frustrated that I have never seen this happen; but that truth is also a truth that we can hold to for other aspects of our lives. How we look at situations or circumstances generally dictates the direction we will go. Craig Groeschel has said, "You are always moving towards your strongest feeling." It is a real thing.

Philippians 1:12-13 says, ***"I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ."***

1. Why does God use weakness or hardship as an amazing tool to advance the Gospel?

_____

_____

_____

Paul is in jail. While Paul is penning Philippians, he has a strong sense that death is awaiting on the other side of this imprisonment. Paul's focus is not to sulk, blame, mope, or become enraged. Paul's focus is on ensuring the Gospel of Christ is furthered. Paul was in a bad spot, but he saw the opportunity to reach those who hated the church.

Philippians 1:14 continues, ***"And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear."***

2. Who is someone that encouraged you to live for Christ with more boldness and commitment to the Gospel even though they were going through a trial or a difficult situation?

_____
_____
_____

3. How can reframing the way you think about a situation help create eagerness and tenacity in preaching the Gospel?

_____
_____
_____

So often we are looking for an extra supernatural move of God. While I would never limit God on what He is doing, I am a firm believer that God is often moving right before our eyes and we often miss it due to the fact we are looking for the Hollywood version of the Gospel. When we are looking for the grandiose, we overlook the person who is often right next to us and who needs to hear the amazing grace that only comes because of the work and person of our Lord Jesus.

4. Who is someone who is "chained" (a person that you regularly encounter) to you?

_____
_____
_____

Philippians 1:15-18 adds, ***"Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What***

then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice."

5. In verses 15-18, why was Paul able to not hold on to spite?

_____

_____

_____

How can we model this same faith? Put yourself in Paul's place. He is in prison. There are people who are trashing his apostleship. There are people who are destroying his character. There are people who were going into towns to undo the teachings Paul had taught. Life becomes so discouraging when you feel like everything is against you. Yet, Paul never allowed the rivals and envious to throw off his mission.

6. Why is rejoicing such a crucial part when it comes to reaching those who do not know Jesus as Lord?

_____

_____

_____

7. How do you view suffering? Is it a punishment or an opportunity?

_____

_____

_____

No matter where Paul was, in all the accounts we have written in the Bible, we see one central goal in Paul's life. In Acts chapter 20, Paul gives a tearful farewell to a group of elders from Ephesus saying, ***"But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God"*** (Acts 20:24). For Paul, his life only had one purpose, to ensure people knew Jesus.

8. Has reaching the world become an extra-curricular event when it is easy and convenient in your Christian walk?

_____
_____
_____

9. When was the last time you saw the Gospel move forward? Was it during a time of comfort or a time of discomfort?

_____
_____
_____

God has sent His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross to forgive us of our sins. When we put our faith in the work and person of Jesus Christ, we are made new. We have a new life. Because the Holy Spirit lives inside of us, God gives us a new heart that can now live for God. Sadly, there are times in life when we encounter difficulties. In those moments, it pushes our heart back into a rebellious, self-seeking mode. We care less about the amazing grace that saved us from the grave, and we care more about the inconvenience that is around us. We, as the Gospel-giving church of Jesus Christ, cannot allow hardship to stop us from moving the Gospel forward. The Gospel will always advance. God is working in the good times and working in the hard times. My prayer for you is that your heart is motivated to see the opportunity to tell others about the love that has set you free and given you life.

NOTES

GET IN THE GAME

DEVOTION #1 - CHRIS MONTVILLE

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Philippians 1:3-6

When I think of the events in my life that have brought me the most joy, they always involve two parties: God and another person. These events are always moments when I get to see God do something amazing in someone's heart. Sometimes that is in my heart, but usually, that is in the heart of a friend. Thus, the two factors that are required for these deep moments of joy are faith in God and relationships with others.

We see in this passage that Paul has a great relationship with the Philippians and remembers them quite fondly. In verse 3, he says, ***"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you."*** Think of someone in your life where that statement is true. Why are you most thankful for them? My guess is that the answer can be summed up by what is said in verse 5, ***"because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."***

Now, think about what typically consumes most of your attention span throughout the day. At work, my guess is that it is pretty material. Once we are home, we are often preoccupied with the number of things to take care of, or maybe we are hoping that new Amazon order came in. We spend too much time thinking about

things that will never give us joy. The fact is, this joy that Paul talks about here in verse 4 (***"making my prayer with joy"***) is only found as a result of sharing our faith with others. That is how he arrived there, and that is how we must arrive there. He shared his faith and gained brothers and sisters to walk toward Christ with. To get there, we must put ourselves in a position to see God move.

I have a friend who I have known for about eight years. I remember sharing the Gospel with him and several other friends in a group setting shortly after we met. This did not lead to him, or any of them, becoming a Christian immediately. We can often be discouraged by that. However, several years later after losing contact with him for a few years, he told me that he had accepted Christ during that time. In this story, all God used me for was to plant a seed, but when he told me the full story, I was literally jumping up and down in my room. Several tears were shed. It was a real joy.

The seeds we sow on Earth have eternal consequences. When someone accepts Christ, we feel joy because of verse 6, ***"That he who began a good work in you [and them] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."***

God has got the ending; let us get in the game.

GOSPEL PERSPECTIVE

DEVOTION #2 - PASTOR KYLE WENDEL

"I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ." Philippians 1:12-13

Could you imagine being imprisoned for the cause of Christ? I know I have pondered this question before. What would my attitude be if I was thrown in prison for following and preaching about Jesus?

I love looking at Paul's life and being amazed at his attitude and perspective. This is a guy who has truly suffered for the cause of Christ. At one time he was completely against all Christians. He was a Pharisee who hunted the believers down to stop them. God gets the attention of Paul in his life and completely transforms him. However, God did not promise Paul an easy life by any means. God instead promised Paul a life of suffering for His name's sake. Acts 9:16 says, ***"For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."***

I greatly admire Paul and his journey. Paul went through an incredible amount of persecution, imprisonment, and was eventually martyred. I love Paul's attitude through it all. We do not see him complaining, but instead counting it joy as an opportunity to suffer for the Lord.

Paul was a guy who was all about the Gospel and proclaiming the Gospel in his life. He would not stop proclaiming Christ in his life. He could not be stopped. If you came his way, he was preaching about Jesus. He was threatened to be thrown in jail for preaching

Jesus, but he did not care. He was thrown in prison for it. Yet, he used the opportunity in prison to continue to proclaim Jesus to the other prisoners and write letters to the churches. Once he got out, you would find him proclaiming Jesus. There was no stopping this man who was all about telling people about the Good News found in Jesus Christ. Paul even goes on to say in Philippians 1:21, ***"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."*** No matter what, Paul was going to live for Christ. If you wanted to kill him, he said that would be gain because he would then be in Heaven with his Creator and it would be known that he died for the Gospel to go forward. This man was all about the Gospel and there was no stopping him.

Philippians 1:12-13 says, ***"I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ."***

Again, we look at this passage and see Paul's attitude and perspective. He does not want others to be discouraged that he is imprisoned. He wants the Christians to see that his being imprisoned is serving the Gospel and allowing it to advance. The entire ***"Imperial Guard"*** now knows he is in prison because of Christ! God is using him to get the Gospel out! What an incredible attitude and perspective to have. I pray to have this same view in my life. I want it in all aspects even if my life comes to the point where this type of persecution would be a reality.

So, how do we have this perspective in our lives today? We all face hardships in our lives. We all have people that may look down on us for following Christ. Work may be harder by being a Christian. Just know that we are called to be the light of the world and to show Jesus in everything we do. Count it as an opportunity to suffer in any way for the sake of the Gospel and the cause of Christ!

CONFIDENCE

DEVOTION #3 - ZACH HONNEN

"And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear." Philippians 1:14

As we see throughout the Bible, we are called, as believers, to reach the lost with the Good News of Jesus Christ. However, for some of us, we have never shared the Gospel with anyone and honestly do not even know how. Others of us are scared to share the Gospel because of the anti-Christian culture we find ourselves in today. No matter which category you find yourself in, there is an answer in this passage, ***"having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment."***

We see that in the days of the early church the brothers and sisters had confidence in the midst of growing persecution. Where did their confidence lie? What did they put their confidence in? Was it a Gospel class? Was it a Reach conference? No. They put their confidence in God because of the example they saw in the Apostle Paul. Now, I want to clarify that a Reach conference and Gospel class can be great tools, but they are not where our confidence should be placed. That honor is for God alone.

The verse continues, ***"are much more bold to speak the word without fear."*** Now, we see what happens when our confidence is in God and not man. The brothers and sisters had become bold in sharing the Gospel because of their confidence in God and His Word. This is the missing key in our Gospel-sharing mission. For us to reach the community with that Gospel, we must first seek God's

Word on what the Gospel is, and who He is. These two exercises will increase our confidence in who God is and what His Good News is.

Confidence leads to boldness without fear. Once we are confident in God (***"If God is for us, who can be against us"***), and see the examples of those who came before us and suffered far more than us, then we can be bold in reaching the lost in our communities. Remember, our confidence is in God. To build that confidence, we must know who God is and how He has been faithful to all believers throughout the history of the world.

I want to leave you with one question. Do you know God and His Word well enough to be confident and bold in reaching the lost?

- If yes, then go reach the lost! Come alongside a brother or sister and teach them to do the same.

- If no, search God's Word, learn who He is, and see how faithful He was to all who believed. Then, in the confidence of who He is, go and reach the lost with the Good News of Jesus.

WHERE IS OUR FOCUS?

DEVOTION #4 - PATRICK BICKNELL

"Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice." Philippians 1:15-18

Every year during January and September, The River Church goes through our Reach, Gather, Grow series to discuss the mission and vision of the church. If you have been here for a while, then you have heard this multiple times. It is very easy to allow yourself to tune out of this recurring series since we go over it often. You might say things like, "I have heard this before. I do not need it." I want to encourage you not to take that approach. For this devotion, I want to discuss where our Reach first needs to start. It is our mindset, or to put it more plainly, what we are focused on.

I used to play a lot of sports, so I tend to use sports analogies. One of the hardest but most important things to any sport is the work that you put in before the big game, before everyone sees you. It is all the time spent in the gym or on the field practicing your craft and working your tail off. That is what leads to results in the game. This hard work can become very taxing if you do not have a clear goal and focus on what you are doing or trying to accomplish. I believe this is what Paul is revealing to us in Philippians 1:15-18. He is telling his readers about some people who are preaching Christ for the wrong motives, and even people who are preaching Christ with

the purpose of bringing pain and sorrow to Paul himself. What Paul says about these people is shocking. Many of us, including myself, would not only want these people to stop doing what they are doing, but we would want justice for how they are affecting us. Paul does not excuse what they are doing, but he reveals to the readers and to us what is more important, Christ is proclaimed.

Paul writes in verse 18, ***"What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice."*** This is the focus we need to have if we are going to reach our world effectively. To be able to say what Paul is saying here (that I will rejoice in any way that Christ is proclaimed even if it means I am inflicted by the people doing it), requires one thing. It requires us to take the focus off of ourselves. Too often, I am guilty of this. We think about our own needs and our own well-being first. We want what is best for us. We want to do what is easy and what will not cause us pain. However, we are told to do one thing, proclaim Christ. We need to take ourselves out of the center of our own world and put Christ there, as He should be. If our main focus in life, as individuals and as a church, is to see Christ proclaimed and glorified, we will see an explosion of new believers and greater effectiveness in reaching our world.

TO LIVE IS CHRIST

DEVOTION #5 - NATHAN ELLIOTT

"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Philippians 1:21

Another week goes by and another week is mostly forgotten. I often find myself falling into the same mundane routine and simply wasting time scrolling through YouTube. In those moments, I have to ask myself, "What have I done this week that had eternal impact or value? Who have I shared the Gospel with recently?"

For Paul, there was no life worth living outside of our Lord Jesus Christ. His focus was solely on what Christ had commanded him to do in his time here on Earth. Much of Paul's ministry was devoted to reaching others with the news of the Gospel. Paul says in Romans 9:3, ***"For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers."***

Paul was willing to lay down his own life for others to be led to Jesus. However, Paul knew that laying down his life could not lead others to salvation (only Christ's death on the cross was sufficient for salvation). This passage gives us insight into the depth of Paul's compassion and earnest love for the souls of all people. This heavenly perspective protected Paul from being in despair by the current circumstances of this world, and instead, anticipating the future with Jesus.

How much of your life are you willing to lay down for the sake of reaching your fellow brothers and sisters with the Good News of Jesus Christ? So much of our time spent will be nothing more than that - time spent. There is nothing any of us can do (outside of the

Gospel) that will have an eternal impact. God has allowed us only a certain amount of days on Earth. We will stand before God one day and give an account of our earthly life. When that inevitable day comes, how will you answer God? I encourage you to be bold with the Gospel today.

When talking to unbelievers, make an effort to remember what God has rescued you from and how He has transformed you. This humbling mindset will encourage you to reach others for Christ and look forward to a precious eternity with Him. Psalm 116:15 says, ***"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."*** While an earthly point of view says death is the ultimate end, God's divine view challenges us as Christians to remember the biblical truth, ***"to die is gain."***

HAMMER TIME

DEVOTION #6 - KARSEN THEEDE

"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel." Philippians 1:27

I love superheroes. As I read Scripture, I find myself, for better or for worse, comparing Bible stories or figures in the Bible to superheroes. As I was reading Philippians for our Reach, Gather, Grow series, one hero immediately popped into my head: Thor. He is the Norse god of thunder in the Marvel universe and is one of the founding members of the Avengers. He wields a powerful, magic hammer called Mjolnir, which allows him to fly and channel lighting while in battle. One of the things that made it powerful is the spell put on it. The spell makes it so the only people who can lift the hammer, are people whom the hammer deems worthy. If the hammer does not believe you are worthy, the hammer remains heavy and will not move an inch.

Thor has not always been able to wield his hammer. In the first *"Thor"* movie, Thor was living a life of foolishness, irresponsibility, and not taking the power he had seriously. Thor's father, Odin, noticed this and cursed Thor. Odin took away Thor's power and his worthiness causing him to not be able to wield his hammer. So throughout the rest of the movie, Thor had to prove that he was worthy so he could regain his power and be able to wield his hammer again.

Just like Thor, we are called to live a life worthy, as said in Philippians 1:27, ***"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of***

Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel." If we want to "wield" the Gospel of Christ as Thor wields his hammer, we must live a life that is set apart from this world. For us to be effective in the sharing of the Gospel, we must not have anything in our lives that hold us back. If we have things in our lives that are holding us back, as with Thor's hammer, the Gospel remains "heavy." Meaning, it is not easy for us to share with people, or we may not even be able to see the opportunities to share the Gospel in the first place. Do not be discouraged if you are finding that it is hard to wield the Gospel. Just remember, if Thor can become worthy again on his own, imagine how much easier it will be for you with the King of kings and Lord of lords in your corner.

LESSON TWO

GATHER

PASTOR PHILIP PIASECKI

From March 2013 to October 2019, the Grand Blanc location of The River Church met every Sunday morning at the Trillium Movie Theater. Each week, we would pick up a trailer full of equipment at around 6:30 am, get to the theater by 7:00 am, and start the setup process. By 9:30 am, the kids' theater, the nursery theater, and the adult theater were all set up and ready to go. Every week, different believers would sacrifice their time to make sure the Gathering of the church could even happen that day. There were many weeks where we had a blast serving in that way and many weeks where it was tough to get up and out the door to do it! I tell you that story to try and show you a small picture of what it takes to actually gather as a church. Each weekend, believers all around the world sacrifice their time to serve God's Church allowing others the opportunity to gather together.

1. In what way do you currently serve the Church?

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_____
_____

2. If you do not currently serve, is there any area you wish to get involved in?

_____
_____
_____

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

3. In the context of Gathering as a church, what would it look like to count others more significant than yourself?

_____
_____
_____

When I think back to that time in ministry and all the wonderful volunteers I have encountered at our Gatherings, I think of this verse in Philippians. I think of people who were willing to weekly count others more significant than themselves and sacrifice to serve those people. It is important that we understand that it takes the whole body of Christ, from the toes to the head, to accomplish His mission on this Earth. Those of us that serve to help accomplish the Gathering of the church each week, do it because we know how important it really is. We would implore those of you who are not serving in any way to come join us! There is always a need, and when we truly start to understand the importance of it, helping in some way to make it happen is the only natural response.

We run into some of our biggest spiritual hurdles when we start to believe that the Sunday morning Gathering is all about us. Some are regularly thinking, “How am I going to get something out of this?” Eventually, our attitudes will probably sour ourselves and others to the whole concept of the church. However, if weekly we approach gathering with the church as an opportunity to serve and count someone as more significant than ourselves, I promise that the Lord will use the Gathering of His people in extraordinary ways to encourage us.

4. How have you encouraged someone through a Gathering of the church?

_____
_____
_____

5. How have you been encouraged by someone recently through a Gathering?

_____
_____
_____

6. How can you better prepare your heart to be an encouragement to someone else at a Gathering?

_____

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I would challenge you to pray prior to the church Gathering that you attend each week. Pray on the car ride in that the Lord would make it evident how you could be an encouragement to someone that day. This may seem intimidating, but I promise there are numerous different ways that you can encourage someone else in this context. It may be something as simple as genuinely worshiping when singing during the Gathering. When the church sings together it can be an incredible encouragement to those around us who may be struggling that day. I know personally, as someone on the stage, it is such an encouragement to my soul when I see members of the congregation wholeheartedly engaging in singing. It could involve you noticing a person who is sitting alone and introducing yourself to them. It could just be you honestly asking someone how they are doing and being willing to listen to their response.

Philippians 2:1-2 says, ***"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."***

7. Why do you think Paul says, ***"complete my joy"***?

_____

_____

_____

8. What would it look like for us, as the body of Christ, to be of the same mind and have the same love?

_____

_____

_____

It is such an encouraging sight to see different people connecting on a Sunday morning over the main thing that they have in common, the Lord. I believe this is what Paul means by ***"complete my joy."*** He is saying, it makes me so happy when I see you all connect by being of the same mind and the same love. Now, this verse is not saying that we all have to be exactly the same. It is a dangerous thing when we start desiring everyone that is a part of the church to look the same, act the same, and be in the same socioeconomic group. The list is endless. The beautiful thing about the church is that we are all so different, yet we can all be united around the things of Christ. When we are of one mind, we can accomplish so much more for the Kingdom of God and we work towards this goal by gathering together to study God's Word and worship Him together. When we gather together, we are saying to the Lord that all of our hearts together are set on Him and within that, He encourages us to live for Him in our daily lives.

9. How have you seen the church become ineffective when we are not of the same mind and love?

_____

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Unfortunately, the Gathering of many churches is rendered ineffective because the body of believers is too busy fighting over having different priorities and different loves. They find themselves constantly looking inward at their own sinful priorities, instead of looking upward toward the Lord's priorities for His church. In the end, these churches tend to just take up space instead of stirring each other to good works.

10. How can we prevent the Gathering of our church from becoming something that is ineffective for the Kingdom of God?

_____

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_____

My eternal desire is that when we gather together as a church, there is a room filled with believers who are ready to sacrifice themselves for others and view others as more significant than themselves. Then we can move towards having our minds and hearts align on the things of God. When this happens, go beyond gathering together as a church into the world that so desperately needs to know the love of Jesus, and we will be ready to show it to them. Faithfully gathering together as a church allows us to become effective in the mission of the Gospel that Christ has faithfully entrusted to us. Gathering together is not a ritual to appease the Lord, it is a powerful, God-ordained, weekly opportunity to sacrifice for others, and be encouraged by the Spirit of the Lord.

NOTES

JOY IN JESUS

DEVOTION #1 - DEBBIE GABBARA

"Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose."
Philippians 2:1-2 (NLT)

For several years now, I have led a Growth Community for ladies on Friday mornings. As you can imagine, our group has grown very close over the years as we have studied, prayed, and shared in each other's lives. Some ladies have joined us for just a season, and some of us have been meeting together year after year.

Just as the pandemic began in early 2020, we were finishing up the study that we had been working on. We realized that during a time when the world was locked down and we were all separated in our homes, we needed to continue studying together and be there for each other more than ever. As I was praying and asking God what we should study next, the Lord brought the book of Philippians to my mind. We needed some joy in our lives. If you are looking for joy, the book of Philippians is a good place to find it!

We figured out how to call each other and be on one line altogether. So, on Friday mornings we would have eight to ten ladies on our call. You might be wondering why we did not do a Zoom meeting; they had quickly become so popular at that time. Well, as I mentioned, our group meets in the morning, and we agreed that we did not need to see each other in the morning. It was a pandemic after all, and

on the phone, we did not have to worry about being in our sweats or not doing our hair. So, for us ladies, a group phone call was perfect.

When all the world was separated and anxious, we found a way to gather together to seek the joy and comfort that only our Lord can bring. We laughed together, cried together, and celebrated the joy that we found when we fixed our eyes on Jesus. We talked about the blessings we were seeing and were there for each other through the hard days and tragedies that the pandemic brought.

The Apostle Paul certainly knew hard days. Scripture says that Philippians was written while Paul was in prison in Rome under house arrest. Acts 28:30-31 tells us that though he was guarded by a soldier, ***"He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."***

Just like the example we have from Paul, to study and share the Gospel during hard times, we found encouragement, strength, and sweet love for one another that only the love of Christ can bring. We went looking and God helped us find joy together!

Author Henrietta C. Mears wrote, "Christ must be your joy, your trust, and your aim in life."

BE HUMBLE

DEVOTION #2 - CAMERON ALDRICH

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

It has become clear that the majority of people in today's culture have taken on a specific mindset, focused entirely on the self. They ask, "What is best for me? What do I need? What or who will make me happy?" I am certain that people today are having these questions pop into their minds on a daily basis.

Let us face reality - people are selfish. That mindset is just human nature, right? While that might be true, I also believe that the story does not end there. So, how can we overcome our human selfishness?

Jesus is the perfect example of someone who is the exact opposite of selfish. Every word that He spoke and every action He made during His time on Earth came from love and selflessness.

Do you remember the way Jesus chose to come into the world? He did not choose to come with undeniable glory, unmatchable power, or forceful sovereignty. Instead, our King became an infant and placed Himself into an extremely low status compared to that of other earthly kings. By becoming an infant, He made Himself helpless and incapable of caring for Himself. Talk about setting the ultimate example of humbling oneself.

Now, as we think of how we can overcome our human selfishness, I believe we should also think about our church life and focus on another important question, "Why do we go to church?"

When we gather together as the church, we not only gather to meet with God, worship God, and hear His Word, but to also act as the church and all that the body of Christ represents and embodies.

A major role of the church is to help win people to Christ and to share and spread the Gospel of Jesus throughout the world. In doing so, this means that we must place high importance on reaching and loving others around us. Just as we reminded ourselves earlier, this is exactly what Jesus did.

So what is "gathering as the church" not about? When we gather together as the church, we cannot only focus on ourselves and our needs and situations. If we go to church for the sole purpose of focusing on ourselves, then how are we acting as and embodying the church when we gather? How are we fulfilling what Jesus commanded the church to do?

To put it simply, the church is not only made up of a single individual. So, why would we gather to only focus on ourselves? Just as Jesus unfailingly did through His earthly ministry, we must focus on and put others before ourselves. This is especially the case when we gather.

During our church gatherings, we have the opportunity to encourage, build up, love, and stand in faith with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Doing this is undeniably important, and Jesus emphasizes this in John 13:34-35 where He states, ***"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."***

If we do not love others and put others before ourselves, then we are not putting on the mindset of Christ. As a result, we cannot possibly hope to display the image of Christ to the world around us. If we only think about ourselves and our needs when we gather as the church, then we cannot possibly be gathering for the right reasons.

I cannot provide the entire answer to how we can overcome our human selfishness, but I am confident that a great place for us to start is to evaluate the reasons we have been going to church and to focus on the importance of gathering as the church for the right reasons which Jesus intended.

WORK OUT YOUR OWN SALVATION

DEVOTION #3 - PASTOR FERDINAND SANDERS

"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Philippians 2:12-13

Being the parents of a 6 and 2-year-old repeatedly continues to prove to be one of the most frustratingly challenging and yet somehow beautifully rewarding things my wife and I have ever lived through. If you are currently walking through anything remotely similar to what we are walking through, we send our sympathy. If you are not currently in this season of life, pray for us (and maybe send coffee). Although parenting can often feel like an endless amount of repeating yourself over and over and over, one of my favorite things about being a parent are those moments where I get to see when the "lightbulb" flips on and they "get it" for themselves. More than the victory of no longer needing to repeat yourself, there is this proud parent feeling where you get to see the thing that you have been trying to teach or impress on your child becoming a part of who they are.

In Paul's letter to the Philippian church, Paul writes, ***"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure"*** (Philippians 2:12-13). Paul, whilst enduring a great deal of persecution and currently imprisoned, offers a pretty radical message on the hope

we have through Christ. If anyone had the right to complain, give up, or let life's circumstances get them down, it was Paul. However, Paul urged the Christians in Philippi to press on and to ***"work out your own salvation."***

For those of us who have been saved, we know two things: there is work yet to be done, and we will face prosecution. Paul is not saying that salvation is a result of our works; however, it can be argued here that "works" are a result of our salvation! Paul encourages us to ***"work out your own salvation,"*** and to press on in the face of persecution through fear and trembling because of the hope that we have in Jesus.

In regard to raising my kids, I have often said that I have two main priorities:

- That they come to know Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior.
- That they are good, kind humans.

It may seem simple, but I feel like if they have those two things locked in their heart, I do not think I would be too worried about many other things. Paul wrote a similar message to the Philippians in these verses, but in essence, his words are still relevant and applicable to us today. It is my prayer that today, and every day, we are able to ***"work out our salvation"*** in accordance with God's will and for His glory!

ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

DEVOTION #4 - KENDALL HINE

"Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain." Philippians 2:14-16

Okay, I will admit it, I was feisty as a little kid. Some may argue that not much has changed, but that is beside the point. When I was upset as a little kid, I would make sure everyone knew it. I would mope around, sulk, complain, and have very charismatic facial expressions. Every time I would give my very theatrical performance, I was humbled very quickly by my parents. They would sit me down and always say the same phrase, "Kendall, you need an attitude adjustment."

Do you know someone that still needs to be told that they need an attitude adjustment? Is it that coworker that always has a new complaint and can never seem to muster up a positive attitude? Now, let me make it more personal. Are you that person at work? Christians, more often than not, need an attitude adjustment. God gives us just that in Philippians 2:14-16, ***"Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain."***

I do not know about you, but that verse is extremely convicting. I find myself so often seeing God's blessings in my life as an opportunity to complain. This is the homework that comes along with the education I am so fortunate to receive. I often grumble about it. Is it because of those difficult tasks at the wonderful job I have? Yes, I find myself complaining about those too. If you can see my point here, we are blessed with so much from a loving and caring Father, yet we have an attitude of thanklessness rather than gratitude. How much more productive for the Kingdom of God would we be if we changed our mindset and held our tongues?

Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:1, ***"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called."*** In your workplace, walk worthy. In your school, walk worthy. As Christians, our conduct should look drastically different from those around us. We are called to be the salt and the light of the Earth (Matthew 5:13-14). In order to do that we have to look, talk, and act contrary to our flesh. Today church, let us speak with gratitude and life rather than complaints.

FAMILY BUSINESS

DEVOTION #5 - JOSH THAYER

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

My father was a hairstylist, owned a successful salon, and I did not follow in his footsteps. I have an abundance of confidence so I could look you in the eyes and tell you, "Yes, I can give you an amazing haircut," but when I turn you around to look in the mirror you will realize this was a huge mistake and probably ask me to glue your hair back on. It was very common when this passage was written for fathers to vocationally train their sons and for their sons to stay loyal to the family business and eventually take over. Here in Philippians, Paul is writing to Christians at Philippi from jail, and Timothy is with him. Timothy was not in jail, he was serving with Paul in his ministry. Timothy and Paul were not related but Timothy was showing this same father-son loyalty in his spiritual apprenticeship with Paul.

Paul states later in this Scripture that Timothy has proven his worth, and has served with him in the sharing of the Gospel. Then he makes reference to the father-son cultural relationship norm of the time. Here, Paul is saying that Timothy was serving with him in his ministry. This can be comparable to our ministry here at The River Church, or any church for that matter. Serving is a vital role in the

gathering of the church today, just as it was back then. Could Paul have done it alone? Yes, probably for a while, but would he have been able to reach more people with Timothy's help? Was he able to make sure future generations would be in good hands after his ministry was done? I would go out on a limb and say, "Yes!"

The same is true for what we do today in the modern church. We are all called to our communities to be a light where there is no light. We are to bring truth where there are lies. We are to bring grace and love where there is hurt and pain. It is our privilege and responsibility to tell people about Jesus and what He did for them. It will change their lives for eternity. This is why we are always trying to make serving opportunities available to everyone. We see it done in Scripture and we know that with everyone's help we can reach more people with the Gospel and then the Gospel will continue to go out long after we are all gone. Just like Timothy served with Paul, who are you serving with, but also who are you teaching to serve with you?

THE FRESH CONNECTION

DEVOTION #6 - DAVID HUDGENS

"I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me." Philippians 2:25-30

Recently, I had the privilege of serving in the wedding of a young man whom I knew from a former church family that I was a part of years ago. Several months before the wedding, I was contacted by the soon-to-be happy couple with a request to lead a time of praise and worship during the ceremony. I was truly honored by their inquiry, but also a little bit surprised due to now being several years removed from the regular fellowship from these believers and that season of life. Nonetheless, the couple expressed their desire for me to accept their invitation to which I was happy to oblige.

As the summer months passed, giving way to their September nuptials, I began to reconnect with the people of God I had grown to love and walk with from my past. Throughout the day of the wedding, I was reminded anew of how uniquely wonderful it is to be a part of the body of Christ. It was so encouraging to enjoy a fresh connection

with individuals that I had walked with in times of struggle, enduring some of life's most difficult moments to eventually witness God's awesome power to overcome and sustain. The day proved Proverbs 17:17 true, ***"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."***

Likewise, so it is also with Paul as he expresses similarly his love and gratitude for the relationships he has among the church in Philippi. Even though the beginning of this church was born in difficulty (Paul's preaching was opposed and Paul was imprisoned), a group of believers was able to be established before Paul was asked to leave the region (Acts 16:35-40). Moreover, an enduring bond was formed between both parties in Christ. Despite, most likely, only ever once visiting the church (Acts 20:1-6; 1 Timothy 1:3), Paul and the people of Philippi shared a deep and meaningful connection in the Spirit of God.

This truth remains even now, thousands of years later. For anyone who is a part of the body knows personally that it is Jesus that bonds us together with Him and the Father through the fellowship of the Spirit. Furthermore, this bond transcends geography, education, social position, economics, and race. This bond endures time, trouble, and even offense. How truly wonderful it is to walk in Christ and with others who love and serve Him!

LESSON THREE

GROW

PASTOR ROY TOWNSEND

1. Do you remember when you first met someone that you really wanted to know? Please share the story.

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_____
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There is a lot of advice out there about what is the best way to grow a relationship with someone. A quick Google search revealed that this must be a major concern for people. There are websites that answer this search related to health, church, psychology, marriage, parenting, self-help, and improvement. At the very least, we can say that there is a lot of advice out there as to the best ways to grow a relationship.

2. What have you done to grow a personal relationship?

_____
_____
_____

3. What has gotten in the way of growing a personal relationship?

_____
_____
_____

4. Do any of the things that you listed have an application to your growth spiritually in a relationship with God?

_____
_____
_____

The Apostle Paul speaks of his desire to know Christ more fully in Philippians 3:3-9, ***"For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh - though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the***

people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

The Apostle Paul is making it pretty clear here that we do not get to start our relationship with God based on our own righteousness, but we can start our relationship out with what Jesus has done for us. Our righteousness will not save us, but we can put our trust in Christ to save us. Our acceptance is based upon what Christ has done for mankind and nothing more.

5. Compile together the things that the world believes will grow you spiritually.

_____
_____
_____

6. What are the things that the church groups believe will grow a person spiritually?

_____
_____
_____

7. We often list things like reading my Bible, praying, attending church, and getting into a Growth Community, but do you know people who have tried these things and did not grow spiritually? Why?

_____
_____
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Philippians 3:10-11 continues, ***"That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."***

We can see here that Paul had a deep desire to know Christ. This is very similar to the desire that we should exhibit in concern of our spiritual growth. However, for many, they come into this spiritual growth relationship holding on to their own righteousness. It is just like Paul who had mentioned that he had a really good education, came from the right family, and was from God's chosen people, ***"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him."*** We too often see people holding onto their self-worth and good works as a way to spiritual growth.

Moreover, some demonstrate a spiritual pride that also gets in the way of spiritual growth. Philippians 3:12-14 reads, ***"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."***

8. Why do you think that Paul was explaining that he had not already "arrived" spiritually?

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9. What are the downfalls of spiritual pride?

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We have to be careful that our relationship with Christ is not based upon just "becoming a Christian." It is just like our earthly relationships that do not stop with becoming a friend, parent, or spouse. There is more to the relationship than the initial act of becoming a Christian. When we lead someone to Christ, we must make sure that they understand that we need to have a healthy relationship or grow our relationship. This is because many fall into a spiritual pride that says, "I have made it; I am saved!" Paul was saying that he had not made it yet because there were many people in his time (and ours) who believed that they had reached spiritual perfection on this side of Heaven, or they had stopped growing their relationship at the beginning stage and were proud of it.

It seems pretty clear that we often grow in the areas that we focus on. If I want to grow a relationship with my spouse, children, neighbor, or friend, I have to focus on that relationship. Paul takes it a step further by making an analogy to a physical race in Philippians 3:13-14, ***"Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."***

10. Do you have the desire to know Him more?

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11. What is getting in the way of your focus on growing a relationship with Christ?

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NOTES

WATCH OUT FOR THE WOLVES

DEVOTION #1 - PASTOR JUSTIN DEAN

"Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh." Philippians 3:1-2

Being a huge nerd, one of my favorite things to do is read about what life was like in medieval times. One thing that is always so foreign to me is the constant threat of wolves. I have only ever seen a wolf once in my life, and it was in an enclosure at the zoo. Having to be on the lookout for this dangerous animal is something I have never once experienced. To think this was a constant reality for people hundreds of years ago boggles my mind. Traveling, hunting, and even just daily life on their farm presented a potential danger.

Paul writes Philippians 3:1-2 with the understanding that for the people of this church, being on the lookout for animals hoping to harm is a regular experience. Though he uses the analogy of dogs, he really means evil people seeking to lie, distract, and dissuade you from growing in your spiritual walk with God.

As we grow in our relationship with God, our enemy's chief concern is stopping that growth by any means necessary. Our enemies are Satan, his minions, our flesh, false teachers, and ungodly people who wish to see us abandon our faith. If we are not on the lookout, we can easily become their prey. In those medieval days, the best way to be prepared for wolves was to be armed and ready for the beasts when they came. Paul, in the book of Ephesians, lays a similar strategy before us as we grow.

Ephesians 6:10-18 (NIV) says, ***"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."***

We must prepare ourselves to ensure that we are armed and ready with each of these facets of the armor of God. We need to remind ourselves of the importance of each piece and surround ourselves with others who will stand beside us when we need to resist our enemy.

As you wrap up this devotion, I ask that you pray and ask God to equip you with these pieces of His armor so that you may be ready and alert when the enemies come looking to stop your growth. Ask that He set your feet firmly and not let you become distracted or slip into complacency, but keep you fervent in your spiritual growth and your desire to see others do the same.

TRASH

DEVOTION #2 - JEANNIE YATES

Can you think of something that you worked really, really hard for? Some of you studied diligently to earn that diploma with high honors while others spent countless hours rebuilding a car engine. Think about how you would feel taking your highest achievement and burning it like it is trash. Now, let us take that idea another step further and take your entire lifestyle, the way you grew up, the way you learned how the world works, everything you built your life upon, and burn that like it is trash. This is the example Paul uses in Philippians 3:7-8, ***"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ."***

Paul was the poster boy for the "perfect Jew." He was a natural-born citizen, from the tribe of Benjamin (the favored one), and followed the Law to the highest standard as a Pharisee. This is the ***"gain"*** that Paul is mentioning here. Before he encountered Jesus, he believed that the responsibility of being in the right standing with God rested solely on his shoulders. He put in the hard work and took that responsibility very seriously. In fact, he was so extremely passionate about following the Law that he made himself the judge, jury, and executioner of the early Christ followers.

However, Paul says that he found something that far surpasses the highest earthly achievement. Everything Paul had succeeded at, from culture's perspective, was not just insignificant, but it was utterly worthless trash compared to knowing His Savior, Jesus. I

like the way that *"The Message"* paraphrases this passage, ***"The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash - along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant - dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him."***

Now, I am not saying to go take your accomplishments and throw them in the trash, but maybe it is time we all take a spiritual inventory. What things in our lives do we place at a much higher, or even equal, value to knowing Christ? Are we continuing to set aside our "self" to let Christ reign as our Lord? Paul reminds us that we no longer live, but it is Christ who lives in us. Galatians 2:20 says, ***"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."***

Is our desire to have our ***"gain"*** be knowing Christ alone? If we truly want to ***"grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,"*** (2 Peter 3:18) then we need to look at what we value in our day-to-day lives. Are we going to value worldly achievements or will we seek only Christ? Will it be money or Christ? Will it be our families or Christ? Will it be our comfort or Christ?

Ephesians 4:21-24 (NLT) adds, ***"Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God - truly righteous and holy."***

SAUL OR PAUL?

DEVOTION #3 - SIERRA COMBS

"And be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith - that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." Philippians 3:9-10

Whenever anyone asks me who my favorite person in the Bible is, I always have three answers. It is impossible to pick one, so I categorize. The first is Jesus, obviously. The second is Joseph (my Old Testament pick) and the third is from the New Testament. I am a huge fan of the Apostle Paul. Not only is Paul's testimony one of the most incredible and powerful testimonies in the history of the world, but he is both an amazing example to learn from and emulate, and also one to who I can relate in several areas. Like me (and like you if you have been born again) before Christ saved him, Paul was a completely different person. Regardless of what your life used to look like, we can rejoice that God has given us a new heart and will continue to sanctify and grow us until He brings us home.

One of the things I love about Paul is that he not only speaks with boldness and authority, but he uses his past to really drive the message home. In the book of Philippians, which Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, he gives a brief biography of his life prior to following Christ. In chapter 3:4-6, he says, ***"If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as***

to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." Before Paul (or Saul, as was his name prior to his conversion) was saved, he was one of the Jewish religious elite. He came from the right lineage, was a genius, and knew absolutely everything one could know about the Hebrew Scriptures. He was well-known, admired, and highly respected by the Jews. He knew everything about the Law and lived it out as perfectly as he could. When he sinned, he would have known the exact sacrifice that was required to atone for it. If anyone could boast in his own righteousness according to what the Jewish Law deemed righteous, very few could compete with Saul. In the worldly sense, he had everything, and yet after the Lord saved him, he realized that it was all rubbish. Nothing he could ever have would be worth more than knowing Christ. What about the ***"righteousness"*** he once boasted in? He knew it was useless garbage.

Like Saul, I have always been a rule follower. While I grew up in a wonderful Christian home and was correctly taught that salvation was given by God's grace alone (with nothing I could do to earn it), I did not live as I believed it. As a kid, teen, and young adult, I often viewed people as a Pharisee would, judging them on how well they lived up to my own moralistic standards. In my eyes, I did all the right things. I went to church several times a week, did not swear or cheat, and wore the right clothing. The list could go on. It did not matter if a person was a Christian or not, if they did not live life by my perfect moral code I would turn up my nose at them. Praise God that He saved me and opened my eyes to the truth of the matter. Whatever ***"righteousness"*** I think I have will never be enough to make me right with God. No amount of effort, discipline, or rule-following can earn my salvation. It comes from Christ alone. Paul continues in verses 8-11 saying, ***"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on***

faith - that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

Thinking back to this time in my life makes me feel embarrassed and ashamed of how I treated others and disgusted with the way I viewed myself. Like me, Saul built his life on his own self-righteousness and moral superiority. However, moralism cannot save. We cannot earn a relationship with God. Salvation comes by His grace through faith alone. It is only through the righteousness of Christ that we can know God. I love reading about the life of Paul because it encourages me that God can do incredible work through anyone. He can take an arrogant, prideful, self-righteous Pharisee and change their heart. He did it with Paul and He did it with me. Whenever I am tempted to fall back into that self-righteous trap, He lovingly brings me right back to the truth.

THERE IS NO IN-BETWEEN

DEVOTION #4 - JOE WILSON

"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." Philippians 3:12

Lou Holtz is a former NCAA Football Coach and ESPN Analyst. One of his most notable accomplishments was in 1988 when he coached the Notre Dame Fighting Irish to a 12-0 record with a 34-21 win over the West Virginia Mountaineers in the Fiesta Bowl. More importantly, it was during a 2015 Commencement Speech at the Franciscan University of Steubenville that Coach Holtz made a statement that would (or should) affect the lives of all those who attended. Thanks to platforms like YouTube, we all can benefit from one man's simple six-word quote, "You're either growing or you're dying."

This is also true spiritually. There is no in-between You are either growing or you are dying. We should never stop trying to achieve growth in our spiritual life.

According to the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Paul's salvation experience had taken place about 30 years before he wrote to the Philippians. He had won many spiritual battles at that time. He had grown much in those years, but he candidly confessed he had not obtained all this, nor was he yet made perfect. He still had more spiritual heights to climb. This testimony of the apostle reminded the saints at Philippi - and it serves to remind believers today - that there must never be a stalemate in their spiritual growth or a plateau beyond which they cannot climb.

I must admit, if I were to look in the mirror and if even for a millisecond thought I had achieved the level of Paul, I would probably be satisfied and by fault of my flesh thought I had arrived. My brothers and sisters, this could not be further from the truth and a lie from the great deceiver. There is only one time when we can say, "I have arrived." If you are reading this, you can rest assured you have not.

So in love, I ask you today, "Are you growing or are you dying?" Remember, there is no in-between. We must continue to seek growth.

James 1:5 adds, ***"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."***

THE GOAL

DEVOTION #5 - GARY WRIGHT

"Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Philippians 3:13-14

I worked as an equipment operator for the Genesee County Road Commission for 25 years. I am so thankful that I had such a good job. To be honest, there were times when the job was a real struggle. There was a lot of politics that we had to deal with, and working with the public was very difficult as well. I considered switching jobs more than once; however, the benefits of working there were many. I made a good living for my family and had great health insurance for us all. My main goal, and the one thing that really kept me going, was that I knew if I stayed focused and put my time in, eventually, I would be able to retire with a very good pension.

Paul shares in Philippians chapter 3 that he had a goal as well. His goal was far more important than a good pension. Paul's goal was to be like Christ, and he knew that he had not yet achieved Christ-likeness nor would he ever achieve it in this life. Philippians 3:13 says, ***"Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own."*** This did not stop him from taking every opportunity to grow in his faith. Philippians 3:13 continues, ***"But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead."***

Paul did not let his past failures or achievements distract him from his goal. He was intently focused on Jesus.

Paul goes on in Philippians 3:14 and shares were his motivation to grow comes from, ***"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*** Paul knew that in the future he would reach his goal. He would be in Heaven with Christ and be like Christ. This motivated Paul to continue to be all that Christ had called him to be and do.

There are three applications that Paul is teaching us.

1. Paul is encouraging us to continue growing and not feel like we have arrived. The growing process is a marathon, not a sprint. It is a lifelong journey. What does the growth process look like in your life? Does something need to change?

2. Paul was focused on what lies ahead instead of getting bogged down by the past. It is so easy to let our past keep us from growing. Are you focused on what lies ahead or are you letting your past keep you from growing?

3. Paul was motivated by his goal of being in Heaven and being like Christ in the future. What motivates you? What is the goal in your life?

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-25, we read, ***"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."***

FRESH TRACKS

DEVOTION #6 - JOHN STONE

"Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." Philippians 3:17

Many years ago, my wife and I were hiking up our favorite trail in the mountains of Colorado. It was a typical late fall day with clear sunny skies and a few inches of fresh snow on the ground. We were the first ones up the trail that morning and had the privilege of making fresh tracks. We had hiked this particular trail many times and knew the route despite not being able to see the ground. At one point, we came to a creek in a meadow and took a minute to scout the safest place to cross. As we were tracing the edge of the water a pair of hikers came up from behind and the man asked a question I will never forget, "Did you see where those tracks went?" Momentarily confused, then humorously realizing what he meant, I gestured to the snow behind me, "Those are my tracks you have been following."

We are all leaders. Whether we recognize it or not, people are watching and following our example: children, other believers, coworkers, family members, and social media followers. You may say, "But, I do not feel like a leader. I am not qualified. I do not know enough. Maybe someday I will be ready, but not yet." Whether you are ready or not, it is already happening. As Christians, we are called to imitate Christ; growing in our resemblance to Him day by day. We are guided along by believers who have been on the trail before us (1 Corinthians 11:1), or we are misled by wanderers (Matthew 24:4).

Also, there are those who are on the trail behind us. Are you preparing to lead them? Do you know where you are going or are you walking blindly? Are you leading people into the ditch or to the Savior? Our calling as Christians is high, but He has provided all we need in order to be equipped for life and leadership (2 Timothy 3:17). We have the Word (Psalm 119:34-35), the Spirit (John 16:13), access to the Father through prayer for wisdom and strength (Hebrews 4:16; James 1:5), and guides to help us (Ephesians 4:11).

We need to be mindful of these things. Where are we headed? Who are we following and are they leading us in the right direction? How do we exemplify Christ as we lead others? The answers to all our questions can be found in the Word of God. Read it every day. Study it like your life depends on it. It is the trail map that leads us to Christ.

LESSON FOUR

GIVE

PASTOR JOSH YATES

Generosity: the quality of being kind and generous; the quality or fact of being plentiful or large. Comes from the Latin “generositas” meaning magnanimous.

1. When you come to the word generous, what thoughts come to mind? (Be honest here: guilt, thanksgiving, pain, desire.)

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2. How would you define what it means to be generous?

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Any time we begin to talk about giving, there is a wide gamut of emotions that can raise up in us. We can feel guilty because we have not been generous. We can wish that we were more generous, but we just do not have the ability to be generous. We can be thankful for how generous others have been to us or be upset at the lack of generosity we have seen. Then, of course, when we talk about generosity or giving in the church, that is a whole different feeling altogether!

3. The topic of generosity or giving typically raises some deep feelings in us, why is that?

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We are called to be generous people because of how generous God has been to us. We only have to look to the cross to see His generosity and if He did nothing else for us, that would be enough! However, God does not stop there. He is overwhelmingly generous to us in so many different ways: in our relationships, careers, health, and yes, in our finances too.

Paul talks about the generosity of the people from Philippi. The Philippians were not wealthy people, but they were generous. Read about what Paul has to say to them in Philippians 4:14-20, ***"Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen."***

4. How many other churches helped Paul and supported him in partnership?

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The Philippians' partnership with Paul was not only financial. They were consistently concerned about Paul and his ministry. He began this book by talking about the partnership that he had with this church and these people. Philippians 1:3-5 says, ***"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."***

What a statement. The Philippians had partnered with Paul in the Gospel. They had supported him even in the hard times. He had commended them for how they stuck with him at the beginning of our passage. In doing so, they had become a partner in his present trouble.

5. How can generosity show a partnership with others? How does it go deeper when you share in others' trouble or trials?

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6. How can we participate in the Gospel if we are generous to those that preach and teach God's Word?

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As you consider the above questions, keep in mind what Jesus said to Zacchaeus in Luke 19:8-9, ***"And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.' And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.'"*** Matthew 6:21 adds, ***"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."***

7. With the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:21 in mind and based on your generosity, where does your treasure lie?

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Paul continues in Philippians 4:17-18 and speaks toward the quality of their gifts as well as how God responds to those gifts. God had multiplied their giving in Paul's ministry and God would continue to multiply those gifts! The Philippians had not given for their own benefit, but there would be benefits to them!

There was a study done by *"The Motley Fool"* (a financial website) about how being generous affects your life. They came up with eight findings:

- Greater satisfaction in life
- More friends
- Stronger relationships with the people you know
- Happier with career
- A more positive outlook
- Better physical and mental health
- Satisfaction with what you have
- Higher self-esteem

8. How have you seen generosity change your life?

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These sound pretty good, huh? However, this is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. God sees our giving as it raises up to Him like the offerings of the Old Testament, it is ***"a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."***

When we are generous, we are investing in something. Better yet, we are investing in some One. Best of all, when we give according to God's directive, we are investing in another Kingdom. The time, talent, and treasure that we invest in God's Kingdom is the only currency that we will truly see again, and when it returns, it returns with compounded spiritual interest.

9. How have you been blessed by being generous with your time, talents, or treasure?

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We must hear Paul's encouragement as we give. Paul knew how generous the Philippians had been. They gave up to and even beyond their means to support his ministry. No matter what, God would supply the needs of the Philippians. They would not be forsaken. In fact, He would supply their needs according to His

riches in glory. This is based on His supply, not theirs. It is also not based on our supply.

As we supply the needs of others, God meets our needs too. The crazy reality of this is that in your generosity, God is fulfilling the same promise made to you in the life of another person. You become the answer to someone's prayer!

However, there is another reality. For those that are begrudging and not generous, there is no such promise. This promise is for the generous follower of Jesus.

When we give, we remember what we have been given. It shows Who we really trust when we give.

I have always been struck by how generous people are when they are poor. I have seen many YouTube videos where people go into homeless areas of cities and give away money to help. The video follows the recipient and so many times they go and share that money with others around them that need help. You would think that those that need it would hoard it. While I am sure that happens, so often the gift is given away again.

Is that not really what we do when we give? We have been given so much, so we give. In Matthew 10:8 (NIV), Jesus says, ***"Freely you have received; freely give."***

10. How can you give freely today?

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NOTES

SEEK AN OPPORTUNITY

DEVOTION #1 - STEPHEN BILLINGS

"I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity." Philippians 4:10

Recently, I reached out to a missionary friend of mine to see if he would be willing to virtually join Awana at The River Goodrich. My request was for my friend to share details about his missionary work during Awana. Frankly, when you have a friend whose job is to fly helicopters for God's glory, kids tend to think you are pretty cool!

After a fun-filled evening, I called my friend to thank him for faithfully pursuing God's plan for his life. As our conversation continued, I discovered that my friend was not yet fully funded for his upcoming ministry season. As I thought of how I could help, I realized that I knew a few local churches and lead pastors who I thought may be interested in supporting my friend. I knew that each church I mentioned had the heart to support missionaries, but was not sure if the churches could afford to add support for another missionary. My friend had a need, but was it the right time and opportunity for these churches to begin to support my friend's ministry?

In the book of Philippians, Paul is writing to a church located in Philippi. In Philippians 4:10-13, Paul is recounting how God has matured him to be ***"content"*** (4:11) in all circumstances of life. Verse 10 in particular highlights that the church in Philippi wanted to help meet Paul's needs, but for a long time was not able to provide support for Paul. To be exact, Paul says the church of Philippi did not have the ***"opportunity"*** to give.

Just as many of the churches my missionary friend was about to approach may not have the opportunity to support him, the same was true in the relationship between the church of Philippi and Paul. However, it is important to understand that Paul said the church of Philippi was ***"indeed concerned"*** for his well-being. So the church of Philippi did give when it was the right opportunity.

The question then arises, "What do we do when there is an opportunity to give?" Do we have hearts where we want to give as God has blessed us? Or is our heart hard to the needs of the church and others? We are not called to give to every single need that presents itself to us, but we are called to give when the opportunity arises.

Personally, I find my heart at times becomes cold when asked to give because there are so many opportunities to give to others. This is so wrong. God wants our hearts to be of a giver regardless of what we can give. If our hearts are soft and willing to give, then when the right opportunity arises we will be able and willing to give to others.

Spend some time today with God. Evaluate your heart before God. Is your heart soft and ready to give unto others?

CONTENTEDNESS

DEVOTION #2 - MITCHELL HOLMES

In America, there is a dream that anyone can work hard enough to earn their way to anything because of the equal opportunity available to everyone. Our country holds this belief in high regard, and it is one of the things that makes our nation so fascinating. There is always a new house to save for, a faster car to buy, a new degree to earn, or a new promotion to chase. Unfortunately, that same ideal has caused a feeling of restlessness. It is not bad to have goals; however, I think it is very easy for us to let these goals and aspirations be consuming and take priority over things with eternal value rather than fleeting worldly treasures.

In Philippians 4:11-13, it says, ***"Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."*** One of the hardest lessons that anyone can learn, and one that I battle daily, is the battle of contentedness. Learning how to be content and pleased with where one is at, whether that be a season of plenty or a season of need, is an important step in developing one's faith. A dangerous trap of the enemy is the feeling of self-sufficiency that we often feel when in seasons of plenty. When it feels like we have things under control and when we feel as if we have no need of a Savior, it is easy for us to become complacent in our need to be filled with Scripture and in our need to be in constant relationship with Almighty God.

In Mark 12:43-44, Jesus notices many rich people offer large sums of money followed by a poor widow that offers all that she owned, ***"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.'"*** Jesus is saying that a generous heart, a heart of contentedness in Christ alone, is far more valuable than the offering done out of abundance just to fulfill an obligation.

As we discuss this series on giving, my challenge to you is to take an evaluation. When we look at our goals and when we evaluate our finances and the things that we want and desire, a decision has to be made. Are we willing to trust the Lord with our desires? Are we willing to give with a contented heart and trust God to handle the rest? In Matthew 6:33, Jesus says ***"But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."*** I want to reiterate that it is not bad to have goals and desires, but how often do we allow the discontent in our hearts, our goals, aspirations, and desires to cloud our minds and take priority over the Kingdom of God? I battle with this, and I do not have it figured out. I write this to ask you some of the questions that I try to ask myself.

Meditate on these passages of Scripture then ask yourself these questions: Where is my priority? When I give, is it out of a generous and content heart? Am I content with nothing more than Jesus? Oftentimes, many of us feel like we need something more from this world in order to be content, as if the love of Jesus is not sufficient in itself. If Jesus is all we have, He is more than enough.

ACTIVE GIVING

DEVOTION #3 - JAMES MANN

"Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again." Philippians 4:14-16

The mission field is not one that I have had a lot of experience with, yet it is a beautiful ministry that the Lord empowered people to chase after. When I read through this passage in Philippians, I am seeing this idea of a group of people supporting someone who is trying to further the ministry of God. This is something that many people do not think about when it comes to their giving. A person in the mission field typically is making just enough money to survive, which is often through the support of congregants. As many might know, The River Church supports many missionaries throughout the globe. This is an amazing thing; but many of us, myself included, think, "That is awesome," and move on about our day. We do not have any kind of intentionality in that area of giving. Any kind of giving should be surrounded by prayer and the inner conviction we feel from the Lord. If we are just passively giving money to some arbitrary mission, we are not having this time with the Lord. This is a valuable time that we should not be overlooking. Whenever we are giving to the church, we should be looking to see where it is going so that we can properly pray for that ministry and organization that the church is supporting. Through this time, you may even be convicted a step further to support that ministry in another way.

Understand, I am challenging myself in this too. I have had my giving auto-transferred from my bank account to the church for years. I do not even think about it until I see the bank transfer. Through doing this, I am not actively giving and instead, I am practicing something the Lord did not command, which is passive giving. Giving without having your heart invested is like cheating on a homework assignment. The task that is necessary is getting completed but you are not really learning anything or following the intended rules.

This week, take some time to look at the missionaries that your church supports and pray for them. Maybe reach out to some of them and ask in what areas they are specifically needing prayer.

GOD'S MATH

DEVOTION #4 - PASTOR KEATON WASHBURN

"Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit." Philippians 4:17

Thanksgiving is one of my favorite holidays. I love the stuffing, the time with family, and the football. Amid all the usual traditions, growing up, my church also had a thanksgiving tradition that I loved. Every year, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, we would have a thanksgiving service where, as a church, we did exactly that - gave thanks. In place of a sermon, the microphone would be passed around and many people would share testimonies and stories of what they are thankful for. One year, there was a woman named Tina, who I knew well, and who chose to share. What she shared that day, over 15 years ago, has stuck with me to this day.

Philippians 4:17 says, ***"Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit."*** Paul, referring to the Philippians' financial support of his ministry, is commending them for what they gave and encouraging them to continue giving. In this verse, he is doing his best to explain why he is once again talking about giving. As he will say in verse 18, he is well-supplied and supported. So, what is his reason for asking them to continue sacrificing and giving to the ministry of the Gospel? It is because of what they gain from it! It is, ***"The fruit that increases to your credit."*** Like a financial investment with a financial advisor, the word here translated as ***"credit"*** could also be translated as "account." Paul's point is that giving to God's work is like a loan to God that He will pay back with interest.

The lady at my church growing up, Tina, saw this firsthand. What she shared at that thanksgiving service was that earlier that year she began tithing for the first time ever. Though she did not have a lot financially, she made sacrifices and chose to tithe consistently and take opportunities to bless others. Over the course of that year, she saw God begin to bless her. She told us that day that though her income had not increased, she was in a much better place financially than she had ever been. It did not make sense. When more goes out, there should be less in her bank account than ever before. However, God had other plans. I remember being so dumbfounded at that moment. It did not add up. How did she have more now than ever before? She understood the principle that Paul is making in Philippians 4:17. A gift to God is a loan that will be paid back in increase. It is like the old adage, “You can’t take it with you, but you can send it ahead.”

A SWEET AROMA

DEVOTION #5 - CATHY STORY

"I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."
Philippians 4:18

We observe the world through our senses. Most of our senses allow us some form of "escape" when encountering something unpleasant. If we see something that is scary, we can close our eyes to avoid it. If you touch something and it is hot, you can pull away. If you are cold you can put on something warmer. If you hear something loud or bothersome, you can cover your ears or turn the sound down. When something tastes bad, you can spit it out. What can be done when something smells offensive? We really do not have the option to just stop breathing to avoid the smell!

We cook a lot in our home, and many things fill the house with wonderful smells. One thing that has on occasion plagued our home with a terrible smell, and I am going to guess at some point may have plagued yours as well, is the smell of burnt popcorn. Not long ago, my parents made popcorn for our children, and some of it accidentally burned. As soon as we smelled it, my mom said, "We might as well throw this away, it is going to taste as bad as it smells." I am going to guess you have likely encountered this situation yourself (and if you have not, count yourself as lucky), how something that can taste and smell so great, can just as quickly smell and taste disgusting. Once that smell of burnt popcorn enters the air, it can take a while to get rid of it. You can try to mask the smell or open a window, but it is so difficult to get rid of that smell quickly. We do not have the

ability to just close our nose to the offense, as much as we may wish we could.

In Philippians 4:18 Paul describes the gifts from the Philippians as ***"a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable, and pleasing to God."*** Once we realize just how offensive bad smells can be, and how easily we can be stuck with them, it should bring about an appreciation for when things do not smell like that. Since avoiding bad smells can be extremely difficult, we often pay attention to the way things, and ourselves, smell. We can easily imagine the offense that comes from a bad-smelling offering, so take that mentality and put it into consideration with how God views what we bring to Him. Consider if God would look at your giving as something that could be described as a fragrant offering, or would it be something He would want to turn His nose away from? What steps may you need to take to ensure that what you give to God is fragrant, acceptable, and pleasing?

FAITHFUL AND TRUSTWORTHY

DEVOTION #6 - PASTOR BEN KIRKMAN

"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:19

The privilege of giving back to the Lord some of what He has given to me was instilled in me by my parents as far back as my memories go. I remember getting birthday and Christmas money and setting aside a portion of it to put in the offering that next Sunday. I even remember being five or six years old and committing to giving ten cents every week to the missionaries our church supported. At the end of that year, it was so neat to see how my little ten-cent offering every week added up to over five dollars!

I am very thankful that I was taught as a child how important and wonderful it is to give to the Lord. I was taught to give willingly, cheerfully, and sacrificially. When your annual income as a five-year-old is like twenty bucks, I would say giving five dollars is pretty sacrificial. Honestly though, my parents did a great job of helping me give in a way that I was not resentful or secretly upset about. My mom and dad both modeled and explained to me the reality that everything I had and was, was a gift from the Lord. Every breath I took was given to me by God; my talents and abilities were all from Him. All that I had, He actually had given to me, so then why would I not joyfully give some of it back to Him?

I mentioned that my parents modeled what they taught. I watched them give consistently. No matter how tight things were financially, I know they sacrificially and joyfully gave to the Lord. I lived with them, I heard their conversations, I saw how much they put into the

offering, and their faithfulness to give did not surprise me one bit. I knew their character and their strong confidence in the promise that Paul had given to the faithful givers of Philippi. Philippians 4:19 says, ***"And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus."*** They knew the Lord called them to give, how the Lord wanted them to give, and that when they gave that way they could be confident He would provide for all of their needs. They knew God's resources in Christ Jesus were unlimited and they could confidently give.

As I was writing this, so many incredible stories of God making good on His promise and providing for my family in almost unbelievable ways flooded my memory. It was a wonderful reminder to me that God is good, faithful, and trustworthy!

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.

The River Church
8393 E. Holly Rd.
Holly, MI 48442

theriverchurch.cc • info@theriverchurch.cc