THE REAL McCOY
A note from founding senior pastor Keith Loy

I am so excited about this journey that we are doing as a church. What an opportune time to be intentional about growing individually, as well as corporately. It is my hope that this devotional will assist you in that process.

Please note the schedule for the devotional. It is my hope that you will experience this journey in its fullness and in the order in which God gave it to us. Take careful notes. Write down those promptings—do not downplay them. Like a tapestry being woven together, each thread is connected to another, and in the end, a beautiful picture comes forth.

I encourage you, as you ingest each daily reading, to not hurry through them or do them in a one-time setting. The goal is not to just get them done and move on, but to savor, learn, and allow them to sink deep into your life. So take your time as you read each one through, answer the discovery questions, and then personalize them for your life. Don’t be discouraged if there’s a day that doesn’t seem to connect. One of the great things I’ve learned in my personal growth journey is that God is at work way beyond my comprehension. In the moments of dryness, the times where things don’t seem to be connecting, even in the times of great disarray, God is at His greatest work in my life. I fully believe this is what the prophet meant when he wrote, “Those who wait upon the Lord.” So take each day, ponder its message, personalize it, and believe that the Lord is at work.

The same is true with the LIFE Group materials available on the Celebrate app. As you work together, pay attention to what others are saying and getting out of it. One of the great ways that God works in my life is through others, through their reflections, their insights, and their experiences. Be prepared to write down what others are saying. Meditate on them. Allow others to speak into your life. For we are truly better together.

Do the same with the message notes on the Celebrate app or that you receive as you enter the weekend services. I truly believe you will begin to see, over the weeks as we make this journey, the big picture of it all. May this be one of the most rewarding journeys in your life. This is precisely why I can’t encourage you enough: Don’t miss a weekend, don’t miss your LIFE Group, and don’t miss one of your daily devotionals. I know it’s a big commitment, but I believe it’s one we make together and with ourselves for the next seven weeks.

I love you with all my heart, and I’m so honored to be your pastor.

[Signature]
Everything changes. And it seems it’s only increasing as time moves on – which by the way is also changing – every second of every minute of every day. Those are the facts, nothing stays the same.

But just for fun, let me help you with a little history. The Victor Talking Machine Company introduced the first phonograph in 1915. By 1919, Americans spent more on phonographs than musical instruments, books, periodicals and sporting goods. In 1916 electric clocks were introduced and the average price of a new car was $600 (obviously, that changed). There were only 15 million cars registered by 1923. And by 1930 there was one automobile for every five Americans. Now think about that – 80% of Americans still didn’t own a car. In 1927, the first successful demonstration of the television took place in New York City – but that was only a demonstration. It wouldn’t be possible to own one until the end of World War 2. In 1950 only nine percent of homes owned a television. In 1951 CBS presented the first color commercial even though, ironically, no one owned a color TV. That would soon change as one percent of homes had a color television in 1954, increasing to a whopping three percent 10 years later. By the early 1980s, 98% of televisions sold were color. My friends, everything changes. Remember the VCR and the 8-track? Remember your VCR player always flashing “12:00 pm”?

English poet Abraham Cowley was right, “The world is a scene of change.” And he said that during the 17th century. The Bible even tells us that for “everything there is a season” (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

Everything changes. Which means, there’s really nothing I can count on, or count in. Well…except one. And this One is a big deal. The prophet Malachi writes, “The Lord never changes” (Malachi 3:6). And King David agrees, “You [God] are always the same” (Psalm 102:27). The author of Hebrews attests, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

Now, I can’t speak for you, but that’s good news to me. Because in an ever-changing world, it seems when I find something I can count on, it changes. Which means, there’s really nothing I can count on – except One. And that gives me amazing hope. How about you? In what are you putting your trust? Who are you counting on? Where have you built your trust?

Can I offer you a Someone to consider? That Someone is God. The Bible says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3).

**Discovery Questions**

How have you changed over the years?

What are the significant markers of your change?

When you first came to Christ, what changes did you make in response?
As we talked about yesterday, everything changes, except God. The Bible says, “Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father...He never changes” (James 1:17). So, let me give you two things about God you can always count on.

The first is His love. Can you imagine? Paul tells us that “Nothing will be able to separate us from His love” (Romans 8:38). My friends, we can go to bed tonight and when we wake up in the morning – same God, same love. It’s not conditional or inconsistent. We are the object of His love, and that love will never fail and will never end. The great theologian Karl Barth said it best, “God: ‘the One who loves.’”

This is precisely why we get so easily frustrated in our human relationships: they are always changing. They never stay the same. Ever heard someone say, “What ever happened to that sweet child of mine?” Or, “He’s not the man I first married.” Well, he’s not. You’re right. Everything changes. Including those around you. But never God. We can always count on His love.

But just as true as His never-changing love, the second thing you can always count on is His word. Peter writes, “The grass withers, and the flowers fall away. But the word of the Lord will last forever” (1 Peter 1:24-25).

Listen, the Bible isn’t some archaic, outdated, irrelevant book of history. My friends, it’s fresh every day and can be trusted regardless of how the world is ever-changing. I’ve always said, “I’ve most definitely gotten the Bible wrong, but it has never gotten me wrong.” Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35).

In 1961 Alan Shepherd, the very first American astronaut, was asked by a reporter just before he boarded his spaceship, “What is the one thing you’re depending on most in this space venture?” I love his answer, “I’m depending on the fact that God’s laws never change.” Well Alan, they won’t. David wrote, “Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever” (Psalm 119:152).

My friends, there will be things that will always be wrong, but God’s Word is never one of them. Jesus promised that “everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matthew 7:24).

**Discovery Questions**

What are some things people build their lives upon?

What are you building your life with?

To which authority are you entrusting your life…for we all have one, the question is, what and who?
Just as true as there’s a God we can depend on today, there’s a devil lurking in the shadows somewhere, wanting to derail us with our yesterdays and tomorrows. Allow me to explain.

Whether our yesterdays hold great accomplishments or painful failures, the devil wants us to reminisce on them to the point of paralysis. It’s been said, “Whatever you’re holding onto is still holding you.” Truth be told, some people can never get beyond them because they are paralyzed by that daunting day of “once was.”

Motivational speaker Rick Olson just happened to be on a flight next to Jim Craig, one of the players from the U.S. hockey team that won the gold medal over the heavily favored Soviets in the 1980 Olympics. Today it’s known to many as “The Miracle on Ice.” When Rick asked Jim about the rest of his teammates, he responded sadly, “They sit in bars every day, talking about that day.” In short, all they keep doing is reliving “once was.”

But tomorrow can be just as paralyzing as yesterday. Have you ever met someone who always says, “Tomorrow I will do this,” or, “Tomorrow I will do that,” and with whom “one-of-these days” really means “none-of-these-days”? I read a poem once that goes like this: “Procrastination is my sin, it only brings me sorrow. I know that I should give it up. In fact, I will, tomorrow.” I can only wonder how many of us still have unfulfilled “to do” lists for our lives? Proverbs tells us, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring” (Proverbs 27:1).

My friends, listen, God’s favorite day is right now, today. And truth be told, it’s really all we have. Jesus Himself told us when we pray, we ought to say, “Give us THIS day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11, emphasis added). It’s been said that, “Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, but today is a gift, that’s why it’s called the present.” So, let’s not dwell in the past and let’s not boast about the future. Instead, let’s make each moment count, for the clock is running and time waits for no one.

**Discovery Questions**

Have you been putting off something until tomorrow?

What do you need to let go of today?

What step can you take toward letting go in a healthy way?
Grace is a wonderful gift from God. For everybody makes mistakes. Nobody’s perfect. The Bible tells us, “All have sinned” (Romans 3:23). But Grace tells us, “Don’t worry. I got it covered.”

You see, just like the prodigal son that Jesus talks about in the Bible, we’ve all been to the far country. A place that is not measured in miles, but in our selfish wants. A place where we choose to live in our sin rather than in Christ. But praise be to God for Grace that says, “I forgive you no matter what you’ve done.”

Just look at what Paul wrote. “What a difference between our sin and God’s generous gift of forgiveness [grace]. This one man...Jesus Christ, brought forgiveness to many through God’s bountiful gift” (Romans 5:15-16).

I read a story about a monk and his apprentice who were traveling from their abbey to a nearby village. When they arrived at the village gates, they parted company and agreed to meet the next morning after completing their tasks. According to the plan, they met and began the long walk back to their abbey. The monk noticed that his younger companion was unusually quiet. When he asked him what was wrong, his apprentice responded, “What business is it of yours?”

Now the monk was sure his brother was troubled, but still he said nothing. As they continued their journey, the distance between them increased. When the abbey came in sight, the monk stopped at the gate to wait for his student. “Tell me, my son. What troubles your soul?”

The boy started to react again, but when he saw the warmth in his master’s eyes, his heart began to melt. “I have sinned greatly,” he sobbed. “Last night I slept with a woman and abandoned my vows. I am not worthy to enter the abbey at your side.”

The teacher put his arm around the student and said, “We will enter the abbey together. And we will enter the cathedral together. And together we will confess your sin. No one but God will know which of the two of us fell.”

I love that story, because that’s exactly what God did for us in Jesus Christ. The Bible says Jesus accepted our shame (Hebrews 12:2).

**Discovery Questions**

What guilt have you been carrying around?

What sin have you allowed to imprison you?

Would you consider taking a moment and confessing that to God today?
As we talked yesterday, God’s grace forgives us. But just as true, God’s grace frees us. The Bibles says, “By the death of Christ we are set free” (Ephesians 1:7).

Do you understand how incredible that is? We’re not talking about a simple pardon, as if God’s forgiveness suggests, “I’ll let it slide this time.” No, my friends, God’s grace cries out, “I’m going to remove the offense from all memory, as if it never occurred.” The writer of Hebrews promises that God has forgiven our sins and “will remember them no more” (Hebrews 8:12).

I like the way Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* expresses Ephesians 1:7 – “Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, His blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we’re a free people...and not just barely free... abundantly free.”

But we struggle with this, don’t we? Pastor Rick Warren writes, “The biggest problem with Christianity is that people start with a relationship but revert back to the rules.” Listen, God’s grace calls us to righteousness, not rituals. It’s impossible to live forward if we’re always looking over our shoulders. Because of Jesus our past is exactly that, our past. “The old is gone...” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul tells us, “Just as we received Christ, we are to continue to live in Him” (Colossians 2:6).

Allow me to offer three ways you can let go of what’s been and live free.

First, accept what cannot be changed. We all know that none of us can change the past, so why relive it? If there is someone you need to make amends with, do it. The Bible says, “If it is possible on your part, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). If there’s something you can do to make something right, right it. But other than that, accept it, and let it go.

Secondly, don’t play it down, pray it up. Get your focus off of what was and put it on who God is – the One greater than anything. Run to God, not from God.

Thirdly, focus on what’s left, not what’s lost. We all have more to be thankful for than what we do not. Self-pity is much more damaging to your life than any tragedy you’ll ever face.

It’s time to move on in Christ rather than stay paralyzed by your past.

**Discovery Questions**

What do you need to accept as the past?

When was the last time you just worshiped God and thanked Him for His grace?

Where is your focus?
God’s grace forgives us. God’s grace frees us. God’s Grace finishes us.

I can’t speak for you, there are times I just want to give up. There are times I just want to throw in the towel. And I get it. We all get tired. Sports legend Vince Lombardi used to say, “Fatigue makes cowards of all of us.” He’s right. We all get discouraged. We all feel like failures at times. So, it’s no surprise we all want to throw in the towel and quit.

Winston Churchill, near the end of his distinguished career, was asked to return to speak at his old school, Harrow. The headmaster had been preparing the students to listen to Churchill’s every word because, he said, “In a few days the greatest orator of our time – perhaps of all time – will address you.” The day finally arrived, and after the school’s fanfare and acclamation Sir Winston stood to his feet, acknowledged the introduction, and gave the following address, “Young men, never give up. Never give up. Never, never, never, never, never give up.” That was it. His entire speech. And just as true as he was then, I think Churchill would speak the same to us today. Maybe we should listen again and heed his challenge.

Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthian church, “Stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

God’s grace is the key to keeping me going. Sure, there are times when I pray, “God remove the pain,” and He does. But there are also times when He leaves the pain and invites me to simply trust Him regardless. Either way, I must never give up.

Let’s be honest, we learn more in our pain than we do in any of our pleasures. That’s why we have His assurance, “My grace is all you need for my power is strongest when you are weak” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

During the early days of the Civil War, a Union soldier was arrested on charges of desertion. Unable to prove his innocence, he was condemned and sentenced to die a deserter’s death. His appeal found its way to the desk of Abraham Lincoln. The President felt mercy for the soldier and signed a pardon. The soldier returned to service, fought the entirety of the war, and was killed in the last battle. Found within his breast pocket was the signed letter of the President’s pardon. My friends, His grace will always see us through. Never give up.

**Discovery Questions**

Can you think of a time when you just wanted to quit?

Would you be willing to share that experience?

Where do you need to embrace His grace today and persevere?
I read about a preacher who wanted to illustrate the incredible free gift of Jesus. He stood in his pulpit and held up a poinsettia plant – “Whoever wants this beautiful Christmas poinsettia may have it. All you have to do is take it.” Seemed simple – but what happened next was a real eye-opener for him. I will let him tell it in his own words:

People just stared at me. So, I waited. And waited. Until finally, an old lady, a little timid, raised her hand – “I’ll take it,” she said. “Great!” I said, “It’s yours.” But to my surprise she didn’t move, but instead, nudged a young boy next to her and said, “Can you go get it for me.”

“No,” I said. “Whoever wants this gift must come and get it personally. You can’t send someone else in your place.” To which the little lady then declined the gift.

Thus, I reverted back to my initial offer, “Whoever wants this beautiful Christmas poinsettia may have it. All you have to do is come and take it.” And again, I waited.

I was perplexed by my offer. For this was an unusually gorgeous plant, beautifully wrapped in red cellophane with a gold satin ribbon around it. I didn’t understand. For the past several weeks, people had commented on how beautiful it was and wished they could take it home. And now, here it was, free for the taking, and yet, with no response.


A teenage girl raised her hand and asked, “Can I take it after the service?” To which I shook my head no – “You have to come right now and get it.”

I was beginning to wish I’d never started the whole thing. But just then, a man came forward. He walked rather slowly, but made it to the front, picked up the plant, and walked away. At that I finished my sermon and was grateful it was over.

After the service concluded and most people had already gone, that same old man who claimed the poinsettia, came up onto the platform. “Here,” he said, holding out his hand. “This flower is too pretty to just take home for free. I couldn’t do it with a clear conscience.” When I looked down at his hand, he held a crumpled up ten-dollar bill.

What is it about us that we just can’t seem to believe that God’s offer is free? There must be a catch, a condition, or strings of some sort attached, right? But there’s not, and there’s nothing we can do in and of ourselves.

The Bible assures us, “God saved us by His grace when we believe. We can’t take credit for it, it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done...no, it was all His doing” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

I once read about a guy who received a gift 49 years ago and still hasn’t opened it. Now, I don’t know about you, but that’s not weird, that’s crazy! What’s the point of a gift if we never take it, open it, and receive it?

In a world where nothing is free, it’s hard to believe God’s free gift remains unopened. But until we do, we really won’t receive it. Is it time for you to take His incredible, most-generous gift, and receive Jesus as your Savior?
Discovery Questions

What “gift” have you received that you have yet to “open”?

What is stopping you from “opening” it?

Are there some beginning steps you would be willing to take toward receiving that gift?
There’s a Japanese paraphrase of Psalm 23 that I have grown to appreciate. I think it’s just what our world needs more than anything today.

The Lord is my pace-setter; I shall not rush. He makes me stop and rest in quiet intervals; He provides me with images of stillness, which restores my serenity. He leads me in the way of efficiency through calmness of mind and His guidance of peace. Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day, I will not fret for His presence is here. His timeless, all-importance will keep me in balance. He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of activity by anointing my mind with His oils of tranquility. My cup of joyous energy overflows. Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruits of my hours. I shall walk in the pace of our Lord and dwell in His house forever.

If you’re like me, upon reading that, I feel a little guilty. Because unfortunately, that doesn’t describe most of us. I think we can agree that for many of us, we’ve been running too much toward all the wrong things in all the wrong places. And the result: we’re stressed.

According to Christian psychologist Rollo May, “Stress is one of the most urgent problems of our time, and anxiety, is now the official emotion of our day.” One of the most recent studies I found concurs – over 80% of Americans feel stressed on a daily basis. It’s no wonder David wrote, “Trouble and anguish have taken hold on me…” (Psalm 119:143).

Friends, listen. Few things are as damaging to the Christian life as trying to work for Jesus rather than spending time with Jesus. Oswald Chambers asserted, “We slander God by our very eagerness to work for Him without knowing Him.” Jesus Himself said, “For apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Allow me to offer some things that I know can help. But I must remind you that nothing happens unless you become intentional about putting them into practice.

The first thing we need to do is STOP. And I mean just that. You have to put your life in park. The Bible says that we are to “be still before the Lord” (Psalm 37:7). The word “still” here literally means to stop any and all activity. We cannot think that by simply slowing down we will reduce stress in our lives.

The second thing we need to do is SIT. To spend time “at the FEET of Jesus.” Friends, listen. We cannot become all that God wants if we merely stand in His presence, we need to stop and sit at His feet. The Bible says, “Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our maker” (Psalm 95:6). When we sit, there’s an inward understanding of who God is and who we are not.

Finally, we need to SAVOR what Jesus is telling us. This means, listen. I had a teacher once who said, “Mouth shut – Mind open.” The fact is, we cannot hear when our mouth is moving. But when we have a posture to listen, our lives will never be the same. James tells us, “But those who look closely into the perfect law, who keep on paying attention to it and do not simply listen and then forget it, but put it into practice – they will be blessed by God in what they do” (James 1:25).
Discovery Questions

Are you regularly over-stressed and anxious?

What is one thing you need to STOP doing?

Do you SIT at His feet?

How can you gain additional time with Him?

How can you SAVOR His direction and truly put it into daily practice?
Every time I talk to someone it seems “busyness” dominates the conversation. Have you ever noticed that? “How was he doing?” And in typical fashion, “Busy! Running like a chicken with its head cut-off.”

And what makes it a little weird for me, is that for some, it seems to be a badge of honor. As if in some strange way, busyness is the goal in life.

According to sociologist and economist Thorsten Veblen, work, not leisure, is today’s status symbol. She writes, “In all our studies, time availability, or the lack of it, has actually become our new measure of one’s status.”

We’ve become what the Red Queen told Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, “Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that.”

According to American cardiologist Meyer Friedman, we worship speed. He calls it hurry sickness. In fact, studies even tell us that we sleep 2½ hours less than we did 100 years ago.

Just listen. Domino’s Pizza grabbed the biggest market share in its industry when it put the emphasis on speed, delivering in 30 minutes or less. Their shares shot through the roof. Their CEO stated, “We don’t sell great pizza. We sell great speed. Because that’s what people want.”

In *USA Today*, a Detroit hospital applied Domino’s guarantee to the medical profession. It advertised that its emergency room patients would be seen within 20 minutes or the treatment would be free. Business improved 30% and, ironically, so did the mortality rate.

But for me, here’s where it gets a little scary. In a recent survey, people were asked what keeps them from knowing God and growing spiritually. The number one barrier cited was, “I don’t have time. I’m in too much of a hurry to get to know God.”

So, here’s my question: are you suffering from hurry sickness? Are there ever enough hours to get what you want done and, more importantly, have any time for God?

**Discovery Questions**

Have you made the “tyranny of the urgent” your measure of status?

Take some time to identify some of your “time bandits” that keep you from God’s feet.

What are a couple of ways you can start to eliminate those distractions?
Imagine you’re pulling up to a stoplight where there are two lanes, with a car in each lane. Are you that person who gets in line behind the car you figure might pull away first?

Or imagine you’re at a grocery store attempting to check-out. Do you find yourself counting products in peoples’ carts and calculating which line will move the fastest? Even after making your decision, do you keep checking other lines to see if you made a mistake?

If you can relate to either of these, you need to slow down. Friends, one of the great illusions of our day is that hurry will buy us more time. According to a recent CNN poll, 59% of Americans wish they could slow down and relax.

I read about a dad who would come home from work every day with his briefcase. This troubled his son, because his son just wanted to be with his dad. He finally said to him, “Dad, how come you bring your briefcase home every day?” His dad answered, “Well, son, I can’t get all my work done at the office.” His son said, “Dad, can’t they put you in a slower group?”

I think we all can relate. The Bible says, “It is useless to rise up early and go to bed late and work your fingers to the bone. Don’t you know that God enjoys giving rest to those He loves?” (Psalm 127:2). I’m so grateful that God knew that my best would require His rest. Our bodies were not created to always stay in motion. If I don’t retire occasionally, my body will eventually expire in exhaustion.

I think we need to pray:

Slow me down, Lord. Ease the pounding of my heart by the quieting of my mind. Steady my hurried pace with the vision of the eternal reach of time. Give me amidst the confusion of my days the calmness of the everlasting hills. Break the tension of my nerves with the soothing music of the singing streams that live in my memory. Help me to know the restoring power of sleep. Teach me the art of taking minute vacations of slowing down, to look at a flower, pet a stray dog, to chat with an old friend or make a new one, to watch a spider build a web or smile at a child or to read a few lines from a good book. Remind me each day that the race is not always to the swift – and that there’s more to life than increasing its speed. Let me look upwards through the branches of a towering oak and know that it grew great and strong because it grew slowly and well. Slow me down, Lord.

There’s a story about a banker who was a hard-nosed businessman vacationing in a small coastal village. While walking near a pier, he saw a small boat with a lone fisherman aboard. After noticing the fisherman had caught several yellow-fin tunas, he complimented him on the quality of his catch and asked how long it took to catch them all.

“Only a little while,” he replied.

The banker then asked why he didn’t stay out longer and catch more fish. The fisherman said he had enough to support his family and didn’t need anymore.

“What do you do with the rest of your time?” the banker asked.

The fisherman responded, “I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a nap in the afternoon, and stroll into the village each evening with my wife where we relax and sing while I play guitar with our friends. I have a full and busy life.”

The banker scoffed, “You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat, and with its proceeds buy a fleet of boats. Instead of selling your fish to a middleman, you could sell directly to a processor. You could eventually open your own cannery. You would control the product, processing
and distribution. You could leave this small village and move to a big city where you could run your expanding enterprise.”

The fisherman asked, “But how long will this take?”

“15 to 20 years,” said the banker.

“And then what?” asked the baffled fisherman?

The banker laughed and said, “That’s the best part. You can sell your business and retire and move to a small coastal fishing village where you could sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take afternoon naps, stroll to the village in the evenings with your wife where you could relax, sing and play guitar with your friends. You would have a full and busy life.”

The fisherman smiled and said, “I already do that” – and walked away.

Friends listen. “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). It doesn’t say, “Drive through and grab a glimpse of Me,” but “Sit down and eat.” God doesn’t give us the Sabbath to be used on ourselves, but to be infused with Him. Christ didn’t die so we could get more done, but for Him to be more known.

**Discovery Questions**

Are you constantly seeking the “next thing” hoping to catch up?

When do you make time to “Be still and know that I am God?”

Are you willing to let God expand your time by honoring Him with yours? How so?
Studies tell us that over 80% of Americans feel stress on a regular basis. That’s a lot of stress. In fact, it makes me stressed just thinking about it. But truth be told, we’ve all had those days, haven’t we, where we feel like life as we know it is out-of-control? There’s just never enough time to get everything done. So, in response, we’re overwhelmed, over-worked, and over-extended.

Look at it this way: every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up and knows it must outrun the fastest lion or be killed. And every morning a lion wakes up and knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or starve. So, whether you’re a lion or a gazelle, when the sun comes up, you’d better be running. And that’s exactly what we’ve been doing.

We have e-mails arriving, text messages pinging, and phones ringing. Then we get out of the car and go in the office. And for me, it’s even more ironic. I live in a state where people vacation at a national park called Rushmore. It’s no wonder why Solomon wrote, “I hate life. I toil, I labor, I run, run, and then run some more.”

Well I have good news, there’s hope. Jesus encountered incredible stress, but through it all He was one calm cucumber. He slept during a storm, drew pictures in sand, fed thousands with nothing, and took a detour when his friend Lazarus was ill. Nothing ever seemed to ruffle His feathers. Nothing ever seemed to get under His skin. He was the picture of peace under pressure. So, what was Jesus’ secret?

First, He had PERSPECTIVE. Jesus knew who He was. Eighteen times in the Bible, Jesus defines Himself: “I am the bread of life,” “I am the good shepherd,” “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” He knew exactly who He was. Which brings me to a valid point. Stress always results when trying to be somebody we’re not. Because if we’re honest, we’re only running in an attempt to define ourselves. Think about that!

Secondly, Jesus also knew who He was trying to PLEASE, and it wasn’t the crowd. John writes, “I only try to please the One who sent Me” (John 5:30). Jesus dedicated His whole life to pleasing His Father. Imagine if we did the same? The Bible says, “The fear of man will prove to be a snare [a noose], but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe” (Proverbs 29:25).

So, He knew who He was and who He was trying to please, and finally, He lived with a sense of PURPOSE. He knew exactly what He wanted to accomplish. How about you? Every one of us has the exact same amount of time, and that time is all we need to get done what God created us to get done. The question is, are you about your Father’s business? For Jesus it was clear, “I know where I have come from and where I am going” (John 8:14).

Living with purpose is an amazing stress reliever. It means that every day you get up, you are already moving in His direction. It’s the difference between living by your calendar or being guided by a compass. God wants us to have a compass.

**Discovery Questions**

Do you feel as if you know yourself well?

What new perspective do you need to discover about yourself? It may be who you are not!

Be honest, what audience do you live for? What business are you about?

What is your life’s purpose statement? If you don’t have one, take some time this week to pray about it and develop one, and share it with your LIFE group next week.
Let’s continue with what allowed Jesus to be calm, effective, and cool under pressure.

Fourthly, Jesus had PRIORITY. Jesus did what He needed to do. “At daybreak, Jesus went to a lonely place, but the people looked for Him. When they found Him, they tried to keep Him from leaving. But Jesus said to them, ‘I must preach about God’s kingdom to other towns, too. This is why I was sent.’ Then He kept on preaching” (Luke 4:42-44). Someone once said, “If you have too many irons in the fire, you’ll put the fire out.”

Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, “This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before” (Philippians 3:13). Notice he didn’t say, “These 40 things I do.” He said, “This one thing I do.”

Maybe you’ve heard it before that less is more. And when you know what you are to do, there’ll be a whole lot less to do in your life.

Fifthly, Jesus involved PEOPLE. He involved others. Now listen, this is huge. Mark writes, “He appointed twelve, designating them apostles, that they might be with Him and He might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14). Jesus enlisted the Twelve, he taught them, trained them, and involved them. Nothing induces stress more than isolation.

I truly believe if we try to make a name for ourselves, we’re going to experience more stress. Life was never designed to be a solo performance. It was designed with others in mind, doing life together, and needing each other. The Bible says, “We belong to each other, and each of us needs all the others” (Romans 12:5). Dwight L. Moody once said, “I’d rather put 10 good men to work than do the work of 10 men.”

Sixthly, Jesus PRAYED. I truly believe this is one of the greatest stress-relieving gifts God gives us. The Bible says, “Jesus often slipped away to be alone so He could pray” (Luke 5:16). A lot of stress could be minimized, and a lot of living could be maximized if we would just learn to “be still and know that He is God” (Psalm 46).

Finally, Jesus PLAYED. He knew how to have a good time. Let’s be honest, our world is way too serious. I call it constipated living. Jesus said that He came that we might have life, and life to the full. “A merry heart does good like medicine” (Proverbs 17:22). It’s often said, if you don’t play, you’ll pay – at the liquor store or the drug store.

**Discovery Questions**

Where do you need to re-prioritize to discover what is most important to do?

Teams can achieve more, so how can you bless others by including them in what you are doing or by getting involved in what they are doing?

Do you take time to pray first rather than pray as an afterthought or last resort?

What are you praying for today?
I don’t know if you’ve heard of “glamping,” but it’s a form of luxury camping started by wealthy Brits who frequently took African safaris. Instead of roughing it in the wilderness, these aristocrats vacationed with the best accommodations such as soft beds, fluffy pillows, and all the modern conveniences like televisions.

Well, it didn’t take long for this form of relaxation to make its way to the United States. In 2010, KOA Campground’s luxury lodge rentals increased by 26%. According to glamping guru Ruben Martinez, “After a week of camping, you’re not thinking, ‘I look homeless right now.’ In fact, you’re thinking about how comfortable you are.”

I fear the same mindset has found its way into local churches. I fear we have become a nation of comfortable Christians rather than committed, convicted ones. “I’m OK. You’re OK” is not a healthy approach to living out our Christian lives.

The Bible tells us to “live life, then, with a due sense of responsibility, not as men who do not know the meaning and purpose of life, but as those who do...firmly grasp what you know to be the will of God” (Ephesians 5:15-17).

Allow me to offer some signs that perhaps we’ve become too comfortable: We are not attending church with a high level of expectancy. We no longer seem to be concerned about the spiritual condition of our neighbors, family members, and co-workers. We haven’t had a good, deep, spiritual conversation with a non-Christian in a long time. The Bible has grown stale to us. Our happiness on Sunday mornings is more important than doing what it takes to reach the unchurched. The plight of the poor doesn’t seem to concern us all that much. We do not give our financial resources cheerfully, if at all. It doesn’t even dawn on us that God could do something radical in our lives at any moment.

If any of these strikes a nerve with you, then it’s probably time to stop glamping as a Christian and start camping again in His presence.

**Discovery Questions**

What moves you toward a greater desire for His presence? What stops you from doing it?

What stirs your heart to compassion for the lost, needy and marginalized?

What can you and your LIFE Group do to reach out to the community?
In preparation for writing an article on the pace of life, Pastor John Ortberg called the wisest person he knew looking for answers. Here’s what his friend said in response to pace, “You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.” No kidding! Joyce Stephen Daedalus concludes that “hurry is the greatest enemy of spiritual contentment in our day.” Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung wrote, “Hurry is not of the devil; hurry is the devil.”

We live in high gear. Even the sale of frozen juices has declined because people don’t want to wait for it to thaw. It’s crazy. I think most can identify with what a USA Today article said about life for so many, “Today people are souped up, stressed out and overscheduled. In this brave new world, boundaries between work and family are disappearing. Everybody is mobile, and every moment is scheduled.”

The Bible tells us that hurry, worry, and scurry have major negative effects on our life. So, if we’re serious about slowing down, we’re going to have to make some countercultural changes.

First, we’re going to have to become like Paul and learn contentment that starts in the heart. “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation” (Philippians 4:12). It’s not in our nature to be content. If we want life to be better, then we must start by becoming content with what we have. For if we’re honest, busyness is about chase – chasing for things we don’t yet have. Until we conclude that we are blessed right where we are and with what we already have, we will never slow down.

Secondly, we must take seriously the fourth commandment – to keep the Sabbath day and make it holy. I know, some of you are chaffing at that right now. But if God set a day aside to rest, what makes us think we don’t have to?

I read about a church member who was upset with his pastor because he couldn’t reach him after calling several times on Monday, the pastor’s day off. The pastor said, “I’m sorry, but that’s my day off.” His member responded, “The devil doesn’t take a day off.” I love the pastor’s reply, “You’re right. If I don’t, I’d be just like the devil.”

Learn to say “no.” No one can keep adding to their schedule without eliminating some things. Too often in our attempt to appease people, we end up punishing ourselves. Leadership guru Peter Drucker would often say to his students, “Don’t tell me what new thing you’re doing. Tell me something you’ve stopped doing.” The mark of maturity is knowing what not to do.

Most of us have a hard time saying “no” to opportunities. Ask yourself two questions every time you’re given one: “Is it worth it?” Remember, your time is your life. You need to decide whether a new opportunity is worth a portion of it. And secondly: “What am I going to give up?” No one can keep adding. Good addition requires some level of subtraction.

Discovery Questions

How are “being content” and “being comfortable” different? Which are you?

Can you identify your sources of discontentment?

What good things might need to be removed to find God’s best?
The Bible says, “A man without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken down walls” (Proverbs 25:28).

Have you ever made a decision based on emotion? I have. And every time I do, it’s like a line from Bonnie Tyler’s hit single from the 70’s, “It’s a heartache.”

One time I told my mom I didn’t feel like going to church. Do you know what she said to me? “I don’t care how you feel, you’re going.” But I was in a bad mood, so I told her flat out, “No I’m not.” This time she was a little more firm, “You’re going. And I’ll give you two reasons why. One, you’re 33. And two, you’re the pastor.” Okay, I thought it was funny, but it makes my point. Sometimes our emotions can get the best of us, and when they do, it seems to never end well.

Paul wrote to the Galatians, “My counsel is this – Live by the Spirit. Then you won’t feed the compulsions of your emotions” (Galatians 5:16). That’s a good word. He goes on to say, “There’s a root of sinful self-interest in all of us, but it’s at odds with the Spirit. These two ways of life are always opposing. Living by the Spirit will keep you from living one way at one time according to how you feel. Choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of your emotions” (Galatians 5:17-18).

We all have emotions, don’t we? And they can change rather quickly, can’t they? But successful people don’t allow their emotions to determine their decisions.

Have you ever heard someone say, “They made me mad?” I’m sure you have, and that somebody might have been you. Every time someone says that, they’re admitting someone else is in control. When I choose to be angry at you, I am choosing to let you control me. George Washington Carver once stated, “I will never allow another man to control my life by making me hate him.”

Here’s the deal: we better learn to manage our moods, or we’ll be at the mercy of them. Paul wrote, “Keep your head in all situations” (2 Timothy 4:5).

**Discovery Questions**

What does “Living in the Spirit” mean?

Do you tend to make decisions based on emotions or God’s direction?

When was the last time you consulted God’s Word in a critical decision?
We live in a high-pressure, rat-race, generation and it’s easy to run out of emotional energy. You can call it whatever you want – depression, burnout, despair – but the bottom line is that something is out-of-whack, and we’re having a hard time carrying on.

Elijah was such a man. He experienced great highs and great lows. He knew what it was to stand tall on the mountain of success and despair in the valley of adversity. And from his life we can learn a number of causes for life in the valley.

One is fear. The Bible says, “Elijah was afraid and ran for his life” (1 Kings 19:3). Another was resentment: “I’m fed up. Lord, I’ve had enough. I don’t want any more” (1 Kings 19:4). Another is low self-esteem: “I’m no better than my ancestors. I’m no good.” How about anger? “God, I’ve been serving You yet none of these people want to follow Your will” (1 Kings 19:10). Loneliness and worry: “Now they’re trying to kill me too.”

Listen, faulty thinking is the major contributor to burnout. The Bible says, “As a man thinks in his heart, so he is” (Proverbs 23:7). Our thinking controls our emotions, and our emotions control the way we act. Allow me to show you four common mistakes that happen when we allow our emotions to run low.

The first mistake is focusing on our feelings rather than the facts. Trusting our emotions skews true perception. The Bible says that Elijah, “prayed that he might die, ‘I’ve had enough, Lord’” (1 Kings 19:4). Think about that. This was the man who witnessed fire fall from heaven and who now wanted to die - skewed perception! That’s what emotions do when we fall prey to their weight.

This is what I call emotional reasoning. Emotional reasoning says, “I feel it; therefore, it must be so.” I feel like a failure; therefore, I am a failure. I feel like I’m depressed; therefore I am depressed. I don’t feel close to God; therefore, I must not be close to God. Listen, feelings are not facts. They are emotions and are, therefore, irrational.

The second mistake we make is comparing ourselves to others. When we start becoming emotionally drained, there is a tendency to start comparing ourselves to others. This is what Elijah did. “Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors” (1 Kings 19:4b).

The Bible warns us about comparisons. “Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else” (Galatians 6:4). For when we start comparing ourselves to others, we are setting ourselves up for depression.

Why is this so wrong? Everybody’s different. Everybody’s unique. Only you can be you. If you don’t be you, who’s going to be you. You see, if you’re not being you, then there’s no us, there’s only me, and that in the end is not good. I guarantee that when you get to heaven, God isn’t going to say, “How come you weren’t more like Billy Graham?” He’s simply going to ask, “How come you weren’t more like you?”

Do you know what the problem is with comparing? We only compare our weaknesses with others’ strengths, ignoring the fact that someone else has weaknesses, too – weaknesses where we may be strong. So, we must not compare ourselves to anyone.
Discovery Questions

Have you ever acted on or made a decision based on F.E.A.R. (False Evidence Appearing Real)? What was the outcome?

Have you taken time to really examine who you are and who you are not?

This would be a good time to jot a few thoughts down, it can be very enlightening.
The third mistake we make is blaming ourselves for things that were not our fault. The Bible says, “I have been zealous for God but they have rejected your covenant, and broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with a sword” (1 Kings 19:10). The bottom line is this: when you start assuming responsibility for other people’s mistakes, you’re going to become depressed. No one can be responsible TO someone without being responsible FOR someone.

The fourth mistake is exaggerating the negative. “I’m the only one left. And now they’re trying to kill me, too, Lord” (1 Kings 19:10b).

Perhaps you remember the song we used to sing as children: “Everybody hates me. Nobody likes me, I guess I’ll go eat worms. Fat ones, skinny ones. Little itty-bitty ones. I guess I’ll eat them all.”

The problem with this logic is that no one is really ever alone. It may feel like it, but you’re not. And that’s the problem with emotions. They skew our perception. You see, Elijah only had one person pursuing him, named Jezebel. She became so jealous of Elijah’s popularity that she sent a messenger to create fear in him, and it worked. So, Elijah ran across the desert, hid in a cave, and had a pity party. One person has it out for him and he starts singing the blues, “Everybody hates me, nobody likes me…”

Have you noticed how when you’re depressed, everything seems wrong? It’s like the wino who fell asleep on the street. Somebody rubbed Limburger cheese on his mustache. When he woke-up, he started running around complaining, “The whole world stinks. The whole world stinks!”

Discovery Questions

Do you take on the burden of others’ mistakes and internalize them or do you support and empathize to help them move through mistakes?

Can you find the lesson in negative circumstances that moves you forward, or do you dwell on what seems to be wrong in the moment?

How can you look at these differently?
Life can definitely be draining. There are a lot of demands that pull at us and, unless we are intentional about taking care of ourselves, it won’t take long until we feel the “blahs” and eventually burn out. It’s been said, “If we’re burning candles at both ends, we’re not as bright as we think.” So today and tomorrow, I want to provide four things we learn from the life of Elijah to keep healthy, fit and effective.

First, we must rest our bodies. The Bible tells us, “Elijah laid down under a tree and fell asleep. All at once after a while the angel touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat’. And he looked around and by his head there was a cake of bread baked over hot coals and a jar of water and he ate it and drank it and he lay down again. Then the angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat for the journey is too much for you.’ So he got up and ate and drank again” (1 Kings 19:5-8).

It’s interesting to me that when Elijah started having a pity party, contemplating suicide, saying, “God, I just want to die,” God didn’t scold him, and He didn’t give him a sermon on priorities. God’s remedy was simply, “Eat and sleep.” Doesn’t that sound great? Listen, sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do when we feel weak and exhausted, both physically and spiritually, is go to bed. It’s amazing how a good night’s rest does wonders for our attitudes.

Secondly, we must release our frustrations. We have to give ourselves permission to vent, unload, cry out to God, and cast all our cares on Him. There’s an old song that goes, “Let’s just have a little talk with Jesus. Tell Him all about our troubles. He will hear our faintest cries. And He will answer by and by.” Our problem is that we just don’t have that talk with God. My friends, one of the most difficult things we can do is give ourselves permission to “vomit” our emotions on God, but I’ve learned it’s one of the most cleansing things we can do. It’s important to know that God invites us to. He literally asked Elijah, “What’s bugging you? What are you bothered about?” So, go ahead, let God hear it. It’s one of the healthiest things you can do.

When you read the story, notice how God doesn’t interrupt him. He doesn’t criticize him. He just lets Elijah vent until he runs out of words. We read of David’s venting in the Psalms. In fact, some of David’s rants get pretty vicious: “Knock their teeth out, God” (Psalm 58:6), and “Bash their babies against the wall” (Psalm 137:9). I know it doesn’t sound real spiritual, but God simply wants us to get it off our chest. It’s called spiritual cleansing. Sometimes, all a brother or sister needs is a good venting session.

By the way, it’s better to talk it out with God than to take it out on people.

**Discovery Questions**

Life is full, are you intentionally taking time to just rest?

Are you getting enough sleep and taking time during your day to clear your mind for a few moments?

How could this make you more effective?

When was the last time you allowed God into your world in a moment of frustration?

What happened when you took the time to do so?
The third thing we can do is refocus our attention on God. Look what God did with Elijah: “God said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord for I’m about to pass by.’ Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord. But the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave” (1 Kings 19:11-13).

Can you imagine what this must have been like for Elijah? There was thunder, lightning, and an earthquake. But God was not in any of them. Instead, God spoke to Elijah in a whisper – in a still, quiet voice. This is just like God. We tend to expect something spectacular while God prefers visiting us in stillness and quiet – like during prayer, reading His Word, or while sitting along a beach front. It was in this hushed moment that God reminded Elijah, “I’m right here.”

May I suggest the same for us? Refocusing our attention gets us back to the consistency it takes to grow our relationships. To address our emotional troubles, we simply need to redirect our minds back toward the One in whom we trust. Paul writes, “Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable... think about these things” (Philippians 4:8). These are the things that describe the God on whom we need to focus our attention.

The fourth thing we must do is rededicate our lives. “Then the Lord said to Elijah, ‘Go back the way you came’” (1 Kings 19:15). Someone once said, “We all have two tongues. One in our shoes and one in our mouths. The one in our shoe never lies. It’s always pointed in the direction we’re going.” The key to rededication is getting our lives pointed in a new direction.

Now, allow me to bring together our last two days. Some of you are struggling right now. And maybe you’re having a hard time deciding. You just don’t know what to do. Maybe you feel like everybody’s against you and your world is falling apart. Here’s what to do:

First thing, right now, re-establish your relationship with Jesus. Re-surrender your life. Don’t over think it, just do it. Then, get some rest. Again, one of the best things you can do in any situation, is just eat and sleep. Now, release your frustrations. Let Him know what’s been bothering you. Don’t hold anything back. Once you’ve done that, re-focus your attention on God. Get your priorities back in order by redirecting your life. Make an about face, and start walking your faith out in a better direction. And may I add, the quickest way to do this is to get involved with the needs of others. Get to a place where you can give yourself away, a place where you can serve others. The happiest people I know are those who help others get ahead. Remember what Jesus said, you have to lose your life to truly find it.

Would you pray this in your heart? “Dear God, help me to rest my body. You invited me to come to You so I would find rest in You. Lord, I also want to release my frustration to You. You said to cast all my cares upon You, because You care for me. So, I give You my hurts, fears, resentments, anger, guilt, bitterness, and my judgments. Jesus, help me to sence You, to believe You, to realize that You’re here with me. Help me to feel Your presence. I want to fulfill Your purpose for my life. God, I commit myself anew to You.”

Now, take a deep breath. Exhale all your anxieties and tensions. He’s got you.
Discovery Questions

How might your days be different if you included time to regularly focus on Jesus even in the brevity of some moments?

How would being still in the moment of a challenge and turning toward Jesus change your response to those moments?

When was the last time you thought of serving others in the midst of your struggle? Though it sounds counter-intuitive, what do you think the outcome might be?
The Bible tells us, “Happy are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). It almost sounds ridiculous when you think of meekness, like a weenie or a wimp. But that’s because we don’t understand what meekness is.

Meekness isn’t weakness, it’s power under control. The Greek word refers to a wild horse that’s tamed, or medicine that breaks a fever. Maybe a better way to read this is, “Happy are those who don’t overreact to people.” Now, there’s a thought! So, let’s look at five ways we can respond with meekness rather than reacting in our humanity.

The first way is to be UNDERSTANDING when someone serves us. The Bible says, “Don’t just think about your own affairs, but be interested in others too, and in what they are doing. Your attitude should be the same as Jesus Christ’s” (Philippians 2:4-5). Allow me to ask how you treat the people who serve you: waitresses, secretaries, clerks, tellers, those who take your order at Starbucks or McDonald’s, or the cashier at the grocery store. Are you understanding or demanding? According to a recent study, Americans have a reputation for being demanding, rude, and disrespectful. Is that you?

The second way we demonstrate meekness is to be GENTLE when somebody disappoints us. The Bible says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).

I have come to realize something pretty significant. When I start to think I’m better than someone else and, in a sense, begin to look down on them, it pays for me to look up and realize there is always someone looking down on me. Paul writes, “...in humility consider others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3).

The third way we can model meekness is by showing TENDERNESS when someone disagrees with us.

Here’s the deal, no one can please everybody. It seems that about the time I get Crowd A satisfied, Crowd B is upset. One minute I’m the hero, the next minute I’m the zero. So how do you handle disagreeable people who irritate you and like to be argumentative? Well, it seems to me you have three alternatives. One, you can retreat in fear. Two, you can react in anger. Or three, you can gently respond in love.

Listen, meekness is not compromising your convictions. You don’t have to be passive, a doormat, or give in. The Bible says, “Wherever there is jealousy or selfish ambition, there will be disorder...but wisdom from above is pure, peaceful, gentle, and friendly” (James 3:16-17). It just means we may have to disagree agreeably. Even though we don’t see eye-to-eye, I still think we can walk hand-in-hand. We can be brothers without being twins. Just remember, we eat with a knife and a fork, not two knives.

The Bible says, “The Lord’s servant must not quarrel...those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in hope that God will give them a change of heart” (2 Timothy 2:24-25). Saint Augustine gave us a little hint: in the essentials, let’s have unity; in the nonessentials, let’s extend liberty; but in all things, let’s have charity.
Discovery Questions

How do you treat people that serve you?

You may be the only Jesus they see, so do they see Him in you?

What is your typical reaction when someone disappoints or disagrees with you?

Do you move toward compassion and seek understanding or are you more concerned with how this affects you and how you can win them to your viewpoint?
Allow me to continue with yesterday’s lesson, the ways to respond with meekness rather than reacting in our humanity.

The fourth way is being TEACHABLE when someone corrects us. This one can be difficult. It’s been said that the man who is too old to learn was probably always too old to learn. Meekness is about having a teachable spirit. Meek people don’t ever pretend to know it all.

In the book of Proverbs, we read, “Do not be wise in your own eyes” (Proverbs 3:7) and, “Incline your ear to wisdom...; search for her as for hidden treasures” (Proverbs 2:2,4). My dad used to say it this way, “The moment you stop learning you just died, whether physically or spiritually.”

The fifth way we can express meekness is through SELF-CONTROL when somebody hurts us. The Bible says, “Do not repay evil for evil but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:17).

Here’s the deal: in life, you’ll be hurt. You will be hurt by others and sometimes be hurt intentionally. The question is whether you will be meek and self-controlled, or weak and lose control. To react is to retaliate, but to respond is to forgive – regardless of whether they asked for or deserve it.

In his book Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am? John Powell tells of a time when he was walking down the street with a friend and they stopped to get a newspaper. The man selling the newspapers was grumpy and rude. His friend said to the man as they were walking away, “You have a nice day now.” John asked his friend, “Is that man always that rude to you?” “Yes, he is,” his friend responded. “Then why are you being so nice to him?” To which he replied, “I’m not going to let one man ruin my day.”

Booker T. Washington, the great African-American scientist, once said, “I will never allow another man to control or ruin my life by making me hate him.” The Bible says, “He who rules his own spirit, is he who captures a city” (Proverbs 16:32).

Jesus promised, “Happy are the people who can control their reactions, for they will inherit the earth.” Meekness is power under control. Paul wrote, “God’s Spirit does not make us timid, instead His Spirit fills us with power, love, and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:7).

Discovery Questions

Are you a lifelong learner and do you have a teachable spirit?

Are you able to receive correction as an act of love and not as criticism?

Is this difficult for you? How so?

What is your very first reaction when you are hurt by someone?

Are you able to control your initial response if you are tempted to retaliate?

If not, what are some ways you could respond differently?
We probably all had that teacher during our formative years that said to us, “The mind is a terrible thing to waste.” And he or she was right, regardless of whether we bought into it at the time. Our minds are a gift, a very special gift from God.

Researchers tell us that our minds can store about 100 trillion facts, even though we only think about 10 thousand thoughts a day. That means we don’t use anywhere near our minds’ capabilities. What a sad reality! We need to be relentless with the part we do use. As Peter wrote, “prepare your minds for action and be self-controlled” (1 Peter 1:13). The Greek word here literally means to gird-up your mind like a soldier would cinch-up his belt.

We must be intentional about filtering what enters our minds. As the old adage goes, “Garbage in, garbage out.” But just as true, “God in, God out.” The Bible tells us that life transformation happens in the mind, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). What we allow into them will most definitely come out somewhere later in our life. The Bible says, “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7). So, we must guard the access to our mind.

Think about it this way. You wouldn’t let an enemy come into your camp and steal something without doing something about it, right? Paul urged, “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5b). We need to take captive those things that are robbing us of our treasures. We need to guard our minds against poisons, like pornography, occultism, trashy novels, and things that profane the name of God. We should be like David, “I will set no vile thing before my eyes” (Psalm 101:3).

**Discovery Questions**

What do you think about most during your day? Be honest!

What are some ways you guard your mind from moment to moment?

Who holds you accountable?
Did you know that Americans spend more money on beer than books? Wow! It’s no wonder our stomachs are bigger than our brains. My friends, just as we are what we eat, we are what we think. Fill your mind with garbage and garbage you will get. “As a man thinketh, so he is” (Proverbs 23:7). This not only embraces the whole of a man’s being but is so comprehensive as to reach out to every condition and circumstance of his life. We are literally what we think, our character being the complete sum of all our thoughts.

A lot of studies done in the last 40 years discovered the way you see yourself will determine, to a large degree, the way you act. Your self-perception, your self-worth, and your self-esteem tend to be the governing factors in your life.

For example, if you see yourself as a loser, you will probably end-up acting like a loser. If you see yourself as a victim, you tend to let people victimize you. On the other hand, if you see yourself as a success, then you will probably tend to repeat successes. This isn’t anything new. The Bible teaches very clearly that your beliefs can and will determine your behavior.

Unfortunately for many of us, false or skewed beliefs began as a child. Remember going to those fun houses with warped mirrors? Some make you big, some skinny, and some short. You look at yourself and your image is distorted. The same is true about our self-perception. Because we grew-up with imperfect people, we often developed distorted images of ourselves.

The enemy throws thoughts at us all day long. He will remind us of our sin, our failures, and what other people did to hurt us. But they are all lies. That’s why we have to believe God’s Word over our stinking thinking, so we won’t give into the lies.

The enemy loves to put God’s people into bondage. So, if you want to change your life, you must change your thinking. The key to that is getting into God’s Word, the truth of who you really are and the gateway to renewing your mind. Otherwise, those negative thoughts about self can keep you from the purpose and calling of God. This is precisely why Paul wrote, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2). It’s interesting that people are anxious to improve their circumstances but unwilling to improve themselves, remaining bound without understanding why.

When God gave us a mind, He gave us one of the greatest gifts we could ever have. Such a gift comes with a high responsibility. How we use it, develop it, and keep it sharp is entirely up to us. The Bible says, “God has not given to us a spirit of fear but a Spirit of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7). So, if we are going to take responsibility for it, then we must also take responsibility for what we allow into it.
Discovery Questions

Do you allow the Word of God, what others say about you, or even what you believe about yourself to mold you?

Are you stuck with intrusive thoughts or memories of the past that hold you back from God’s purpose and destiny?

What could you do today to overcome the lies you may be holding on to?

What would your self-perception look like if you could overcome such lies?
Having a learned mindset is key to managing your mind. Thus, if we want to be mentally fit, we must never stop learning. Solomon writes, “He who loves wisdom, loves his own soul” (Proverbs 19:8). A commitment to learning, growing, and developing is the best thing you can do for yourself. In fact, learning is the proof you truly love yourself.

But sadly, many don’t. Scientists tell us that about the time we hit our mid-thirties, we stop acquiring new skills. So, when was the last time you learned a new skill, a new truth, a new thought, or a new attitude? We can never stop learning.

Being a Christian means that we are committed to life-long learning. The word “disciple” literally means “learner”. If you’re not learning, you’re not a disciple. Jesus commanded, “take My yoke upon you and learn of me” (Matthew 11:29).

Allow me to help you with this verse. The Pharisees, the teachers of the law, had laid many burdens on the people of that day. Jesus said of them, “They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burdens” (Matthew 23:4).

A “yoke” is the wooden beam that a driver would place across the head of his oxen and, as you can imagine, it was heavy. Jesus was contrasting his refreshing teaching (yoke) with the demanding rules and regulations preached by the Pharisees. Saint Augustine beautifully compared the yoke of Christ to a bird’s plumage, an easy weight which enables it to soar to the sky. This is the peace of God that comes with surrender. So, to be yoked to Christ is the greatest blessing we can possibly experience. That’s why he said, “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

Discovery Questions

What new skill, truth or attitude have you learned in the last year?

What happened with this new finding once you acquired it? How did you use it?

Did you use your discovery to serve others? How so?
Allow me to offer three attitudes we must develop to be a learner and stay mentally sharp.

First, we must develop the attitude of OPENNESS. The Bible tells us, “the intelligent man is always open to new ideas, in fact, he looks for them” (Proverbs 18:15). A sign of intelligence is having an attitude that says, “I can learn from anybody, any place, and any time.”

Here are some examples of a closed mind: “We tried that before,” “It cost too much,” “We’ve never done it that way before,” “That’s not our problem,” “It isn’t in the budget,” and “Let’s form a committee.” If you are guilty of such thinking, the good news is that you can change. And that change can start now.

Secondly, we need an attitude of HUMILITY. “When pride comes then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom” (Proverbs 11:2). Humility is the attitude that says, “I don’t know it all.” Winston Churchill once said, “I love to learn, I just hate to be taught.” My friends, pride is a killer. Whenever we’re humbled, we always learn. As we just read, “With humility comes wisdom.”

Finally, we need to develop the attitude of ENTHUSIASM. Paul wrote, “Whatever you do, do it heartily as unto the Lord and not as unto men” (Colossians 3:23). Listen, it’s a known fact that we learn faster when we’re enthusiastic.

If you want to be mentally fit, you must start waking-up in the morning and greeting the Lord with an attitude that says, “Lord, teach me something new today. Help me to be mentally alert. I’m open, humbled and eager for what you are going to teach me today.”

**Discovery Questions**

How open are you to new ideas, thoughts, and ways?

What do you do with a new thought that challenges you to question your previous perceptions?

Do you greet that with a sense of wonder and anticipation that something new may be revealed to you?
We are talking this week about the importance of becoming intentional in guarding our minds. As we’ve noted multiple times, “Garbage in, garbage out.” But just as true in Christ, “God in, God out.” Now, let me provide you with four practical tips that will help you stay mentally sharp.

First, you must schedule THINK time. This is key and notice the intentionality of “scheduling” it. Nothing happens unless you make it happen.

Think time is when you don’t read, you don’t talk, you don’t listen to music, you just think. Nothing is more rewarding than sitting in the presence of the Holy Spirit. So, schedule a time to get alone, get quiet, and just think. Paul asserted, “Make it your ambition to be quiet” (1 Thessalonians 4:11).

I read once that 5% of the world really thinks, 20% think they think, and 75% would rather die than think (or at least have everyone else do their thinking for them). If we’re going to grow in Christ, we must choose to be among the 5% who think.

Secondly, schedule READING time. People are always amazed that I typically read a book per week. I’m frequently asked, “How in the world does that happen?” And the answer is easy: I schedule it. Believe it or not, you can literally read yourself out of a rut. The more you fill your life with good Christian books, magazines, and articles, the more health you’ll have in your life.

Thirdly, schedule time with WISE people. We can gain wisdom the hard way by learning from our own experiences, but it’s better to gain wisdom the easy way by learning from the experiences of others. Who said we have to make all the mistakes ourselves?

King Solomon, who is considered one of the wisest in history wrote, “He who walks with the wise will be wise” (Proverbs 13:20). This is probably the reason he was so wise. Listen, there’s amazing power in association. It’s been said, if you want to fly with the eagles, you’re going to have to stop running with the turkeys.

Finally, take advantage of TRANSITION times like driving to and from work, getting ready in the morning, waiting for a taco, waiting at the doctor’s office, or exercising. Use these times to put on a podcast, listen to Scripture, or read. You’d be amazed by how much time is wasted in transitioning. I consider these to be some of the greatest opportunities that shouldn’t be missed.

**Discovery Questions**

What is your day filled with? How much of that could be reclaimed for one of the four activities you read about today?

Who is the wise person in your life from whom you can gain insight?

How do you use transitions today and could they be used more effectively?
The Bible tells us to think of things that are true, just and honest in Philippians 4:7-8. One of the greatest ways we can do this is to be in God’s Word on a REGULAR basis. Paul wrote, “The Bible is inspired by God [which means it can be trusted] and is useful to teach us what is right and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip His people to do every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). In short, God’s Word keeps us on the right track. In Joshua, we get a promise that if we’ll do this one thing, we’ll, “be prosperous and successful.” And what’s that one thing? “To meditate, memorize, study the word of God, and fill your mind with it” (Joshua 1:8).

To mediate, memorize and study the Word is to taste and enjoy it. The Bible calls it “musing”. It refers to enjoying His word so much as to be infused with God, to breathe God in, and to receive spiritual nourishment.

Englishman George Müller reflected on “musing” in God’s Word, saying, “Now I saw that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to reading of the Word of God, and to meditation on it, that thus my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, reproved, and instructed; and thus, by means of the Word of God, while meditating on it, my heart might be brought into experiential communion with the Lord.” He went on to say, “the result I have found to be almost invariably this, after a very few minutes my soul had been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication, so that,…it turned almost immediately more or less to prayer…and then my inner man almost invariably is even sensibly nourished and strengthened….”

Allow me to quickly offer some practical steps in “musing” on God’s Word.

First, begin first thing in the morning. The best time to start in God’s Word is when the world around you is most quiet. And for most of us, that is first thing in the morning.

Secondly, make sure all electronic devices are silent. We all know that when our cell phones vibrate, our minds do, too. And once we give into it, it’s almost impossible to reel ourselves back into meditation.

Thirdly, and in keeping with the above, find a quiet place where you won’t be distracted.

Fourthly, pray a short prayer to turn your heart to the Lord, to be open to Him, and to ask Him for His blessing on the opening of His word. Remember, the same Spirit that revealed the Scriptures to Jesus will do the same for you.

Finally, when something jumps out to you, share it with others. Talk it. Text it. Tweet it. Or use whatever other source of social media you choose. Either way, just do it! We always retain more when we involve others in our learning.

**Discovery Questions**

What does your daily immersion in the Word look like? Are you satisfied with it?

If not, what is a step you can take to make it more fruitful?

Is it difficult to remove distractions? How can you intentionally remove those distractions?
Dr. Charles Cooley, the Dean of American Sociology, says, “Our self-esteem, our self-worth is
determined, to a large degree, by what you think the people or the person that matters most to you, think
about you.” There’s a lot of truth to that. This is why it’s so important to be in God’s Word, discovering
what He says about us. Shouldn’t He be that most important person?

So, what does God say about us? We are ACCEPTED.

A lot of people will spend their entire lives pursuing acceptance by their parents, their peers, and the
public. This desire pulsates through their veins and, if not careful, will drive their entire intentions – the
kind of clothes they wear, the kind of cars they drive, the kind of houses they buy, and even the careers
they choose. Some will do the craziest things to be accepted.

Remember playing “I dare you” as a kid? Oh my, the risk we took in hopes of acceptance! Well guess
what, the Bible says our wants can be fulfilled in God. “You are a CHOSEN people...a people for God’s
own possession” (1 Peter 2:9, emphasis added). Now that ought to raise someone’s self-esteem. It’s
awesome that our acceptance is not based on any needed performance, special abilities, or perfected
talents. Peter clearly says, “God chose you.” And His acceptance of us is before we ever accept Him.
That’s pretty cool.

But just as awesome as it is to be accepted by God, we are also extremely VALUABLE to Him.

Let me ask you a question. How much do you think you’re worth? I’m not talking about your net
worth, I’m talking about your self-worth. There’s a big difference between the two – your valuables and
your value.

They tell me there are two things that determine value. One is what somebody is willing to pay, and the
second is who owned it in the past. Now again, based upon these two things, what’s your value? The
answer is found in who owns you and what He is willing to pay for you.

Hopefully, your answer is Jesus – which makes you extremely valuable. Even more remarkable is the
price He paid for you – His very own life. Nobody has ever paid more than what God paid for you. And
that makes us priceless.

**Discovery Questions**

In what have you found your value in the past? How did this enhance your life?

How does your self-valuation compare with how Jesus values you?

Find additional Scriptures about how much Jesus values you and commit those to memory.
If there’s one word that will transform any relationship, it’s the word appreciation. People are starving for it. According to American philosopher and psychologist William James, “The deepest need in human beings is their need to be appreciated.” This is why the Bible says, “Encourage one another daily” (Hebrews 3:13).

In England, they tell me, there’s a service called “Dial-a-Compliment”. In short, if you’re feeling down, you can dial the number and somebody on the phone will build you back up. It has a wide array of compliments from which to choose, such as, “You look wonderful,” “Your hair is great,” “You have a wonderful smile,” and, “I love your eyes.”

My friends, appreciation raises a person’s value, and everybody wants to be valued. So, allow me to offer some things that we can appreciate in others.

First, people’s LOYALTY. Paul wrote, “I thank God for you every time I think of you, because of the way in which you have helped me in the work of the gospel from the very first day until now, both now that I am in prison and also while I was free” (Philippians 1:3-5). There’s just nothing like those who stand beside us through thick and thin. A true friend walks in when it seems everybody else is checking out.

In Yellowstone National Park there’s a geyser called Old Faithful. Interestingly, it’s not the biggest of geysers. In fact, it’s not even the most beautiful. But people like it, because they can count on it. It’s faithful. It’s loyal.

Secondly, we need to appreciate people’s DIFFERENCES.

Years ago, in 1970 to be exact, singer Ray Stevens sang, “Everything is beautiful, in its own way.” He was right, and we should appreciate that. Think about it. If we all liked vanilla, Cold Stone would be closed and the only thing that would appreciate it would be my waistline. What if everybody was like me? Or imagine if everybody was like you? Paul wrote, “Be patient and tolerant with one another, always ready to forgive if you have a difference with anybody for you were called to live as one united body and always be thankful” (Colossians 3:13-15). We need to learn to appreciate each other’s differences. Remember, the greater the differences, the greater potential for growth.

Finally, we need to appreciate people’s EFFORTS. “We always thank God for you; how you put your faith into practice and how your love made you work so hard” (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3). Remember the teachers who gave an “A” for effort? I loved those (even though they couldn’t spell).

Listen, we can’t take people’s efforts for granted regardless of the results. Too often we think things must be perfect in order to be appreciated, which means nobody can ever be appreciated. Too often we nag instead of brag and give pokes instead of strokes. It’s time for the tide to turn.

**Discovery Questions**

Who do you need to express appreciation to this week?

When was the last time you thanked your parents for just being your parents?

How are you different from those around you? How can you appreciate those differences?

Whose efforts do you need to acknowledge and be thankful for, even for small things?
Mark Twain once said, “I can go two weeks on one good compliment.” The Bible agrees, “A word of encouragement does wonders” (Proverbs 12:25). So how can we show appreciation that is genuine and effective?

First, make it REAL. The Bible says, “Don’t just pretend that you love others; really love them” (Romans 12:9). Appreciating someone needs to authentic, not false flattery. I heard it said once, “Usually when somebody pats you on the back, they really want you to cough something up.” Isn’t that the truth? Paul didn’t say that. Paul said “Don’t have ulterior motives. Genuinely, authentically, love them.”

Just as true as the need for it to be real, make sure it’s RECOGNIZABLE. That means make it clear. Be specific. Make sure they know that you know. The Bible says, “What a joy it is to find just the right word for the right occasion” (Proverbs 15:23). Don’t beat around the bush. Don’t dabble in the grey. Say it. Write it. Touch them. Hug them.

Thirdly, make it REGULAR. Do it often. Make it consistent. I’ve often said, if you woke up every day to a card of appreciation in the mail (whether snail mail or email), your life would be dramatically different. Paul wrote, “Whenever we can we should always be kind to everyone, and especially to our Christian brothers” (Galatians 6:10). It’s been said, “Give people flowers while they can smell them. A single rose given while somebody’s alive is much more valuable than a wreath at a funeral.”

Scientists have discovered the healthiest human emotion is appreciation. When appreciation is received consistently, people are healthier and will live longer. It is one of the most powerful yet overlooked aspects of successfully motivating people and empowering teams. Appreciation impacts productivity, morale, and ultimately success.

So here is my “ask” of you. Who is the one person to whom you need to write a card, make a call, send an email, and express your appreciation – for their loyalty and for their efforts? I challenge you to find ways to give a compliment to every person you interact with. Remember, people blossom under affirmation but wilt under criticism. Voltaire said, “Appreciation is a wonderful thing. It makes what is excellent in others belong to us as well.”

Discovery Questions

Are you a flatterer?

What will it take for you to notice things in people that you can truly appreciate and express?

Who is the one person to whom you need to write a card, make a call, send an email, and express your appreciation – for their loyalty and for their efforts?

How can you remind yourself to be consistent in recognizing others?
One of the greatest building blocks to healthy relationships is the art of listening. The source of so many problems in our relationships is our failure to listen.

Experts tell us that we will spend approximately 40% of our waking hours hearing, and yet, we never listen. The Bible says, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). Interestingly, Cardiologist Dr. James Lynch proved that every time we listen our blood pressure goes down; but every time we speak, our blood pressure goes up.

Don’t miss this: listening is more than hearing words and sounds. It’s more than waiting for your turn to talk. Listening is an art we need to learn, because truly listening is actually loving. The Bible says, “He who answers before listening, that is his folly and his shame” (Proverbs 18:13). The Living Bible says it this way, “It’s stupid to decide before knowing the facts.” It’s true, we get into trouble when we make assumptions. Actress Rachel Welch once said, “You can’t fake listening.” So, allow me to offer three ways we can improve our listening, and in turn, have healthier, stronger, and better relationships.

First, we need to listen with our eyes. Psychological researcher Albert Mehrabian discovered that approximately 90% of all communication is non-verbal. If you love someone, you’ll look at them. You give people a gift when you look them in the eye, communicating that they have your undivided attention. In Mark’s gospel we read, “Jesus looked at him [talking about the rich young ruler] and loved him” (Mark 10:21).

Secondly, listen with your heart. When Jesus talked with the woman at the well (John 4), He was listening to what was NOT being said. You see, to listen for the hurt you must be listening with your heart. The key is to figure out what they are communicating but not saying. Everybody hurts somewhere. The question is where? To find out, you have to listen for it. It’s been said, “A man is already half in love with a woman who will listen to him.”

Thirdly, make time to listen. Schedule it. Put it on the calendar. When it comes to marriage, experts tell us that, the average couple spends only 26 minutes a week in serious conversation. Time is one of the greatest gifts you can give someone, because time is your life.

Allow me to quote from Jay Osborn’s book, Listen to The Marriage: “When I ask you to listen to me, and you start giving me advice, you haven’t done what I’ve asked. When I ask you to listen to me, and you begin to tell me why I shouldn’t feel that way, you’re just trampling on my feelings. When I ask you to listen to me, and you feel like you have to do something to solve my problem, you have failed me, strange as that seems. Listen. All I ask that you do is listen. Not talk, not do. Just hear me out. Advice is cheap. Twenty cents will get you both Dear Abby and Billy Graham in the same paper. I can do that for myself. I’m not helpless. Maybe discouraged, maybe faltering, but not helpless. So, please, listen and just hear me. And if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn, and I’ll listen to you.”

Discovery Questions

Are you a hearer or a listener?

Anyone can hear sounds, but do you absorb what is actually being communicated?

Do you lock in on those that are talking to you or are you one to be looking around? What does that communicate to those who are speaking to you?

Do you prepare your heart to receive what may be communicated in non-verbal ways? How can you prepare yourself?
It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who said, “The only way to have a friend is to be sure you are one.” There’s nothing like a friend. Solomon wrote, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work; if one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10). Studies tell us that the number one emotional problem in America is loneliness. Everybody wants friends. Author Sydney Smith wrote, “To love and to be loved is the greatest happiness of existence.”

Now listen, real friendships are not accidental; they are made, they are developed, planned, cultivated, nurtured, and built. They require great intention. So, allow me to offer some key principles to developing good, long-lasting, healthy friendships.

First, you must be COMMITTED. “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24). Commitment is a big deal, especially in a world where people don’t want to be committed. It seems people want the long-term benefits of a friendship, but will only give themselves to a short-term investment. I like what philanthropist Henry G. Bosch said, “The shortest way to London is good company.” Allow me to add “committed company.”

Secondly, you must be CONSIDERATE. Solomon wrote, “He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends” (Proverbs 17:9). True friends accept each other, warts and all. They are quick to forgive blunders. By the way, if you ever want to know who your friends are, just make a mistake. Friends don’t rub it in, they rub things out. Like one guy said, “You’re a good egg, even if you are a little cracked!” The fact is, we’re all a little cracked. The Living Bible says it this way, “Love forgets mistakes, nagging about them parts the best of friends” (Proverbs 17:9).

Thirdly, you must be SAFE. And this is a biggie. The Bible says, “A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret” (Proverbs 11:13). Allow me to ask, can you keep a secret? Evangelist Charles Spurgeon once said, “He who throws dirt always loses ground.” The writer of Proverbs tells us, “Gossip separates close friends” (Proverbs 16:28). The quickest way to kill a friendship is to forsake confidentiality. A faithful friend listens to you without a burning desire to tell somebody else.

Fourthly, you must be HONEST. “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). Genuine friends stimulate each other to growth. They bring out the best in each other. I like the way Ralph Waldo Emerson says it, “A true friend is someone who makes us do what we can do.”

Finally, you must be DEPENDABLE. “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17). I can count on my friends. They’re always in my corner, especially when I’m cornered. When everybody else seems to be walking out, they walk in. Someone said a real friend is like toothpaste, they come through in a tight squeeze.

“I went out to find a friend but could not find one there. I went out to be a friend, and friends were everywhere” (author unknown).

With whom are you committed, considerate, confidential, candid, constructive, and consistent? The greatest Christian witness to the world is a Christian friend.
Discovery Questions

Who are your close friends on which you can rely?

To whom are you committed?

Are you good at holding confidences? If not, who can help you sharpen your skills?

Are willing to be challenged? Who is trusted enough to help you grow?
Every day, we encounter people who are difficult to be around, let alone to live with. Thus, we need to learn how to deal with them without conflict. That’s easier said than done. The Bible tells us, “Those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of goodness” (James 3:18). Every day, we sow seeds in every relationship – the question is “what type?”

Allow me to offer some seeds of wisdom we can sow to nourish difficult relationships rather than inflict more damage. James tells us, “Wisdom is pure, peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (James 3:17).

First, wisdom sows seeds of PURITY instead of compromising our integrity. Personally, this means I won’t lie to you, cheat you, con you, take advantage of you, or deliberately mislead you. Why is this list so important? Because all relationships are built on trust. The Bible says, “A person of integrity walks securely” (Proverbs 10:9).

Secondly, wisdom sows seeds that are PEACE-LOVING instead of antagonizing someone’s anger. Wise people work toward harmony. They don’t go looking for a fight. But let’s be honest, some people love to be argumentative. The Bible says, “Any fool can start arguments. The wise thing is to stay out of them” (Proverbs 20:3). And that must be our goal, to stay out of them. Therefore, we must be peace-loving.

Thirdly, wisdom sows seeds of CONSIDERATION instead of minimizing someone’s feelings. Allow me to note that feelings are neither right nor wrong, they’re simply feelings. Being considerate means being mindful of them. “Kind words bring life, but cruel words crush your spirit” (Proverbs 15:4). The key to consideration is listening when someone shares their feelings rather than trying to fix them. Consideration doesn’t try to figure them out like a psychologist, it just shows sympathy.

Fourthly, wisdom sows seeds of LISTENING instead of criticizing someone’s suggestions. Wise people can learn from anybody. They’re not defensive. They’re teachable. They’re open. The Bible says, “A fool thinks he needs no advice, but the wise man listens to others” (Proverbs 12:15).

Finally, wisdom sows seeds of MERCY instead of emphasizing someone’s mistakes. James tells us, “Wisdom is full of mercy and good fruit” (James 3:17). Solomon writes, “Love forgets mistakes, nagging about them parts the best of friends” (Proverbs 17:9).

Mercy is giving people what they need, not what they deserve. By the way, isn’t that the way God is toward you? Think about it. If God gave us what we deserve, none of us would be here. The Bible says, “Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13).

**Discovery Questions**

Is integrity a priority for you? How do you maintain your integrity? Who holds you accountable?

In what ways can you be a peace-maker? Which relationships in your life need this?

How do you feel when someone tries to “fix” you?

How do you respond when someone shares their feelings with you? Are you a “fixer”?
The Bible says, “Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love...And He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:7-8, 21).

There are a lot of misconceptions about what real love is. Some people think love is a feeling. They describe it as an ocean of emotion, a quiver in their liver. No doubt about it, love can cause those feelings, but love is not a feeling. It’s so much more than that.

Another misconception is that love is uncontrollable. In other words, they just couldn’t handle it. They just fell in love as if they were walking down a road and stepped in an unforeseen pothole. The Bible says that’s not true.

So, what is love? The Bible says that love is a choice. Paul writes, “And over all these put on love which binds them together” (Colossians 3:14). Notice the words “put on,” as in putting on your coat. It’s a decision to do something. Which brings me to the second thing the Bible says love is, a conduct, an action, something we do, more than feelings, more than words. John tells us, “Let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and truth” (1 John 3:18).

I heard a husband say once, “Baby, I’d die for you.” I loved what she said in response, “You’re always saying that, but you never do it.” I guarantee he’d only do it once. So how can we express authentic love to others?

First, we have to experience God’s love ourselves. “I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your heart, living within you as you trust Him. May your roots go deep into the soil of God’s marvelous love, and may you be able to feel and understand how long, wide, deep and high His love really is, and experience this love for yourselves” (Ephesians 3:17-18). Wow, that’s a good word!

Why is that so important? Because a battery cannot give what it does not have. True love starts within before it can move without.

Now, secondly, we can give what everyone needs: forgiveness. The Bible tells us that we are to “forgive as the Lord forgave us” (Colossians 3:13). Why is this so important? Because it’s impossible to love someone while we’re holding on to stuff with somebody else.

I cannot love my kids fully if I’m still resenting my parents. I can’t love my wife fully if I’m still reacting to my former girlfriend. A bitter heart is a divided heart. If you are still holding on to the past, then you are still reacting to the past. That’s why Jesus said, “Love others as I have loved you” (John 13:34).

Thirdly, once you’ve received God’s love and have cleaned the slate of all past offenses, you can start believing and expecting the best of others and for others. Paul writes, “If you love someone you will always believe in him, and always expect the best of him” (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Let’s be honest, we tend to live up to what other people expect of us. If we want to change ourselves, our families, our spouses, we must treat them the way we want them to become. Expect the best of them. Raise the level of expectation and watch people blossom under affirmation and expectation. Remember, love works if you work it.
Discovery Questions

Do you sometimes “choose” to be in love?

Be honest, don’t we have those moments where we have to be intentional?

Can you recall a time where you chose to be loving when you didn’t feel like it?

What actions can you develop to be intentional and show love in action?

How can you connect with your first love (God) more intentionally, so you can pour into others from fullness in Him?
The Bible says, “It takes wisdom to have a good family, and it takes understanding to make it strong” (Proverbs 24:3). Read it again. It takes wisdom and understanding to build a good family and have healthy relationships. I love that verse.

In wrapping up this week, I want to offer some wise advice and some good understanding that will assure you experience all that God wants you to experience by way of relationships.

First, we need to make what’s important to them, important to us. I love the story about a father who wasn’t much of a sports fan, but his son was. The boy had developed a strong interest in hockey. So, one year, his daddy took him to every game he could. It cost him a great deal of time and money, but it proved to be a strong bonding experience for both of them. One of the father’s best friends inquired, “I thought you didn’t like hockey all that much?” To which the father replied, “I still don’t. I just like my son that much.”

Let me give you a little tip to developing this: listen. Listen to their heart, their ideas, their dreams, their loves, their wants, their likes and dislikes, and in a short period of time, you’ll be on your way. The great baseball legend, Yogi Berra said it this way, “You can hear an awful lot – by just listening.”

Secondly, keep your promises. And this is HUGE. “Faithful followers of the Lord...keep their promises even when it hurts” (Psalm 15:4).

Turkey was hit by a terrible earthquake in 2003. Many of its small villages were devastated. In one small village there lived a man and his son, Armand. On the day of the quake, Armand went off to school, as he had so many other days, with his father assuring him, “After school, I’ll come for you.” But this day wasn’t like any other day. When the quake hit, the whole village was demolished, including the school. Armand’s father was terror-stricken and ran to find his son. Knowing he was buried in the rubble, he began digging. For 2, 4, 6 hours they labored. Evening came, and they continued to work – 9, 11, 13 hours. When morning came, many began to give up, but not Armand’s dad. He continued, 18, 20, 24 hours, until eventually it was just him alone. Many began urging him, “It’s hopeless. You need to quit.” “I cannot,” he said, “I told Armand I would come for him.” Brick after brick, he continued to dig – 32, 34, 36 hours. And then it happened, around the 38th hour, Armand’s dad removed a small piece of debris, and there was a hole, and through that hole, he saw two little eyes; and a voice, “Dad, I knew you’d come for me. You said you’d come.” Armand’s father kept pulling rubble away, and he saw other children in the hole. He reached down to take his son’s hand, “Come on, Armand. I’ll lift you out.” But his son responded, “No dad. Take the other children first. They’re afraid. I told them you’d come for me, and you came.”

Cisco Systems (a worldwide leader in understanding how people connect, communicate and collaborate) did a study and found that the number one reason people leave a company is when the leader makes promises and doesn’t keep them. Solomon wrote, “Keep all the promises you make...it is better to say nothing than to promise something that you don’t follow through on” (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5).

Finally, encourage one another. I’ve said it already, but I’ll say it again: one of the most powerful things you can give someone is appreciation – encouragement. What’s crazy is that it doesn’t cost you a thing, yet it can make a person feel absolutely priceless. I heard it said once, “We live by encouragement, and we die without it, slowly, sadly and angrily.” Paul writes, “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up...” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

A reporter once asked Andrew Carnegie why he hired 43 millionaires to work for him. Carnegie pointed out that the men were not millionaires when he hired them. Of course, the reporter had to ask, “Then
how did you develop these men, to become so valuable to you, that you would pay them so much money?” Carnegie replied, “People are developed the same way gold is mined. When gold is mined, several tons of dirt must be removed to get an ounce of gold; but you don’t go into the mine looking for dirt, you go into the mine looking for gold.”

Someone once said, “Man doesn’t live by bread alone. Sometimes, he needs to be buttered-up.”

**Discovery Questions**

What do you know about those around you? Do you know enough to enter their world? Do you know what is important to them?

Share a time when you did something important to a friend, family member or spouse that was meaningful to them.

Are you listening close enough to know what is important to others?

Why do you think listening grows relationships?
15% of everything Jesus said dealt with money or possessions. Now think about that. One out of every seven words spoken were on the topic of money. Obviously, it’s a pretty important subject to Jesus.

Now, it’s important to note that money in and of itself is not evil. Like fire, money is neither good nor evil, it’s neutral. Its character, however, is determined by the eye of the perceiver and the hand of the user. The Bible doesn’t say, “Money is the root of all evil” (1 Timothy 6:10). It says that the “love of” it is the root, the source of all kinds of evil. And in that, the love of it brings forth its potential downside. The Bible says, “If you love money, you’ll never be satisfied; if you long to be rich, you’ll never get all you want” (Ecclesiastes 5:10).

Did you know that if you were born after 1970, you’re already in more debt than the previous generations? Let’s be honest, our nation is obsessed with stuff. And it’s an obsession that needs to change. The Bible says, “Beware. Don’t be greedy for what you don’t have. Real life is not measured by how much we own” (Luke 12:15). It’s been said that money is a great servant but a lousy god. If we don’t learn to manage our money, our money will manage us. And isn’t that the truth? So how can we learn to be wise with our wealth?

First, I think we need to RECOGNIZE that God owns everything there is – which means everything we already have. The Bible says, “The world and all that is in it belongs to the Lord. The earth and all who live on it are His” (Psalm 24:1). This is the first stumbling block for many. It’s easy to think, “But I’ve worked my butt off for everything I have.” And at first glance, it seems logical. But I have to add, “Who do you think gave you the butt to work off in the first place?” In the book of Deuteronomy, we read, “Remember the Lord your God. He is the one who gives us the power to be successful” (Deuteronomy 8:18).

And I remind you, if you are a Christ follower, YOU belong to God. The Bible tells us that “God bought you with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:20). Truth be told, every breath we take is a gift from God. Everything belongs to the Lord.

Which means, I must REALIZE that I’m the steward of all God has entrusted me with. The Bible says, “If you’re untrustworthy about worldly wealth who will trust you with the true riches of heaven? And if you’re not faithful with other people’s money why should you be trusted with money of your own?” (Luke 16:11-12).

**Discovery Questions**

How does your handling of money show that it all comes from God and you are the steward of what He has entrusted you with?

Are you managing God’s money well? Where can you be a better steward?
In yesterday’s devotion, I stated that everything belongs to God and thus, we are His stewards. Let me offer a picture of what that stewardship looks like. Imagine a three-layered cake.

Layer one is GOD. The Bible says that we are to honor God with the FIRST portion of our wealth. And in Scripture, God called it a “tithe”. The word simply means a tenth of all that we receive by way of income. The Bible says, “The purpose of tithing is to teach you always to fear the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 14:23). It doesn’t matter how much we make; the percentage is the same. It is a beautiful act of worship toward God.

You see, every time I put my tithe in the offering plate, I’m acknowledging that God is the owner of all I have, and I’m being a good steward. It’s the moment of gratitude in which I’m saying, “I realize that everything I have comes from You, God. Thank you.”

Let me add that if you’re not tithing, I encourage you to get started. I guarantee you’ll be glad you did. It’s one of the most freeing things you can ever do, as well as getting to witness God multiply the loaves and the fish once again (John 6).

Layer two is YOURSELF. The Bible says that work, the ability to make money, was given as a gift from God so that we can provide for our families. “A good man leaves an inheritance to his children” (Proverbs 13:22).

Layer three is OTHERS. Part of God’s expectation concerning our money is helping others in need. “All of the believers were of one heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own. They shared everything they had” (Acts 4:32). We should always be looking around and asking, “How can I bless someone else?”

**Discovery Questions**

Have you considered giving the first 10% back to God? What might be the outcome if you did this first, then planned for the balance?

Would you consider talking to some people who you know are tithers and hear what God has done with their obedience?

How has God gifted you with the ability to earn an income? How could that be used to help others less fortunate than you?
John D. Rockefeller was asked in light of his wealth, “How much is enough?” To which he replied, “A little bit more.” He was also known to say, “The poorest man I know is the man who has nothing but money.”

I’m not sure his reply hasn’t become common thinking and the practice of many. It seems to be the norm. And it seems most people think money does one of three things.

First, it satisfies.

I’ll be happy if I have this. I’ll be happy if I have that. It’s been said that our yearnings will always exceed our earnings. Solomon wrote, “You will never be satisfied if you long to be rich” (Ecclesiastes 5:10). Think about that for a moment. For who decides how much is “rich?”

Consider, if money makes people happy, then the wealthiest people in the world should be the happiest. And, truth be told, that’s just not true. Always remember that if the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, you can bet the water bill is higher, too.

People think that money brings significance. Money means power, and power means respect, right? I read once, “Man’s true life is not made up of the things he owns.” Our net worth should never determine our self-worth. Our value is not based on our valuables. Our checkbook should never determine our outlook.

Finally, people think money means security. The Bible says, “Money can be gone in a flash as if it had grown wings and flown away like an eagle” (Proverbs 23:5). You can’t control the stock market, so don’t let the stock market control you. Whatever you put your security in will become your god.

My friends, we live in a very materialistic world, and all of us are susceptible to its lure. We are always one purchase removed from throwing it all away. The Bible teaches us, “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have” (Hebrews 13:5). Our ultimate security should not be in things, it should be in the One who made them. Someone once said, “Don’t depend upon your supplies; depend upon the Supplier.”

**Discovery Questions**

Consider how money works in your life; do you control it, or does it control you?

How does God’s view of money affect how you view yours?
As we’ve said, there is God’s way of understanding wealth, and there are harmful, unproductive ways that we understand wealth. Allow me to identify some of our harmful ways.

One is the ACCUMULATION of wealth. James writes, “You have hoarded wealth in the last days” (James 5:3). Let me ask a simple, but profound question. What’s the point of having something you never use? James just told us not to stockpile wealth. In fact, God wants His money in circulation.

A while back, the newspaper reported that an elderly, poor person died. When they removed his mattress, they found hundreds of thousands of dollars. Evidently, he wasn’t that poor.

When James wrote this, people were hoarding their wealth in three ways. They would either stockpile it, invest in clothes, or gather precious metals and jewels. It’s important to remember this as you read his writing. “Your wealth has rotted, moths have eaten your clothes and your gold and silver are corroded” (James 5:2-3). The simple point James is making is that whatever you accumulate, deteriorates.

Another harmful way is the ACQUISITION of wealth. Please understand, God is not only concerned with “what we’ve got,” but also with “how we got it.” “The wages you have failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you” (James 5:4).

Again, when James wrote this, most everyone worked on a daily basis. They were hired at the beginning of the day, and paid at the end of the day. There were no contracts, labor unions, or laws to protect workers. If the boss wanted to rip someone off, he could. This is what James was criticizing.

In our time, James would be telling us not to charge too much. If you sell your car, don’t make it out as “the deal of century.” Don’t cheat on your taxes. Don’t lean on your shovel.

Another harmful way is the ALLOCATION of wealth. In other words, how we spend it. James blasts these guys. “You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence” (James 5:5).

One of the greatest temptations to avoid is selfishly overspending on ourselves. Just because we can afford something doesn’t necessarily mean we ought to buy it. James adds, “You have fattened yourself for the slaughter” (James 5:5).

The final harmful way is the APPLICATION of wealth. In his book Money, Sex and Power, Richard Foster says that money has a lot more power than simply buying. When you have money, it gives you influence and authority. James says we should recognize money is powerful without abusing it. Use it for good. He writes, “You have condemned and ruined innocent men, and they are powerless to stop you” (James 5:6).

Evidently, James saw the rich exploiting people. Still today, a lot of people use money to manipulate others. Listen, wealth is not a weapon to be used for power and control. It doesn’t exist for looking down on anyone, or expecting special treatment from everyone.

Discovery Questions

What does your checkbook say about your use of money?

Have a look at where it goes and ask yourself what it says about you.

In the last year, how has gratefulness for what you have prompted you to reach out to others?

What might you do differently today?
For the past several days, we’ve been talking about money. I hope we’ve learned that money means something to God that is much different than what it means to us. Allow me to offer some more principles that will help in using money wisely.

First, ESTABLISH trust in God. Now, I know some of you are thinking, “That’s exactly what I do already. Every time I go to the mall, I write a check and pray, ‘God, I’m trusting You to cover it.’” Okay, that’s not what I’m talking about. Listen, there’s a big difference between a “righteous” check and a “rubber” one.

Worry is the telltale sign that we are not trusting God. USA Today noted that two-thirds of Americans worry about their finances daily. Regardless of what financial struggles we face, we must develop a trust in Almighty God. Paul writes, “I know how to get along with humble means and I also know how to live in prosperity. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:12-13).

Secondly, we must EDUCATE our spending. They tell us that we Americans spend 110-120% of our income. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that we’re not being real smart. Solomon writes, “The more you have, the more you spend right up to the limits of your income” (Ecclesiastes 5:11).

Thirdly, we have to EXERCISE tithing. The Bible literally says, “A tenth of what you produce belongs to the Lord. It must be set apart to Him as holy” (Leviticus 27:30). Notice the Bible says that money is holy. When have you ever thought of money as holy instead of your pockets?

Listen, God isn’t interested in your money, He’s interested in how it represents your heart. Your trust. Paul understood this. “My God will supply all my needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

Finally, we must learn to EXECUTE discipline. The writer of Proverbs tells us, “The borrower is servant to the lender” (Proverbs 22:7). They tell us every adult in America is carrying $3000 in credit card debt. Paul wrote, “Pay all our debts” (Romans 13:8). God wants us to serve Him, not someone or something else - especially money. The lower your debt goes, the more your cash will start to flow. “He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment” (Proverbs 12:11).

If we learn to implement these four principles, I guarantee our lives will become fuller than we ever imagined.

**Discovery Questions**

Are you trusting God with your finances or do you spend more time worrying about them?

How do you track where your money is going? Are you fully aware?

Would complete awareness change where it goes?

How can you be more disciplined in your spending?
Ann Landers once said, “Do your givin’ while you’re livin’…then you’ll be knowin’ where it’s goin’.” I think she’s right. But permit me to add – do it CHEERFULLY. The Bible tells us that “God loves the person who gives cheerfully” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

I read about a preacher from a long time ago who said, “Never do something for someone if you’re going to complain about it later. Only serve, give, or do what you’re willing to do happily, without regret or complaint.” That’s a good lesson to learn. But unfortunately, many don’t always live by this rule. It seems when it comes to giving, most stop at giving nothing.

So why is cheerful giving so important? Because giving grudgingly is a sign of an underlying heart condition. Paul emphasized this time and time again. Our gifts must come from the heart voluntarily, not reluctantly or from a sense of compulsion. Truth be told, if we find giving money to God’s work to be difficult, we probably haven’t given our hearts either.

Cheerful giving is really evidence of God’s grace revealed through us. God is pleased when His grace towards us produces His graciousness in us. And when we give this way, generously and cheerfully, God returns the same measure back to us – “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38). Solomon even wrote, “The generous will themselves be blessed” (Proverbs 22:9).

Winston Churchill once said, “We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.” And life, life to the full, is precisely what God wants for our lives.

By the way, if we complain about our giving and the things we do for others, we rob ourselves of God’s blessing and any chance of receiving back from Him.

My friends, God created us to be conduits, not containers. For God’s nature is to give, and He desires His children to replicate His likeness – to be givers.

By the way, the Greek word for “cheerful” is where we get the word “hilarious.” So, I ask when was the last time you gave, and then broke out in uncontrollable laughter and applause? Well, maybe it’s time to start.

**Discovery Questions**

After examining your heart, what is it’s condition toward giving?

Do you need to reconsider how to be a cheerful giver?

Have you received God’s grace and blessings in your life? How so?

What are some ways the fullness of His grace could help you give with greater enthusiasm?
In 1923, a group of the world’s most successful financiers met at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. These tycoons controlled more wealth collectively than the United States Treasury; and for years, newspapers and magazines printed their success stories and urged the youth of the nation to follow their examples.

Some 27 years later, things weren’t as they first appeared. Charles Schwab, the president of the largest independent steel company, lived on borrowed money the last five years of his life and died penniless. Arthur Cutten – the greatest wheat speculator – died abroad, insolvent. Richard Whitney, the president of the New York Stock Exchange, was released some time ago from Sing Sing prison. Albert Fall, a member of the President’s Cabinet, was pardoned from prison so he could die at home. Jesse Livermore, the greatest bear on Wall Street; Leon Fraser, the president of the Bank of International Settlement; and Ivar Krueger, the head of the world’s greatest monopoly, all committed suicide.

For good or bad, one of the most powerful words in the English language is the word “more.”

For instance, “more” of God, “more” faith, reaching “more” people for Christ – are all good. But there are potential downsides as well. “More” stuff. “More” power. “More” control. And we get bombarded with solicitations all-day long. “Use me, buy me, drive me, wear me, try me,” and, unfortunately, we tend to respond, “Absolutely!”

The Bible says, “Just as Death and Destruction are never satisfied, so human desire is never satisfied” (Proverbs 27:20). In the New Century Version, it reads, “They will never stop wanting more.”

But how much is enough? I mentioned John D. Rockefeller’s response to that question the other day: “Just a little bit more.” When he died, his accountant was asked how much Rockefeller left behind, and he replied, “Absolutely everything.”

Please don’t miss this. As I said, “more” has the potential for good or bad, and your satisfaction completely depends upon which side of the pendulum you fall – “more” God, or “more” goods. Allow me to highlight a few more of the lies from when the pendulum swings to the bad side.

Lie number one is that “more” will make me HAPPY. Solomon wrote, “Those who love money will never have enough. How absurd to think that wealth brings true happiness” (Ecclesiastes 5:10).

No society has more stuff than ours does right now, and I would contend that people still aren’t happy. The Bible says, “Enjoy what you have rather than desiring what you don’t have. Wanting more is useless” (Ecclesiastes 6:9).

Lie number two. “More” will make me SOMEBODY. Never confuse your self-worth with your net-worth. Your value is never based on your valuables. Jesus said, “Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have” (Luke 12:15).

It’s crazy how much money we’ll spend that we don’t have, just to impress people we don’t even like. Crazy! Listen, money isn’t a “trophy” to be had, it’s a “tool” to be used.

Lie number three. “More” will make me SECURE. The 1973 edition of Money Magazine had an article that read, “It’s beginning to appear to me that my wife and I would be foolish to invest any money in retirement because the Social Security System will be so good in 30 years when we retire.” That worked out well. Proverbs says, “Those who depend on their wealth will fall like the leaves of autumn” (Proverbs 11:28).

It’s interesting to note that in 1945, the workforce had 41.9 workers for every one person on Social
Security. Today’s workforce only has 3.41 workers for every one person on Social Security. “The rich man thinks of his wealth as an impregnable defense, a high wall of safety. What a dreamer” (Proverbs 18:11).

**Discovery Questions**

What do you depend on for your happiness?

Better yet, whom do you depend on for your joyfulness?

Which of the lies have influenced you in the past?
As we begin this week talking about our vocational work, I thought I’d share a few loopy, off-the-wall, business slogans, because I just love the crazy things people do.

This was a sign that was painted on a tow truck “We don’t want an arm and a leg, just your tows.” This was on a Bar-B-Q joint – “We will serve no swine before it’s time.” This was a sign at the photography shop – “First we shoot you, then we blow you up.” Here’s one from a hot dog vendor – “Our buns are steamed.” This was from the Huddleston Plumbing Company in Aurora, Colorado – “Don’t sleep with a drip tonight, call a plumber.” In California, another plumber – “If it wasn’t for your plumber, you’d have no place to go.”

Now, if you’re a follower of Christ, work should never be just a job. Our work should be more than just work. According to Scripture, our job is our ministry. Over the years I’ve had a lot of people say to me, “I sure wish I could just quit my job and serve the Lord full-time.” My friends, listen, you are in full-time ministry right where you are. Full-time ministry is not a place of employment, it’s an attitude in our hearts. Paul wrote, “Work hard and cheerfully at all you do, just as though you were working for the Lord, and not merely for your masters, remembering it is the Lord who’s going to pay you... He’s the one you are really working for” (Colossians 3:23-24).

So how can we adjust our attitude and work as if we are working for the Lord? Jesus said, “Anything you’ve done for one of my brothers here, however humble, you’ve done for me” (Matthew 25:45). We serve God by serving others. So, allow me to offer a few ways we can have a servant’s mindset in our workplaces.

First, we have to learn to ACCEPT others just the way they are. We minister to people when we truly accept them. And as I’ve said over and over throughout our devotional times, everybody needs acceptance.

Here’s the deal, we all have faults, foibles, weaknesses, and hang-ups. We all goof up, goof around, sin, make mistakes, and stumble. Nobody’s perfect. If we expect perfection from people, we’re going to be frustrated in life. Listen, we can’t help people until we accept people just the way they are – the same way God accepts us. “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you” (Romans 15:7).

Now listen, I’m not talking about approval. We can accept people without approving of their lifestyles. We can love people without agreeing with their behavior. Jesus did it all the time. In fact, Paul explained that’s why Jesus died, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). The Bible says Jesus was “the friend of sinners” (Luke 7:34). He accepted them without condoning their lifestyles, and so can we.

The key is to look past the behavior and see the hurt. We often say that hurt people, hurt people. You see, people hurting on the inside simply act in hurtful ways on the outside. It’s actually a cry for acceptance.

Remember, those who deserve it the least, need it the most. We need to learn when people can’t find acceptance, they look for attention. And when we accept them, we can then minister to them.
Discovery Questions

Who in your workplace needs to find Jesus?

Would you create a list to start praying for them by name?

Can you accept people for who they are today and start to see them as God sees them? To whom do you need to extend such acceptance?
I thought I would continue with a few more of those loopy, off-the-wall, business slogans. This was on an auto body shop—“We meet most of our friends by accident.” In a veterinarian’s waiting room—“Be back in 5 minutes. Sit! Stay!” A funeral home sign—“Drive carefully. We’ll wait.” A window cleaning company—“Your pane is our pleasure.”

So, let’s continue with a few more ways to have a servant’s mindset in our workplace.

Be an ENCOURAGER. Again, nothing floats someone’s boat more than feeling valued. If you build people up, they will never let you down. Paul writes, “Encourage one another and build each other up…” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Let me tell you three things about the people you work with. They are having, or have had, a tough time. They all have a hidden hurt. They all can use a lift. My friends, Christians should have the reputation of being the most encouraging people on the planet. The Bible says that we are to “speak only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29).

I read about a waitress who was being really nice to a little boy one day, and expressed some real appreciation towards him. He looked at his mom and said, “Wow. She thinks I’m real.” People tend to become the way we think of them. If you ever want to change anybody, the secret is to treat them the way you want them to become. Appreciation is always appreciated.

Here’s another way, HELP. Lend a hand. Make them look better than yourself. Solomon wrote, “Whenever you possibly can, do good to those who need it. Never tell your neighbor to wait until tomorrow if you can help him now” (Proverbs 3:27-28).

Did you know that the Bible teaches that when you offer any kind of practical assistance to people at work, you are ministering to them and, ultimately, serving the Lord? Jesus said even a cup of cold water given in His name counts (Matthew 10:42). Paul wrote, “Nothing you do in the Lord’s service is ever useless” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

My friends, we are to be God’s hands, His ears, His eyes, and His mouth. We are to represent Jesus at work. And it’s not only an act of worship, it’s our great witness. We just might be the only Jesus someone ever sees.

Fulton Sheen, a famous Catholic Bishop, went to Africa years ago to visit a leper colony. While he was there, he went to talk to one particular man. The man was almost completely naked, wearing just a loin cloth, laying in the dirt with open sores all over his arms and legs. Fulton leaned over to talk to him wearing his crucifix, and the crucifix broke and fell into one of the open sores on the man’s leg. The bishop said, “I was just kind of revolted by the whole thing, but all of a sudden I was filled with compassion for this man. I reached into that sore and I took up the cross.”

The bottom line, we need to see things as Jesus sees them. There are people we deal with every day that are difficult to work with, work for, and work around. But they are hurting, and we have everything they need in Jesus. Remember, “People don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”
Discovery Questions

Who has been an encouragement to you?

How did that build you up? Who could you do this with and share what you were given?

Do you look like Jesus to others – not physically, but with a character that offers hope and encouragement of what could be?

The Bible tells us that we are to “offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to His service and pleasing to Him. This is the true worship we should offer” (Romans 12:1). Take another look at this passage. Paul tells us that worship is not just something we do on the weekend, but something we do with our lives. Worship is anytime we’re expressing our love to God. Thus, worship is something we can and must do in the workplace. And when we grasp this, it’ll change our lives. So, allow me to offer three things that will transform your work into worship.

First, don’t make work your FOCUS, make your Heavenly Father that. “May He work in us what is pleasing to Him” (Hebrews 13:21). Ira Nays says, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

Just look at this excerpt from an article entitled “Reinventing the Corporation”: “The new American work ethic holds that work should be fulfilling and fun; and integrated as a part of whole life planning. More and more of us believe that work should accomplish a personal or social mission.”

Secondly, do all your work in FAITH, not for fortune. Paul writes, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord, and not for men. Remember, the Lord will reward you... For Christ is the real Master you serve” (Colossians 3:23-24). Listen, no job is too small or too insignificant when you have the right motive and perspective.

Finally, make loving your work your FORCE, not your fame. Love is the key motivator to all success. Paul writes, “Let all that you do be done in love” (1 Corinthians 16:14) – and that includes our work. Mother Teresa said, “It’s not what you do so much that matters, but how much love you put into it.” John Rushcan writes, “When love and skill come together, expect a masterpiece.” Whatever you do for a living, you can turn your workplace into a place of worship when you model Christ’s love to your co-workers, your clients, and your customers.

**Discovery Questions**

What does it mean to be a “living sacrifice”?

What would it look like if you incorporated your work as an offering to your Heavenly Father?

What would be different if you worked in faith, not for fortune?

How can you make your work your Force?
I know they’re terrible, but I just can’t resist it. On a septic tank truck – “Yesterday’s Meals on Wheels.” On the door of a proctologist’s office – “To expedite your visit please back in.” On a plumber’s truck – “We repair what your husband fixed.” At an optometrist’s office – “If you don’t see what you’re looking for, you’ve come to the right place.” Okay, I’m done.

Did you know that 40% of your time will be spent at work over the course of your life? It’s crazy. But since that’s true, I think we need to take advantage of it. For if we don’t, we’ll spend 40% of our lifetimes wasting a God-given arena of personal growth and development.

So how do we become winners in the workplace?

Winners take RESPONSIBILITY for their work. The Bible tells us to “live life with a due sense of responsibility, not as people who don’t know the meaning of life, but as those who do” (Ephesians 5:15).

First, take responsibility by keeping your WORD. David wrote, “God blesses the one who always does what he promises, no matter how much it may cost” (Psalms 15:4). I remember when a handshake was as good as a contract. But today, people are high on promise, but low on performance. It’s one of the reasons airlines deliberately overbook by 30%, because people won’t show. They don’t keep their word. One of the marks of being responsible is keeping your word.

Secondly, take responsibility by WORKING hard. The Bible says, “The one who is slack in his work is a brother to the one who destroys” (Proverbs 18:9). Laziness is literally destruction. Taking responsibility means we labor…not in vain.

Thirdly, take responsibility by becoming WORTHY. Reliable. Dependable. Trustworthy. “Don’t work hard only when your master is watching...work hard all the time, as though you were working for Christ” (Ephesians 6:6-7).

I read about a customer who once said to a clerk, “I want you to do this dishonest transaction, but don’t worry, your boss is out. He’s not going to know about it.” The clerk just happened to be a Christian and said, “My real boss is never out.” So, allow me to ask, how do you work when you are unsupervised? The Bible says, “The man who is faithful in the little things will be faithful in the big things too. If you cheat even a little, you won’t be honest with greater responsibilities” (Luke 16:10-11). Always remember, it’s the little things that test our true integrity.

Finally, take responsibility by being wise with your WEALTH. Somebody said the most sensitive nerve in the human body is the one that goes from the heart to the pocketbook. In Luke’s gospel we read, “If you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of Heaven? And if you are not faithful with other people’s money, why should you be entrusted with money of your own?” (Luke 16:11-12). How you spend your money says a lot about how you live your life. Being a loser is not being poor, it’s being rich and never knowing it.

**Discovery Questions**

Do you go about your work in a way that honors God?

Have you handled your responsibilities as God-given?

Have you ever been tempted to short-change your assignments as if nobody would know? How did you feel about that, and what changes when you realize God is aware?

Are you known for your integrity?
Okay, I lied. One more round. Found on a sanitation truck – “We’re number one in the number two job.” I love this one: found on a septic truck – “After the first whiff, call Cliff.” Finally, a pastry shop – “Get your buns in here.”

So, the first attribute of being a winner in the workplace is RESPONSIBILITY. The second is being RELATIONAL. One of the most important skills that we can learn is how to get along with others – especially at work. And I know for some, this one can be difficult. Introverts often find it’s much easier to isolate than communicate, but we must commit to discovering ways to be friendly. John D. Rockefeller once said, “I’ll pay more for somebody who knows how to get along with others than any other skill.”

But I think we would all agree that some people are tough cookies. We have all dealt with some strange, weird and wacky folks – and I’m being kind!

So, just for the sake of more fun, allow me to stereotype a few of them. Those who tend to run over people can be pushy and demanding. They sometimes use threats, intimidation, and fear. There are the chatter boxes who just don’t know how to be quiet. Their mouths are always in gear, and a lot of times, their work isn’t. How about the pessimists? They see the negative in everything. Their favorite phrases are, “It won’t work. Can’t be done. Costs too much. Impossible.” How about the ones we walk around on eggshells? They’re always fun! Anyone ever work with the crybabies? They’re always getting their feelings hurt. These are just a few, but we’ve all had to work with some.

So, how do we be relational, yet keep our sanity? Herein lies the great dilemma. Allow me to offer some suggestions. First, be HUMBLE. The Bible tells us to “be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly” (Romans 12:16). Remember, while some are difficult for you, you’re probably difficult for someone else. Be HUMANE. In other words, have a heart. The Bible says, “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone” (Romans 12:17). Be HONORABLE. “Respect what is right in the sight of all men” (Romans 12:17). Winners do what is right regardless of consequence, convenience, or acceptance. Finally, be HARMONIOUS. Don’t be divisive. People can be jerks, but we all have been at times. Paul writes, “Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18).

Discovery Questions

If you are an introvert, how can you be a “learned” extrovert?

Do you know any introverts who have learned how to get outside themselves and could teach you?

What if you practiced being humble, humane, honorable and harmonious? Would these open relational connections for you since even Extra-Grace-Required people are attracted to such attributes?
So, the first attribute of being a winner in the workplace is RESPONSIBILITY. The second one we looked at is being RELATIONAL. The final attribute is being RELIABLE, having staying power.

If there’s one thing for certain, you can always count on a winner. That’s why they are a winner. They don’t give up. They’re in it for the long-haul. As the old adage goes, “When the going gets tough, the tough stay on.” I like to say it this way, “Starters are a dime a dozen, but finishers are one in a million.” Reliable people just see it through to the end.

One of my favorite quotes is by Theodore Roosevelt. “Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure... than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much, because they live in a gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.”

All of us have experienced problems at work. Sometimes walking away from the problem would be so much easier than persevering through it. And truth be told, sometimes that might be the best course of action. But it should be our last resort.

The ability to never give up, to overcome, to be creative if need be, to finish and finish well, is the heart of a winner and should be the heart of every Christian. Paul writes, “We can rejoice when we run into problems and trials for we know they are good for us – they help us learn to be patient. And patience develops strength of character...” (Romans 5:3-4). I want you to note the phrase, “Patience develops strength of character.” God is always more interested in our character than He is in our comfort. For character is built best in times of adversity. And when character is complete, we will always finish well.

My friend, the most important thing you bring home from your work is not your paycheck. It’s yourself. So how are you doing? Are you becoming more like Christ in your workplace? Are you allowing the adversities of your work to shape and mold you into the likeness of Christ?

**Discovery Questions**

Can you recall a time when you gave up? What happened? Did you discover that there may have been a different approach? What was it?

How could Paul’s perseverance encourage you?

How can you look more like Christ in your workplace?
What a journey we’ve had together. It is truly my hope that your life has changed, and the change is for the better – to be more like Christ. What our world needs more than anything else is a walking and talking group of people – God’s remnant – who are willing in love to truly be His hands, feet, eyes and voice to a desperate world.

As John so clearly stated, “Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6). And what a life Jesus lived! We, too, can be a vital part in impacting the world around us. It doesn’t require any special abilities, just your availability. So, step forward. Step up. And be a part of God’s amazing movement through your neighborhood, our community, and throughout the world.

I love you with all my heart.