

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 several weeks.

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

KL A. L



Life is a battle. And it's been that way for a long time.

Consider some of the most famed battles of history. In 480 BC, the battle of Thermopylae was fought between a coalition of Greek cities led by King Leonidas of Sparta and the Persian Empire of Xerxes I. From 1775 through 1783, the American Revolutionary War between Great Britain and the 13 colonies of the United States resulted in our country's freedom. Roughly a hundred years later, the Civil War raged from 1861 to 1865 over the controversial enslavement of black people.

But truth be told, war has been a fact of life since the beginning of the human race. And it seems to be waging more in today's world than ever before. There's a lot of unshakable ground surrounding us, and I believe we can thrive rather than simply survive any war we face.

We've all heard the adage: "Those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it." I'm not sure that it is about us, but we tend to allow our crisis to define our faith, rather than our faith define our crisis.

Paul writes in his letter to Timothy, "*Fight the good fight*" (1 Timothy 6:12). Note the adjective 'good'. Do you remember what adjectives do? They describe a nearby noun in a sentence. The Greek word for 'good' here means to have a desirable and/or positive quality about its subject. In other words, even though we're in a fight, it's actually a good one. It's worth having. But for that to happen, we're going to have to change our thinking about the battles we face. We're going to need a check up from our neck up.

2

Legend has it that there was a wise chief who once said he faced a battle in his mind. He said it was a battle between his old nature and his new nature. He likened it to two dogs fighting. When asked, "Which dog wins?" the wise chief responded, "The one I feed."

And there you have the key to success and health. The Bible says there is a spiritual battle we all face. A battle between light and darkness. Which one we feed will determine how our lives end.

So, it's time for you and me to take ownership of our spiritual growth. As Peter wrote, "*Crave pure spiritual milk [God's Word] so that you would grow into a full experience of your salvation*" (1 Peter 2:2). Notice that Peter writes a command. This means that such an appetite doesn't come naturally, but it is precisely the stuff that meets our deepest needs.

So how do we develop such a necessary appetite? Like a baby, just start drinking. It's interesting how newborns don't instantly long for the very milk they need. They must develop a taste for it. But once they do, well, they start guzzling it.

And what is this 'pure spiritual milk' that we need to hunger for? It's the Word – the Bible – the undiluted, uncontaminated, Truth of Life. And as we drink it by being in the Word and drawing close to Christ, we grow up in ways that are only possible by doing so. Peter made it clear that we will grow when we do, and that both the battle and how we view it, will change.



As I said yesterday, battles are a part of life and we've been in them since the beginning of time. World War 1, World War 2, the Korean Conflict. It just seems we can't get along. I remind you of a battle within us that is superior to any other: the battle between light and darkness – the battle over our souls.

Allow me to give you three battles that exist between our old, sinful nature, and our new Godly one.

The first is **the battle between selfishness and unselfishness**. Every day we face this battle. Am I going to live for me, or am I going to live for He – that being Jesus? James wrote, *“Do you know where your fights and arguments come from? They come from the selfish desires that make war inside you...then when you don't get what you want, you quarrel and you fight”* (James 4:1).

Think about it, every conflict we have with our spouses, our kids, or our friends, starts here. Am I going to be selfish or selfless? Am I going to do what's in the best interest of me or what's in the best interest of we? It's crazy that even though the Bible instructs us to be unselfish (Philippians 2:3), it's a lot easier said than done. Isn't it?

The second is **the battle between forgiveness and bitterness**. Am I going to hold on to the wrong that was done to me, or am I going to let it go? Will I rub it in or allow God to rub it out? Here's the deal: we live in a broken world where we're going to be broken – hurt, that is. Sometimes it happens intentionally, and sometimes unintentionally. But either way, life is a battle. We're going to go through injustices. We obviously can't avoid getting hurt, but we can control how long we stay hurt.

The Bible tells us to *“watch out that no bitterness takes root among you, for as it springs up it causes deep trouble”* (Hebrews 12:15). Note the last two words – “deep trouble.” When we keep holding onto something, it will eventually hold on to us. I can tell you this: a great marriage or a great friendship is always the union of two great forgivers.

The final battle is between what's easy and what's right. We read in Galatians, *“What your corrupt nature wants is contrary to what your spiritual nature wants. They are opposed to each other. As a result, you don't always do what you intend to do”* (Galatians 5:17).

I think we would all agree that most of our problems are due to our inability to delay gratification. Think about it! Most debt is because of this. The entire credit card industry is built on what's easy instead of on what's right.

Let me offer you some advice. Every day, simply ask yourself, “What must I do today to get myself where God wants me to be tomorrow?” If you will set your mind on where God wants you tomorrow, you will always be living for God in every moment of today. The Bible says, *“Let us not get tired of doing what is right, for after a while we will reap a harvest of blessing”* (Galatians 6:9).



As we fight this good fight, there are two weapons we have to fight with. If we use these two weapons, we will win the battle every time. The Bible tells us, *“Though we live in the world, we do not fight in the same way that the world fights. We fight with weapons that are different from those that the world uses. Our weapons have power from God”* (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). Did you hear that? Our two weapons come from God and have His authority and power. My friends, that’s great news! So, what are they?

The first weapon is God’s Word, the Bible. And the more I read it, the more my victory is assured. Here’s the deal: we can’t lose a single battle when we’re in God’s Word and obedient to it.

Now, allow me to pause here, because maybe you haven’t settled the issue of the Bible being God’s Word. Listen to what Dr. Robert Dick Wilson, a former professor of Semitic languages at Princeton Theological Seminary, said, “After 45 years of scholarly research in Biblical textual studies and in language study, I have come now to the conviction that no man knows enough to assail the truthfulness of the Old Testament. Where there is sufficient documentary evidence to make an investigation, the statements of the Bible, in the original text, have stood the test.” And then there’s Dr. J. O. Kinnaman, an American Bible scholar and Biblical archaeologist who’s been gone for a long time but whose words hold amazing value, “Of the hundreds of thousands of artifacts found by the archaeologists, not one has ever been discovered that contradicts or denies one word, phrase, clause, or sentence of the Bible, but always confirms and verifies the facts of the Biblical record.”

6

It is not my hope to argue you into trusting God’s Word. And truth be told, no one ever has been. But I want to encourage you to give it a try. The Bible is filled with promises that, when we own them and make them our own, are game changers. I’ve always said, “I’ve most definitely gotten the Bible wrong, but it has never gotten me wrong.” Jesus said our mistake is that we don’t know the Scriptures, and thus, we don’t know the power of God (Matthew 22:29).

Imagine if we could fully trust God’s Word, fill our mind with it, and let it take root in our hearts. Remember, the closest thing to our mind is what will come to mind – every time – especially when we’re in a battle. *“This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The Lord’s loving kindness indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness”* (Lamentations 3:21-23).

For me, the Bible is the single most important tool to build a life upon. It tells us how to live a life, how to build a marriage, how to raise our kids, how to manage our finances, and on and on. That’s why David wrote, *“Blessed is the man...whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night...whatever he does prospers”* (Psalm 1:1-3).



The second weapon we have is Godly friends. I'm not talking about those who do a whole lot of talking, but those who are walking – being like Jesus. The Bible tells us, *“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?”* (2 Corinthians 6:14). It's been said, “You can't soar with the eagles if you keep running with the turkeys.” So many battles are lost because we hang around the wrong friends, the wrong influences, and the wrong counsel. To fight a spiritual battle we're going to need a Spirit-led family of friends.

The Bible tells us that God created us for relationship. *“For it is not good for the man to be alone”* (Genesis 2:18). The fact is, there is no living without Godly friendships – only existing. The Bible tells us that *“Two are better than one...”* (Ecclesiastes 4:9). But it's important to be careful with those we choose to hang around if we are going to experience this. We read in Corinthians, *“Stop being deceived: ‘Wicked friends lead to evil ends’”* (1 Corinthians 15:33).

Sadly, I've watched people live with revolving doors when it comes to their relationships. They seem to be so desperate to just have a friend that they neglect developing good, healthy, Godly friends. I've learned that my friends are key to my future. The Bible says, *“A righteous man is cautious in friendship”* (Proverbs 12:26).

The book of Hebrews says, *“You should not stay away from church meetings, as some are doing. Instead, you should meet together and encourage each other”* (Hebrews 10:25). Note two phrases: “you should not stay away,” and, “you should meet together.” Both are needed – a large worship experience, and a small group fellowship. We need the inspiration and teaching of both a weekend retreat, and a weekday relationship.

8

Think about it this way: how would life be for you if you only showered occasionally? Now, I'm not trying to offend anyone, but that might be why we struggle amidst the battles. Do you watch television occasionally? Probably not. Do you get on the internet occasionally? Probably not. What if we treated weekend worship and our LIFE group gatherings like we do the television or the internet? I think our lives would be dramatically different. We need others to be effective in life.

So, allow me to offer a couple of keys to developing Godly friends. First, **find friends who make you think**; people who create reflection. Solomon wrote, *“As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend”* (Proverbs 27:17). If we truly desire to be formed into the image of Christ, then it's imperative that we have some friends who are anvils and some who are hammers in our lives. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, we need friends who “make us do what we can do.”

Secondly, **get friends who really care** – not those who just say it, but those who actually show it by their actions. *“A friend loves at all times...”* (Proverbs 17:17). I'm tired of people who call me their friend, but as soon as sparks fly, so do they. Friends don't do that. Real friends care more about their relationships than they do about their own feelings and reputations.

Even better, let me encourage you to be this kind of friend to others, one who makes people think and one who really cares. We need friends in our lives like this, but we also need to be that kind of friend for others.

Solomon wrote, *“One standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer, and a group of three is even better”* (Ecclesiastes 4:12).



In 1633, the Dutch painter Rembrandt painted a picture he entitled “The Storm on the Sea of Galilee.” It’s a wonderful depiction of life. Every line of the painting converges on Christ. The shaft of light and a rift in the clouds both remind us that our help is, or needs to be, from God. Everything else in the painting is in utter chaos, depicting our frantic, helpless state. The disciples are panicked, as you can imagine, and their panic only makes their situation worse.

If we’re honest, the same is true for us. Life is a battle. We really only have one of two options amidst its peril: faith up or freak out. Wise up or worry about. Of course, the Apostle Paul tells us, “*Don’t worry about anything*” (Philippians 4:6) even though so many of us do. So, how can we faith up rather than freak out? Allow me to offer some simple, but vital truths.

First, **storms happen**. They are a part of life and nothing is going to stop them from coming or shield us from them when they do. If we’re going to get real so we can get right, we have to learn to face the inevitability of storms. The Bible says, “*When troubles come and all these awful things happen to you...*” (Deuteronomy 4:30). Notice how the first word in the verse isn’t ‘if’ but ‘when.’ Being a follower of Jesus doesn’t mean we are free from storms. Being a follower of Jesus means that when we face them, we’re never alone through them.

The second truth is our response. Storms happen, but **stress doesn’t have to**. You see, stress is also a part of life, but stressing isn’t – that’s a choice. If we don’t first settle within ourselves Who’s in control, then we’re going to struggle with everything outside ourselves.

If we choose well, the third truth is the result: **sleep happens**. “*Jesus said, ‘Come to Me, all who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest’*” (Matthew 11:28). Here’s the deal, today won’t be better because our circumstances change, for they may not. It’ll be better because God won’t.

I love this promise in Matthew’s Gospel. The simplicity of it is both striking and refreshing to me. Jesus doesn’t offer us a fourfold path to peace-giving enlightenment like you find in Buddhism. Jesus doesn’t give us five pillars of peace through submission like you find in Islam. Nor does Jesus give us “10 Ways to Relieve Your Weariness,” like you find us pragmatic, self-help-oriented, 21st century Americans so drawn to. Jesus simply offers Himself as the universal solution to all our battles.

Years ago, a story was written about a military officer and his wife who were aboard a ship caught in a raging storm. Seeing the frantic look in his wife’s eyes, the man tried unsuccessfully to calm her fears. “How can you be so calm?” she asked. He stepped back a few feet, drew his sword, and said while pointing it at her heart, “Are you afraid of this?” She replied without hesitation, “Of course not.” “Why not?” he said. “Because it’s in your hand, and you love me too much to hurt me.” To which he replied, “And the same is true with our God. I know the One who holds the winds and the waters in the hollow of His hand, and He, too, surely cares for us.”



In the 2018 men's NCAA basketball tournament, the Texas A&M Aggies pulled off a 1-in-3,000 chance victory. Down by 12 points with 44 seconds on the clock, who would have thought? But sure enough, the Northern Iowa Panthers allowed the biggest last-minute comeback in college basketball history. They committed four turnovers, none of them past half court; and the Aggies managed five two-pointers, a three-pointer, and a free-throw to complete a 14-2 run that sent it to overtime.

We've been talking about battles and that one was epic. When it seemed all hope was vanquished, the Aggies had only just begun. There's a tremendous lesson to be learned here: never stop playing.

I'm sure we've heard the old adage, "it ain't over 'til the fat lady sings." It's a phrase that means no one should presume to know the outcome of an event while it's still in progress. More specifically, the phrase is used when a situation is, or at least appears to be, nearing its conclusion. It cautions against assuming the current state of an event is irreversible, and it clearly identifies how or when the event will end.

And though I was privileged to watch this game happen, I've been privy to front row seats where I witnessed way too many people give up prematurely in life. So how do we stay the course when our going gets rough? The answer lies in one word: faithfulness. The writer of Hebrews says, "*Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with faithfulness the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus*" (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Solomon wrote, "*A faithful man will be richly blessed*" (Proverbs 28:20). So, allow me to offer some key ways to stay faithful, to playing on regardless of what life's scoreboard says.

First, **start with the end in mind**. This is precisely what we read in Scripture. "*Fix your eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*" (Hebrews 12:2). The Bible says that God is the *Alpha* and *Omega*, which means He's the Beginning and the End – and everything in between. This is why the Apostle Paul wrote, "*I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will finish it*" (Philippians 1:6).

Secondly, **remember you're never running alone**. It's been said that somewhere in this race of life, the immortal bear will jump onto your backside. In other words, a marriage will disappoint. A child will struggle. A job won't satisfy. As storms happen, so do bears. And nothing can stop a race quicker than a bear of adversity. But we are told, "*Fix your eyes on Jesus...so that you will not grow weary and lose heart*" (Hebrews 12:2-3). That's good advice.

Finally, **finish**. Don't give-up. Paul wrote to Timothy, "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race*" (2 Timothy 4:7). Jesus said, "*The one who is faithful to the end will be saved*" (Matthew 24:13).

If it's true in the game of basketball, just imagine what God promises in the real game of life!



I don't know if you've ever had the privilege of smashing your thumb with a hammer, but I have many times. Let's just say my language wasn't always a *hallelujah*.

But it brings up a good question. What comes out of you when you get hammered? I'm not referring to intoxication. I'm talking about when the storms of life beat against you. Because here's the deal, you will get hammered, and what's on the inside will quickly surface. James tells us that we are to, "*Consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything*" (James 1:2-4).

My friends, listen. Fire doesn't make character, it only reveals it.

Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, "*I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches*" (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). Talk about getting hammered! Yet he writes, "*I am more than a conqueror through Jesus Christ*" (Romans 8:37).

As we finish up this week, allow me to offer a couple of key principles Paul knew that we must know as well. First, **what is in you will come out of you every time you get hammered.** It's like a tube of toothpaste. What's on the inside always comes to the outside when squeezed. So what's truly inside you? What are you depending on for your source of everything?

The second principle is much like the first. **Who is in you will come out of you every time you get hammered.**

In a world full of fear and anger, people are watching to see what we are made of – and Who – is inside of us. Will they see Jesus when the hammer of life falls? Will they see faith when the storms rage? What is on the inside always comes to the outside, regardless.

When the hammer fell on Jesus, He expressed grace. "*Father forgive them*" (Luke 23:34). May I suggest, when the hammer falls on us, we give the world the same?

"Only by a life of obedience to the voice of the Spirit, by daily dying to self, by a full dedication to Christ and constant fellowship with Him, are we able to live a Godly life and have a positive influence in this present ungodly world," (Billy Graham).



Ever heard the sayings, “You only live once. Nothing lasts forever. So, live it up. Drink it down. Laugh it off. It’s worth it.”? Well, believe it or not, they’re not anything new. They’re actually a version of a saying by a highly influential philosopher 300 years before Christ. “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die,” Epicurus said. Life was about attaining pleasure and being happy. And that’s exactly the philosophy of our day.

Dostoyevsky wrote, “The secret to life, is not just to live, but to live for something definite.” That’s precisely what the Apostle Paul taught – “*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*” (Ephesians 5:15-16).

God didn’t give us life to be lived haphazardly or selfishly. God created us with a purpose and plan that has eternal implications all over it. But there’s a problem: we have forgotten who we are and why we are.

I love the story about a heavily booked commercial flight out of Denver that was canceled. A single agent was in charge of rebooking a very long and very inconvenienced line of travelers. Out of nowhere, an angry passenger pushed his way to the front, slapped his ticket down, and snorted, “I have to be on this flight, and it has to be first class.” “I’m sorry, sir,” said the agent. “I’ll be happy to help you, but I first must take care of these fine folk.” Un-impressed he snorted again, “Do you have any idea who I am?” he demanded loud enough so that everyone could hear him. Without hesitation, she smiled, picked up the public-address microphone, and said these words. “May I have your attention, please? We have a passenger here, who does not know who he is. If anyone could help him find his identity, please come to the counter.” As you can imagine, the man retreated to a seat and the people in the terminal burst into applause.

Now to me, that’s funny. But in light of reality, it isn’t. Because thousands of people are being harassed and robbed of their personal identities every year to the tune of 10 million victims, costing 50 billion dollars to recover that which should never have been stolen in the first place.

Listen to the words of a fellow Christian, “When I first came to Christ, everything seemed to change for the better immediately. I felt joy for being forgiven for all of my shame. I felt peace knowing that God loved me. And I felt hope because I learned that He had a purpose for my life. It was all a great relief. But after a while, my joy seemed to shrink. Following Christ became a struggle. Old habits reared up their heads again and I felt the tug of old ways coming back. This really frustrated me because I thought I was through with all of that. I want to do the right thing, but I lack the ability to do it. I can’t seem to fulfill all of my good intentions. I know what is right, and I know what is wrong; and I really don’t want to do wrong any more. I know that God doesn’t want me to do wrong. So why do I still make poor choices? What’s wrong with me? It’s so frustrating. I sometimes wonder if maybe I’m not really a Christian.” Can you relate? Ever felt that way? Job did. “*Human life is a struggle, isn’t it? It’s a life sentence to hard labor*” (Job 7:1).

My friends, this was never what God intended. So, for the next several days, we’re going to look at rediscovering our God-given identities.



There's a five-step process that happens in losing our true identities.

The first marker of our off-ramp is **the step of confusion**. Years ago, a baseball game was forced into extra innings and the NBC sportscaster announced, "The 'Tonight Show' has been cancelled, the 'Tomorrow Show' will be seen later tonight, and the 'Today Show' will be seen tomorrow."

Paul said it this way, "*For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate*" (Romans 7:15). Paul references himself with a first person pronoun six times in this one verse. In fact, if you were to read the entire chapter, he will use the word 'I' twelve times, the word 'my' six times, the word 'me' six times, and the word 'myself' two times. In twelve verses, Paul references himself with a first-person pronoun a whopping forty-two times. Do you see the pattern here?

Paul's problem was a 'me, myself and I' problem, the same problem you and I have. For the moment we make ourselves the center of our universe, our center will start to crumble. We will never be able to do what only God can do. The key is He, not me or we.

Which leads to the next step in the off ramp, **the step of guilt**. Paul wrote, "*I know perfectly well what I'm doing is wrong. And my bad conscience proves that I agree with these laws I am breaking*" (Romans 7:16). The word 'conscience' here is Latin, 'con' meaning 'with' and 'science' meaning 'full knowledge of.' Now watch this. When we do something, we're not fooling anyone, including ourselves. We know exactly what we are doing. Truth be told, sin never happens accidentally. We know we shouldn't eat that. We know we shouldn't watch this. We know we shouldn't say that. We know we shouldn't do this.

18

Do you remember the night before Jesus went to the cross? He goes out to a garden, takes three friends with Him, and tells them, "Look guys. I just need you to hang out with Me for a while. You don't have to say anything. Just hang and pray." But do you remember what happened? They fell asleep. Jesus says again, "Can't you guys just hang out for an hour?" But then He adds, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Listen, the flesh is always weak. And when the flesh is weak, our natural bent is to beat ourselves down rather than pick ourselves up.

Which is the third step, **the step of self-condemnation**. We're good at this one. Paul writes, "*I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it*" (Romans 7:18). The Bible says, "*The heart is hopelessly dark and deceitful, a puzzle that no one can figure out*" (Jeremiah 17:9). Our natural self lacks any capacity to do what is right. And when we misunderstand that, we move to the fourth step in the off-ramp process. We'll look at that tomorrow.



The fourth step is **the step of frustration**. Once we're confused and feeling guilty, starting down that road of self-condemnation, we then get frustrated. We don't know what to do or where to go. Paul wrote, *"No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't; when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. If I'm doing what I don't want to do, it's plain where the trouble is: sin has me in its evil grasp"* (Romans 7:18).

The law of sin is the spiritual counterpart to the physical law of gravity. Both pull us down. Sadly, it's a whole lot easier going down than it is picking ourselves up. Think about it. What's the easiest part of a push-up or a pull-up? It's always easier to go down than it is to go up.

Which brings me back to the law of gravity. It is always greater than our human strength.

Look at it this way. If I start flapping my arms and tell you I'm going to be the first human to fly, you'll think I'm crazy because you know the law of gravity is always greater than any human ability. That's why the prophet wrote, *"Those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles"* (Isaiah 40:31).

Frustration leads us to give up in the final step, **the step of despair**. *"It seems to be a fact of life, that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. In my mind I want to be God's willing servant, but instead I find myself still enslaved to sin...oh, what a terrible predicament I'm in"* (Romans 7:21, 25).

Now listen, even though I'm a Christian, my old nature is still alive and well. We never really eradicate it this side of heaven. There's always going to be a part of me that wants to be human. Like Paul stated, I just do things I wish I didn't do. That's why the answers to our problems can never be found in our will power. It just won't work no matter how hard we try. We can't change by simply wanting to change. Truth be told, we might as well start flapping our arms.

Look at the words Paul uses: "terrible predicament, wretched man." The original Greek means 'exhausted, worn-out, fatigued.'

I've used this story before, and I'm sure I will again. I heard about an old Native American chief who was a Christian. He explained to his son an internal war he battled between his spirit and his flesh. "It's like two dogs," he said. "In my mind, they are in constant battle. One's a good dog and one's a bad dog, and they're fighting it out." The young son said to his dad, "Well, Dad, which one will win?" The chief replied, "Whichever dog I feed the most."

We'll talk about that in the days ahead. Paul gives us the solution, *"Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin? Thank God. The answer is through Jesus Christ, our Lord"* (Romans 7:24-25).

The answer to every battle we face is not a principle, a program, or a pill. It's the person of Jesus Christ. And just like Paul said, "Thank God."



We all face three everyday battles: the battle against the devil, the battle against others and circumstances we face, and the battle against ourselves. The key to victory is not facing all three battles, but learning to face the right battle first. If we start with the devil, we will lose every time. But if we start with ourselves, we will automatically win the other two as well.

Here's the deal, most people would rather change their circumstances to improve their lives than change their lives to ultimately improve their circumstances.

I think a lot of people are like Lucy in the cartoon *Peanuts*. "Boy, do I feel crabby," Lucy says. Her younger brother Linus responds, "Maybe I can be of help. Why don't you just take my place here in front of the TV, and I'll go and fix you a snack? Sometimes all we need is a little pampering to help us feel better." He returns with a sandwich, chocolate chip cookies, and a glass of milk and says, "Now, is there anything else I can get you? Is there anything I haven't thought of?" "Yes, there's one thing you haven't thought of," Lucy replies as she takes the tray, "I don't wanna feel better."

Boy, is that the truth! Whether we understand or even like it, some people just don't want to get better. They will go on all day long about changing the world or complaining about the world, but never look at themselves. Look at the words of Julio Melara, "But if your career, marriage, job, and life are to improve, you must change. In the mirror, you are looking at the problem and the solution. The people who reach their potential, no matter what their background or profession, think in terms of improvement."

If we truly want to get on the on-ramp and stay off the off-ramp, then we must inevitably choose to change within.

22

Our society is full of plastic buildings on the foundation of false hopes. We live in a day of shortcuts, loopholes, and "one more for the road" as we look for an exit to escape reality. We're not successful until we know what's right, and then make the choice to do it. Look what Paul wrote, "*Throw off your old evil nature and your former way of life...grab hold of the new nature because you are a new person*" (Ephesians 4:22).

To live differently, you have to think differently. But to think differently, you have to make the deliberate choice to change. Like a trapeze artist, you have to let go of one bar to get to the other. Listen, good intentions without action always lead to indigestion.

Have you ever heard someone say, "Wow, you've given me a lot to think about?" Well listen, God didn't give us anything to think about. That's our struggle. He gave us His Truth to obey. "*If you listen to the Word, but do not put it into practice, you are like a person who looks in a mirror...and sees themselves as they are*" (James 1:23-24). And permit me to add, they are lost.

Good intentions only become God intentions when we choose to act, to make the choice to change.



Allow me to quickly highlight four reasons why so many people don't change or don't want to change. It's important that you personalize them and see if you identify with any.

First, people don't want to change because **it feels like a personal loss**. They feel as if they have more to lose than they do to gain.

There's a story about a New York City newspaper reporter who was sent to Maine to interview an old man nearing his 100th birthday. The reporter politely said to the aging man, "You must have seen a great many changes during your 100 years." To which the old man gruffly replied, "Yep, and I was against every one of them."

Listen, every beginning has to end sometime. And every ending is the beginning of something new. To discover new lands, one must consent to lose sight of the shore for a while – maybe forever.

No one likes to die to anything, especially to themselves. I get that. But it's only through death that we will truly get life. The question is this: is what God offers greater than what you've been living for?

The second reason people don't want to change is because **it's just weird**. Let's be honest, change is awkward. So was my first kiss, but it didn't stop me from doing it! Listen, just because something feels weird doesn't mean it's wrong.

The third reason people struggle with change is because **we're all creatures of habit**. It's a lot easier holding onto what we've known than it is stepping into the unknown. For the person who insists on using yesterday's methods in today's world won't be in business tomorrow. Think about that.

Finally, **change takes time**. And in today's world, no one feels like they have any time.

There's a story about a man from the back woods of Tennessee who found himself one day in a large city. For the first time, he stood outside an elevator. It was intriguing to him. He watched as an old haggard woman hobbled on and the doors closed. A few minutes later the doors opened, and a young, very attractive woman came out. Quickly he turned to his youngest son and said, "Billy, go get mother."

I love that story. But I think it's the problem in becoming all God purposed and planned. We tend to think in terms of promptness, not process. Part of the problem isn't that we feel we don't have time, but that we live in a world that doesn't make time. We live in a microwave age where we really don't have to wait for everything we want. It's crazy, but the sale of frozen juices has decreased because no one wants to wait for it to thaw. We have instant coffee, instant messaging, and instant instances. Who wants to wait for change?



The teacher was about to start her 4-year olds' Sunday school class when a little boy showed up without any identification. She managed to get out of him his first name, but she couldn't get him to give his last name. "Brian," the teacher asked, "what's your daddy's name?" He thought that was weird and replied, "Daddy." She tried again, "Brian, what's your mommy's name?" Again, thinking it was a weird question, he replied, "Mommy." Suddenly, she knew how to get him to answer, "Brian, what does your daddy call your mommy?" His face lit up, and with a grin, he replied in a deep voice, "Hey, Babe."

Identity determines everything. Every moment of stupidity in my life was because I allowed my identity to be stolen. I forgot who I am and Whose I am.

When I was a kid, I made some really dumb choices when no adults were around, especially my father. I discovered I was smarter and made better decisions when my father was present. Now think about that. Remembering that my Father is present changes everything.

Allow me to give you two keys to keep your identity safe from ever being stolen.

First, **we are royalty**. Peter wrote, "*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of His own...*" (1 Peter 2:9). Whatever the Bible says should always be greater than anything we think, especially when it comes to our identities. It's precisely why being in God's Word is so essential. Think about that. One is based on truth, the other is built on lies. The truth sets us free. Anything else imprisons us.

Anytime we forget the Father is present, we're in trouble. Listen, the two most important days in your life are the day you were born, and the day you figure out why.

George Barna writes, "America certainly did not experience the spiritual revival that many had hoped, as the new millennium began. In fact, Americans seem to have become almost inoculated to spiritual events, outreach efforts, and the quest for personal spiritual development. True, there are exceptions, but overall, Christian ministry is stuck in a deep rut. The need for behavioral modeling, strategic ministry, and a more urgent reliance upon God, is vital. Like the churches of Laodicea and Sardis...too many Christians, and churches in America, have traded in spiritual passion for empty rituals, clever methods, and mindless practices. The challenge is to resuscitate our spiritual passion, and once again figure out who they are." We are royalty.

Secondly, **royalty always has a kingdom**. This means we should live as royalty in the kingdom where we live. Jesus said precisely that: "*You're a kingdom subject. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity*" (Matthew 5:48). It's time to live the way God intended for us to live.



Pastor Mark Batterson writes, “You and I are only one defining decision away from a totally different life.” I would like to give you two such decisions.

The first is to **repent of the wrong things we’ve done**. If there’s one thing missing in the church today, it’s a heart of repentance. It seems people are quicker to place blame or justify their own wrong doing. But the Bible says, “*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, God will not despise*” (Psalm 51:17). We’re not talking about the shame and condemnation the enemy wants to heap on us, but authentic, Godly grief. I heard it said that true repentance, like all good things, is a gift of God. We can be in the habit of going through the motions when it comes to repenting. True repentance is a condition of our heart. So, allow me to ask you a question: Does your repentance look like a heart that has been rent like a garment, broken and contrite, as it beats before God? This attitude is missing from most repentance, and it’s the very thing God is trying to teach us.

Look what David wrote after his sinful affair with Bathsheba: “*Be merciful to me, O God... wash away all my sin and make me clean. I recognize my faults; I am conscious of my sins. I have sinned against You...and done what You consider evil. Remove my sin, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Create a pure heart in me...and put a new and loyal spirit in me*” (Psalm 51:1-10).

My friend, it’s in our brokenness that our lives begin to take on His likeness. The cross precedes the resurrection. We must die to ourselves before we can ever be raised in His likeness.

The second decision is to **start doing righteous things**. You’ve probably heard the old saying, “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing right.” I’ll say it Biblically: “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing righteously.” And why do I say that? Because some things in life might be right, but they are not of God. David wrote, “*Lord, who may dwell in Your sanctuary? Who may live on Your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless, and who does what is righteous*” (Psalm 15:1-2). I want to do the God thing, not just anything.

Don Capers wrote, “Maturity is doing what you are supposed to be doing, when you’re supposed to be doing it, no matter how you feel.” In short, the righteous thing may not be the most comfortable thing, but it most definitely is the God-honoring thing.

Pastor Tony Evans says it this way, “If you want a better world; composed of better nations; inhabited by better states; filled with better counties; made up of better cities; comprised of better neighborhoods; illuminated by better churches; populated by better families; then you’ll have to start by becoming a better you.”

As American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said, “Great is the art of beginnings, but greater still, is the art of endings.”

We are royalty, and it’s time to start living like it. “*For the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need*” (Psalm 23:1).



Billy Sunday became one of the most celebrated and influential American evangelists during the first two decades of the 20th century. He used to tell of a professing Christian who got a job in a lumber camp that had the reputation of being very ungodly. A friend, hearing that the man had been hired, said to him, “If those lumberjacks ever find out you’re a Christian, you’re going to be in for a hard time.” The man responded, “I know, but I need the job.” The next morning he left for camp. One year later, he came home for a visit. While in town, he met his friend who asked, “Well, how did it go? Did they give you a hard time because you’re a Christian?” “Oh no, not at all,” the man replied. “They didn’t give me a bit of trouble – they never even found out.”

Sadly, it seems this has become the norm. It seems God’s children often just want to blend in, laugh at dirty jokes, never confront a gossip, nor speak a word that would identify them as a Christian. This seems entirely strange to me. I can only wonder what God thinks.

My friends, genuine Christianity is a matter of the heart; a heart that understands the cost because it’s been to the cross. Thus, genuine Christians can’t imagine changing their stripes depending on the crowd in which they gather. They daily put to death the deeds and desires of their flesh. They live humbled, yet confident, in the hope their lives in Christ may shine through.

Just listen to the words Norval Geldenhuys observes: “In the hours of crisis, it is often the Peters who have sworn loyalty to Jesus with big gestures and fullness of self-confidence, that disappoint, and it is the secret and quiet followers of the Master that do not hesitate to serve Him in love – at whatever cost.”

Martin Luther, who certainly modeled taking a stand for Christ, wrote, “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the Word of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that point attacking, I am not confessing Christ however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is tested and to be steady in all the battlefields besides is mere flight and disgrace if the soldier flinches at that one point.”



A minister was preoccupied with his thoughts of how he was going to ask his congregation for more money. He was also annoyed to find his regular organist was sick and a substitute had to be brought in at the last minute. The substitute wanted to know what to play during the service. “Here’s a copy of the service,” the pastor said impatiently. “But you’ll have to think of something to play after I make the announcement about the finances.”

During the service, the minister made the announcement, “Brothers and sisters, we are in great difficulty. The roof repairs will cost twice as much as expected, and we need \$4,000 more to make the repairs. If any of you would be willing to give \$100 more please stand up.” At that moment, the substitute organist began to play “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Needless to say, everyone stood. And that is not only how they raised the necessary money, but also how the substitute organist became the church’s regular organist.

I love that story because it illustrates an important point. Our world needs God’s children to take a stand no matter the cost; to be a people that talk their walk and walk their talk; to be a people that have more than words, but with deeds that follow; and to declare before the world what and in Whom they trust. For it’s been said, “If you won’t stand for anything, you’ll probably fall for everything.”

I like what motivational speaker and author Bob Perks says: “It’s one thing to say you believe in something. It’s another to stand up and prove it.” Isn’t that right? If we truly get salvation, I guarantee that something will be radically different in how we live. Jesus said, “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father*” (Matthew 7:21). In other words, following Jesus is more than lip service. It’s more than putting fish stickers on the bumpers of our cars. It’s more than having our names on a church membership role. Sadly, I think for some people – if not most – coming to Jesus is more about a tune-up than a complete overhaul.

I don’t know if you heard about the chicken and the pig walking down the road together when they came to a sign that read, “Annual Fundraiser. Ham and egg breakfast.” The chicken had an idea and turned to his friend the pig, “Hey, that’s right up our alley. Let’s go in and help out.” “Sure,” said the pig. “That’s easy for you to say. You’ll just be contributing. For me, it will require a total commitment.”

Now, allow me to give you two things you’re going to have to decide when it comes to your relationship with Christ. Truth be told, up to this point, you’ve already decided because it’s a decision we make every day. And that is, you’re going to have to **define the context and depth of your relationship with Jesus**. Secondly, you’re going to have to **determine your level of commitment**. Are you going to be like the chicken or the pig?

Look what James wrote: “*Let God work His will in you. Yell a loud ‘no’ to the Devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet ‘yes’ to God, and He’ll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it’s the only way you’ll get on your feet*” (James 4:7-10).



I'm told there are approximately 350,000 books published annually in the United States, conservatively. Now think about that. That's almost 1,000 books a day and about 40 books every hour. That's a lot of books! Granted, a lot of these are simply recreational. Regardless, there's a lot of opportunity to grow in pretty much every area of our lives.

Now, I say all that to say this: if we're going to be unshakable and become all that God wants us to be, then learning is never optional. Resourcing our lives is absolutely vital to growth, development, and maturity in Christ. If you're not reading, then you're not growing. And if you're not growing, what in the world are you giving?

Imagine if your children decided that school is no longer for them; neither is listening to your parental counsel. In some cases, we're already there! It seems this is precisely what's happening. That's why I'm grateful, at least for today, there are laws governing when a child can decide to no longer attend school. But in keeping with our context as children of God, we never really graduate. We're always in class, or at least, we should be.

In a study of 90 top leaders from a variety of fields, leadership experts Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus made a discovery about the relationship between growth and leadership: "It is the capacity to develop and improve their skills that distinguishes leaders from their followers." *I believe the same is true of those who are married, raising children, and living effective lives – we possess the capacity to develop and improve our skills. The Bible teaches, "A wise man will hear and increase learning" (Proverbs 1:5).*

Allow me to offer some ways we can grow, develop, and improve ourselves.

34

First, **read**. As I stated above, there are a wealth of resources to wrap around ourselves. Even if you're not one that likes reading, you can buy books on discs, listen to podcasts, or access a host of other options. It's been said that Theodore Roosevelt read two books a day. Abraham Lincoln, who had only one year of formal education, attributed his successful political career to his habit of reading.

Secondly, **hang around others who you consider mature**. Leadership guru John Maxwell says it this way, "To grow, you must be around others who are more successful than you are." And then he adds, "If you're the head of the class, you're in the wrong class." Solomon wrote, "*Where there is no guidance, people fall, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety*" (Proverbs 11:14). When you're intentional in wrapping your life with Godly others, you will grow exponentially. In the words of Sir Isaac Newton, we will always see further and wiser "by standing on the shoulders of giants."

Thirdly, **develop a learned mindset**, for such an attitude is everything. Think about it. What really makes one wiser as they get older? I'm convinced that it's not a matter of years, but of experience – experiences embraced. When we capitalize on learning lessons from others in addition to the things we've lived through ourselves, we accelerate our growth.

Remember, it's only when a cup is empty that it can be filled.



An article in the Harvard Business Review reads, “Successful people keep their minds open to new things, because they know that no matter how high their level of mastery, there is always more to discover.” One of the things my daddy constantly told me was, “Always be a learner.”

The Bible tells us, “*an intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge*” (Proverbs 18:15). It’s precisely what successful people do, because they believe that learning is as much a part of their life as eating. They understand that learning is the never-ending result of self-discipline and perseverance. Thus, their goal each and every day is to get a little better, a little smarter, and a little wiser. By doing so, they believe they can shape the world.

For this to happen, not only is cultivating a desire to learn essential, but so is creating the right environment of growth. What does a growth environment look like?

First, it is **forward-focused**. It’s not about looking back and protecting what once was. A growth environment is thankful for yesterday but excited about the new possibilities that lie ahead.

A growth atmosphere is **affirming**. Growth happens in an environment where there’s a level of anticipation that something cool and fresh is about to happen. “*The wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtains guidance*” (Proverbs 1:5). It’s all about thanking God it’s Monday, rather than thanking God it’s Friday – if you get my drift.

It’s a place where **failure is never the enemy**; in fact, it’s encouraged. Because sometimes you win, but most often you learn. And that’s what it’s all about. Remember, if you lose, you lost. But if you learn, you always win.

It’s a place where **others are growing**, and it’s welcomed. It’s a place where you’re challenged, where you’re pushed out of your comfort zone. Which means, it’s a place where people desire change, where they’re looking for it, and help create it. Growth is expected. Solomon writes, “*Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you*” (Proverbs 4:5-6).

I don’t know about you, but I just got excited reading that.



We all crave quality, intimate friendships. In fact, we all need them. The Bible says, *“It’s not good for anyone to be alone”* (Genesis 2:18). God knew what we needed and, when we get this, we will live richer, deeper, more fulfilling lives. If we’re going to be unshakable, then we need friendships that are unbreakable.

There’s an old adage that says, “I went out to find a friend, but couldn’t find one there. But when I went out to be a friend, they were everywhere.” And that’s exactly our problem. We all want friends that are loyal, honest, and trustworthy. The key is asking ourselves if we are loyal, honest and trustworthy. So many are out looking for Mr. Right instead of becoming Mrs. Right. You see, the type of friend I am is exactly the type of friends I attract. We all get what we give. The Bible says, *“He who wants to have friends must show himself friendly”* (Proverbs 18:24).

So, I want to spend the rest of this week looking at six essential qualities of being such a friend. In short, if you’ll start with yourself, I guarantee such friends will come about.

First, **do I have staying power?** Am I a person who’s always in, or do I have a tendency to opt out, to quit, to give up? *“A man of too many friends comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother”* (Proverbs 18:24). Notice the word ‘sticks’ – like glue. The word actually means ‘to fasten oneself by process of welding.’

Allow me to offer a couple of ways you can develop this. First, be committed through the good and the bad. Real friends are like a coin. They know you can’t have heads without tails. Second, be committed in the short run and the long haul. Someone once said, “Real friends never have endings – just the journey.” Solomon wrote, *“A friend loves at all times”* (Proverbs 17:17). Just remember, we’re all a work in progress.

Second, **am I a selfless person?** Is it all about me, or all about them?

Do you remember those class pictures we took as kids? Oh my! Now, let’s be honest, who was the first person we’d look for when we saw it? Ourselves. And if we didn’t like what we saw, we considered it a bad picture. If we liked how we looked, we deemed it a good picture.

The New York Telephone Company did a survey. They monitored phone calls to discover the most used word in every conversation. Do you know what it was? ‘I.’ My friends, listen. If all we do is look out for ourselves – our needs, our pains, our wants – we’re not going to have many friends. Selfishness is a highway to loneliness – and may I add, trouble.

One Sunday afternoon I was reminiscing over my amazing message that I gave. I asked my wife, “I just wonder how many great preachers there are in the world today.” To which she replied, “One less than you think.” The Bible teaches, *“Do not be interested only in your own life but be interested in the lives of others”* (Philippians 2:4).



As I stated yesterday, we all crave those deep, valuing, intimate friendships. If we're going to be unshakable, then we have to have friendships that are unbreakable. The key is not in going out to look for them, but rather, in becoming them.

Remember the old adage, "I went out to find a friend, but couldn't find one there. But when I went out to be a friend, they were everywhere." Again, the Bible says, "*He who wants to have friends must show himself friendly*" (Proverbs 18:24). So, let me give you two more of the six key ingredients to being that kind of person.

The third essential quality of being a good friend is, **can I keep a secret?** Am I trustworthy? Someone once quipped, "I can keep a secret – it's the people I tell who can't."

I heard about three pastors who were out fishing. One of them had an idea. "Let's all share our greatest sin, that one thing that we struggle with the most in life." The first pastor said, "My problem is greed. I have an out-of-control love for money." The next one said, "My problem is lust. I can't keep my eyes off other women." The third pastor said, "My problem is gossip and I can't wait to get home and tell someone what you said."

The quickest way to kill any friendship is through gossip. The Bible says, "*Gossip separates the best of friends*" (Proverbs 16:28). Friendships are built on confidentiality. If you don't foster that, you aren't going to have very many friends, if you have any at all. Charles Spurgeon once stated, "He who throws dirt always loses ground." And he's right.

Let me give you a couple of things to help with this. First, **if you're one who spreads it, then stop it.** "*A true friend will always keep a secret*" (Proverbs 11:13). I heard it said, "The best thing you can do behind a friend's back, is pat it."

The second thing is **when someone else is spreading gossip, silence it.** The Bible says that we're to "*silence the ignorant talk of foolish people*" (1 Peter 2:15). The damage of gossip is like a feather pillow being cut open in the wind. It's impossible to get all the feathers back. "*Stay clear of false accusations. Don't contribute to the death of innocent and good people*" (Exodus 23:7).

The fourth essential quality of being a good friend is, **do I shoot straight?** In other words, do I level with my friends? I think this is one of the great problems in our world today. Too many will speak about 95% of what needs to be said, but they never get to that remaining 5% that someone needs to hear. Solomon wrote, "*An honest answer is the sign of a true friendship*" (Proverbs 24:26). It's been said that if you truly care, you will honestly share. The Bible tells us that "*the wounds of a friend can be trusted*" (Proverbs 27:6).



As we wrap up this week, I want to give you the final two key ingredients of the six needed to be a friend. Remember, the key is not going out and looking for such a friend, but rather, in becoming that kind of friend. “I went out to find a friend, but couldn’t find one there. But when I went out to be a friend, they were everywhere.” Remember the words of Solomon, “*He who wants to have friends must show himself friendly*” (Proverbs 18:24). You should commit this verse to memory.

Here’s number five. **Am I safe?** When it comes to friendship, to be incredible is to be credible. I want people to know that “what they see is what they get.”

Children’s author Dinah Maria Mulock Craik wrote, “Oh, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but to put them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with the breath of kindness, blow the rest of them away.” Wow! I love those words. There’s nothing like having somebody who loves you, no strings attached, no personal agenda, just un-imaginable freedom. And isn’t that what we all really want – no matter where we are, what we’re doing, we just feel safe like Fort Knox?

It’s interesting, I have a “safe” deposit box filled with things I consider valuable. Some Michael Jordan cards, state quarters, home mortgages, birth certificates. And never once have I ever worried about whether it’s all safe or not. How much more valuable are our friendships? I want my friends to know that they can “bank” on my safety when they confide in me. And I want to know the same in return. The Bible says, “*If you are good, you are guided by honesty*” (Proverbs 11:3). “Promise may get you friends, but it is performance that keeps them,” said Benjamin Franklin.

The final ingredient is, **do I make others smile?** The Bible says, “*A cheerful heart is good medicine*” (Proverbs 17:22).

In the movie *Mary Poppins*, Julie Andrews sings, “A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down.” When it comes to my friendships, I want to be that sugar. Far too many people have become “sad sacks” in this world. They just don’t know the value of a smile. It’s the greatest of universal languages and it speaks volumes. There’s an old Chinese proverb that says, “Sometimes it is worth splashing in the puddles, even if it means you have to wear wet shoes for the rest of the day.”

I think too many of God’s children take life too seriously. I know I have at times. We all need to lighten up and laugh a little more. They say that the average person laughs 17 times a day. Can I suggest we need to live above average?

Did you know that when you laugh for 10 minutes, you can actually lose 50 calories? Now, how cool is that? We can be a friend and grow thin, all at the same time!



I'd be doing a great disservice if I didn't take some time to talk about time. Time is something that we can't buy or sell. We all have the same amount of it and, I contend, it's the most valuable resource we will ever be given. The great question is, how are we spending our time?

The American Time Use Survey collects information about the activities people do during the day and how much time they spend doing them. On the average day in 2015, Americans over the age of 15 slept about 8.8 hours, spent 5.2 hours doing leisure and sports activities, worked for 3.5 hours, and spent 1.8 hours doing household activities. The remaining 4.7 hours were spent in a variety of other activities, including eating and drinking, attending school, and shopping.

We read in the book of Ecclesiastes, *"There is a right time, and a right way, to do everything"* (Ecclesiastes 8:6). Just imagine if we could learn the value of time and spend it wisely. The problem with time is not the clock. To get mad at that would be like getting mad at a bathroom scale. Time is simply a measurement, but it speaks volumes to what we truly value. H. Jackson Brown, Jr. says it this way: "Don't say you don't have enough time. You have exactly the same number of hours per day that were given to Helen Keller, Michelangelo, Mother Teresa, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Einstein."

So allow me to offer some tips that will help value your time.

First, **pay attention to it**. Paul wrote, *"Live life with a due sense of responsibility, not as ones who do not know the meaning of life but as those who do. Make the best use of your time"* (Ephesians 5:15-16).

44

It's been said that time flies, and it's true. My dad says it all the time, "Life is a quick trip." But here's the good news: you're the pilot. You get to decide where you will spend your time, so pay attention to it. Remember, time is not refundable. Once it's gone, it's gone.

Secondly, **pay the price**. Make the most of your time.

Have you ever thought of how much time we waste? It's crazy. Opportunities are missed all the time. So let me give you a little secret. Don't measure time in length, but rather in moments.

Think about it. Have you ever received something in the mail that had the words printed on its envelope, "For a Limited Time Only"? We should stamp that on the forefront of our minds because that's exactly what life is – for a limited time only.

Here's the deal. Every moment is filled with three realities: here's what I can do, here's what I want to do, and here's what I must do. We need to live in the 'must do.' Paul wrote, *"I am bringing all my energies to bear on this one thing...."* (Philippians 3:13). Notice, he didn't say "I'm bringing all my energies to bear on these thirteen different things."

I remind you light defused is harmless, but light focused can cut out cancer. Steam defused is inconsequential, but steam harnessed moves a locomotive. Let's make our lives count by making our time count.



If you looked in the dictionary, you would find a technical definition that says, “Faithfulness is the follow-through with a commitment regardless of difficulty.” In short, commitment. It’s that attitude that says, “I will not quit. I will not give up. You can count on me.” Such an attitude is a big deal because nothing great ever happens without it.

In 1943, a group of 100,000 young Germans crammed into the Olympic stadium, the largest stadium in the known world. They used their bodies to form a sign that said, “Hitler, we are yours.” When they took over the entire continent, it took World War II to liberate Europe from the bondage of Nazism.

In the 1960s, a group of Chinese students took a little red book called *The Sayings of Chairman Mao*, memorized it, and said they were going to live and die by it. And they succeeded in killing as many as 2 million people in China’s Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution. Today, over one billion people are under the domination of Communism because of that commitment.

The Bible teaches: “*The eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him*” (2 Chronicles 16:9). God is looking for those who want to make a difference, those who want to make the world a better place. And it only requires one thing: commitment. Our commitments define our lives. We all are the sum total of our commitments. Someone once said, “Show me a person’s commitments, and I’ll tell you who they are.”

When we choose our commitments, our character follows. We are where we are right now because of the commitments we’ve made. If we don’t like where we are, then we need to change our commitments.

Now here’s the deal. Every commitment we make has a consequence. It may seem insignificant, but in the grand scheme of things, every choice adds up to one thing: our lives. Our choices will ultimately determine our destiny.

I read about a wary traveler in ancient Greece who was seeking directions from a man by a roadside. “Sir, how can I reach Mt. Olympus?” The roadside stranger responded, “Just make every step you take go in that direction.” That man was Socrates.

The most important commitment you’ll ever make is your commitment to Christ. There are all kinds of symbols people use to identify themselves as Christians: a fish sticker on the back of a car or a cross hanging around a neck. But I contend the most powerful identifier is commitment.

Billy Graham once said, “I have found that the casual Christian has little or no influence upon others. Only by a life of obedience to the voice of the Spirit, by daily dying to self, by a full dedication to Christ and constant fellowship with Him, are we able to live a Godly life and have a positive influence in this present ungodly world.”



Yesterday, we talked about the importance of commitment. This attitude says, “I’m not giving up. You can count on me.” Someone once said, “Show me a person’s commitments and I’ll tell you who they are.”

My friends, the difference between success and failure is not talent, IQ, background, or skill. The difference is a small span of 10 letters: commitment. People who succeed have commitment, and people who lose don’t. They give-up.

It’s easy to say you’re carrying through, but unfortunately it seems easier to not. In a day when a person’s word should equal their worth, we find that people’s words and actions do not coincide many times. It’s precisely why we need to cultivate a mindset of commitment in our relationships, to ourselves, and – most importantly – to God.

So let’s talk about how we foster an attitude and life of commitment.

First, **do you give God your first thoughts each day?** Before you talk to anyone else, do you talk to God? David wrote, *“In the morning, O Lord, You hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before You and wait in expectation”* (Psalm 5:3). The fact is, we all start our day with the things to which we are most devoted. Let’s make sure that thing – is God.

Secondly, **do you give Him the first 10% of each paycheck?** In other words, do you tithe? Oh my, I just said what seems to be the most profane word in the church these days.

The Bible says, *“Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the best part of everything your land produces”* (Proverbs 3:9). Listen, tithing is not about giving God your leftovers, but about giving Him your best, the best part, the first part of everything. It’s been said our checkbooks speak volumes about what’s most important to us.

Thirdly, **do you give His teaching first place in your life?** We read in Deuteronomy, *“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land the LORD swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth. If you carefully observe all these commands I am giving you to follow – to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to Him and to hold fast to Him – you will succeed”* (Deuteronomy 11:18-22). Wow...what a promise!

Finally, **do you trust your decisions to Him first?** Solomon wrote, *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes”* (Proverbs 3:6-7).

There are too many Christians who abandon their posts. They walk away when the going gets tough. They compromise in a moment to ‘fit in’ rather than ‘faith up.’

Art Turock once said, “There’s a big difference between interest and commitment. When you’re interested in doing something, you do it only when circumstances permit. When you’re committed to something, you accept no excuses, only results.” Those are great words. My friends, let’s learn what true commitment is, put it into practice, and watch the fruit of it grow in and through our lives. What the world needs now is God’s children – fully devoted and committed to Him. *“Choose to love the Lord your God and to obey Him and commit yourself to Him, for He is your life”* (Deuteronomy 30:20).



For the next four days we're going to talk about the necessity of prayer. If we're going to be unshakable, then our lives need to be immovable on prayer. The fact is, those who pray, stay. They don't run when the going gets tough. They understand the power therein. People of prayer change the world.

But if we were honest, we've probably wondered why it is that thousands of prayers go up, but so few answers come down. Maybe it's because there are some things we need to understand about prayer. When we approach the throne of God, there are some key things that need to be understood.

Allow me to give you some key conditions of prayer.

First, **we must have an honest relationship with God.** Let me explain. John writes, "*If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, you can ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you*" (John 15:7). God says if we will fill our minds with the Words of Christ, He will fill our prayers with unbelievable life. You see, God requires that we listen to Him before He listens to us. One of the greatest privileges we have is learning to know God better and obeying His commands. I don't think it's that He doesn't hear us, but that we don't adhere to Him. We need to ask ourselves, "Am I ignoring Biblical principles? Do I really want God's will for my life?"

Secondly, **we must have a forgiving attitude toward others.** Mark writes, "*When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins*" (Mark 11:24-25).

50

More than any other characteristic in the Bible, forgiveness is the number one thing related to prayer. Over and over again, when Jesus talked about prayer He talked about forgiveness because nothing kills prayers faster than resentment.

Thirdly, **we must believe God will answer.** How many times do we read, "*According to your faith it will be done*" (Matthew 9:29). There's really only one kind of prayer that God answers – the prayer of belief. Here's the deal, I think we see little because we expect little. Faith is believing He can do it, not merely talking about it.

So, which of these conditions have you been overlooking? Are you holding a grudge? Is there resentment built up in your heart? Maybe you're refusing to admit a wrong in your life? This is big, because the Bible says "*the prayers of the righteous accomplish much*" (James 5:16). Maybe you haven't been expecting God to answer your prayers? Think about that. If you're not expecting God to answer, then why are you even asking in the first place? Prayer is not a ritual, but a wonderful right.



The disciples made a very interesting request in the Gospel of Luke, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Now think about that. The disciples heard Jesus preach the most awesome of sermons. They watched Him perform the most incredible miracles. But never once did they ask, “Lord, teach us to preach. Lord, teach us to do miracles.” Instead, they asked, “Teach us how to pray.” And why? Because when Jesus prayed the greatest things happened.

They say that the average Christian knows more about Ann Landers than they do about prayer. That’s sad because, according to Jesus, prayer can move mountains (Matthew 17:20).

There are a lot of misconceptions concerning prayer and how it works. First, **it’s not a magic wand**. Prayer is not something you wave around and – poof – results. It’s wrong to see God as some sort of magic genie. You don’t rub Him so He’ll say, “Your wish is my command.”

Secondly, **prayer is not a first-aid kit for emergencies**. We’re not to be like the pastor who said in a very difficult time, “Well, I guess all we can do is pray,” to which one of the deacons responded, “Has it come to that?”

For some, **prayer is some sort of tug-of-war** where we have to beg and plead with God. He’s not some sort of cold-hearted monarch sitting millions of miles away that you have to convince what you’re asking is worth His time.

Finally, for me, the worst misconception about prayer is **it’s a religious duty**, an obligation. And if you don’t pray, you’ll be on God’s naughty list. These people learn memorized phrases and religious clichés thinking God will be impressed.

None of these are what God intends when it comes to prayer. So, for the next three days we’re going to look at some keys to what prayer is supposed to be.

First, **prayer is an act of devotion**. Jesus said, *“If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit, but apart from Me, you can do nothing...but if you remain in Me and My words remain in you, you can ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you”* (John 15:5).

Notice that prayer is our opportunity to express our devotion to God and our dependence upon Him. It is where we are privileged to say, “God, I love You. I want You. I need You.”

Our biggest problem in prayer is admitting we need God’s help. I think that’s why a lot of people don’t pray. Weakness is unacceptable in our world today, let alone asking others for help. But we really are helpless without God. As long as we think we can do it on our own, prayer will have no meaning.



DISCOVERY QUESTIONS

Do you see God as more of a magic genie or as a Father?

Are you okay with God saying “no” if it means you’re going to grow from it?

Do you trust God with your prayers?

DAILY JOURNAL

DAILY PRAYER



A while back there was a television documentary on deep-sea divers who recovered some gold from a sunken ship in the North Atlantic. They talked about how they lowered a diving bell 800 feet under the water. An air hose was the only connection between those above and those below. It was the lifeline, the support system. Likewise, prayer is our support system. If we cut it off, we will run out of spiritual air.

So let's continue to look at some keys to what prayer is all about. Yesterday, I began by stating that prayer is an act of devotion. The second key is that **prayer is an act of communication**. It's dialogue.

Most of the problems we face in life are a direct result of communication problems. We cannot grow a marriage without communication, and the same is true in our relationship with God.

Several decades ago, our country faced an international crisis known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was a standoff between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev of Russia over placing missiles in Cuba. We nearly went to war over it – it was a big deal. But we didn't, because we established communication. You see, they put a red telephone on the desk of each leader. At any time, if somebody thought the other was doing something wrong, they could simply pick up the phone and communicate.

This is what God wants prayer to be – our red phone. Think about it. If communication is vital on the international scene, how much greater is it when it comes to the spiritual one? My friends, we have a direct line to the Heavenly White House.

54

Thirdly, **prayer is an act of supplication** – a means of request. The Bible says, "*Don't worry about anything but in everything, with your prayers and your supplications, make your requests known to God...*" (Philippians 4:6).

We read about how unbelievable New Testament Christians were. They were happy, joyful, contagious, and enthusiastic about life. They had power. They saw miracles happen. If you're wondering why we're not seeing it happen like that today, perhaps it's because we don't ask. "*If you ask the Father for anything, He will give it to you*" (John 16:23-24). Charles Hadden Spurgeon, the great pastor in London, once said, "God never shuts His storehouses until we shut our mouths."

There's a story of a guy who died and went to heaven, where there were these warehouses all over. Inside the warehouses were tremendous gifts, fantastic things: homes, jobs, happy families – all kinds of neat gifts. The guy said, "Lord, what are all these gifts?" Jesus said, "There is a tag on each of them. Take a look. They all say the same thing." So, the man went over and picked up one of the tags and it read, "Things never asked for."



D. L. Moody once stated, “every great movement of God can be traced to a single praying, kneeling figure.” My friends, prayer is the most important thing we can do. For nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, happens without it. I want our church to be a praying church. For a church that prays is an exciting, contagious, God-honoring church.

So let’s continue with keys to what prayer is supposed to be. We already looked at how prayer is an act of devotion (dedication), an act of communication, and an act of supplication.

Fourthly, **prayer is an act of cooperation.** For me, this is the most exciting thing about it. Prayer is God’s *modus operandi* (the way He works). When we pray for other people, we cooperate with God. We’re teaming up with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Great things happen when we pray.

You might be wondering how this is possible. Well, **prayer is not limited by time.** Our prayers today can be answered three, four, or five weeks from now.

Nor are they limited by space. Prayer is like sending a missile. I can be praying for somebody in Washington D.C. and it’s like sending a missile directly to that person’s heart without ever leaving the state of South Dakota. That’s pretty cool!

Prayer is unlimited in power. People can reject our appeals, our arguments, and even us as a person, but they are totally defenseless against prayer. That’s why we not only can pray, but should pray.

My friends, God can change the course of history by our prayers. All the heroes in heaven are people who prayed.

Let me close this week by giving you a few conditions for prayer. David wrote, “*He will fulfill the desires of those who reverence Him*” (Psalm 145:19). If we delight in Him, God will give us the desires of our heart. The Bible says, “*No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly*” (Psalm 84:11).

Listen, God is not up in heaven holding things back. He’s waiting for us to give Him our hearts. It’s like the flow of water that naturally happens when we are connected to the hydrant. “*Seek first...and all these things will be added*” (Matthew 6:33).



If you're a follower of God, you're going to face difficulty – tests. They are a part of life. So let's look at four ways God allows tests and how we should respond to them. I remind you, even though God will not tempt us, He will test us. To do this, we're going to look at the life of Abraham. Abraham's life was impregnated with lessons we can glean.

The first test is **the test of a major change**. The Bible says, *“By faith, Abraham, when he was called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed, and went, even though he did not know where he was going”* (Hebrew 11:8).

Talk about a major change. Like, pack up everything and move. And by the way, I'll tell you where when you get there. And Abraham was seventy years old! And despite all that, the Bible seems to express that he offered up no questions and showed no hesitations. *“Abraham moved immediately”* (Hebrews 11:8).

Here's the lesson: a real believer will follow God without knowing where. It's an act of trust. God said it, and that's enough. *“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments”* (John 14:15).

Now, some of you might be thinking, “God, first show me.” But I think God might be saying, “How about get moving, and I'll show you as you go.” Listen, if your faith hasn't led you to take any risks, it may not be any kind of faith at all.

The second test is **the test of delayed promises**. *“By faith, Abraham made his home in the promised land, like a stranger in a foreign country, and he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise”* (Hebrews 11:9).

Circle the word promise. This is a very important word, especially in the vocabulary of a true believer. You see, God doesn't want us to base our lives on explanations, but on expectations. Did you catch that? You may have to read that again.

That first test is the test of ‘where.’ This test is the test of ‘when.’ When am I going to get it? When will I see the answer? When will you meet my needs? It's one thing to face adversity when you can see the end in sight. It's another when it seems like there is no end. But faith understands it doesn't need to know when, because God is in control.

So here's the lesson: a real believer will wait on God even without knowing when.

I read about a man out shopping with his wife. They had already purchased a piece of luggage and a picnic hamper. As the man waited for his wife to finish, he was given the responsibility of dragging their newly purchased luggage and hamper. A sales assistant asked if he could be of any assistance. The man replied, “No, thank you. I'm just waiting for my wife.” To which another man standing behind him said, “I'm waiting for my wife as well. But I never thought of bringing a lunch and an overnight bag with me.”

Not a bad idea! But may I suggest it as the perfect idea when it comes to God. *“For they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength”* (Isaiah 40:31). God is never late and never early. His timing is always perfect.



The third test is **the test of an impossible problem**. *“By faith, Abraham, even though he was past age, and Sarah herself was barren, was enabled to become a father, because he considered Him faithful, who had made the promise”* (Hebrews 11:11-12).

There’s something we really need to know about God. When He makes a promise, it’s a promise. He never reneges on it. Abraham understood this.

You see, God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation. Such a promise would require children, but Abraham was ninety-nine and his wife – well let’s just say menopause was a distant memory. However, Mark’s Gospel reads, *“Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God”* (Mark 10:27).

Our first lesson was where, our second was when, and our third lesson is that a real believer will expect a miracle without ever knowing how. My friends, if God decided there’d be no gravity, then we’d float for a while. God’s work done God’s way never lacks His support.

When Abraham and Sarah found out she was to become pregnant, the Bible says she laughed. I have to wonder if she really believed at that point because I think if she really thought she was going to have a baby, she would have cried. My friends, the best part about being with God and of God is having to rely on God.

The fourth test is **the test of a senseless tragedy**. Truth be told, this is really the ultimate test. And this is the test of why. It’s most definitely a question I hear a lot, “Why?” I don’t know why God allows all the evil in the world to exist, but maybe asking why is the wrong question.

After promising Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation through his son, Isaac, God did the unthinkable and asked Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice.

“By faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as the sacrifice. He who had received the promise, was about to sacrifice his one and only son. Even though God had said to him, ‘It’s through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from the dead,” (Hebrews 11:17-19).

Why would God ask such a thing? Probably because Isaac represented every single thing that God had given – and promised – to Abraham. Abraham decided one basic truth governs everything: God has the right to make any demand He wishes, whether we understand it or not.

Which brings me to our final lesson: a real believer trusts God’s purpose without ever knowing why. The fact is, bad things happen to God’s people. We’re not immune to it. Faith goes beyond the realm of explanation.

So we have to decide. Will we follow God’s leading when we don’t know where? Will we wait for God’s timing when we don’t know when? Will we expect a miracle when we don’t know how? Will we trust God’s purpose when we don’t know why?



What is with our natural bent to assume the worst? Often, without any conscious prompting, our minds automatically jump to and fixate on the worst possible scenarios. John Milton says it this way, “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of Hell, a hell of Heaven.” It’s simply a case of an overactive imagination being used for ill, not good. We would save ourselves a lot of suffering if we could stop our minds from dwelling on the most horrible what ifs we can come up with. “The reason why worry kills more people than work is that more people worry than they work,” wrote Robert Frost.

Let me list a few reasons why worry is not worth its worry. First, **worry is wearisome**. Oh my goodness, it’s downright draining and will suck the life right out of you. According to Robert Sapolsky, “Worry will make you sick; from depression, insomnia and addiction, to cancer, heart disease and stroke. Worry plays a crucial role in a host of physical ailments.”

It is a multi-billion dollar industry. Americans alone consume over 43 tons of aspirin every day. I’m not suggesting what you feel isn’t real. I’m just saying you don’t have to keep feeling that way. Solomon wrote, “*Worry weighs a person down*” (Proverbs 12:25).

Secondly, to **worry is just weird**. It doesn’t make sense. Think about it. To worry about something you can’t change is a little strange. To worry about something you can change is simply senseless because all you have to do is change it.

I read a story of a little old lady walking down a country road carrying a big, heavy backpack. A guy picked her up in his truck. About 20 minutes into the ride, the guy looked over and said, “Why don’t you take the backpack off and throw it in the back?” “Oh, no,” she replied, “it’s enough you gave me a ride. I’ll carry my own backpack.”

This is precisely the problem with our worries. It’s like saying to God, “You just get me to heaven, I’ll worry about everything else.” Jesus instructed us that “animals don’t worry, plants don’t worry, and aren’t we more valuable than they?” It’s weird. We’re the only things in all creation that worry. Especially when the Bible tells us, “*God satisfies the desires of every living creature*” (Psalm 145:16).

Thirdly, **it’s worthless to worry**. There are absolutely no benefits to it. Jesus said, “Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” (Luke 12:25). The answer is no. It can’t make you taller, shorter, or faster. It won’t move you an inch closer to any dreams. It can’t change the past. It can’t control the future. Someone once said, “Worry is like a rocking chair; a lot of activity but you never make progress.” It’s stewing without doing. Mary Hemingway once wrote, “Train yourself not to worry. Worry never fixes anything.”

Finally, **worry is worldly**. Jesus said, “*So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or, ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things*” (Matthew 6:31-32). According to this passage, only unsaved people worry. Truth be told, they should. They have a lot to worry about. But you and I don’t. God is for us; not against us. So why worry?



Yesterday we talked about the negatives of worry. But the good news is that Jesus gives us three keys to break free from it. So, let's take a look at them.

First, Jesus tells us to **seek God first before doing anything else** (Matthew 6:33). You see, we've got to decide who's going to be number one. Who's going to get first dibs on our lives? Because if He's not going to be number one, then a world full of number twos is going to take His place. For me, worry is simply a warning light saying, "God isn't being number one. Something at this moment has taken priority over God." My friends, as long as I love or live for anything more than God, I'm going to worry.

The second thing Jesus says is to **seek today, to do it now**. It's the first thing we do. *"Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own"* (Matthew 6:34). One of my professors always taught that anytime Scripture starts with a therefore, we need to see what it's there for.

God is telling us, "Don't borrow trouble. Don't open your umbrella until it starts to rain." There are two days every week that we should never worry about: yesterday and tomorrow. I heard it said, "Today is just the tomorrow you worried about yesterday." Jesus wants us to live one day at a time. When we start worrying about tomorrow's problems, we miss out on today's blessings.

Finally, Jesus instructs us to **surrender our worries to God**. *"Give all your worries to Him, because He cares about you"* (1 Peter 5:7). Worry is a faith issue because worry and trust can't live in the same house. When worry comes in the front door, our trust in God goes out the back door.

Listen, there will always be things in our lives beyond our control. But here's the great news, they are never beyond God's. The Apostle Paul says, *"Don't worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication make your requests known to God and be thankful"* (Philippians 4:6).

Am I suggesting that we don't make plans for tomorrow? No. Even Jesus said, *"What guy builds a house without first considering the costs"* (Luke 14:28). So make plans. Just don't live there.

Did you hear about the grandfather clock that had a nervous breakdown? He went to the psychologist and said, "I'm going to crack up. I have to tick-tock twice a second, that's 172,000 ticks a day, 61 million ticks a year. I can't handle that." The psychologist said, "You have a choice, you can take it one tick at a time, or get ticked off."

Here's what I believe: if it isn't worth praying about, it isn't worth worrying about. The late Henry Ford said it best, "I believe God is managing affairs and that He doesn't need any advice from me. With God in charge, I believe everything will work out for the best in the end. So, what is there to worry about?"



We read over and over in Scripture that God promised to meet our needs, whether they are emotional, financial, physical, spiritual, or relational. One of God's Hebrew names is precisely that – *Jehovah Jireh*, “the God who provides.” Paul declared this to the Philippians, “*My God will supply all that you need from His glorious resources in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 4:19). I don't know about you, but that's pretty clear to me.

So how can we learn to have greater faith and to trust God regardless?

The first thing we need to learn is to **trust God when the pressure gets turned up**. We read in Psalms, “*I want you to trust Me [God speaking] in your times of trouble so I can rescue you and you can give Me glory*” (Psalm 50:15). God says, “I want you to turn to Me when you're in trouble; not to other things.” And that is quite a choice.

It's important to understand that God is always number one, whether we make Him that or not. He never ceases to be who He is. The problem is, we choose not to let Him be that. So, if we're going to develop a stronger faith, we must turn to Him first and nothing else.

I've heard it said, “When I get under stress, I know what I need.” May I encourage you to get out from underneath it? The best medicine is not found at the drug store. The best medicine is found at God's door.

The prophet wrote, “*My people have done two evils. They have turned away from Me, the spring of living water, and they've dug their own wells which are broken wells and cannot hold water*” (Jeremiah 2:13). We can't short-circuit God's will. A quick fix is not God's way. Here's the deal. If we don't wait on God, we won't have to wait long for trouble to come.

66

How many times have we jumped from one relationship to another and prayed once again, “God, please bless this one”? Or we buy something we don't need with money we don't have to impress people we don't even like, and then ask God to bless our finances. You see how it works? We're always trying to do what we want with our own understanding while still expecting God to provide His blessing. The Bible says, “*If you're walking in darkness without a ray of light, trust in the Lord, and rely on your God*” (Isaiah 50:10).

The second thing we need to learn is to **trust God when people put us down**.

God often uses people to test, stretch, and develop us. My friends, life is often disappointing. Things just don't turn out the way we plan them. Our marriages don't go as planned. Our kids don't grow up as planned. Our friends don't always do as planned. Life is disappointing because people in life disappoint.

Here's the deal. Nobody can possibly meet all our needs except one – God. Anytime we put our expectations elsewhere, we will always come away disappointed. Only God can fill the void. Our problem in life is not the people in our lives, but our response to the people in our lives. Unless we settle our within with God, our without won't be handled very well. It's precisely why the prophet Isaiah wrote, “*You should stop trusting in people to save you because people are only human*” (Isaiah 2:22). There is only one Savior: Jesus Christ. So, stop expecting anyone, or anything else, to be your savior. “*Anyone who trusts in Me will not be disappointed*” (Isaiah 49:23).



Number three, we must ask ourselves if we are truly **committed**. The fact is, our lives are shaped by our commitments. Our characters are developed by our commitments. Our successes are influenced by our commitments. Our eternal destinies are determined by our commitments. We better choose very carefully, for Heaven and Hell are in the balance. We better learn to make and keep commitments.

For example, let's say you want to learn the piano. As we all know, that doesn't happen automatically. You don't just sit down and start playing. We have to practice and practice, and then practice some more. That takes persistence, discipline, and requires commitment. Likewise, the hallmark of emotional and spiritual maturity is making and keeping wise commitments. The Bible says, *"If you make a promise to God don't be slow to keep it. God is not happy with fools, so give God what you promised"* (Ecclesiastes 5:4).

This is a big one in our society, especially among Christians. It seems when things start going rough, most get going right out the door. It's one of the major faults of our world today. People give up before hanging in and making it through. We've become quitters who walk out before allowing faith to step in. Yet, the Bible says, *"God blesses the person who keeps his vows even when it hurts"* (Psalm 15:4).

Finally, we need good, Godly **priorities** and – as we just saw – we need to keep them. For me, this is the most important one of all.

Here's the deal. We all have legitimate needs in life: some are financial, some are emotional, some are relational, and some are physical. These are all legitimate and very real, but God has promised to meet every one of them if we put Him first in every area of our lives. *"Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs and He will give you all you need from day to day if you live for Him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern"* (Matthew 6:32-33).

So allow me to ask three questions. First, **what do we think about most?** Whatever we think about most is what's most important in our lives. Second, **where does our money go first?** The Bible says, *"Where your treasure is, your heart will be also"* (Matthew 6:21). Money reveals a lot about our priorities. Third, **how do we spend our time?** These three questions will show what really matters in our lives.

Here's the great news. The Bible says, *"If you come back to Me and trust Me, you will be saved and you will be strong"* (Isaiah 30:15). This is a promise, my friends. Everything we need is wrapped up in the name of Jesus. When we put Him where He rightly belongs – first – eternal, God-purposed things begin to happen in every area of our lives. *"My God will supply all that you need from His glorious resources in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:19).



A common theme throughout this weekly devotional is choice. Life is simply a series of choices. It's been said, "We make our choices, and then our choices make us." And it's true. Good decisions mean a good life. But bad decisions mean a life of strife. The fact is, every decision has consequences.

This is why God gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit and precisely why David wrote, "*Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God; let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground*" (Psalm 143:10). It's exactly what Jesus promised the Spirit would do. "*And when the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth*" (John 16:13). And it's in Him, the Spirit, that we find our identity. "*Only those people who are led by God's Spirit are God's children*" (Romans 8:14).

How do we let the Spirit lead us? Well first, **we cannot follow a culture that doesn't follow God.** I heard it said, "If you don't meet the devil head-on daily, you might be going the same direction."

There's a story of an old priest who was asked by a young man, "Father, when will I cease to be bothered by the sins of my flesh?" To which the priest replied, "Son, I wouldn't trust myself until I'd been dead for at least 3 or 4 days." If we're going to live by God's Spirit, we have to die to our flesh.

The Bible says we are not to "*follow the crowd in doing wrong*" (Exodus 23:2). God cares very little about political correctness, but cares a great deal about holy living. Paul wrote, "*Do not copy the behavior or values of this world. Instead, let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do*" (Romans 12:2).

Secondly, **I cannot follow friends who aren't led by God.** If God isn't first in your friend's life, it won't take that long before He won't be first in yours either.

Peer pressure is one of the things that causes more people to miss God's will for their lives; His perfect, good and pleasing plans. It's sad that we care more about being liked by people than being loved by Almighty God. John says, "*Do not let anyone lead you in the wrong way*" (1 John 3:7). There's a stinking thinking in our world today. There's a lot of bad advice that people are celebrating. But if we're going to be led by God's Spirit, we have to get rid of some bad gas. "*Keep company with wise friends and you'll become wise. But if you associate with fools, your life will suffer great hurt*" (Proverbs 13:20).

Thirdly, **we cannot look to sources other than God.** Not the television. Not the radio. Not magazines. There's one source for everything – the Spirit. There's a lot of substitutes out there, but there's only one source we need in our lives. Anything else is an idol. "*Never look to psychics or séances or fortunetelling or the stars or people who claim to be in contact with the dead. People who do these things are doing evil and God hates it with a passion*" (Deuteronomy 18:10-12).

Finally, **we must stop being led by our feelings.** We all know that feelings change, sometimes pretty quickly. My friends, feelings lie. It may be the result of some burrito we ate or something else. "*You may feel you're on the right road and still end up dead*" (Proverbs 14:12).



Egyptian astronomer Ptolemy hypothesized in the 2nd century that Earth was the center of the universe. He assumed all the other planets and the Sun orbit the Earth, a belief that existed for over 1,400 years. However, in the 16th century, a mathematician and astronomer by the name of Nicolaus Copernicus formulated a model that placed the Sun at the center of the universe rather than the Earth. But now there was a problem. “We’re not the center of the universe?” As you can imagine, people didn’t want to accept that. Then Galileo came along and discovered the same thing. Believe it or not, the church kicked him out for it and the government put him under house arrest.

Here’s the deal, and don’t miss this. Both Copernicus and Galileo pointed to the Sun as the center of the universe. God’s been saying the same thing since the beginning of creation. Author Max Lucado writes, “What Copernicus did for the Earth, God did for our souls. Tapping the collective shoulder of humanity, God points to the Son – His Son – and says, ‘Behold the center of it all.’”

When God looks at the center of the universe, He doesn’t see us. He sees Himself. God doesn’t exist to make a big deal out of us. We exist to make a big deal out of Him. We’re to join the angels in singing, “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty*” (Revelation 4:8). As John the Baptist declared, “*I am not the Christ...*” (John 3:28).

When was the last time you said that to yourself? The Bible tells us, “*Pride goes before the fall*” (Proverbs 16:18). So, for the next several days, we’re going to look at pride and how we can keep from such a fall.

72

We’ve probably all heard someone note the middle letter of the word ‘pride’ is ‘I’, and it’s why we struggle. For anytime we make ourselves the focus, our fall is not far behind. If we don’t grasp who we are not, and Who we need, we set ourselves up for trouble. No wonder Solomon wrote, “*Pride only causes problems*” (Proverbs 28:25).

Think of it this way. Why would we search for something we think we either already have, or don’t need? I’ve said it countless times, ‘EGO’ stands for ‘Edging God Out.’ That’s why Jesus said, “*Apart from Me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5).

Perhaps you’ve heard the name Hudson Taylor. He was a Christian missionary in the late 1800’s who spent 51 years in China. The organization he started brought over 800 missionaries to China, directly resulting in over 18,000 people coming to Christ. Historian Ruth Tucker summarizes his life this way: “No other missionary in the 19th century, since the Apostle Paul, had a wider vision and has carried out a more systematized plan of evangelizing a broad geographical area than Hudson Taylor.”

An Australian pastor once introduced Hudson Taylor by using many superlatives, including the word “great.” But when Taylor stepped on the stage, he simply said, “Dear friends, I am but a little servant of an illustrious Master.”



DISCOVERY QUESTIONS

Can anyone close to you say that you act like you're the "center of the universe" in any area of your life?

What are some common weaknesses in your life?

Who could you invite into your life to help you with those weaknesses?

Are you humble enough to set aside your ego and ask God what He wants for your life?

DAILY JOURNAL

DAILY PRAYER



There's a story about a little turtle from Cleveland that wanted to winter in Florida. Since it was too far to walk, he convinced a couple of geese to tie a rope around their necks and fly south as he hung on the rope with his vise-grip jaws. As they crossed the river into Kentucky, some other geese joined the formation. Impressed, one said, "Hey, who thought up this brilliant idea?" Immediately, the turtle opened his mouth to say, "I did." Have you ever met somebody like that?

Some might argue it was such an attitude that kept 3-time Olympian, 29-time World Cup Gold Medalist, 10-time X Game Gold Medalist, and 5-time World Champion Lindsey Jacobellis from standing atop the podium to receive the gold medal in the 2006 Olympic snowboard cross. With a commanding lead and just 50 yards from the finish line, she decided to showboat (hot dog, if you will) and fell. Some celebrated Lindsey's free spirit while others admonished her. Either way, "*Pride goes before the fall*" (Proverbs 16:18).

Someone once said that egotism is the only disease that infects you but makes everyone else sick.

Let's not confuse this with the kind of pride that can be good. For if your children come home and tell you they received straight A's on their report cards, you'd be proud – and should be! That's what God wants you to feel and share.

We're not talking about that kind of pride. We're talking about a haughtiness – a stubborn, self-righteous, boastful spirit. Such people are self-deceived, trapped, and unable to see themselves as they really are.

For the next couple of days, let's look at the consequences of such a spirit.

First, **it keeps us from growing**. When we're full of ourselves, there's no room for anything else. There's an old adage that says, "When my head starts swelling, my mind starts shrinking." Solomon wrote, "*There is more hope for a fool than for a man who is wise in his own eyes*" (Proverbs 26:12). Sometimes I think people would rather appear smart than be smart. One of the surefire ways we can tell if someone has a pride issue or not is by asking, "Are they teachable?"

Secondly, **pride messes up our relationships**. The root of all conflict is pride. The Bible says, "*Pride only breeds quarrels*" (Proverbs 13:10). My friends, I don't think stubbornness is a character flaw; I believe it's a prideful fact because until we're willing to admit we're not perfect and always part of the problem, we'll never find a righteous solution. That's the problem with pride. Most often we want to be heard rather than to listen. Jesus said, "*Take the log out of your own eye first...*" (Matthew 7:5).



As we've noted the last few days, pride is a problem, and it causes so much damage. So how do we overcome it? How do we conquer such a destructive force? Well, James gives us the answer: *"God opposes the proud but gives grace [favor] to the humble"* (James 4:6). As pastor Rick Warren often says, "If you're humble, you won't stumble."

Allow me to give you three characteristics of humble people – those who find God's favor.

First, humble people **openly, and most gladly, admit their mistakes**. The Apostle James is right. *"Indeed, we all make many mistakes"* (James 3:2). A humble person knows this. Nobody's perfect, so why pretend? The sooner we can square with that, the healthier we'll become. By the way, everybody else already knows. Why not join them in reality? It's been said, "We all mess up, so we just as well fess up." Solomon writes, *"A man who refuses to admit his mistakes can never be successful"* (Proverbs 28:13).

Secondly, humble people **accept, but never overstate, their strengths**. In other words, they don't exaggerate them.

I heard about the little girl in a Culver's restaurant who ordered a trough of ice cream. The attendant said, "Are you sure you can eat all that?" "Sure can," she said, "I'm much bigger on the inside than I am on the outside." Haven't we all done that – wanting people to think more of us than we really are and what we've actually accomplished? Paul wrote, *"Do not think more highly of yourself than you should"* (Romans 12:3).

The third thing is that humble people **never under-appreciate their strengths**. "What are you so puffed up about? What do you have that God hasn't given you? And if all you have is from God, why act as though you have accomplished something on your own?" (1 Corinthians 4:7).

Listen, everything good we have or have done is from God. "But I built this business with my own two hands." I'm confident it's a great business. But where did you get the hands with which to build? "I thought-up that idea all by myself." And it was a grand idea, but where did you get the mind with which to think?

None of us fabricated or fashioned ourselves into who we are. We might have honed it over the years and taken responsibility for our lives, but it was God who gave us our designer genes (our DNA). James writes, *"Every good gift and every perfect gift comes down from the Father"* (James 1:17). We need to be thankful for the strengths God has given us. By the way, I contend that the person who gets too big for his britches will only get exposed in the end. I thought you'd like that!

So, let's neither over-exaggerate who God made us to be, nor under-appreciate the amazing creation that we are in Christ.



A fourth characteristic of humble people – those who find favor with God – **is their appreciation for everyone around them.**

Several years ago, there was an article that read, “The rate of mental depression in the United States has risen dramatically over the past 30 years. People born in the last 30 years face 3 to 10 times the risk of major depression than their grandparents did.” What’s interesting about this article is that it notes the cause as the exaltation of self. It’s the ‘me, myself, and I’ mindset. “What is in the best interest of me?” It makes sense. For, if you truly believe it’s all about you anyway, then all you need is yourself. And for me, it’s depressing just writing that.

The magazine *Psychology Today* agrees. “With too great expectations, the baby boomers are sliding into individualistic melancholy...just as belief in the nation was crumbling, and belief in God was also fading, the sky rocketing divorce rate was eroding the belief in the family as well. When people no longer believe that their country is powerful and benevolent, and that the family can be a source of enduring unity and support, or that a relationship with God is important, where then do they turn for identity, satisfaction, hope?”

This is precisely why the Apostle Paul wrote, “*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility, consider others better than yourselves. Look not to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ*” (Philippians 2:3-5).

Listen, selflessness will not only transform your relationships, it will transform you. I’ve seen time after time where the most unlovable, unlikely, and cranky individuals nobody wants to be around become the nicest people everybody wants to be around when they become selfless.

78

My friends, humility isn’t thinking less of yourself, it’s just thinking less about yourself and more about others. I heard it said once, “A man all wrapped-up in himself is a very small package.”

This is why it’s necessary to truly “Humble yourselves before the Lord,” so He can lift you up (James 4:10). God cannot do what we won’t let Him do. Humility is a choice. The paradox is that the way to get up is to first get down. The more I’m honest about my weaknesses, grateful for the successes, recognize God as the source of it all, and love those around me, the more God will lift me up.

“Humility is perfect quietness of heart. It is to expect nothing, to wonder at nothing that is done to me, to feel nothing done against me. It is to be at rest when nobody praises me, and when I am blamed or despised. It is to have a blessed home in the Lord, where I can go in and shut the door, and kneel to my Father in secret, and am at peace as in a deep sea of calmness, when all around and above is trouble” (Andrew Murray).



A national study done on America's search for self-fulfillment discovered, "Those most devoted to their own self-fulfillment were those having the most trouble in life." Solomon wrote, "*First pride, then the crash – the bigger the ego, the harder the fall*" (Proverbs 16:18).

If you haven't been to a book store lately, which are sadly becoming dying entities, there are a myriad of books on the topic of 'self': Re-creating Yourself; When all You've Wanted Is Not Enough; Looking Out For Number One; How To Be Your Own Best Friend; Pulling Your Own Strings; Total Self-Confidence; Trusting Yourself; How To Keep Control Of Your Life After Fifty. We're mesmerized with ourselves. It's what Paul told Timothy, "*As the end approaches, people are going to be self-absorbed and self-promoting*" (2 Timothy 3:2).

I want to continue with the fourth characteristic of humbled people: **being interested in others.**

Many moons ago, the Salvation Army held an international conference. They expected the founder of the Salvation Army, General William Booth, to speak. But he got sick at the last moment and was unable to come, so he promised to send a telegram from London. The telegram arrived and the packed convention center was anxious to hear what Mr. Booth was going to say about the vision and direction for the next decade. When it was opened, the reader had to pause, for there was only one word on the telegram: "others." And there it is, God's purpose and plan in life. Paul wrote, "*It is God Himself who has made us what we are and given us new lives from Christ Jesus; and long ages ago He planned that we should spend these lives in helping others*" (Ephesians 2:10). Jesus said, "*Only those who give away their life for My sake...will ever know what it really means to live*" (Mark 8:35).

I know I never feel fulfilled when I'm focused on myself, but I always feel fulfilled when I'm helping others get ahead in life. That's probably why the Word says, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20:35). Paul said, "*Don't get tired of helping others*" (Galatians 6:9).

There's a story about a couple of hikers coming down the Himalayans when they found a body lying in the snow. One of the men wanted to stop and help the man, but his companion refused saying, "We're going to die ourselves if we burden ourselves with this guy." The first man replied, "I'm not leaving." So, his companion went on ahead without him. The man lifted the frozen guy onto his back and began carrying him down the mountain. His body heat began to warm the frostbitten fellow who eventually revived. The two were walking together side-by-side a few hours later when they caught-up with the first man's former companion and found him dead, frozen in the snow.

What a parable of life! The one who tried to save his own life lost it, and the one who was willing to lose his own life for another saved it.

The key is that I'm blessed. But how can I ever know just how blessed until I'm truly at rest – right HERE?



As we wrap our last two days of week six, I want to talk about how to be successful and live life the way God intended it to be lived.

Most of us can sympathize with the fellow who received a call from his wife just as she was about to fly home from Europe. “How’s my cat?” she asked. “Dead.” “Oh, honey, don’t be so honest. Why didn’t you break the news to me slowly? You’ve ruined my trip.” The husband was taken back. “What do you mean?” “Well, you could have told me he was on the roof. And when I called you from Paris, you could have told me he was acting sluggish. Then when I called from London, you could have said he was sick, and when I called you from New York, you could have said he was at the vet. Then, when I arrived home, you could have said he was dead.” The husband had never been exposed to such protocol. “OK...I’ll do better next time.” “Thank you,” said his wife. “By the way...how’s Mom?” There was a long silence – “She’s on the roof.”

I just love that story! It’s more than just a humorous anecdote. It illustrates for me a powerful insight about how we can all learn to love better – whether by word or deed.

Valentine’s Day is such a day to communicate this, when over 180 million flowers and over 58 million pounds of chocolate are exchanged. It’s a day set aside so that – just maybe – all conflict, contention, and divisiveness can be set aside for a moment and we simply embrace love.

Permit me to share some thoughts in how kids understand this amazing gift from God. Glenn, age 7 – “If falling in love is anything like learning how to spell, I don’t want to do it. It just takes too long.” Kenny, age 7 – “It gives me a headache to think about that stuff. I’m just a kid. I don’t need that kind of trouble.” Regina, age 10 – “I’m not rushing into love. I’m finding 4th grade hard enough.” Dave, age 8 – “Love will find you, even if you are trying to hide from it. I’ve been trying to hide from it since I was 5 – but this one girl keeps finding me.” Manuel, age 8 – “I think you’re supposed to get shot with an arrow or something, but the rest of it isn’t supposed to be so painful.”

Have we communicated love so poorly that children see it like this? I think little Manuel is right, love isn’t supposed to be painful. But if it’s left unchecked, it most certainly will be. This is how I want us to finish out these next two days. As Paul said, “*Make love be your greatest aim*” (1 Corinthians 14:1).

If we truly want to be successful, may these words become our mantra: love, our highest aim. God’s greatest gift to us and through us is love. There’s an old poem that illustrates this. “He drew a circle that shut me out: heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had a mind to win, we drew a circle and took him in.” As Jesus said, “*A new commandment I give to you, love one another*” (John 13:34).



We're all familiar with that old adage, "Actions always speak louder than words." Well it's true. If our talk doesn't walk, then our talk is just talk. So let's look at several key characteristics of why love.

Without love, **everything we say is ineffective.** The Apostle Paul said our words are "just noise." The famed thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians helps us with this. The imagery Paul uses is of a large brass vessel used in theaters to amplify the actors' voices. Now watch this. Even though sound came from them, the brass vessels themselves were empty. The same is true with us. Without true love, everything we say is powerless and without substance.

Without love, **all that we know is incomplete.** We could have so many degrees behind our names that people call us Dr. Fahrenheit. But as we say often, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Look what Paul writes. "*If I have the gift of prophecy, and could fathom all mysteries and knowledge...but have not love, I am nothing,*" (1 Corinthians 13:2). Paul is right, "*Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up*" (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Without love, **all that we believe is insufficient.** "*If I have faith that could move a mountain, but have not love, I am nothing*" (1 Corinthians 13:2). Now listen. There's a misconception that being a Christian is only about believing. Ever heard someone say they are a Christian and believe in Jesus? Well, that's only a part of it. The Bible says that "*even the demons believe*" (James 2:19). Christianity is a lifestyle. If our beliefs don't move us to action, then what we believe really doesn't have that much power. Paul said, "*The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love*" (Galatians 5:6).

Without love, **all that we give is insignificant.** "*If I give all my possessions to the poor [everything], but have not love, I gain nothing*" (1 Corinthians 13:3). Everything we give must be motivated by love or it wasn't really a gift. I heard it said that you can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.

Finally, without love, **all we accomplish is inadequate.** "*If I were burned alive [now think about that] for preaching the Gospel, but didn't love others, it would be of no value whatsoever*" (1 Corinthians 13:3).

We're all going to stand before God one day, and He's going to audit our lives. He's not going to check our bank accounts, personal achievements, or titles. There's only one question that will matter: How did we love?

Dr. E.V. Hill was one of the greatest black preachers in America. In fact, *Time Magazine* honored him as one of the 7 most outstanding preachers in the U.S. He died in 2003 after pastoring the Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist church in Los Angeles for 42 years. He was often threatened because he was never afraid to challenge injustice. One weekend, he received a serious bomb threat because of something he said in his sermon. That same week, he came home early to find his car was gone and immediately thought somebody stole it. So, he sat on his front steps concerned. Thirty minutes later, his wife drove up in his car. "What are you doing?" he asked. She, too, knew of the bomb threat. "I got to thinking, this community needs you more than it needs me. And if they're going to rig your car to be bombed, I wanted me to be in it, rather than you." Dr. Hill said in that moment, "I always knew my wife loved me, but until then, I never understood what love was really all about."



It's been said that leaders are learners, and it's true. But learning isn't just imputed to the leader. We all need to develop a learning mindset. For if we're not growing, then I can only wonder what in the world we're living and teaching. Understand that every life makes a difference – good or bad.

Learning is simply a matter of acquiring new insight and expertise by seeking out knowledge and appropriately putting it into practice. There's always something to learn. Life is impregnated with learning opportunities. The Bible says, *“An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge”* (Proverbs 18:15).

Learning is one of the key tenets to a healthy and productive life. Great people were learners and read voraciously. They wrote and taught, passed on something; they were constantly learning. Learning was as important to them as eating. Philosopher Eric Hoffer writes, “In a time of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.”

Learning can take many different forms, so here are a few examples of ways that you can continuously be learning as a leader and encouraging others around you to do the same.

The first is to **read**. Reading is vital. It stimulates the mind. There are a host of books we can read and increasing options we can hear. You don't always have to have a hard copy. Almost every book now comes in audio or in an electronic format.

The second is to **listen**. One of my favorite acronyms is ‘WAIT.’ It stands for ‘Why Am I Talking?’ I just love that. As my grade school teacher use to say, *“Ears wide. Mouth closed.”* James tells us, *“Everyone should be quick to listen...”* (James 1:19). The writer of Proverbs says, *“Answering before listening is both stupid and rude”* (Proverbs 18:13).

We all know there's a big difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is simply a matter of vibrations in our ears. Listening is how we decode those vibrations in our brains. How many times have we heard our wives, kids, or others say something, but we have no idea what they said?

Listening is a skill that anyone can and must learn if we're going to make a God-difference with our lives. The Bible says, *“Let the wise listen and add to their learning...”* (Proverbs 1:5).

Finally, learning doesn't always equate to fresh or new. My friend, nothing sticks forever, except maybe learning to ride a bike. Studies tell us that we forget about 40% of what we learn within 20 minutes, and 77% of what we learn within 6 days. By the end of the month, that percentage jumps to over 90%. That's why, when it comes to learning, repetition is key – to relearn, revisit, and review the things we've already learned, listened to, and read.



One of the reasons God put us on earth was to build deep friendships. It is clear in Scripture that it is “not good” for us to be alone, even before sin. How much more after the fall do we need fellowship and relationships? So, allow me to cite a few reasons why it is essential to foster deep Christian relationships.

First, for **spiritual growth**. One of the highest ways we learn and grow spiritually comes through developing such relationships. Look at what Solomon wrote. *“As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend”* (Proverbs 27:17). Note how clearly this proverb connects others to our need to grow. The first church in Acts understood this well. It says they *“devoted themselves”* (Acts 2:42) to teaching, to the fellowship, to communion, and prayer, and all corporate activities that provided opportunities for sharpening one another.

In keeping with this, allow me to offer two key elements of “iron sharpening iron.” First, there will always be a guaranteed blessing. Note that it takes someone else’s iron to sharpen your iron. The Bible says, He (God) will be with us. *“For where two or three gather...I am among them”* (Matthew 18:20). What a promise! We see this in Malachi. *“Those who feared the Lord spoke with each other, and the Lord listened to what they said”* (Malachi 3:16). Think about that. When we sharpen one another, the Lord bends an ear and is pleased.

Secondly, iron sharpening iron is an act of **fulfilling the Law of Christ**. The Apostle Paul says that we are to share the burdens that we face daily, to lament over personal sin, to advise on how to repent, and to rejoice over the conquest of it, *“and thus fulfilling the Law of Christ”* (Galatians 6:2). Jim Rohn once said, “Success isn’t to be pursued, it is to be attracted by the person you become.” Thus, I keep a tight inner circle because I know the kind of person I desire to be.

The goal of a knife is to cut, right? But how can it if the blade is dull? Sadly, we’ve allowed our fellowship to be more about food and fun than sharpening each other. It’s time for that to change.

Finally, a knife that gets sharpened shines more because the dullness has been rubbed off. The same is true with our spiritual growth. We shine better when we truly embrace what fellowship was meant to be. David wrote, *“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity”* (Psalm 133:1).

We all need iron in our lives – true friends that are willing to crawl up on the anvil of life to nourish us, grow us, and develop us. My friends push and prod me to become everything that God intended for me to be. How about yours?

“Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).



I want to offer a few more reasons why we need to develop these deep, close, Godly friendships. As we talked about yesterday, I need them to grow in my relationship with God. But there are other reasons for them as well.

One of those is for **emotional support**. You see, life is a journey and we need others to get through it. The Bible uses the phrase “one another” fifty-eight times. “*Be patient, bearing with one another in love*” (Ephesians 4:2); “*Be kind and compassionate to one another*” (Ephesians 4:32); “*Forgive one another*” (Ephesians 4:32); “*Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*” (Ephesians 5:19); “*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*” (Ephesians 5:21). It’s pretty clear that God’s plan and purpose for our lives involves the necessity of others, but not just any others.

You see, there are two kinds of people you can have in your life. One kind is what I call ‘VDPs’ and the other kind is what I call ‘VIPs.’ ‘VDP’ stands for ‘Very Dependent People’, while VIP stands for ‘Very Inspirational People’. Dependent ones drain you. Inspirational ones fill you. One group inspires, the other tires. I highly recommend the ones that inspire!

Another reason for our need of others is **better health**. Healthy friends mean a healthy life. Let’s be honest. Unhealthy friends affect us. Paul wrote, “*Don’t fool yourselves. Bad friends will destroy you*” (1 Corinthians 15:33). Not only does the Bible teach this, but science confirms it. We live longer and healthier if we have healthy friendships.

One reason they’re healthy friends is because they’re safe. You can unload on them and they won’t download to others. The Bible teaches us to, “*Admit our faults to one another and pray for each other so that we may be healed*” (James 5:16). Revealing your feelings is the beginning of healing.

Another reason for our need of Godly friends is **social enjoyment**. Life was meant to be enjoyed, not endured, and good, Godly friendships are the bedrock of that. You can make all the money in the world, have all sorts of high achievements, experience all the pleasures of life, but if your relationships stink, life stinks. Nothing will ever compensate for a lack of Godly relationships. As author Dana Reinhardt says, “As long as you have one good friend, one real friend, you can get through anything.” The Bible agrees, “*Two people are better than one, because they get more done by working together*” (Ecclesiastes 4:9). Remember, anything truly great can never be done by just one person.



As we've been talking, friendships are a big deal. I've heard it countless times, "Show me who your friends are and I'll tell you who you are." For the people we choose to be around will shape us – the way we think, the way we speak, and how we perceive the world. Whether we are aware of it or not, the people we pay attention to and consider friends will frame our reality. They are a barometer of what's normal and what's possible. Dan Pena says, "Show me your friends and I'll show you your future." As the old adage goes, "We're only as good as the company we keep."

Read and reread these words that Larry Crabb wrote in his book *Connecting*. "When two people really connect, something is poured out of one and into the other that has the power to heal the soul of its deepest wounds and restore it to health. The one who receives experiences the joy of being healed. And the one who gives knows even greater joy of being used to heal. Something good is in the heart of each of God's children that is far more powerful than everything bad in the world. It's there waiting to be released and work its magic. But you have to be connected."

Now, for this to happen, trust has to be built. So allow me to give you three ways the Bible says to build trust.

First, **be reliable**. Reliability is a big deal. It means you can be counted on, you keep your word, and is the difference between a friend and a flake. The Bible says, "*A friend loves you at all times*" (Proverbs 17:17).

Secondly, **be loyal**. Loyalty is a term we don't talk about much anymore. It seems so few are loyal to anything and is probably why so many struggle with friendships. People just are not loyal, whether it's to their church, a marriage, or anything. Yet the Bible says, "*A true friend is always loyal...*" (Proverbs 17:17). Notice the word 'always.'

I love to read Paul's words to the people of Philippi. "*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 nothing like those who stand beside you, thick and thin. They're not high on promise and low on performance.

I don't know if you've been there, but I'm sure you've heard about Yellowstone's Old Faithful geyser. It's not the park's biggest geyser, or the most beautiful. But it is the one people go to see. Why? Because it can be counted on to predictably erupt every 44 to 125 minutes. It's faithful. It's loyal.

Loyalty is a big deal to God and should be to us. A true friend is someone who always walks in when everyone else walks out. They are loyal, not because of what you do or don't do, but because of who they are.

Finally, **keep confidences**. If all you do is gossip, you deserve to be alone. Because what people need more than anything else are safe friends – those with whom they can share absolutely anything without the friends retreating or repeating. It's been said that the mark of a true friend is someone that knows everything about you and is still your friend. "*A true friend will keep a secret*" (Proverbs 11:13), but "*a gossip separates the best of friends*" (Proverbs 16:28).



Researchers tell us that our minds can store about 100 trillion facts, yet we only think about 10 thousand thoughts a day. Which really means our minds have magnitudes more capacity that we actually use. As the saying goes, “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.”

My friends, our minds, our ability to think and reason, are very special gifts from God. Peter writes that we need to, “*Prepare our minds for action and make sure they are self-controlled*” (1 Peter 1:13).

So how do we do this? Allow me to offer a profound but helpful step: **filter it.**

We have to take seriously what we allow into our minds. We know the old adage, “Garbage in, garbage out,” but we seem to do nothing about it. We have to learn to discriminate. For whatever we let into our minds will one day come out in our lives. Read that again. The Bible teaches us to, “*Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ*” (2 Corinthians 10:5) and warns us, “*As a man thinks in his heart, so is he*” (Proverbs 23:7)

It’s ironic that people will do over-the-top things to protect their stuff. The home security world has made a killing off of us. How much more should we protect the greater worth of our minds?

Here’s what I’ve discovered. If someone takes my stuff but leaves my mind, I can always get more stuff. But if someone takes my mind but leaves my stuff, I would no longer have the mental capacity to use what I have left.

Here’s how you can put a filter on your mind. First, it starts with your eyes. Jesus said, “*The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light*” (Matthew 6:22). In short, you have to start watching what you watch.

Americans watch around 7 hours of television a day, equating to over 2,500 hours of TV a year. If you live to be 65, you’ll amass 9 ½ years of solid television. That’s a lot of TV! But here’s the sad reality. If you went to church every Sunday and never missed a weekend, at the age of 65 you would only amass 4 ½ months of solid church. Therein lies the problem, which is why David said, “*I will set no vile thing before my eyes*” (Psalm 101:3). The same could be said about the movies we watch, what’s on our computers, and what we choose to focus on in life.

I’ll say it again, if our eyes are bad, our whole life will follow. “*As water reflects your face, so your mind shows what kind of person you are*” (Proverbs 27:19). It’s been said, “You are what you eat,” but I think the same could be said about our minds. “We are what we think.” We have a responsibility not only to ourselves, but to God, to use our minds, develop them, and keep them spiritually sharp. What a gift He has given us! I think we need to embrace it and make good on it.



Here's the reality. Everybody wants to be great, or at least to know that their life matters. But I think our problem is in properly defining greatness.

Ask Hollywood and they might say, "A pretty face." Ask Nashville and they would probably offer, "A pretty voice." Ask Washington and they might suggest, "Connections. Knowing the right people." Ask Wall Street and I'm sure they would say, "Financial clout and leverage." Ask the NFL and they'd insist on, "The ability to tackle or run fast."

But what does God say about greatness? *"The Lord does not look at the things that man looks at. For man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart"* (1 Samuel 16:7). And there it is – the heart of the matter is really a matter of the heart. It's God's secret to greatness.

Let me be clear. God's not talking about the primary organ in the human body. The origin of the word itself is where we get the word 'character' – our true self; the person we really are behind closed doors. The one the Lord sees despite being hidden from others.

In the book of Acts we read, *"I have found David son of Jesse, a man after My own heart. He will do everything I want him to do"* (Acts 13:22). There are four things David did that caused God to declare this about him. As it was true for David, it can be for us as well.

First, David had a **broken heart**. Here's the deal. We all sin, right? The issue is what we do after we sin. Do we own it or condone it? Are we quick to confess it or justify it? When David blew it, he knew it, and went to God with it. David was quick to repent. That's precisely what God wants us to do. The Bible says, *"God will never reject a repentant heart"* (Psalm 51:17).

Secondly, David had a **trusting heart**. I heard it said that most of women's stresses are men related: men-o-pause; men-stration; his-terectomy; him-orrhoids; and men-tal illness. Okay, that was bad. But dealing with stress is a reality and David faced all kinds of it. He fought a giant, ran from Saul, and had incredible family problems. During it all he wrote some of the most beautiful Psalms we have today. *"My mind and my body may grow weak but God is my strength. He is all I ever need"* (Psalm 73:26). David trusted God regardless of his circumstances.

Everybody has dark days. Everybody gets down. Everybody feels depressed. The question is where do you turn when you're going through those times? *"In my distress I prayed to the Lord. He answered me and rescued me. He is for me. How can I be afraid?"* (Psalm 118:5-6).

When I was a kid, photographs were developed by taking the film into a dark room. The film was then laid in a tray of acid. The stronger the acid, the more beautiful the pictures. That's what some of you are going through. You're lying in a tray of acid that's eating at you. But what's really happening is that God is developing you, and a beautiful picture will come out if you'll just hang in there and trust God.



Let's continue with the last two things that made David a great man of God.

The third ingredient is that David had a **servant's heart**. He was willing to do whatever God wanted.

Here's the reality. Half-in is really all-out. You will not experience God's greatness by being 'hokey-pokey,' as in one foot in and one foot out. When it comes to our relationship with Jesus, it's all or nothing. David wrote, *"With all my heart I try to serve you"* (Psalm 119:10). He had no limits and placed no conditions.

A servant's heart is joyful, not dutiful, for serving is an opportunity and not an obligation. We should count it a privilege to serve. Reflect on that for a moment.

Finally, David had a **humble heart**. *"In everything David did, he had great success because the Lord was with him"* (1 Samuel 18:14).

As I noted earlier, David faced a lot of stress, but he also had a lot of success. After he knocked off Goliath the giant, he became a national hero. People wrote songs about him, all of Judah and Israel loved him, and David was the man. Such praise can easily become a problem. Abraham Lincoln wrote, "If you want to test a man, don't give him adversity, give him success." Someone once said, "Man is an amazing animal. He's the only animal if you pat him on the back, his head swells." But not David. He wrote, *"To You alone, O Lord, to You alone and not to us must glory be given"* (Psalm 115:1).

Did you know that 2nd Street is the first street in America? According to R. L. Polk & Co., publishers of city directories, 2nd Street is the most commonly named street in America. Park Street is in 2nd. 3rd Street is third. 4th Street is fourth. 5th Street is fifth. And Main Street is sixth. But 1st Street, well, it's seventh. And to be honest, I like that.

My friends, God doesn't mind success. In fact, He's the author of it. The question is, "What do we do with it once we get it?" May I suggest we do as David did – we give God the glory.

"For the eyes of the Lord search back and forth across the whole earth looking for people whose hearts are perfect toward Him so He can show His great power in helping them," (2 Chronicles 16:9).



According to Webster, a legacy is defined as, “(1) money or property bequeathed to another by will; or (2) something handed down from an ancestor or a predecessor from the past.” The Bible says, “*A good man leaves an inheritance to His children’s children....*” (Proverbs 13:22). The question is what kind of inheritance will we leave, one with monetary or eternal value?

Allow me to give you some conditions to leaving a lasting legacy.

The first is **Godly character and conduct**. The Bible says, “*A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold*” (Proverbs 22:1). Unfortunately, I don’t think that’s the legacy most are going to leave.

Pastor Chuck Swindoll writes, “Today, we live in an age of moral vacuum. It seems like character doesn’t count. To put it candidly, you can sleep around, and still be a brain surgeon. You can cheat on your mate, and have little trouble continuing to practice law. Apparently, it is no problem to stay in politics and plagiarize. You can be a successful salesperson, and cheat on your income tax. Seeing this we have allowed this attitude to permeate throughout Christianity. The perception is that you can do these things and still be a good Christian. But the reality is you cannot do those things as a Christian and continue enjoying the Lord’s blessing.”

Listen carefully, there’s a great difference between character and reputation. Your reputation is what you are supposed to be, while your character is who you really are. Your reputation is what you have when you come to a new community, while your character is what you will have when you leave it behind. Your reputation can be made in a moment, while your character is built over a lifetime. Your reputation grows like a mushroom. Your character grows like an oak. Your reputation can be learned in an hour. Your character won’t come to light for a year. Reputation makes you rich or makes you poor. Character makes you happy or makes you miserable. Your reputation is what men say about you on your tombstone. Your character is what angels say about you before God. Your reputation is what men think you are. Your character is what God knows you are. And it is precisely your character that will impact generations to come.

For example, one such man was Max Jukes. He did not believe in religion and married a girl of the same opinion. From their union came 1,026 descendants. Studies have shown that 300 died prematurely, 100 were sent to the penitentiary, 190 sold themselves to vice, 100 were drunkards, and their family alone cost the state of New York \$1.1 million.

Another man, by the name of Jonathan Edwards, believed in God and married a girl of like character. From their union 729 descendants were studied. 300 went on to become preachers, 65 became college professors, 13 became university presidents, 6 were authors, 3 became U.S. congressmen, one was the Vice-President of the United States, and their family didn’t cost the state anything.

“A good father will leave his imprint on his children for the rest of their lives” (James C. Dobson).



Yesterday we began by talking about what kind of legacy is worth passing on. The first one we talked about was the importance of living a Godly life of character and conduct. The second one is **holding Godly convictions**. In other words, the Bible is the authority by which we live.

In the book of Deuteronomy we read, *“And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up”* (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

George Barna recently polled 601 randomly selected senior pastors representing some 50 denominations. The results were staggering, revealing that only 51% of our nation’s pastors hold to a Biblical worldview. In other words, barely half see the Bible as their authority and make their decisions accordingly. Southern Baptists had the highest percentage (71%), while United Methodist pastors had the lowest (27%). In fact, only 28% of pastors from mainline denominations held to a Biblical worldview. How sad!

I sure hope when I’m gone, those closest to me will say of me as Paul said of Timothy, *“I remember your genuine faith”* (2 Timothy 1:5).

Athanasius, an early bishop of Alexandria, strongly opposed the teachings of Arius. Arius declared that Christ was not the eternal Son of God, but a subordinate being. Hounded through five exiles, Athanasius was finally summoned before the emperor who demanded he cease his opposition. The emperor reproved him, “Do you not realize that all the world is against you?” Athanasius quickly answered, “Then I am against all the world.”

I want to live for something that is worth dying for – if not, then what’s the point? To live like that, I must be a man of conviction who holds to a true belief that will never change. Our convictions begin on the inside as a matter of the heart. Thus, those convictions will eventually show up on the outside, in a person’s lifestyle. Violating a conviction is to violate one’s life.

Paul wrote, *“I am not ashamed of Christ, for I know the one in whom I trust, and I am sure that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until the day of His return”* (2 Timothy 1:12). May this be the legacy I pass on!

“Daddy had a little boy, his soul was white as snow. He never went to Sunday school, ‘cause Daddy wouldn’t go. He never heard the Word of God, that thrills the childish mind. While other children went to class, this child was left behind. As he grew from babe to youth, dad saw to his dismay, a soul that once was snowy white, became a dingy grey. Realizing that his son was lost, dad tried to win him back. But now the soul that once was white, had turned an ugly black. Dad even started back to church, and Bible study, too; He begged the preacher, ‘Isn’t there a thing you can do?’ The preacher tried, failed, and said, ‘We’re just too far behind. I tried to tell you years ago, but you would pay me no mind.’ And so another soul was lost, that once was white as snow. Sunday School would have helped, but Daddy wouldn’t go.” (John Homer Luffman)



Two days ago, we began a journey looking at what kind of legacy is worth passing on. The first one we talked about was the importance of living a Godly life of character and conduct. The second was holding Godly convictions – making sure the Bible is the authority by which we live. And now thirdly, it's **demonstrating an authentic, genuine love**. The disciple John said it clearly, *“Let's stop just saying we love people, let us really love them, and show it by our actions”* (1 John 3:18).

So, what is God-lived-out love? Well first, it's **selfless**. It's never about what we get, but about what and how we give. Let me pull that apart. You see, Paul wrote, *“Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others”* (1 Corinthians 10:24). He also said, *“Love each other...and honor others more than you do yourself”* (Romans 12:9-10). And isn't that precisely what God demonstrated through Christ? *“For He loved the world so much that He gave”* (John 3:16).

There's not only a 'what' to our giving, but also a 'how' to our giving. The Bible teaches that our 'how' should be **generous**. We read in Romans, *“If we can give, we should be generous”* (Romans 12:8). In the second letter of Corinthians we read, *“God loves people who love to give”* (2 Corinthians 9:7).

That was the whole point of Jesus' teaching, *“If someone wants your shirt, give him your coat. If someone wants you to walk one mile, walk two.”* I've always believed it's one thing to meet expectations, it's another to go over and above every time.

Our 'how' should also be **cheerful**. *“For each man should give what he has decided in his heart...for God loves a cheerful giver”* (2 Corinthians 9:7). The heart of the matter is always a matter of the heart. Giving is so refreshing to the soul when we understand just how much God has given us.

Secondly, authentic love is **soft**. *“Love is not rude...it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs”* (1 Corinthians 13:5). There are a lot of rude and angry people in the world, but that's not love. Soft love is gentle.

Jesus taught that the gentle are blessed (Matthew 5:5). Solomon wrote that gentleness defuses anger (Ecclesiastes 10:4). And Peter said to women, *“Gentleness is the ageless beauty, which is of the greatest value in God's sight”* (1 Peter 3:4). I don't know about you, but our world could use a dose of gentle love.

Soft love is also about forgiveness and grace. Paul taught to *“be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God has forgiven you”* (Ephesians 4:32). And that soft love *“keeps no record of wrong”* (1 Corinthians 13:5).

Finally, soft love is about patience and protection. For me, the hardest part of love isn't waiting with someone, it's waiting for someone. The Bible says, *“Be patient with each other, making allowance...”* (Ephesians 4:2).



Allow me to continue with what true, genuine, God-lived love looks like, because I don't want to short-circuit the most profound quality in the entire Word of God. Jesus said it was our number one identifier (John 13:35), and Paul said love was the greatest (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Again, the first two qualities of this God kind of love is selfless – always putting others first – and soft, meaning gentle. The third quality is that it's **secure**. It's when, "You know that you know that you know."

When you add a little bit of insecurity to a relationship, it will begin to be torn apart. Insecurity always turns inward, pre-occupying you with what you're not getting rather than what you're giving. A battery cannot put out what it does not have. This is why God is so clear about His love towards us, "*For nothing can separate you from My love*" (Romans 8:38).

The fourth quality of true, authentic love is that it's **stable**. In other words, you can count on it. It's not a fickle type of love that checks out. The Bible tells us that such a love "*never fails*" (1 Corinthians 13:8). It doesn't quit mid-stream. It never allows circumstance to direct its future. It's a love that stays true when everyone else is walking out.

The original Greek attached a picture of two men on a battle field. They would tie a rope to each other so there would be no chance that one might run from the other if the battle got heated. Solomon said, "*A rope of three strands is not quickly broken*" (Ecclesiastes 4:12). How many times do we read in God's Word, "I will never leave you or forsake you?" (Deuteronomy 31:6). That's a stable, you-can-bet-your-life-on-it kind of love.

So how do you find and experience this kind of love? Well, that's a matter of decision. Paul tells us, "*Of all the virtues put on love*" (Colossians 3:14). And it's a matter of choice. No one can do it for you.

Think about it this way. When you get up and get dressed every morning, it's not like you walk into your closet and come out clothed. There was a decision made. You picked what you would wear. The same is true with love. You have to decide to put it on.

You not only have to decide to put it on, you have to choose to live it out. Love is a matter of demeanor. "*Let's stop just saying we love people, let us really love them, and show it by our actions*" (1 John 3:18).

God's love is all about doing. Talk is cheap. We have to walk it out every day in every way. Someone once wrote, "Treat everyone you meet as if they were going to be dead by midnight. Extend to them all the care and kindness and understanding you can muster...your life will never be the same again."



John Todd was a former occultist who became a Christian, and said, “Character is that which lives and abides, and is admired long after its possessor has left the earth.” Character is a non-negotiable. Without it, we have nothing. According to the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, character “is a person’s fate and destiny.” Character is who we are, the way we are, the way we behave, the way we feel, the way we think, and the choices we make. It’s the foundation for everything.

Look at it this way. Reputation is the opinion others have formed of you, but character is the real you. As Dr. D. James Kennedy states, “Character includes those habits and personality traits that distinguish us as individuals, especially with regard to personal integrity, courage, moral fiber and individual initiative.” It’s probably why American lawyer, philanthropist, and one-time Speaker of the House of Representatives, R.C. Winthrop wrote, “The noblest contribution which any man can make for the benefit of posterity, is that of a good character.”

The Apostle Paul instructed Timothy, “*Keep a firm grasp on both your character and your teaching. Don’t be diverted. Just keep at it. Both you and those who hear you will experience salvation*” (1 Timothy 4:16). I find it interesting that Paul connects character and teaching, for your walk is always talking and your talk is always walking. I guess you could say we are the truest form of a ‘walkie-talkie.’

The English word for character is derived from a Greek word meaning the way we are self-carved, marked, impressed, or stamped. It’s the sum total of all the choices we make, the people we choose to hang around, the events we have faced or will face, and how we respond to them. It’s not just in what people see, but also in the person we are on the inside. Italian politician Machiavelli insists, “the acquisition of skills is irrelevant unless the leader acquires the appropriate qualities of character.”

Most of us are familiar with the belief that one’s private life is no one else’s business. But I contend that’s wrong thinking. Our public life has everything to do with our private life, because our public is nothing more than the expression of what’s happening under our hood. We cannot have one without the other. For the end never justifies the means – it’s just the means.

Jesus said, “*Much more is required from those to whom much more has been given*” (Luke 12:48). The much that has been given is our lives, and the much that is required is our character. I love the way Barbara Johnson put it in her devotional, *Daily Splashes of Joy*, “We should all live lives as though someone is writing a book about us” every moment of every day. Amen to that! That’s the heart of character.



For these last two days, I want to unpack some key truths about character. First, **character is best discovered in the dark.**

It's been said that the person no one sees is the true person you really are. Author Thomas Macaulay writes, "The measure of a man's real character is what he would do if he knew he would never be found out."

Andy Stanley, lead pastor of North Point Community Church in Atlanta says, "Every leader wears two badges; one visible, one invisible. The visible badge is your position and title. The invisible badge is your moral authority – who you really are." And it's precisely that private self that we should be most concerned about because that self is our true self as seen and known by God.

I've heard it said that what we see is an image, but what God sees is the man – the real you, the real self. The Bible tells us that, "*God looks at the heart*" (1 Samuel 16:7), and isn't that our true self – our character (Luke 6:45)?

If we are to become the person God purposes and desires, as well as a person that others should want to follow, it's imperative that we give careful attention to our private selves. My friends, gifts and abilities may open doors, but character will determine what we do once those doors are open.

Permit me to give you two private arenas worthy of focus. Elbert Hubbard once said, "Character is the result of two things; mental attitude and the way we spend our time."

Solomon wrote, "*For as a man thinketh in his heart, so he is*" (Proverbs 23:7). Truth be told, what others say about us matters very little, but what we say to ourselves is vital.

What if Hollywood was able to capture everything in our minds on film, and then project those images on a big screen for others to see? For some, that's horrific to even consider. But just imagine that they could. I wonder if we'd be comfortable hosting a red-carpet premier and what rating they would have to put on it.

Now, don't be quick to brush this aside. We need to ask what we allow our mind to think about – to feed on. Just because others can't see or hear our thoughts, doesn't mean they go unnoticed. As the old adage goes, "Garbage in; garbage out." The fact is, some things reviewed too often will eventually come out in our public lives. Rehearse something enough, and it becomes part of our daily lives. Paul wrote to the Romans, "*The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace*" (Romans 8:6).

As author William Channing wrote, "The great hope of society is in individual character."



Secondly, **character is best grown through difficulty.** I read once, “Character is best formed in the stormy billows of the world.” Nothing removes the mask of a charlatan quicker than the face of adversity. Solomon wrote, “*If you falter in a time of trouble, how small is your strength*” (Proverbs 24:10).

True character can withstand the unmerited winds of criticism, for it has this distinct knack to carry one even if it means alone. Robert Schuller said true character would always boast, “Tough times never last, but tough people do.” For I heard it said, “Character is the will to do what’s right even if it’s hard.” True character acknowledges a standard of right and wrong. And thus, it involves doing the right thing because it’s just the right thing to do – no matter how hard and regardless of the consequences.

You know, I’m convinced that character can only grow on the anvil of pain, as if pain is a gift. The tough would never want to avoid it or dare to go looking for it. They just understand that pain is part of the program. And thus, they embrace the words of Thomas Carlyle, “Adversity is the diamond dust Heaven polishes its jewels with.”

Thirdly, **character is best professed in defeat.** Winning may decide who gets the trophy, but character reveals who deserves it. I’ve known a lot of losers who deserved to win, and a lot of winners who didn’t.

Listen, success includes failure. We’re all familiar with the life of Thomas Edison. He didn’t fail 1,000 times in creating the light bulb. It just took him 1,000 steps to get there. It’s been said the average man fears new opportunities, but God’s people fear missing-out on them. Sometimes we’re going to fail in life. It’s not what you lose that defines you, but how you face the loss.

In the words of Theodore Roosevelt, “It is not the critic who counts, nor the man who points how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly...who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at best, knows the triumph of high achievement; and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

And finally, **character is best built over time.** You can’t hurry it. Character is a life-long process. Thus, time becomes the leader’s best friend.



