



# pressing on

running with perseverance





Cloverdale Baptist Church



running with perseverance

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# Dedication

God has called me primarily to love Him. I want my life to display the beauty of who He is and what He has done, and for Him to be glorified in all!

God has called me to be a husband and a father. Though far from perfect, it is my longing that each member of our family would *press on!* Lori, Ryan, Jeff (and Hannah), Ben, Graeme, *I love you*. My heart longs for us together to grow in intimacy and impact for the glory of our King, that He might use this book not only to help His bride, the church, pursue Him. I am proud of you, and who you are becoming, and long for us to all be so much more. My life is dedicated to displaying the beauty of Jesus to His Church, and proclaim His worth to all who will listen. In this you are my first priority in prayer and pursuit. It gives me great joy to see you walking in the truth. May this book, and my life ever help you press on to love Him more, and live for His purposes in every area of your lives. I am privileged to be a pastor, but even more to be a husband and a father. I love you, my family, and am delighted that you love our God. *Press on!*

# Purpose

The goal of this book, and this series is to help those who are in the family of God to live like Jesus and for Jesus. The church in Canada is in need of an awakening, a new passion to live in relationship with God and to have this relationship drive and define them.

My prayer for this study is that we would become more God-centred, Word-saturated and gospel-shaped, that our lives would be lived among those who don't know Jesus and would display who He is, and that we would appeal to those in our sphere of influence to be reconciled to God.



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# Prework

## Seeing the Target: The Mandate and The Mission

*Galatians 4:19; 2 Corinthians 5:11–21*

Change is never easy, yet if you are a follower of Christ it is not only necessary it is non-optional! It is something that we are to give our all to accomplish all the while realizing that apart from Him we can do nothing.

Our mandate is to be like Jesus, or more in line with biblical language, to have Christ formed in us. This means to think, feel and act like Jesus would have us do. This means to live life always conscious of His presence, holy, joyful and on mission.

Our mission is to build the bride, using the gifts the Spirit has given us and the resources that God has given us to steward to reach out to the community where He has placed us. He left us here on earth to display who He is and to draw people to Him. We are a part of His eternal plan, and yet, so often we fall short. We struggle with apathy, or legalism. We avoid talking about God except on Sunday. Our worship is heavily emotional—is it the right volume, are the songs right, and if it is off a little, we feel hurt and heavy.

So this series is put together to awaken in us a new desire to follow Jesus, to be like Him, and to live on mission for His glory. My prayer as we begin this journey together is that the Spirit of God would use this to awaken the bride of Christ, and that we would live on mission as we look like Him.

“Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” (Psalm 85:6)

## 31 Days to a New Life

If we want to change our lives, it will almost always involve a change of habits. This book is put together to help you develop some of those new habits, that we often call keystone habits. A habit is something that we do without thinking about it, it feels normal and natural, and it forms most of what we do. There are very few things that you can learn or do that actually can have an everyday impact. Most knowledge you gain builds on itself, and the accumulative growth brings change. It is not the individual things that you learn at school that make the most difference (okay a few big ones), rather the ability to learn and the growth of knowledge as a whole. There are, however, a few lessons that, when learned, can actually impact everything else. For children, learning to crawl and then walk (perhaps as important going to the bathroom on their own), speaking then reading, makes the world become a much bigger place.

In the Christian walk there are some essential world changing things to know, however the constant growth is also essential. The great thing about Christianity is that even the things that are essential at the start can fascinate for the rest of eternity. How great God is, how profound His love, how wondrous of His wisdom and power, and our search into the depth of His character will only grow better as we grow older. We should know the gospel and how to share it. We should know God's holiness and love and how they explode at the cross and rejoice. There is so much to know and grow in that, sometimes, it can feel overwhelming. So where do we begin? How do we continue?

There are some keystone habits for the Christian that are essential for the overall walking, for learning to know God better and live in obedience to His Word. They are habits that influence all of life, even as they develop in their own specific impact area. A *keystone habit* is a habit that develops a number of other good habits, and produces not only the positive impact related to that particular habit, but overflows into many other areas of life. Keystone habits are *key* to becoming a healthy Christian and for learning to build yourself up in your most holy faith. For the Christian there are four keystone habits that will shape your intimacy with Jesus and impact on mission for Him in the church and the world. The overflow of their influence will change the trajectory of your entire life if you're willing to put the effort in to making them a part of the pattern of your life.

1. Preach
2. Pursue
3. Pray
4. People
5. Person

## Keystone Habit #1: Preach

### Preach the gospel to yourself everyday

This is a lesson that Jerry Bridges taught me very early on in my walk with God, and one that has impacted me perhaps more than any other. Of all of the keystone habits, this is the most important, and perhaps the most impactful. The gospel of Jesus is not only the entry point to a reconciled relationship with God, it is the key to joyful victory in everyday living. It is practicing the discipline of reminding oneself of the richness of what Jesus has done on the cross, so that the reality of our own sin, and the battle we still have with the world, the flesh, and the devil can be done with full confidence, and engaged in with overflowing passion. Jesus gave the church two habits, one at the entry point into relationship with Him, and the other as an ongoing reminder—communion and baptism—both important for all followers of Jesus.

The gospel serves as the very centre of a heart that is fully devoted to Jesus. It motivates the follower of Jesus to obey (Hebrews 2:3) and be those who do not ignore so great a salvation! The gospel compels Jesus followers to a life of full devotion to their Master (2 Corinthians 5:14; Romans 12:1–2) and if we are having trouble in our spiritual life, it is always related foundationally to our experience of the gospel. It serves to inflame the heart, deepen the devotion, and keep the servant on track when life isn't yielding desired results. It is the starting point and staying place for every faithful follower of Jesus. Colossians 1:4–6 states “<sup>4</sup>Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup>because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, <sup>6</sup>which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.” The gospel here is described as bearing fruit and increasing, it is not only content to be known and believed, but is also to be experienced and deepened. The gospel not only introduces disciples to God, it produces the motives and freedoms that come from its work in their lives. There is so much that comes from a proper experience of the gospel:

- Freedom: *Romans 8:1*
- Passion: *2 Corinthians 5:14*
- Love: *Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:19; Ephesians 5:1–2*
- Forgiveness: *Matthew 18:21–35; Ephesians 4:32*
- Identity: *2 Corinthians 5:21*
- Humility: *Matthew 5:3*
- Passion for Mission: *2 Corinthians 5:18–21*
- Joy: *1 Peter 1:8*

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If you live your life in the context of what Jesus has done for you, you will never be the same, and every other area of life is impacted.

How do disciples remind themselves of the gospel every day so that it can be applied to every area of their thinking, believing and living? It is the discipline of actively calling to mind what Jesus has done and the wonderful results of this gift of salvation, and personalizing this relational reality. It is acknowledging the fullness of the gospel and then reminding oneself of the implications. This can be done standing in front of a mirror and talking to yourself (perhaps when no one else is around), or in prayer, rejoicing in who God is and what He has done. It is a great place to begin your day, with a song, or hymn, or spiritual song. I love to wake up to the song "Jesus, Thank You", a Sovereign Grace Worship song written by a friend. It begins my day with the joy of knowing what Jesus did for me, and almost always it is reflected in my heartfelt joy.

Preaching the gospel to yourself is also great as a weapon against condemnation and apathy, against pride and self-pity, and the list could go on. It is the antidote to much sin, and the pathway to overflowing overwhelming joy. When you are tempted to feel overcome with guilt and shame at your sin, remind yourself that Jesus' life, death and resurrection are what give you forgiveness and freedom. Memorize important Scriptures like Romans 8:1, or 1 John 1:9, and live in light of this reality, and when you are not experiencing the richness that comes from the gospel, *stop*, and fix your eyes on Jesus.

If you are tempted to pride or self-pity, remind yourself of Ephesians 2:8–10, and rejoice in God's workmanship. He gets the glory and you have immense value in Him. Boast in your weaknesses, and remember that God uses weak people (1 Corinthians 1:18–30; 2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

If you lack passion and find yourself apathetic, meditate on the love of Jesus as seen in the cross, and you will find yourself compelled (2 Corinthians 5:14). You will be like a tube of toothpaste being squeezed as God's love presses in on your heart and it produces joy-filled obedience and confident service. It is not a surprise that the ordinances that God has given the church focus on this reality: remembering, fixing our eyes on Jesus, proclaiming His death until He returns, rejoicing in our identity with Him. The habit of living constantly in the presence of the reality of the work of Christ on the cross is a discipline that will change your entire life.

The gospel must be central in our thoughts and lives if we are to live confident, obedient, joy-filled lives. The discipline of actively calling to mind what Jesus has done for you, and the wonderful results of this gift of salvation personalize this relational reality.

When I am praying, I journal, and in this I seek to thank God for what He has done for me and plead with Him to deepen my experience of His love (Ephesians 3:14–21). Consciously place the beauty of your salvation before your eyes every day! *Preach the gospel to yourself every day!*

**Making the habit happen**

- In your own words, what does it mean to preach the gospel to yourself every day?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What are some disciplines you will build into your life so that you develop this *keystone habit*?

I am committed to preaching the gospel to myself every day, and will do these three things to make this happen:

*Signed:* \_\_\_\_\_

1.

2.

3.

## Keystone Habit #2: Pursue

### Pursue Word saturation

The second most important relational keystone habit is the consistent pursuit of *Word saturation*. Longing to know God's Word and live in light of it.

Spurgeon understood this well, when he wrote:

“Oh, that you and I might get into the very heart of the Word of God, and get that Word into ourselves! As I have seen the silkworm eat into the leaf, and consume it, so ought we to do with the Word of the Lord—not crawl over its surface, but eat right into it till we have taken it into our inmost parts. It is idle merely to let the eye glance over the words, or to recollect the poetical expressions, or the historic facts; but it is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your very style is fashioned upon Scripture models, and, what is better still, your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord.

I would quote John Bunyan as an instance of what I mean. Read anything of his, and you will see that it is almost like reading the Bible itself. He had read it till his very soul was saturated with Scripture; and, though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his *Pilgrim's Progress*—that sweetest of all prose poems — without continually making us feel and say, “Why, this man is a living Bible!” Prick him anywhere—his blood is Bimeline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his very soul is full of the Word of God. I commend his example to you, beloved.”

*(Mr. Spurgeon as a Literary Man, in The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon, Compiled from His Letters, Diaries, and Records by His Wife and Private Secretary, vol. 4, 1878–1892 (Curtis & Jennings, 1900), p. 268.)*

When Jesus prayed in His high priestly prayer, His words show us the importance of God's Word to our continual growth, “sanctify them by the truth, your word is truth” (John 17:17). Help them to become holy, and use your Word to do it, so the Bible becomes our best friend in our pursuit of holiness. The centre of the Bible is a Psalm that shows the incredible value of the Bible, “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). It is well worth the time to read through Psalm 119 and see how God uses His Word to shape His people. Most importantly, the Word reveals to us who God is, and it is only through Spirit filled study of His Word that we can actually get to know Him. The value of God's Word is surpassed (Psalm 138:2; Psalm 19) only by His Name, and in fact, is the only way we can know His Name.

Psalm 138:2 declares “I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.” In fact, in the Hebrew it is even stronger than this, “you have exalted above your name, your word.” What God is communicating here is the value of His Word on display in its main priority of deepening our understanding of the name (character) of God so that we can know Him and make Him known.

God’s Word becomes our pathway into the presence of God, and helps us to evaluate everything we think about God and life.

“<sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Colossians 3:16–17)

This dwelling of God’s Word in His followers is the key to victory over sin and delight in the Savior. God’s Word is His revealing of Himself, His ways with mankind and how we can know Him and live for His glory. It is not only essential to read to grow in our intimacy with Him, but also to grow in our conformity to Him.

“<sup>1</sup> I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:1–2)

Followers of Jesus need this renewal or they will find themselves coasting downhill in the worldliness pattern. It is a choice between being Word saturated or worldly wanderers. God’s Word is inspired, inerrant and sufficient, and as such, God’s people must saturate themselves in it from Genesis to Revelation. So, how do disciples grow in their Word saturation?

## **Read**

This seems pretty simple, and yet needs to be stated, if you want to be Word saturated you must spend time reading God’s Word. This should be done daily, and should cover the entire Bible. It is my belief that every Christian should be reading through the Bible, and at least once every two years have read the Bible cover to cover. Not only this, an emphasis should be made on reading passages that are especially meaningful for your life now. These will be brought to you with the help of the Holy Spirit, and other believers,

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and can be lived in so that the memory that is filled with God's Word is constantly growing. There are many who have moved away from reading, and this is a tragedy. It is not that you can't listen to God's Word and benefit from this time, but God's Word should be read and responded to. Make this a habit so that you can honestly say that God's Word is dwelling in you!

### **Listen**

Listen to God's Word faithfully being preached. By this I actually mean find a church that preaches God's Word and commit yourself to her (more on this later). When you are committed to listening to expository preaching in community, it will strengthen the depth of your knowledge of God's Word.

As your preacher works through books, and the content of the sermon is driven by the content of the text, you will grow deeper and wider. There are many reasons to choose a church—the main one is the faithful preaching of God's Word and the impact that this will have on you and others around you. Take the time to prepare to listen, so that your heart is ready to respond to God's Word. Read the passage beforehand, give some thought to what you think it means and how it can apply to your life and when the sermon is preached, actively listen with open Bible and pen in hand.

### **Study**

Studying God's Word is done when you try to take a smaller portion of Scripture and seek to understand how it fits into the whole and what it is saying at a deeper level. You can study in groups, or on your own and there are many study helps that are available online, or in books and commentaries. It is taking the time to purposely go under the surface, to place things in their context and to understand what the text means at another level. Remember when it comes to God's Word, it is truth, and we are sanctified as we know the truth, deeper and wider.

### **Meditate and memorize**

To meditate is to chew on and think through, to memorize is to think on and don't let go. As we hide God's Word in our hearts we are able to find victory in our battle against sin (Psalm 119:11). God's Word is the key weapon in our fight for holiness (John 17:17), and memorizing and meditating provide the pathway to Word saturation. Psalm 1 introduces a pathway to victory and it includes meditating on the Law of God day and night.

Choose a few passages that are precious, Romans 8 or John 15 are good starting places but there are so many more, and write a few verses out on cue cards and then think about them often, review them often, and don't stop. Choose the verse of the month from CBC

as another great starting place for memorizing. Challenge your family or friends, and in grace pursue that one verse a month goal of getting God's Word into your heart. Join A.W.A.N.A. as a listener, and eventually all of the children saying their verses to you will give you an wealth of Scripture that rejoices your soul.

### **Share**

This is where you share in humility what you are learning with others. The caution here is that you are inviting others of like passion to stand with you under the Word, so in that sense of tenderness of heart, share what you are learning, how you are growing, what truths are transforming your heart.

We are called to encourage one another daily, and the chief way that we do this is with God's Word flowing through our lives and lips (Hebrews 3:12-14).

### **Live it**

Matthew 7:21-27 introduces the reality to the believe that we must not only know God's Word, we must be those who live it. In fact, applying God's Word to life is the key to a dynamic growing relationship with Him. To believe in Him as Lord is to be one who actively pursues submission to His Word in all of life! Look for ways you can know God better, and allow this knowledge to overflow into all of life! Be one God esteems, tremble at His Word (Isaiah 66:2), and become Word-saturated.

### **Pursue Word saturation**

- I will read through the Bible in the coming year: *Signed* \_\_\_\_\_
- I will actively prepare my heart to receive from God's Word preached faithfully: *Signed* \_\_\_\_\_
- I will memorize at least one verse a month, and seek to think about this verse in my coasting mind time: *Signed* \_\_\_\_\_
- I will seek to apply God's Word to my life, so that I am living in a relationship with Jesus that drives and defines me: *Signed* \_\_\_\_\_

## Keystone Habit #3: Prayer

Prayer is communicating with God. We listen to Him when we read His Word, we speak to Him when we pray. We are to be people who display desperate dependence and His glorious faithfulness by praising His name, and bringing to Him every request in thanksgiving.

Jesus wants His followers to *always pray* and not give up (Luke 18:1). He wants us to know our dependence (Exodus 17:12–14), and live it out by choosing to communicate with Him in our times of need (Hebrews 4:16). Prayer is the overflow of a heart that is living in relationship with God, and it is the practice of casting all of our anxieties on Him (1 Peter 5:7), or bringing to Him all of our anxieties. He wants to hear from us and is looking to strengthen those who are fully devoted to Him (2 Chronicles 16:9).

When should you pray? All of the time, or for extended periods of time? *Yes!* Nehemiah models this beautifully when he cries out to God for help for the people of Israel, for an extended period of time, and then, before the king, shoots up an arrow prayer pleading with him for help in the moment. We should do both. We should actively live in His presence, and constantly take everything to Him (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18) all the time (Psalm 16:8). God has chosen to use His people's prayers to accomplish His will. The most you can do for someone is to pray for them. After that, there are many things you can also do, but our relationship with God should be displayed in our prayer life. We know that unless the LORD builds the church, we are labouring in vain (Psalm 127:1). We know that apart from Him we can do nothing (John 15:1–11), and so we *pray!*

How should you pray? Well the simple answer is that there are all sorts of ways to pray (Ephesians 6:18), and we must be very careful to choose only one way to pray. We can learn from Jesus (Matthew 6) or the prayers of biblical characters on how to pray biblically if we want to rightly pattern our prayers after what the Holy Spirit has inspired. Praying the Psalms, as Donald Whitney helpfully teaches, can also be a huge blessing and benefit as you learn and grow in pouring out your heart to God His way. Don't worry about your words as much as guard your heart (Proverbs 4:16) and allow the overflow of your heart to impact your words. Jesus does not need you to use thee's and thou's, although He does understand them. He wants to hear your heart overflowing and crying out to Him!

Why should you pray? Because it is commanded, and it is God's tool to grow you and use you to impact others. It is relational and powerful (James 5:16) and something we should be growing deeper in all the time as we know God more. When should I start this Keystone Habit? *Now!*

**Prayer: crying out to God**

Today I commit to put reminders into my life that will help me actively be conscious of His presence: *Signed:* \_\_\_\_\_

**Reminders**

Today I commit to bring things on my heart to God in prayer. *Signed:* \_\_\_\_\_

Today I will seek to add 5 minutes to my current pattern of extended prayer. If you don't pray at all, pray 5 minutes a day. If you pray now, add 5. *Signed:* \_\_\_\_\_

If you have trouble knowing what to pray, you can follow biblical prayers, pray through Psalms, or follow helpful acrostics, such as the following:

**A.C.T.S.**

- **Adoration:** praise God for who He is
- **Confession:** agree with God and His view of sin and rejoice in His forgiveness
- **Thanksgiving:** thank Him for what He has done for you on the cross and His everyday gifts.
- **Supplication:** this is the requests time. Pour out every request on your mind.

I have been asked if there are prayer requests that are too small to bring to God. The answer is either “of course, they are all too small,” or, the right response if it is on your heart, bring it to Him and you will experience His grace and love and He will use your prayers to accomplish His will and glorify His name!

**L.O.V.E. — Key things to pray for our congregation**

1. **Love relationship with God:** Core of who we are. Mark 12:28–31

That we would be a church that is relational, and has an experience of God's love, which makes a relationship that drives and defines everything else!

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### 2. One heart and mind

Unity together for God's Glory!

- Romans 15:5–6
- Philippians 1:27

### 3. Vision

That our vision would be God's and we will pursue it together (Holiness, Truth, Mission, Love).

- Philippians 1:21
- John 17:17
- Ephesians 3:14–21
- Galatians 2:20
- 2 Timothy 3:16–17
- 1 Peter 4:8
- 1 Peter 1:16
- Matthew 28:16–20

### 4. Eager servants

That we would be a great church full of eager servants.

- Ephesians 4:11–16
- John 13:1–14

- Pray for God to bless us with numbers (a church full of people who are full of God) and commitment to Him as we move forward.
- Pray for a culture of evangelism and discipleship.

God will use our prayers to shape our pursuit of Him successfully together.

### Helpful New Testament prayers to pattern your prayers after

- Ephesians 1:17–19
- Colossians 1:9–12
- 1 Timothy 2:1–4
- Ephesians 3:16–19
- 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13
- Romans 10:1
- Philippians 1:9–11
- 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17

- 
- Memorize and meditate on Colossians 4:2–4

## Keystone Habit #4: People

The healthy Christian will always live in community with the people of God in a local church. This keystone habit is a commitment not only to belong, and grow in a healthy church, but also to serve her and sacrificially help her to grow to be all that God wants her to be (Ephesians 4:11–16).

This is a habit that has been under attack from the foundation of the church, perhaps because we are fallen people, perhaps because Satan hates what God loves, or perhaps because it is an easy thing to lose sight of in the business of the world. God has chosen the church to be His change agent for the world. In the Bible every individual Christian is seen as a part of a bigger family, commanded to take part in that family to give and receive and it is a key part of the discipleship process.

If you are a part of the Church (you have believed the gospel and joined God's family), you will be a part of a church (local church). This is not always easy as churches are filled with humans like you, but it is mandated, and the only way to be healthy as a Christian over the long term. There are no perfect churches, and if there were, you would wreck it when you joined. There are many imperfect churches that God is using His followers to beautify and, if you are truly saved, it is your mandate and privilege to be a part of it.

### **Being committed to God's family**

#### **1. Commitment to community** *Hebrews 3:12–14; 10:24–25*

The church is the place where we help one another grow towards Jesus. Without her, and our regular commitment to her we will not grow as God desires, and the deceitfulness of sin will steal our holiness and our joy and leave us empty and in despair. We need one another to pursue holiness, and if we do not commit to this kind of community we will be in danger of developing hard hearts, and without knowingly choosing, will move on a pathway to sin.

This commitment in our culture includes making Sunday a priority for the gathering of God's people and coming ready to hear from God's Word and serve, but also a desire to meet with smaller groups and build in opportunities to obey the one-another's of Scripture. The first commitment is a time and priority commitment to make sure that in the business of life, the gathering of believers takes priority over almost everything else. For Canada and our current culture, this is Sunday morning, so this habit is to make Sunday morning a high priority that you pray for, prepare for even in your choices Saturday night, and in prayer.

### 2. Commitment to love and unity

You have heard it said, “to dwell above with saints I love, oh wouldn’t that be glory. But to live below with saints we know, well that’s another story.” Hmmmm...not sure that is what we should be affirming, yet so often we do. I hear of struggles people had with the church, and of recent church historians who would say that many churches are on a 10 year division cycle. Again this is not surprising as it is repeatedly addressed in the New Testament as a goal we should pray for and pursue (Philippians 2; Romans 15:5–6, etc.), and when the Bible outlines things that God hates the highlighted attribute is one who stirs up conflict in the community (Proverbs 6:16–19).

So this commitment to the family of God, to God’s people, is a commitment to selflessness and God centred love (Romans 12:10; Ephesians 5:1–2). A commitment to selflessly and courageously pursuing God’s best. It is a commitment to avoiding negativity and complaining, and to pursuing self-sacrificial love and graciousness. In fact, in a healthy church, when negativity is being shared, it is taken immediately to those who can deal with the issue, or dealt with as the sin of gossip or slander. We are to be known for our love for one another, and in that we need to Ephesians 4:32 one another. You will need to forgive brothers and sisters in the church, or you will live with bitterness that will lead to the rejection of Jesus’ bride and the removal of yourself from community in brokenness. The cost is high if you don’t make it your habit to choose love and unity over division and selfishness.

### 3. Commitment to God’s Word

We have covered this already, but should restate the priority of God’s people gathered is the preaching of God’s Word, surrounded by submission and praise. Commit to a church that believes in expository preaching and as a friend once said, if God’s Word is opened, you can always get something from the message regardless of the quality of the preacher. Commit to active listening! Prepare your hearts on Saturday nights by reviewing the text, and spending time after the text was opened reviewing how it applies to your life. Take God’s Word seriously and pursue active listening and respond to His Word in community!

### 4. Commitment to the gospel

This is and should remain the entrance point to the Church. Also, remember what was already covered in the preaching of the gospel to yourself every day. The church is a place where the gospel is displayed, not only through the ordinances, but also through the constant centrality of Jesus and His work. The mission of the church is to make disciples, and this mission includes guiding people into the gospel and helping them to live in light of the gospel in every area of their lives!

**5. Commitment to service**

The church is a place to belong, help others belong, and serve. It is only as each part does its work that the church will find unity and maturity (Ephesians 4:11–16). If you are someone who has believed in Jesus as your LORD and Savior, you must choose to serve His church, to build it up. If you are not serving it will stunt your growth, and you will be hurting the church you belong to. This means seeking to know your spiritual gift, and seeking to use it in His strength, for His glory (1 Peter 4:11–12).

**6. Commitment to submission**

This is hard in our world, however important to remind people of. The church has God-appointed leaders, and God calls His people to submit to them and make their ministry a joy (Hebrews 13:7, 17). This should be something that is easy, but from experience, we know that it is probably not, as so often, like the Israelites and Christians before us, we think we know better, feel better, or are more qualified.

A part of following elders is choosing on non-biblical issues to submit fully even if you think they could have chosen a better path. Submission does not mean you don't talk, or share, or pursue what the God's best is, but it always means you do so in a respectful manner that joins team when the final decision is made. That seems like a lot, so take the time to re-read this habit, and ask yourself if you are willing to make this a habit, or perhaps habits, that will yield growth.

Remember, as you commit yourself to God's people, that there is no perfect church, but God has chosen His people to be His change agent in the world, so commit to being a part of God's will in building her, and in confidence know He ultimately will build His church (Matthew

- I will seek to be a healthy member of a church, with all that entails: *Signed* \_\_\_\_\_
- I will seek to be one who uses who God has made me to build His church, and be an encourager to those God places in my local family: *Signed* \_\_\_\_\_

Take the time to re-read habit #4, and look up the verses, as you seek to grow to becoming who God wants you to become.

## Keystone Habit #5: Person

This fifth one is very similar to the first, we must be those who live in relationship, and we could easily call this “the preach the gospel to yourself every day” again, however, the focus of this one is the person of Jesus. This habit is to force our minds to remember that our Christian life is much more than a pattern of habits, it is about the person of Jesus, and ultimately fixing our eyes on Him. It is Paul’s “this one thing I do”, or Hebrews “fix your eyes on Jesus”, or the great command to love God with an all-in relationship with Him. If we are successful in these keystone habits, our intimacy with God will grow, and the more we grow and see Him for who He has revealed Himself to be, the more desperately we will need a clear and constant experience of the gospel. The key in this is to not just get good at the discipline of religion, but to be delighted in the relationship of reconciliation. So, don’t forget: preach the gospel to yourself every day. In that, focus on what Jesus has done for you and is doing for you. Take 10 looks at Jesus for every one look at yourself, and see all of life through your relationship with Him. Make everything about Him: “to live is Christ, to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Live in His presence (Psalm 16:8). Jerry Bridges once shared that true revival comes from consciously living in His presence, as this gives power to live and purity in fleeing from sin. I think He is right, so practice Psalm 16:8, and live your life ever growing and glowing to the praise of His glorious grace. Know that you can only work out your salvation as He works in you (Philippians 2:12–13) and that boasting in your weaknesses is a sought-after quality as we know that, in this, the power of Christ will rest on us (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Remember our goal, and our pathway to that goal is relationship with Jesus, and this relationship will change everything else (John 15:1–11). So as we build these habits into our live through discipline and in delight, remember that our passion is to know Jesus more and live for Him continuously. For humility, strength, and courage to go on, keep the your eyes on Jesus, and if you fail (and you will), get up the next morning and begin again to form these habits that will shape so many others in your life with the joy of knowing Him better, and living for His glory always. In God’s strength, for God’s glory, these habits can become the foundation for your conformity to Christ, and with that foundation strong, the impact will reverberate not only in your life and through your life, but for all eternity.

- I will seek to grow in my intimacy with Jesus, and impact for Jesus in every area of my life. *Signed* \_\_\_\_\_
- I will seek to remember that Christianity is about Jesus, and therefore seek to live my life in His presence, in a way that shows that I am driven and defined in my relationship with Him. *Signed* \_\_\_\_\_

## How to Use These Devotionals

Over the next 31 days we want to help you to build these five keystone habits into your life.

### To do this we want you to join us

1. **As individuals:** working through these devotionals every day, and doing the growth work.
2. **As a church family:** by discussing these with people around you and seeking to grow together. Share what you are learning, things you are struggling with, how you are growing and glowing.
3. **In a growth group:** we want each person in our church in a close growing relationship with other believers. One of the ways we are seeking to accomplish this is our growth groups. Please prayerfully commit to joining one of these. Not only do we believe this will help you grow, we believe that you can help others grow in their relationship with Jesus as well!

Please open your Bible in each devotional and do the reading. We want this book to drive God's people into His Book. Please also take the time to meditate on the memory verses. Carry them with you throughout the day and read them 10–15 times. This will help you to live in the context of that verse, and we believe make a difference in your life as you live your life in the context of His Word.

They say it takes 31 days to make a habit, and we long to be a church that is filled with people who live all of life in God's presence for His glory! We will start with people who lived it out, to show us it is possible, and then walk through how we can specifically be a people who build the 5 Christian Keystone Habits into our lives. You will notice that there is no devotional for Sundays, so take the time to work through the Questions for Application, and seek to prepare for your growth group meeting or to discuss with others in your life.

Father, would you take the coming 31 days and use them to draw us to yourself, and bringing to live our lives to the praise of your glorious grace.

### Texts to read and summarize

- Romans 12:1–2
- Psalm 1
- Psalm 119:11





# 1

## Don't Waste Your Life

*Philippians 3:8–21*

Funerals are difficult, even when they are believers who lived great lives. They are a reminder to me of my own frailty, and the frailty of people I love (almost always after doing a funeral I call my mom and dad and let them know how much I love them). Every funeral should serve four key functions: (1) they should remind us of our own frailty; (2) they should present the gospel in a way that is easy to understand and respond to; (3) they should help attenders to learn from the life that is being celebrated how not to waste your life, or put positively, how to live well; (4) they should comfort the people who are grieving.

This text displays the beauty of a man who was wasting his life with passion, and then had the opportunity to meet the person of Jesus and everything changed! Key to an un-wasted life is intimacy with Jesus, of longing to know Him more, and to live life as an overflow of who He is. All of life, when lived well is an overflow of relationship with Jesus!

*Press on...ever deeper...*



# 1 | Don't Waste Your Life

*Philippians 3:8–21*

## Introduction

### How can you waste your life?

- Ignore the question
- Ignite about the wrong things *Galatians 1:13–14*
- Inattention to what you know *1 Corinthians 9:24–27*

### 1. Perceive the value *Verses 7–8*

### 2. Press on *Verses 9–10*

### 3. Pursue passionately *Verses 12-14*

- Godly discontent

- Gospel hope

- Going exclusive

- Great gain

#### **Implications**

- Relationship

- Repent

- Resolve



## Questions for Application

What are some things in your life that have caused you to not live as *all in* as you should?

Hebrews 12:1–3 states that we are to throw off things that slow us down (can be good or bad), and get rid of sin that can trip us up. As you look at North America, what do you think are the top three things that fit each category?

Why do you think that often in Scripture the Christian life is presented as a race?

*1 Corinthians 9:24–27*

Read Philippians 3:8–21

How can we learn to see what has true value? *Verses 7–8*

How did Paul learn this?

What does Matthew 13:44–45 teach us about the cost of following Jesus, and the reward of knowing Him?

Why do you think Paul uses the term *press on* so many times in this text? *Verses 9–10*

## Pressing On

What does it mean to *press on*?

Pastor Rob said that the overwhelming desire of Paul is found in the phrase “I want to know Christ”. How can we have this same driving passion?

Why do you think we are satisfied with so much less?

How can we learn to make this desire of Paul’s, to know Christ, our driving desire?

What does it mean to pursue this passionately? *Verses 12–14*

Pastor Rob said there are four basic steps to doing this, review them in a way that understands and equips you to apply them:

1. Godly discontentment
2. Gospel hope
3. Going exclusive
4. Great gain

Review the implications: *Relationship, Repentance, Resolved*. Together, seek to understand these concepts and work through how to apply them as a group.

extra notes



## Daily Devotionals

*In the first week of devotions, focus on people who lived faithfully for God's glory and did not waste their lives. It is good to remember that the Bible is filled with real people who lived real lives of authentic faith. May our God use these to celebrate the greatness of His followers, but even more to remind us that we can honour Him as we live our lives for His glory.*

Week 1

**Monday**

*Read Hebrews 11:1–22*

It is good to look back at heroes of the faith and refresh our own lives with their stories and passion. Biographies help us to improve our own lives. One man who modelled a life well lived, and whose impact continues on is C.T. Studd. It has been said about him, “C.T.’s life stands as some rugged Gibraltar—a sign to all succeeding generations that it is worthwhile to lose all this world can offer and stake everything on the world to come. His life will be an eternal rebuke to easygoing Christianity. He has demonstrated what it means to follow Christ...without looking back.” (Stephen Ross) His words still should ring in our ears, as true and life defining, “only one life, twill soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.” Sadly most of us (okay almost all of us) tend to waste our lives. Ever since John Piper wrote his great little book *Don't Waste Your Life* this theme of living a life that matters has impacted my generation. Does your life matter? Are you wasting your life? No one really wants to waste their lives, however, often, people slip into a wasted life by accidental choices. There are three main reasons why we tend to slip into this wasted life problem.

The first is that we **ignore** the question of what really matters and coast along. If the devil, the world and the flesh can keep our view of God small enough that He doesn't impact our lives, there is much that can chew up our time (Hebrews 12:1–3)—yes, sin, but also things that are good in and of themselves but which remove our focus from God. We live in a heavily entertained world, perhaps not as bad as, A Brave New World, but it is easy to numb ourselves into mindless survival. Hard questions about life and why we exist, and where we are at are essential to growth, especially in the spiritual realm. We must always be willing to ask what really matters, and pursue the answer in light of who God is and what God wants. If we want to waste our lives, ignore the harder questions of why we exist, and how we can accomplish God's purpose in our lives. However, if we want to live lives that matter, we will never be satisfied with ignoring what really matters. “How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” (Hebrews 2:3a)

## Pressing On

The second way to waste our lives is to be passionate about the wrong things—to **ignite** about the wrong things. I have been told that we live in a low commitment world, so not to expect great things from people who attend church in terms of their commitment level. Anyone who has had kids in sport, watched their favourite team win or lose a championship, or watched American politics over the last few years knows this is not true. It is not a matter of a lack of commitment that is the problem, but rather a commitment to things that don't matter or are of lesser importance. Paul shares in Galatians 1:13–14, that his zeal was extreme, and yet wrong, in fact, as we trace his life, Paul hurt God and His bride the church (Acts 26:14).

We have all been given the right amount of time, and if we want to be those who don't waste that time but use it effectively we must check what we are passionate about, and ensure that it is the same things that God has called us to! Zeal without knowledge leads to death (Romans 10:1–3).

The last robber of a meaningful life is: **inattention** to what you already know. Often in the evangelical world we are on an information hunt. This in and of itself is a great thing, we *need* to be Word-saturated (Colossians 3:16–17). However, if our learning does not lead to a deeper relationship with God that drives and defines us, what we're learning is not accomplishing what God wants it to. Knowledge as a goal in itself is not helpful to an effective impactful life. It is not enough to know what is right, we must be those who live it out (James 1:22–25). There is an eternal difference that is experienced by those who simply have knowledge, and by those who actually live it out (Matthew 7:21–27). If you have the information and ignore it, and don't let it impact your life, then that information is not actually helpful to living a life that is not wasted. Knowledge without action signifies a dead faith that does not save (James 2:14–26).

We begin this 31 day journey, with the desire to begin some new habits that will impact the rest of your life, and the first step we want to take together begins with the realization that we need to be willing to constantly evaluate our lives and make sure that we are growing in the right direction, or as the Philippians text drives home, *pressing on*. Take the time to prayerfully reflect on your life (2 Peter 2:10; 2 Corinthians 13:5), to make sure you remove those things that would block you from being successful and to be one who presses on in the things that matter the most. At the end of his life, C.T. Studd reviewed what had gone on, and shared:

“As I believe I am now nearing my departure from this world, I have but a few things to rejoice in; they are these:

1. That God called me to China and I went in spite of utmost opposition from all my loved ones.
2. That I joyfully acted as Christ told the rich young man to act.
3. That I deliberately at the call of God, when alone in the Bibby liner in 1910, gave up my life for this work, which was to be henceforth not for the Sudan only, but for the whole unevangelized world.

My only joys therefore are that when God has given me a work to do, I have not refused it”

(Grubb, Norman. C.T. Studd: Cricketer & Pioneer)

Ephesians 2:10 tells you that you have a work to do, and that it is waiting for you—don't refuse it, don't waste your life, *press on!* Find meaning and purpose in God's will for you and go hard after it! *Press on!*

As you look forward, remember, “only one life, twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last”, so that one day you can look back and rejoice as your departure from this world looms, a life not wasted, *a life well lived* for the glory of God. We will in the coming month seek to show the key areas that a life well lived focuses on, so that together we can evaluate where we are at, and where we need to go, so that we don't waste our lives. This week we will look at different characters in the Bible and show how they did not waste their lives.

### Questions for application

- What stands out for you in the life of C.T. Studd?
- As you read Hebrews 11:1–22 and saw these lives of faith, what did you notice the most?

This week, realize that you are living a life that God has chosen to give you (Ephesians 2:10), and look for how you can live that life in faith, for you have only one life, twill soon be past, only what is done for Christ will last. The devotionals this week will be short character studies from some of the men and women who are now cheering us on, as we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses.

## Daniel

*Read Daniel 6:1–10*

You know this story well if you have been in the church very long and yet it is powerful to recall to mind and rejoice. Daniel was a man of absolute *integrity*. What is integrity? It is a moral uprightness, an honesty to self and those around you, a living out of your values.

A person with integrity is who they say they are, *all of the time*. They choose in the midst of pain or people to do what is right. As those who are found *in Christ* we would say that to live with integrity means seeking to choose to do what is right in God's eyes, and being willing to pay any price to do that. It will also include an honesty in expressing our need for grace and living in the reality that we all sometimes fall short. Daniel was in a foreign land, in a leadership position and he made his keystone habits a priority in terms of his relationship with His God. He was not willing to let the peril of death by lions interrupt his devotional life.

“<sup>4</sup>Then the high officials and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom, but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him. <sup>5</sup>Then these men said, ‘We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.’” (Daniel 6:4–5)

That is the life we should long to live. This is the great passion of a life of integrity. When Daniel's life was under a microscope, the only things they could find wrong were where the Bible and culture disagreed. In a pagan culture, filled with pagan gods, and pagan practices, Daniel served the king with such faithfulness that the microscope only led to magnifying God. *Wow!*

It is our goal as Christians to have this same integrity, to be Daniel-like in our integrity. It is easy to say you want to live with integrity, even easy to try to be integral for a few days, but to actually live this out so powerfully in the world, but not of the world is amazing! He lived His life in relationship with God, and this relationship showed in how he responded to life throughout the book of Daniel. If you want to live a life of integrity, these three disciplines will mark your life in the crisis, before the crisis, and if you survive the crisis, after.

**Integrity is developed in dependence.** *Read and underline: Daniel 2:17–18; 6:10; 9:3*

A life of prayer is always what undergirds a life of integrity for the follower of God. Daniel was a man of prayer. He sought God's help immediately for favour from others, for help in his own life, and in relationship. If you are not actively dependent you will not have Christian integrity.

**Integrity is developed in discipline.** *Read: Daniel 6:10*

Daniel was not willing to sacrifice his devotions even at the risk of death by lions. Why didn't Daniel stop his devotions, or at the very least change their pattern for a few months? Why didn't he sacrifice his time with God, so that he would not have time with the lions? We don't know for sure other than the text is clear—he was not willing to hide in any way his walk with God, or his discipline to grow in this walk. If you are not actively disciplined in your time with God, you will not have Christian integrity.

**Integrity is developed in determination.** *Read: Daniel 1:8*

I love the word *resolved*. I suppose that Jonathan Edwards has added some meaning to this word with his resolutions, but here Daniel is clearly a man who made the decision to not only know God's Word, but also to obey it no matter what the cost. Imagine, a boy in a foreign land, offered the best of the best, and refusing it to stay obedient to God and His Word. There is much we can learn from Daniel, and one of the key areas of our lives where his story can impact is in our ability to see how we can become men and women of integrity. Dare to be a Daniel, *walk with integrity*.

### Questions for application

- How does your life currently display a life of integrity?
- If someone was to follow you around with a microscope, what would they see in term of your lack of faithfulness?
- What of the three key areas of integrity development from Daniel do you need to work on the most?
- What changes to your life will you bring in over the next 31 days (and beyond) that will help you to become Daniel-like in your integrity?
- Share with at least one other person why you love the story of Daniel, and why you believe that Daniel's God is worthy of such a life as He is our God!

## Esther

*Read Esther 4*

Esther is a sad story of exile and sin, and a happy story of God using broken, weak people to accomplish His will. Esther is one of my heroes. She was an orphan girl, who was Jewish, in a land that did not treat women or exiles well. Her uncle was a godly man, willing to take care of her, but his influence was minimal, and so her prospects were bleak. I wonder if she ever felt like God had abandoned her and her family. Alone, in a land that was far from friendly to her or her people she was trying to survive.

A beauty pageant seemed to change all of that, and she was made queen through what we read clearly as God's favour, but as Vashti would report, being the wife of the king was no real treat. Esther is not a story from the scripts of Disney, rather it is a story of where God is when He appears to be silent. God was rejected by Israel. Because of that, God put Israel into exile. Esther was orphaned, hurting and begs us to ask the question, "Where is God?". In fact, as you read this amazing book, it is the only one in the Bible that doesn't even mention God's name, and yet He is over every single step in sovereign planning.

Vashti rejects the opportunity to sin and is rejected by the king. Esther enters a beauty pageant and is the king's new woman. If you think this is a love story, ask yourself why Esther was concerned to enter the king's presence and considered it a fearful thing to ask for her people's protection. Courage was necessary to risk her life just to talk to her husband. Have you ever lived in a place where you really felt God was silent? No notice of His voice, no experience of His pleasure, bad things seem to get worse, and life is empty of hope. Even if you escape this through a great event, the emptiness and silence can seem to remain.

What then? Where is God? Does God use people like you, or Esther? Esther's answer is ours and it reminds us that God is *never silent* even when you can't hear His voice or see His providence.

"For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

God does not need us, and yet God chooses to use people like Esther and us to accomplish His plan to save His people. God has placed you where He wants you, and has a plan for your life as you move forward that, if you choose to obey, will yield a change in history, stronger, in eternity! Look up and underline Ephesians 2:10. It is true and amazing that today He has good works for you to walk in.

Don't waste your life, *press on*, and look for opportunities to be like Esther, to be courageous in silence, and watch to see God use you and be reminded that God was there all the time in His care and placement. Dare to look for the plan of God in the midst of *all of life*.

### Questions for application

- Can you remember a time when life felt like it was out of control and you were alone?
- Look back at that time (or if you are in it now) and remember that God is at work and never makes mistakes even as we might.
- Who does God want you to encourage in your sphere of influence today?
- Who has God placed in your life that He wants you to share the gospel with?
- Try to wake up tomorrow morning and ask God, what good works He has prepared in advance for you to do that day, for who knows, “whether you have come to the Kingdom for such a time as this.”

## Elijah

*Read 1 Kings 18:20–40*

We live in a day when the majority of people in the USA would claim to be Christian (Canada as well, but less dramatic), and yet our culture is drifting farther and farther away from God. It would seem we have many people saying LORD LORD, and not doing what He says (Matthew 7:21–28).

This problem of being of two opinions (1 Kings 18:21) is not a new one. We seem to have more Christians who are in the world and of the world than Christians who have managed to live distinct and holy in the world but not of the world. We don't have Baal to struggle with any more, but we do have a world system that is not friendly to a Christian worldview.

The challenge of this text is to live as if God is real, because He is, or perhaps more clearly, if you are a Christian, *follow Christ!* For Elijah, a servant of the LORD he states his reason for concern, and then lays down a challenge for the prophets of Baal: if God is real, He will show Himself as real. We should not follow Elijah's example and test God (Luke 4:12), however, we should follow His message and follow God! Really the message of this great text is to call us to live in a way that displays that we are committed exclusively to Jesus. His message is one our hearts need to hear, you can't serve God and idols.

As we walk through this story, the miracle is amazing and the message is powerful. God displays Himself as the authentic God that deserves and demands exclusive allegiance. The heartbreaking part of this story is that although the people saw this great miracle, even responded to it verbally, they never did change. They still served false gods, and were not exclusive in their devotion to the God of the Bible. This left Elijah discouraged and depleted.

So how does this *man just like us* help us to align our lives exclusively with God?

### 1. Remember his message

God desires our exclusive devotion. He is a Jealous God (Exodus 34:14), and demands exclusivity in our marriage relationship with Him. We need to be a people who turn away from idols, and turn toward the Saviour! Are you willing today to give your life exclusively to Him? (Luke 9:23; Matthew 22:37–40)

## 2. Rejoice in God's methods

God chose Elijah to not only bring the message to the Israelites in a powerful way, but to see it done through active dependence. Elijah is an example that James uses of how God uses the prayers of ordinary people to work His will in His creation (James 5:17). God has chosen to use us as His avenue of grace, and has chosen to use our prayers to change what is going on around us. Take heart, you are a part of God's plan, to be used for God's glory. Take heed, be a man or woman who prays, and know that God uses our prayers to powerfully work in the lives of people around us! (Ephesians 2:10; Luke 18:1)

### Questions for application

- In what ways do you think you live like the world around you?
- Are you willing today to count the cost, and give your life exclusively to Jesus?
- What are the plans God has for you, to be a part of His plan in helping people follow Him?
- How can you depend actively on God, and turn to Him when you are discouraged with the results?

Week 1

## Friday: May It Be as You Have Said

### Mary

*Read Luke 1:1–35*

Why? I believe that God is all powerful and good, and that He is actively involved in my life, but sometimes I don't understand what, or why He does what He does. I know that this is because He is God, and not only all knowing, but all wise. But sometimes it is hard to accept what happens to me.

Have you ever felt those things. Wrong though they may be, it is not unusual for followers of God to be confused as to what is going on around them. Mary was a teenage girl looking forward to a great life with a man of quiet integrity. Life was looking up, *and then*, she was warned that she would get pregnant. Getting pregnant out of wedlock is always a big deal, making it much harder to raise children and, at the very least, can lead to a feeling of being judged by those around you. Now this teenager is hit with the reality that she would get pregnant before she was married, and not because of anything she would do, rather what God would bless her with.

Remember Mary was a real girl, with real dreams and problems, and *now this*. How do you respond when life does not make sense. For her, this *and then* moment meant that she would be misjudged for her entire life. It meant she could be abandoned by Joseph, and even killed by those who perceived themselves as more righteous than her, this was a *big deal*.

So how did this precious teenager respond?

“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

(Luke 1:38)

Wow! There must have been confusion, pain, insecurity *and yet* her relationship with God and trust in Him superseded those and she responded to this *and then* moment with humble submission. I do not think she believed this moment would lead to the horror of watching her son crucified, or the wonder of knowing her Son as Savior from her sins. She could not see the plan of God in its entirety, but she could choose to trust, and choose she did! Mary was unique as the mother of God, but should not be unique as a follower of God choosing to submit to God's plan for their lives even when that plan could yield a why? As we study the people of God they encourage us to deeper rooted

faith, and more delight-filled following. If Mary could have seen the end, that her place in *HisStory* was so profound, she would have found this choice easy.

May we learn from this precious teenager to trust and obey, and to recognize that our *all powerful, loving, all wise* God has a plan, and we have a place in *HisStory*, so in the midst of any *and then* that comes our way, we will declare in humble submission to our Master, and His Word: *I am all in*.

### Questions for application

- When was the last *and then* moment you had?
- How did you respond?
- Why do you think that the Angel stated, “For nothing will be impossible with God”, was important for Mary, and you, to hear?
- Jerry Bridges, in his must-read book *Trusting God*, states that true trust comes from believing in God’s power, His love, and His wisdom. Do you believe that God is all powerful, loving, and all wise?
- How can you grow in your walk with God so that in your *and then* moments you respond as Mary did in full, and humble submission to God?

## Getting Ready for Sunday

*Read Hebrews 3:12–14*

Our second Christian Keystone Habit is *people*. Meaning the gathering together of people for the exaltation of God and conformity to Christ. On Saturdays, over these 31 days, we will focus on why this is an essential habit to following Jesus.

David Platt has stated that to be a Christian, and not a part of a local church, is impossible. I would not go this far as there are places in the world where this is almost impossible, but I would say it is commanded, and if a Christian is not a committed part of a local church, where that is possible, they are living in direct disobedience of God's Word. The gathering together of God's people must be *a priority for purity*. The battle for holiness in the Christians life is a battle against sin, and this must be fought in community, there are no lone ranger victorious Christians.

Hebrews is a book that warns Christians to stay faithful, and in Hebrews 3 the warning takes on a strong pattern for victory. We are to *take care*, simply put, notice this—it matters. There is a danger in the family of God that there would be people among us who claim to be followers of God but struggle with a sinful unbelieving heart. This in turn will move the professor away from the Person of God, and thus show them to be non-authentic in their walk with God.

What is at risk? That sin will deceive us and then take us away from a victorious Christian life, perhaps even worse that we will step away from our endurance in relationship with God. What is the resolution? Exhort one another, or encourage one another *every day*! In other words, live in community, and be engaged in one another's lives so that your Christianity can be lived with a "confidence firm to the end". This means relationships that help us follow Jesus, this means community, as long as it is called today that sparks us to obedience and the ability to take captive every thought. One of the great demonic attacks on our lives is to entice us to live our lives alone and for self. So, this is an alarm clock for all who claim the name of Jesus. *Wake up!*

Make Sunday morning attendance a priority. Build relationships that go beyond Sunday morning. Join a growth group. Invite people into your lives, and choose to build relationships where you can be an encouragement to others! God has made us His Work of Art, and this new creation is made to live in community with others who are also His.

Not only will we find in this commitment to community new and deeper relationships we will also find the strength to hold fast our confidence to the end. Take the time to read the passage that we are preaching tomorrow morning (Mark 12:28–34) Pray for the preacher, and others in our congregation, that we would respond to God's Word with joy, yielding a deeper intimacy, a wider impact and a lasting confidence.

### **Questions for application**

- How can you make sure that *today* you are in relationships that will encourage you in your walk with God and keep you from being deceived by the deceitfulness of sin?
- What changes do you need to make in your life so that you follow God's mandate on living in community?
- What three people does God want you to connect with this week to help in pursuing this pathway to purity? In this, seek not to program it, or even discuss the purpose. Rather, connect with the person and let community flourish.





# 2

## Loving God

*Mark 12:28–34*

What does it mean to love God? For Jesus, it was what He used to sum up the entire Old Testament. If we understand what it means to love God, to have an all-consuming love for God, we will be successful Christians!

Perhaps more important than anything else in the Christian life is an understanding and experience of God's love, that yields a love for Him and a life for His glory. Loving God is not optional, it is how we get an optimal life!



# 2 | Loving God

*Mark 12:28–34*

## Introduction

### Christianity is relational

*Hebrews 12:1–2*

#### 1. Everything else is secondary

#### 2. Everyone else is irrelevant

*Proverbs 4:23; John 14:21; 1 John 5:3; Psalm 42:1; Psalm 63:1; Luke 14:25–33*





## Questions for Application

In your own words, what does it mean to love God?

Read Mark 12:28–37

Why is it so important that we remember that Christianity is relational?

How can we be those who are seeking to constantly live in relationship with God?

Why do you think it is easy for us to fall into living a good religious life, rather than a passionate relationship with the living God?

Define:

- Heart
- Soul
- Mind
- Strength

How can we love God with *all* of who we are?

John 14:21: Why do you think Jesus ties loving Him to obeying Him so closely?

*1 John 5:3*

## Pressing On

Reflect on Luke 14:25–33

What does it mean to hate your father, mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters, and even your own life?

Why does loving God always overflow into loving others? *Ephesians 5:1–2*

Why do you think Jesus chooses love as the authenticating mark of His followers?

*John 13:34–35*

Is this what you are known for? Why or why not?

How can we be those who are more effective at loving one another as authentic followers of Jesus? Be practical and applicable in your answer.

How can you experience God's love more richly?

Discuss together changes that need to be made in our lives to obey this command.

extra notes

### Memory Verses

*“I have set the Lord always before me;  
because he is at my right hand,  
I shall not be shaken.”*

**Psalm 16:8**

*“You make known to me the path of life;  
in your presence there is fullness of joy;  
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”*

**Psalm 16:11**

### Prayer: Ephesians 3:14–21

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## Disciplined Pursuit

*Read 1 Corinthians 9:24–27*

When I was in my early 20s, I had the privilege of being a dryland trainer for a hockey camp. My job was to help young hockey players learn how to get in playing shape by training in a way that would enhance their ability to impress coaches and scouts at training camps. The amount of work you put in in the summer as a hockey player always shows in the fall when the first on-ice tryouts allow you to display how hard you worked. Typically, hard work displays itself in heavy rewards.

That summer I worked with an on-ice instructor (Bobby Bassen) who was playing in the NHL for my second favourite team. He had just signed a contract for a million dollars as a free agent, and was preparing for his first season with this new team. This man never stopped getting ready for the season: he ran, played, was early on the ice, focused for the season that was to come, preparing with all his might so he could succeed on the ice. He worked harder than any of the players that were my responsibility to teach how to get in shape. He loved what he was doing, and he knew that his privilege of playing the NHL was directly related to his work in the summer.

After the hockey camp, Lori and I went to spend time with a good friend who was on the verge of making the NHL. He had been a superstar in junior, and had all the tools to become a superstar at the next level. He was big and strong, had soft hands and big shoulders. He was the number one ranked prospect on the team that he had been drafted to a few years before. The week we spent with him was a great week, we enjoyed the water, skiing and golfing filled our days, however the only training we did was on the golf course and behind the ski boat.

Bobby was short (5' 10") and light, at least for the game he played (180 lbs), but through his extraordinary effort he had a long NHL career that ended with over 750 games played, and a lot of memories of being a role player in the show. My other friend who skied and golfed to get ready for the season, all 6' 2", 230 pounds of him played only 58 games, and never did shine in the show. I think the key for both of these men was how they prepared. In defense of my friend, he did have an eye injury that shortened his pursuit, but I will never forget the week I spent with both of these pro athletes, and the impact it made on my life to seek to live in a disciplined way for God's glory.

How we prepare will show in how we live. So many of us talk about the dryland training we used to do, or are enjoying life on the golf course, rather than focusing on doing whatever it takes to grow our faith so that we can be effectively used by God.

In 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 Paul calls himself to an Olympic Christianity for the sake of the gospel. He wants the prize badly enough to shape his entire life to pursuing it. Today as you reflect on your spiritual life, are you spending more time in front of the TV, or with your Bible open? Are you passionately pursuing growth in your relationship with Jesus, or relaxing in complacent lukewarm coasting?

### Questions for application

- Does your pursuit of Jesus reflect a coasting, or a costly pursuit?
- Why do you think it is so easy to be apathetic in Canada?
- How can you grow deeper in your desire and disciplined pursuit of having an exclusive *all in* relationship with Jesus?
- What three things can you change to start to improve in your Olympic athlete pursuit of God?
- How can you make sure that in your disciplined pursuit you don't fall into a self-trust, or works theology? Ephesians 2:1–10; Philippians 2:12–13.
- Read and reflect on Romans 12:1–2

## Practice the Presence

*Read Psalm 16*

Jerry Bridges has shared that the pathway to revival is learning to live conscious of the presence of God all of the time. I think this is correct.

One of my favourite verses, Psalm 16:8, includes the definitive choice of setting the LORD before us. This means choosing awareness of His presence, and keeping our focus set on this awareness. Bridges rightly points out that God is always with us, so this step is one of awareness to live in light of it. The two main things an awareness of God yields (there are many more) is a confidence in any circumstance, and a passion for purity. Psalm 16 focuses on the fearlessness that the presence of God yields to followers of God. This means that no matter what circumstance you are in, you can have full confidence in God and His strength in you.

This impacts our willingness to serve even when we know what God is asking us to do is difficult. In fact, Paul was brought to the place where he would boast in his weaknesses so that the power of Christ would rest on him (2 Corinthians 12:10). If God is with us, then no task is too big. This practicing of His presence also yields a confidence in the face of any and all enemies! In fact, if we know He is with us then no giant is too big (Numbers 13) and no enemy too powerful (2 Kings 19).

Setting God before us reminds us of His presence in an active way. We can do this with reminders, or starting each day in prayer and God's Word, or using other people to call this to our attention. It is an active pursuit of a memory that will guide and guard our hearts. That is the second main thing that an awareness of God yields, a passion for purity. When we are aware of the presence of God it causes our hearts to fear sinning against God. If you are constantly aware of the presence of God, then temptation to look at things you shouldn't or act in ways you shouldn't or feel things you shouldn't are swallowed up in His care.

In our pursuit of confidence in the midst chaos and purity in our personal lives, the key is this practice of the presence of God. I do this usually through *reminders*. Almost all of my prayers begin with thanksgiving for what Jesus did for me on the cross, and what it means for my freedom from sin's penalty and power. This motivates me to seek to live my life in His presence for His glory (2 Corinthians 5:14). I sometimes wear clothing,

or jewelry to remind me of His presence, to consciously set Him before me at all times. I am not sure what I do will work for you, but I am sure, that for all who know Him as Lord and Savior, setting Him before you will change your life!

### **Questions for application**

- What are some proactive things you can do to set the LORD before you at all times?
- In your own words what does this practically look like for you?
- Can you remember a time when you needed courage, or a motive for purity and you failed. Looking back into that memory, what would have been different if you had “set the LORD before you”?
- Meditate on Psalm 16:8. What we mean by this is to call it to mind and think about it over and over again. Deepen your understanding of it, and a passion to follow the pattern it displays for a healthy Christian life.

## **Treasuring Christ**

*Read Hebrews 12:1–3*

True Christianity is about treasuring Christ above all! This is not simple as He sometimes feels distant, and it is easy to get caught up in surface treasures (apathy), or religious trappings (self-righteousness). One of the things about being a healthy Christian is the constant pursuit of intimacy with Jesus, and the realization that our faith has entered us into a reconciled relationship with God, not a duty-filled organization. Many have gone before us who can encourage us in our faith. Hebrews 12 follows Hebrews 11, which I suppose is obvious, but often forgotten. That “cloud of witnesses” shows us that running the race, living the life of faith, is possible. This text tells us that in this race there are three essential steps to keeping us on course, and getting us to the finish line.

### **1. Lay aside every weight**

These are the things that are good but not the best. If you have ever watched someone running in a race, whether that be a sprint or a marathon, they rarely do it in work clothes. When I was in Houston, BC, every year I had the opportunity to preach a sermon that included an object lesson. One year I had a friend who was a great athlete run up the aisle in snorkeling gear, weighed down with a huge backpack, who was, as the object lesson went, running in a marathon. Dumb right! If you're running a race, you get rid of everything that would hinder you in your run. So often we as Christians fill our lives with distractions, rather than removing them. This text encourages us to lay aside any distraction, no matter how good, that would keep us from running our Christian race faithfully.

### **2. Lay aside every sin**

The reformers encouraged us to practice a continual attitude of repentance. This means hearing from God's Word, God's standard, honestly evaluating our lives, and leaving everything that is sinful. God's people can easily get tripped up by sin in their lives. In fact, if you keep reading in Hebrews 12, one of the ways that God's fatherly love is displayed is through His discipline to help us avoid sin. If we want to finish the race, it is absolutely essential that we pursue holiness, or as Hebrews 12 puts it, lay aside sin.

### **3. Look to Jesus**

This is so important, a look that keeps on looking. A focus that is daily fixing our eyes on Him. He is the founder and perfecter of our faith, our source of life, and He is our

model in how He lived and died, and the pathway to eternal life. Fixing our eyes on Jesus is a non-negotiable skill that needs to be practiced to be perfected. It is choosing to live our lives in relationship, and be motivated by that relationship. It is Psalm 16:8 with a Christological focus.

### **Questions for application**

- As you reflect on your own life, what are some of the good things you are doing that are weighing you down from pursuing God's best?
- Is there any sin in your life right now that you need to repent of, and lay aside?
- Pray Psalm 139:23–24, and truly ask the Spirit of God to help you to know your sin, to turn from it, and to be led in the way everlasting.
- What are some ways you can fix your eyes on Jesus that are practical, and that you will work on this week?
- Share what you have learned with three other people today, and rejoice that we have a Savior who shows us the way to live, and a cloud of witnesses who show us it is possible!

## Don't Let Your Heart Lose Sight of the Gospel

*Read Psalm 42*

By now, if you have been keeping pace with these devotionals you will have realized that you fall way short of where you should be. If you have not been keeping up with the readings, then you are falling short, and should realize it, and if you are just reading it because you opened up to this page in the book, reality is, you fall way short. You are not *good enough* to get in or stay in a right relationship with God. As Isaiah 64:6 states, even our good deeds are like filthy rags. Even our very best is not perfect, and that is what God demands. Help! This can be very discouraging! In fact, debilitating! The Christian life is impossible! If we lose sight of the gospel, trying to live the Christian life will lead to giving up (apathy), or self-righteous judgmentalism (legalism). The two ditches on either side of a healthy Christian life can only be avoided if we stay on the gospel highway.

Another way of stating this is that the closer you come to Jesus the brighter His holiness will shine, and the more clarity you will get on your own sin and shortcomings. So make sure that all of your growth is motivated by the gospel (Romans 12:1–2), and saturated with the gospel (2 Corinthians 5:21). What makes me acceptable to Jesus is Jesus. The gospel is about Him and what He has done, not what I do.

### **This is what we need to remind ourselves of**

1. God is holy and no matter how hard I try, how good I am, how much I do, one sin causes me to fall short of His glory, and as such I am an object of wrath and have a broken relationship with Him that is punishable by death (eternity in hell).
2. God has made a way for me to have a reconciled relationship with Him and it is the perfect life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of my Savior, Jesus. Through Him, I can find the gift of God, which is eternal life in Christ Jesus. It is by grace alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone.
3. This leads to a new life, becoming a new creation, that now seeks to honour God and struggles for holiness as He is holy.
4. This means that my true home is heaven and my hope is now secure in Christ.

If we keep this in mind, then when we realize we fall short and are driven to our knees in repentance, we will find a hope and joy in Jesus' forgiveness (1 John 1:9) and a delight in moving forward in our relationship with Him.

When I first taught Iranian pastors and they were sharing what they learned, one seasoned pastor with tears in his eyes shared that this idea of preaching the gospel to himself changed his life. Why? Because it is so freeing in the discipline of seeking to be like Jesus, and so motivating in life that is sometimes difficult and long! This skill of preaching to oneself is not only biblical, it is life changing.

As a Christian, Romans 8:1 applies to you, and there is no condemnation that can get to you! As a Christian, 2 Corinthians 5:21 is true. You have the righteousness of Christ! Never forget this, and you will live in thankful joy, even as you repent of known sin, and discipline your life to pursue holiness!

### **Questions for application**

- Go to a private mirror, look into it, and preach the gospel to yourself out loud. I know this sounds strange, but it is worth doing.
- Why do you think David preached to his soul in Psalm 42?
- How can you make this preaching of the gospel to yourself a pattern of your life?
- Which ditch to you struggle falling into (self-pity, self-righteousness)?
- What are some ways you can avoid self-condemnation and self-righteousness in your life?

## What Does It Mean to Love God?

*Read Mark 12:38–39*

A coach of mine gave each player a gift, a book called *Loving God* by Charles Colson. Colson begins with the presupposition, based on his research, that the vast majority of people who call themselves Christians do not know what it means to love God.

If he is right, and I think that he is, then this is a huge issue! In fact, when God sums up the entire Old Testament, He does so with this being the first and most important thing we can do.

So what does it mean to love God?

Well to love God, infers we are in a right relationship with Him. It is relational, and it has to be through the gospel. To love Him with all we are and all we have means that it is a relationship that is all-defining, positive, and because of who God is, always growing.

But there is more, when it comes to God, defining what that looks like is important for we don't just want to speak the words and not have this all defining love. Daniel Block, a brilliant Old Testament scholar claims that no person in the Old Testament ever claims to love God, because for them, to love God means to obey God. Although that was their desire, they knew that they did not obey perfectly so no one dared to make this claim. If you look this up, you will find a few places where it appears that people are saying that they love God, but I trust Dr. Block's Hebrew over ours, so we will believe him. It is interesting that with all of the language that followers of God use in the Old Testament, I love you God, is not a part of this. Should it be in ours?

In the New Testament it is a little easier, as the Bible defines loving God directly as obedience (1 John 5:3) and as displayed in loving other believers (1 John 4:7–21). So how do we know if we love God? We obey Him, and we self-sacrificially choose to serve others with God's best for them in mind (1 John 5:16–18). We do find people claiming love for Jesus, and we also find the model of Jesus for us to follow (Ephesians 5:1–2).

So what does it mean to love God? It means that we have offered our lives to Him, and that we have experienced His love so richly that this relationship is an *all in* relationship. It means that when we simplify our lives we always choose Him, and obedience to His

Word. To love God is to obey God, and to love those who love Him. Now you read that and, perhaps like me, you wonder how much you really love Him. You see your disobedience, and your lack of thinking of Him as you should and I hope it drives you up a day (in the devotional) to remind yourself that the gospel paves the way for people like us and motivates us to love Him all the more!

So, if He desires my love, and it means an all in all defining relationship, how can I grow in this? Three quick steps:

1. **Know and experience the gospel daily!** We love because He first loved us! Authentic Christianity is relational, and this relationship is focused on the gospel. Don't lose sight of the gospel and let the love of God compel you (2 Corinthians 5:14).
2. **Pray that you would experience God's love.** Take a moment and reflect on Ephesians 3:14–21. Pray this prayer for yourself and two other people whom God brings to mind.
3. **Choose to obey.** This means, actively reject sin, and choose obedience. This means an honest look at your mind, motives and choices, and a willingness to bring everything into submission to God for Him to use for His glory! Choose obedience! Know God's Word and apply it to every area of your life all of the time (Matthew 7:21–27).

The core desire of every Christian should be to love God, and to constantly be growing in that love.

### Questions for application

- Do you love God, as the Bible defines it?
- Where do you need to grow in this?
- Reflect again on what Jesus has done for you, and rejoice in the richness of His love!

## Getting Ready For Sunday: Service

*Read Ephesians 4:11–6*

If you were from outer space, came to North America, and came to a church, what would you see? If you came to our church, what would you observe?

It is very unlikely you would see all that is going on behind the scenes—the ministries of so many people who are serving in God’s strength to build up the people of God. It has been said that the North American church functions like a football game with a few people really busy and working hard, and thousands watching and cheering. I do believe our church is not that, but perhaps you are reading this and need to be encouraged to engage, or to keep engaging in ministry. The Bible teaches us that we are a body, and that we need each other and that each part has a role to play if we are to reach maturity. This means that if you are not engaged and serving in the church we are missing out, and so are you. So how can we use this day of preparation for what God will do in us and through us on Sunday to grow in our commitment to being those who are used by God to beautify His bride?

**Realize** that God has called us to live in community. In other words you are called not only to radical commitment to God (Romans 12:1–2), you are called to selfless service in community (Romans 12:3–10). Knowing this means that if you belong to Him you will be on alert looking for ways to build up the family of God.

**Rejoice** that you are gifted and a part of God’s plan to build His church. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that we are God’s workmanship for a purpose, for doing things that He has prepared in advance for us to do, and we are called to walk in them. The focal point of this will be the family of God, the local church. Every follower of Jesus has at least one gift, and that gift is given to be a blessing to the church family you belong to. That means if you are reading this, and you belong to Jesus, you are gifted by God’s Spirit to serve. Amazing, God not only saves us, He gifts us, and places us for His purpose, and in that we get to impact eternity. *Wow!*

**Renew** your desire to serve in the church. Look for places where there are needs, discover your spiritual gift, and engage. If you are unsure where to serve at Cloverdale Baptist Church, fill in a Connect Card and we will get you involved in God’s plan here.

Come tomorrow and be encouraged! Be ready to praise God with God's people, lifting your voice together with others is not only a praise to God it is an encouragement to God's people. Be ready to grow as we study God's Word together and seek to conform our lives to Jesus and live lives on the Rock, as we hear and apply His Word. Be ready to pray along with the congregation, and entrust everything to God. Be ready to encourage those God brings across your path with love and engagement. Be ready to greet new people, and welcome them to our family. Be ready to serve, for your part in our becoming who God wants us to be is essential!

If you are broken, beat-up and in despair, you can put all that I have said on hold for few weeks, until your heart is stronger in Christ. Then, join us in serving His bride.

### **Questions for application**

- Take the time to pray for a heart that will engage in worship in song, worship in word, in prayer and in service!
- What do you think your spiritual gift is?
- What, if anything, is blocking you from using your spiritual gift?
- Why do you think God has chosen to use people like us to accomplish His plan?
- Pray for your pastor!





# 3

## Love One Another

*1 John 3:11–18*

To love God is to belong to the family of God. To love God is to love other believers. That is not an easy task and yet the Bible is clear—love is the mark of authentic followers of Jesus that most colours their uniform.

What does this love look like, and how do we get it? Thankfully God declares this to us in His Word.



# 3 | Love One Another

*1 John 3:11–18*

## Introduction

*Mark 12:29–31*

1. **The command** *1 Corinthians 13:1–3; John 13:34–35; 1 Peter 4:8*

2. **The contrast** *Matthew 5:46*

*“To dwell above with saints we love*

*O, that will be glory;*

*But to dwell below with saints we know—*

*Well, that’s another story”*

### 3. The copy *Romans 5:8–11; Ephesians 5:1–2*

#### Implications

- Pass the test *Love is the test for authenticity*

- Press on

- Passionate experience of the gospel

*Ephesians 3:14–21; Romans 8:28–39; Ephesians 5:1–2*



## Questions for Application

What would those who know you best describe you as? (What are you known for?)

Read 1 John 3:11–18; John 13:34–35

Why do you think Jesus defined love as the defining mark of being His follower?

Who is someone you believe has this reputation? What is it about them that causes you to think they are loving?

How do the two *greatest commands* relate to one another? *Mark 12:29–31*

Reflect together on 1 Corinthians 13:1–8

- How does God define love?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- How is its importance emphasized in these verses?

How does a Christ-like love in God's people contrast to the kind of love that the world lives out? *Matthew 5:46*

## Pressing On

How is seeing this contrast helpful in our pursuit of being known for our love?

What does it mean to love like Jesus has loved us? *Ephesians 5:1–2; Romans 5:8–11*

Share what Jesus has done for you in love.

How can you show this love to others in practical ways?

Work through Pastor Rob's Implications:

- Pass the test
  
- Press on
  
- Passionate experience of the gospel

How can we grow in our love for God and one another? Be practical in your answer to this question, and include steps that are helpful.

If you have time, meditate on Romans 8:28–39

extra notes

### Memory Verse

“<sup>1</sup>Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. <sup>2</sup> And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

**Ephesians 5:1–2**

### Prayer: Philippians 1:3–11

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## Why Pray

Read Luke 18:1–8

One of the keystone habits we want to develop individually and corporately is prayer. We want to be people who pray consistently and who live in the presence of God. If I was asked “what is prayer?” my simple answer would be: it is our hearts communicating to God. Obviously it could be a lot more complex, but if we are seeking to live our lives in relationship with God, then prayer will be a part of our lives.

There are many reasons why prayer is essential for Christian health, and why some even liken prayer to breathing for the Christian. Here are my top four.

### 1. Intimacy

Prayer is relational, and as such we want to be a people who not only listen to God’s voice through careful study of His Word, but also who speak to God through prayer. If you want to know someone you must both talk, and listen. More than in any other relationship we should spend the majority of our time listening; however, we must also communicate back in praise, thanksgiving, repentance and petition! If we want to be close to God we must be a people who pray, and if we want to grow closer to God, prayer is essential!

### 2. Important

This is because we all need mercy. Look up and read Hebrews 4:16. We are always in need, and therefore we can always know that we will find mercy and help when we approach the throne of grace. The passage we read earlier, Luke 18, shares that we should *always pray* and never give up. Prayer helps us not only connect to God in intimacy, it also keeps us faithful and loyal to Him on His path.

### 3. Impact

God has chosen to use prayer to make a difference in the lives of His children and through their prayers make a difference in the world. James tells us that the prayers of righteous people (we are righteous in Christ) make *huge* differences in this world for the next (James 5:16). God has chosen as one of the avenues of accomplishing His will, the prayers of His people. It is true that if we don’t pray we will miss out on good things (James 4:2–3). Prayer is not the only thing you can do for others, but it is the most you can do!

#### 4. Obey

To pray is commanded in God's Word. He clearly states that His will for us is that we pray (1 Thessalonians 5:17). It is a key tool in our spiritual battle against the flesh, the world, and the demonic realm. Prayer is not optional for the Christian, it is optimal!

So, if prayer is this important, then we must be people who rightly evaluate our spirituality by our prayer life.

#### Questions for application

- How important do you think prayer is for the Christian life?
- How is your prayer life?
- Where do you think you can improve your prayer life?

## Learning How to Pray

*Read Matthew 6:5–14*

There is a way to pray that is right, and there is a way to pray that is a waste of your breath. If you cherish sin in your life God will not hear you (Psalm 66:18), so prayer that is heard by God in a favourable way needs to come from a heart that is willing to submit to the Lordship of Jesus (1 John 1:9) fully. If you want to learn how to pray, start by making sure you belong to God through the gospel, and that your willing to confess any known sin to Him so that you are clean in Christ, and surrendered to Christ.

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, and in Matthew 6 we have the privilege of listening in. Prayer is about relationship with God, not religion, so it is to be done not to impress man, but to come before God.

Prayer is communication with God, not some magic mantra that you repeat. Those who simply repeat prayers are not listening to Jesus in this passage, for it is not about emptying your mind and saying the, “right”, words, it is about filling your hearts and overflowing to God. Jesus then gives a pattern for prayer that is helpful for us to understand and apply to our own prayer lives. This is a pattern that if we follow will help us to be focused on the right way to pray. It is helpful to note that when Jesus teaches us to pray He starts with our relationship with God, and requests for God’s glory.

**Our Father:** Dearest Daddy. This is relational, and focused on God being our heavenly Father who loves us and wants what is best for us. We run reverently to Him and cling to Him with joyful submission and rest. God is our Father, and He is a *good good Father!*

**In heaven:** You are over all, and sovereign over all of life! We can trust Your plan for our lives, and Your power over all things. Nothing can stay Your hand.

**Hallowed be Your name:** Once Jesus has established this tender intimacy and respect, He calls us to pray for things for God. In this case, that God’s name would be seen as holy. What does this mean? It means that people would see Him for who He is, and that we would live in such a way that being set apart for His glory, people could see through our lives how great His holiness is (Isaiah 6). This is a prayer that the person praying should also see as a commitment to live a holy life, O God, help my life show how awesome your holiness is!

**Your Kingdom come:** This is a prayer for God's reign in our lives. That we would be a people who submit to Him fully, and that call others to do the same. This is the only part of the prayer that is evangelistic, and is a call for us to help others to also submit to His rule, His Lordship in their lives. God is our King, and we long for His return and reign in our lives now and for eternity!

**Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven:** This is the overflow of knowing God as King. We want to submit our wills to Him, and call others to do the same. This is a Great Commission prayer (Matthew 28:16–18), for our own lives and the lives of those in our sphere of influence and around the world.

As we go to asking how we should apply this, remember Jesus' warning in verse 7 that we think through what this prayer means, and not just say it in an empty way. I had a friend, who has since gone to be with the LORD, who longed for this to be prayed over and over, word for word, because in his mind it had saved him in the foxhole when he found himself in the war. This is not what Jesus is after. He wants us understanding and embracing the content, so that we can, in the context of our own lives, with hearts and minds engaged, lift up prayers that honour Him. So don't just repeat the words, take the words to heart, and in your own words learn to pray as Jesus has taught.

### Questions for application

- Re-read verses 9–13.
- Why do you think it was so important for the disciples to learn how to pray?
- How does this teach you to pray?
- Why do you think Jesus' pattern of prayer is so God-centred?
- Set some goals in your own life to improve your prayer life.
- Take time now and, in your own words, pray through the Godward requests found in Matthew 6.

## Learning How To Pray: Part 2

*Read Matthew 6:5–14*

Most of those who follow Jesus know how important it is to pray. Most of those who follow Jesus know they need to pray more. So one of the more difficult tasks of those who are writing on prayer is to feed into the motives that are already present without using the guilt and shame that is already being felt by anyone who needs to improve their prayer life. Yes, I am talking about you.

So, as we begin the second step in our journey through Jesus' lesson on prayer from Matthew 6, our goal is not to understand how to pray, or even how Jesus taught to pray, although we want that, our goal is to more and more be a people of prayer. Our longing is to build a culture that not only knows our desperate need to depend on God for all things (apart from Him we can do nothing), but also to display that understanding by crying out to Him in our time of need. When we feel this need, we will long to pray in a way that is honouring to Him and biblical, and what better way than by following the pattern that He has given us. Our goal then is to be a people who pray, to have our church be a house of prayer, to live consciously in the presence of God (praying continually) and to go to Him for long times of reaching up in our need and in praise.

### Review

**Our Father in heaven:** We begin with intimacy and in relationship that gives us confidence to continue on in the presence of God in reverence to worship. We begin with the immanence of God as our Father and a recognition of His transcendence over all things.

**Hallowed be your name:** You are holy, and we want you to be seen as holy in all of life, and through our lives.

**Your Kingdom come, your Will be done on earth as it is in heaven:** Full surrender to God as King in my life and the life of people I pray for. Praying for people to know Him as King, surrender to Him fully and follow Him in every area of life, all of the time.

### Continue

**Give us this day our daily bread:** Please provide for us our basic needs. This is not only an acknowledgement of need for the basics in our lives, but also a request for God to meet them. We are absolutely dependent and He is the great provider.

**Forgive us our debts:** Acknowledge our need to be forgiven in our own lives so that we can live with Him in peace and joy. This is a prayer that includes a pattern of repentance, daily seeking to align our lives with His character and Word, and when we fall short, overtly agreeing with Him (confession) and asking for forgiveness through Jesus (1 John 1:9). If you are not daily confessing your sins you have not seen the holiness of God or the greatness of His grace!

**As we also have forgiven our debtors:** Taken with verses 14–15 this is an area of the prayer that makes us sit up and pay attention. The only way we can do this is to be those who are poor in spirit and have experienced His rich forgiveness. In that context, no one can treat you worse than you deserve (as a sinner). Therefore, it is much more important that our heart experiences the gospel than we seek to obey this on our own. If you struggle forgiving people in your life, keep working on it. *But*, also work on your experience of God's grace!

**And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:** How this prayer closes is so helpful in our own understanding of what matters most. Notice not only what is not in this prayer, but also what is. This is a prayer for spiritual purity, for not allowing temptations to overwhelm us, rather to be those who honour Jesus in all we say and do! Oh, that we would be those who long for our own spiritual health, and who live lives that honour our LORD and Saviour!

What a prayer! What a pattern!

We should never tire of hearing this prayer, and shaping our own hearts so that what overflows in our prayers mirrors its content. Don't pray it word for word, but do pray it concept for concept, and learn from your LORD to lean on your Father fully.

### Questions for application

- Take the time to read over the verses again, and then to pray this entire prayer in terms of content, not words.
- Ask God to help you have a heart that is fully His, and a mind that learns to pray the way He has taught.

## Pauline Patterns of Prayer

*Read Ephesians 3:14–21*

We know we need to pray more, and Jesus has taught His disciples to pray, and there is more. The Bible is filled with patterns of prayer. What is a pattern of prayer? It is a model of what prayer looks like when it is literally “praying in the Spirit”, or praying what the Spirit would have us to pray.

One of the men in Scripture who calls us to pray (1 Thessalonians 5:17–18), also shows us through His prayers *what to pray*. It is never wrong to pray for anything and everything that is on your heart (Philippians 4:4–6). However, the more mature we are, the more we will find our prayers follow what is closest to the heart of God. Go ahead and pray for your friends, uncles, cousins, the neighbour’s cat (that is actually okay to do if it is on your heart). However, the closer you get to God, the more that what is on your heart will be a reflection of His priorities, and the more your prayers will match the prayers of the Bible. There are a number of the prayers of Paul that are worth reflecting on:

- 1 Thessalonians 1:3–12
- 2 Thessalonians 1:1–12
- 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13
- Colossians 1:9–14
- Philippians 1:9–11
- Ephesians 1:15–23
- Ephesians 3:14–21
- Romans 15:14–33

For us, with only the time to spend one of our 31 habit forming days on this important subject, we will look together at a life-changing prayer: Ephesians 3:14–21. If you pray this prayer from your heart for a month, you will never be the same and those you pray for will be changed. Remember, do not pray word for word, pray the content in your own words as an overflow from your heart. What stands out? This is a prayer for power to gain His strength, and power to experience His love. This is an understanding of life that knows that what God has called us to, outside of His work in us, is impossible. It is a longing for His power to work in our inner being, so that we can have the strength to endure!

To live our lives for His glory takes His strength! Pray for this power! Carson sums up this prayer in terms of content, as a prayer for, “power to be holy, power to think, act and talk in ways utterly pleasing to Christ, power to strengthen moral resolve, power to walk in transparent gratitude to God, power to be humble, power to be discerning, power to be obedient and trusting, power to grow in conformity to Jesus Christ” (pg. 189). Oh that we would have this power! We also find in Ephesians 3 a power to pray for, to grasp and experience the love of Christ in a way that would otherwise be impossible to have. This is the prayer for the experience of the gospel that we are to long for and experience and is impossible outside of the power of God at work in us.

Oh, there is more, so read it again, and again, and again, and each time, let the content drive you to your knees as your heart rejoices. If you understand this kind of prayer and pray in the Spirit, you will never be the same again!

### Questions for application

- How do your prayers reflect your maturity in the faith?
- How can you seek to learn the prayers of Paul so that as your faith matures, your prayers are more “according to the Spirit”?
- Take the time today to pray Ephesians 3:14–21 in your own words, but following the pattern.
- Read this great text again!
- Note how it ends: “<sup>20</sup>Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen”.
- A great book that I have found life-changing for my prayer life is *A Call To Spiritual Reformation* by D.A. Carson, on the priorities from Paul and his prayers.

## Power to Change

*Read James 5:13–20*

I grew up in Calgary and this, by virtue of the mountain air in Calgary, has made me a life-long Flames fan. I do now like the Canucks better with my mind, but am unsure if my heart will ever fully follow (it is getting better). About 12 years ago, we were back in Calgary visiting my family, and my boys and I thought it would be a great idea to go and watch a Flames game. Ryan prayed that we would get to meet Jarome Iginla (G.O.A.T.).

Now as a dad, it was a great teaching time to share with Ryan gently that God is more concerned about a number of other things, and his meeting his hockey hero probably was not high on that list. I knew that we would not meet Jarome, so wanted also to somehow let God off the hook for this. The weekend went well, but I made a little mistake in buying the hockey tickets and trying to save money. I bought generic tickets that I needed to cash in at the Saddle Dome. Not a bad deal, so we went there, and there was a practice, and we got to meet Jarome and many other great hockey players (including having a cool goalie mask signed by all three Calgary goalies for Jeff). The lesson was not for Ryan, that he should not pray about such frivolous things, but for his dad, that God cares very deeply about His children, and even listens to us when our prayers are not perfect, or exactly with His priorities in mind.

God actually wants us to bring to Him everything that matters to us, nothing too small, nothing too big. This does not mean that everything that matters to us should, but it does mean He tenderly notices us and loves us and has a plan to mature us. God wants His followers to not only know Him, but also to follow Him, and in this to share their hearts with Him. To overflow in all of life and cry out to Him. It is a sharing and pursuing. To do this, we must believe three things:

1. **God cares about us!** 1 Peter 5:7 uses this tender care for us as a motive for us to cast all our cares on Him. This is legitimate. Do you know He cares about your life, about all of your life as a loving heavenly Father! He is not a distant deity, rather a Father who calls you to take shelter in the shadow of His wings. Take a moment and honestly ask yourself if you know that God cares for you? Do you feel it. It will show by your crying out to Him.
2. **God is all powerful.** We talk about this a lot and perhaps know it well theologically,

but this is a reality that when the heart experiences it, our confidence rises! He is so powerful that nothing and no one can stop Him. We need not fear the demonic realm (1 John 4:4) or the fire (Isaiah 43:2). We need not fear others and what they can do to us (Matthew 10:28); we need only to run to Him and cling to Him. This gives us, not only the confidence to choose to do what is His will as revealed in His Word no matter what the cost, but to rest no matter what is going on around us (Habakkuk 3:17–18).

3. **God is always with me.** There is never a time you are outside of His presence (Matthew 28:16–18). Never a time that we might fear that He does not notice us. Yes, we need to be aware of this. In fact, being aware of this is the beginning and staying point of revival (Jerry Bridges), but whether we are aware or not, it is still a reality. So, we must learn to set Him before us always (Psalm 16:8) and practice His presence so that we always call out to Him.

God cares about you, and He cares about you crying out to Him about what you care about. Nothing we think or feel will be perfectly right no matter how much we grow, but we have a tender God who notices and cares, so with confidence.

“<sup>6</sup>Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, <sup>7</sup> casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”  
(1 Peter 5:6–7)

God had a great lesson for me that day in Calgary when I thought it was my job to teach Ryan, and that is a lesson that I hope each of us can learn from. He cares for you, so cry out to Him, with everything and anything that is on your heart!

And for the record, *go Canucks go!*

### Questions for application

- Read Romans 8:32. Why do you think that God shares this verse with us? Why do we need to hear of His care for us, and how does He display this?
- What are some practical ways you can, “set the Lord before you”?
- Take the time to share with two people today about God’s love for you, and why that is important to your prayer life.

Week 3:

**Saturday: People**

## Choosing to Live Together

*Read Romans 12:1–10*

I visited with someone today who shared the value they see in cyber church. I do not disagree with the value that can be found in listening to great music, or sermons online, but cyber church is impossible. Church is the gathering of believers together to exalt the name of God; the local church is the heartbeat of the plan of God to conform believers to Him, and to impact this world through His gospel message.

So why, throughout history has the church come under such attack from the outside and from the inside? I think the answer is because it is a treasure of Jesus, and only the transformed can actually be a part of her, and build her up. The demonic realm hates the church. The flesh chooses self over service. The redeemed rejoice to gather together and exalt God. So how do we live out the values that God has given in His Word and protect this call to highly value the church that Jesus will build, and be a part of actually building what He treasures?

1. **Know how important it is to Jesus and His followers:** Hebrews 3:12–14. Basically without the gathering of believers as a part of our lives and all that it biblically should entail, we will fail in our desire to follow God (Hebrews 10:24–25). This is not optional, nor open for debate in God's Word. There is no such thing as a follower of God who does not fellowship with a local church where that is available.
2. **Keep your elders in prayer.** This should be a given, but in Acts 20 Paul warns the elders of Ephesus that savage wolves will come up from within the flock to destroy her. One of the roles of the elders is to be accountable to God for the protection and provisions of the flock. This is a huge responsibility, and one that is impossible unless God works in their lives. Pray for your elders, and submit to them so that their ministry may be a joy (Hebrews 13:17) as they watch their lives and doctrine closely.
3. **Self-sacrificial service:** Now, it gets a little more difficult. You can know something in your mind, and pray for others with your mouth, but this is an adjustment of life, as verse 10 of Romans 12 says a preferring of others. This is not easy, in fact, in our day and age of entitlement and self-justifying self-centredness, without the Spirit impossible. This means you come to the gathering of believers looking to die to self and prefer others. Looking for how you can choose God's best for someone else at the sacrifice of personal taste. In our "Christian" world we do the opposite, instead of serving those who differ in taste, we tend to fight for our own way, or worse, just

leave and find a church that better suits my taste. Churches learn from this, and so to grow, instead of targeting a biblical health, they target a specific age, or ethnicity. We long for so much more! Greatness comes from service (Matthew 23:11), and humility and self-sacrifice show God's Work in our lives. This is a choice that comes as an overflow of full devotion to Jesus! If you struggle with this meditate on John 13.

4. **Knowing my gifts matter and using them:** Romans 12 does address this, but perhaps even more clearly it is found in Ephesians 4:11–16. Each person who belongs to the church (member) is gifted with something specific to build up the body of Jesus. If you choose not to serve, you will miss out, and the church will miss out. This means a willingness to study spiritual gifts, to live life filled with the Spirit, and to find places of need and serve. It is very related to the previous way to live out God's value of the church, but is not always self-sacrificial. In fact, often in this use of our gifts, we flourish as we serve one another.
5. **Love.** Love who? Well, God, and when you experience His love, others. This is a call for us to be imitators of God, and live a life of love (Ephesians 5:1–2). This means we choose the pathway of love when we have other choices. Often I have heard people long for a more loving church for them to belong to, and I long for this. However, the answer is not others loving you, the answer is you choosing to love!

Now what? That was a mouthful, maybe too much for a Saturday night devotional?

Review the five ways to treasure the church the way that God wants you to and personally ask if you are effective at feeling as He wants you to feel, and doing what He wants you to do.

### Questions for application

- Pray for a heart for Jesus that yields a heart for the local church. That your love for Him would show in a love for her!
- Look over Romans 12, and answer these questions:
  - For you, what does it mean to prefer others in your local church?
  - What is your spiritual gift? Where is there a need in your local church? Are you God's plan to bring this family of His to maturity?





# 4

## Living Life on Purpose

*Philippians 1:12–30*

When I was a youth pastor, I did not get to preach as often as I would have liked. On our last Sunday, I had the privilege of preaching on my favourite text. Leading up to the service, the excitement of preparation was overwhelming, until the realization hit me: this was not a text that I was actively living out.

To live is Christ, to die is gain. This means that everything else is secondary to Jesus, and death means the greatest privilege of being in His presence forever more! I wanted to preach this with passion and fix the church I belonged to, and yet, the problem was mine. Jesus made me ready to die, but before I died, I wanted some children, ping golf clubs, a master's degree, and all of a sudden, the sermon was for me.

My prayer is that we would hear God's Word and be a people who can say this with joy, passion and truth!

*To live is Christ, to die is gain!*



# 4 | Living Life on Purpose

*Philippians 1:12–30*

**Introduction** *2 Corinthians 10:23–29*

**1. Purpose: honour Christ** *Verse 20; Ephesians 2:1–10*

*Our key purpose is to magnify Jesus.*

**2. Perception: worth any cost** *Verses 12–14; Matthew 13:44–46*

- God is sovereign
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- God uses us to accomplish His mission

**3. Passion: advance the gospel** *Verses 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23–25, 26, 27*

**4. Partnership: striving together** *Verse 27*

### Implications

- Value: know your life matters
  
- Vocation: keep your life worthy of the gospel



## Questions for Application

Why do you think that understanding your purpose is so important?

Read Philippians 1:12–30

Sum up in your own words what Paul, from these verses, sees as the purpose of all believers.

What does it mean to honour Christ? *Verse 20*

Why is it significant to Paul to have this thought through?

How did Paul show in His own life that this was worth any cost?

What are some of the costs you have had to pay? Might have to pay?

How does believing that God is Sovereign help us with this willing payment?

Review: • Joseph: Genesis 45:7–8; Genesis 50:19–21

• Job: Job 1:21–22; 2:10

• Jesus: Acts 2:22–24; 4:27–28

How do these stories help us to see God's Sovereignty, and help us trust Him even if we are struggling and look for His purpose in our pain?

## Pressing On

Esther 4:14 shares that God had a plan for Esther, even as she struggled to live her life for God's glory in a pagan culture and painful circumstances. How does God's use of her help us to rejoice in His plan for us?

Ephesians 2:10 shares that we are God's *work of art*, and that He has good works for us to do. Discuss what these two realities mean in your world.

What does it mean to advance the gospel in this passage? *Verse 12*

How does having a proper understanding of our purpose give us unity in the midst of diversity?

What does it mean to be partners in the gospel?

What does it mean to walk worthy of the gospel? *Verse 27*

*Ephesians 4:1–2; Ephesians 5:1–2*

How can we apply the implications of Pastor Rob's sermon?

- Know that my life matters to God and His plan
- Live out His job for me
- Define my target and win, through His eyes

How can you as a group magnify Christ in the next week?

extra notes

### Memory Verse

*“<sup>1</sup>I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup>with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.”*

**Ephesians 4:1–2**

### Prayer: Colossians 1:9–14

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## Freedom from Condemnation

*Read Romans 7:21–8:8*

The more you experience the gospel, the more you want to grow, the more you grow, the more you realize you need grace, the more you realize you need grace the more you are grateful, the more you are grateful, the more you grow. That is a mouthful, read it again. The closer you are to the Light, the more you can see the dirt. This is not good news; in fact, it is heart breaking. This is why Paul can call himself the chief of sinners as he is moving towards his death. He was growing, and as he grew, he understood in more depth the holiness of God, and therefore how far he fell short. Paul was not comparing himself with others, he was looking at God, and as his sight of God grew clearer, his sin was overwhelming.

If you feel content in your Christian walk, it is probably because you are comparing yourself with others and condemning them, or you are very immature. Authentic followers of God want more, and the more intimacy with the Almighty they get, the more they need the good news of the gospel to overwhelm them.

So, how do we keep the gospel central in our lives so that we are not overwhelmed with our sins and give up? We preach the gospel to ourselves every day. What does this mean in light of feeling overwhelmed with our sin and the holiness of God? It means we remind ourselves of the gospel and meditate on what we should experience through its reality. We should know the gospel so well that we can give it to others, and perhaps as important that we can preach it to our own hearts! Here is a good summary of the gospel from Mark Dever. A good way to summarize this good news is to biblically unpack the words God, Man, Christ,

### Response

1. **God.** God is the creator of all things (Gen. 1:1). He is perfectly holy, worthy of all worship, and will punish sin (1 John 1:5, Rev. 4:11, Rom. 2:5–8).
2. **Man.** All people, though created good, have become sinful by nature (Gen. 1:26–28, Ps. 51:5, Rom. 3:23). From birth, all people are alienated from God, hostile to God, and subject to the wrath of God (Eph. 2:1–3).
3. **Christ.** Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully man, lived a sinless life, died on the cross to bear God's wrath in the place of all who would believe in him, and rose from the grave in order to give his people eternal life (John 1:1, 1 Tim. 2:5, Heb. 7:26,

Rom. 3:21–26, 2 Cor. 5:21, 1 Cor. 15:20–22).

4. **Response.** God calls everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and trust in Christ in order to be saved (Mark 1:15, Acts 20:21, Rom. 10:9–10).

(Some of this material has been adapted from *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* by Mark Dever, p. 43)

So what for us who are growing and see our own sin? So wow! This means that all of my sins, past, present, and future are dealt with on the cross of Jesus! This means I am forgiven, no matter how wicked I have been, or can be. This means that nothing I do, or have done could make Jesus love me any more, or any less.

*Really?* Yes!

The more you experience the gospel, the more you want to grow, the more you grow, the more you realize you need grace, the more you realize you need grace, the more you are grateful, the more you are grateful, the more you grow.

May we be a people who take 10 looks at the gospel as we take steps to be more like Jesus!

### **Questions for application**

- Do you know how to preach the gospel to yourself?
- Take a few moments (when you are alone) and look in the mirror and preach the gospel to yourself, and make it personal. (Okay, stop. Now actually go and do that exercise, and look in the mirror and preach!)
- Write out a paragraph in your own words explaining to your own heart why you need the gospel so badly as you grow in your walk with God.
- Read and rejoice: Romans 8:1

Week 4:

Tuesday: Preach

## Motivated by the Master's Love

*Read 2 Corinthians 5:11–21*

The more you experience the gospel, the more you want to grow, the more you grow, the more you realize you need grace, the more you realize you need grace, the more you are grateful, the more you are grateful, the more you grow.

What is wrong with the North American church? I suppose that is really asking the question “what is wrong with us?” You could come up with many answers, but I think the one that reflects what I observe best is that we are lukewarm. In our evangelical circles, we are struggling with doctrine, with building a culture of evangelism, with a lack of prayer, with selfishness, with a lack of love, and yet I think all of these would be substantially changed if we were on fire for our LORD. So, how do we rid ourselves of apathy and replace it with an all in devotion? Romans 12:1–2 shows us that the motive to being an all in sacrifice is God’s mercy, or what has been explained in the entire book of Romans to that point, the richness of the gospel. If you are sometimes apathetic in your Christian life, if you want more passion, more zeal, more longing to be conformed to the image of Jesus and make a difference with your life, the key starting and staying place is the gospel.

What is the gospel? Well, you could go up and read Mark Devers summary, but it might be helpful to picture it in different ways. One of the great tools of explaining the gospel that would be helpful for you to have in your memory banks is the Romans Road.

- Romans 3:23
- Romans 5:8
- Romans 10:13
- Romans 6:23
- Romans 10:9–10

These verses, when properly understood, outline the gospel message well, and if you put the list in the front of your Bible, you will always have it available to you.

Maybe more importantly as we learn to preach the gospel to ourselves, can you give yourself a brief summary as you look in the mirror? If you can, and if you understand the depth of your sin and the wonder of God’s grace, you will find a rekindled fire to live for God. 2 Corinthians 5:14 talks about the love of Jesus compelling or controlling us. Enflaming and engulfing us, when the gospel is experienced it always yields a controlling passion that kills apathy.

So, if you struggle with apathy, if your heart sometimes grows cold and you can authentically sing, “prone to wonder, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love”, then take the number one tool in the Bible’s tool kit for killing apathy and preach the gospel to yourself!

When you have this kind of love given to you, received and experienced, you will never be the same. It is sad that we have to remind ourselves of it, and awesome that God has given us communion and baptism as a church so that we can constantly share the gospel reality with our hearts.

The more you experience the gospel, the more you want to grow, the more you grow, the more you realize you need grace, the more you realize you need grace, the more you are grateful, the more you are grateful, the more you grow.

If you are struggling with the want to, then you have to get the gospel afresh. For if you do, the love of Christ will compel you, the mercy of God will master you, the apathy you sometimes feel will be chased out by all-in devotion!

If the number one problem with the North American church is apathy, and if you sometimes struggle with it, the antidote to apathy is the lavish love of God!

### **Questions for application**

- If someone were to ask you how to explain the gospel, what would you say?
- Take a few moments (when you are alone) and look in the mirror and preach the gospel to yourself, and make it personal. (Okay, stop. Now actually go and do that exercise, and look in the mirror and preach!)
- Ask our God to overwhelm you with no condemnation, and to compel you with His love.
- Talk to three other people in your home church about preaching the gospel to yourself and how you feel about it.

## Overwhelmed in Thanksgiving

*Read Colossians 3:1–4:2*

For a few years every morning I woke to the song "Jesus, Thank You" by Pat Sczebel.

"The mystery of the cross I cannot comprehend  
The agonies of Calvary  
You the perfect Holy One, crushed Your Son  
Who drank the bitter cup reserved for me

Your blood has washed away my sin  
Jesus, thank You  
The Father's wrath completely satisfied  
Jesus, thank You  
Once Your enemy, now seated at Your table  
Jesus, thank You

By Your perfect sacrifice I've been brought near  
Your enemy You've made Your friend  
Pouring out the riches of Your glorious grace  
Your mercy and Your kindness know no end

Lover of my soul  
I want to live for You."

My friend Pat wrote this song as an overflow of his thankful heart for the gospel. I love this song because it is a reminder of what Jesus did for me, and how I am to respond. A fresh start every morning of the opportunity to be overwhelmed with thanksgiving. If you are anything like me, you need this. The flesh and the world chase away true thanksgiving, and the only true proved way of finding a root for thanksgiving that can never be stolen is the gospel. The action of the fleshly heart of man seems to lead to entitlement, bitterness, despair and unforgiveness. The spring of living water leads to thanksgiving. Life is not easy. Okay, that is a little simplistic—there is much in life that can steal your joy and a heart of thanksgiving. But one thing that can always restore it is a heart that is filled with gospel realities.

Thanksgiving is commanded, so followers of Jesus should obey. Thanksgiving is valuable: it chases away bitterness and despair and replaces it with joy and the privilege of serving God. Thanksgiving is contagious. I suppose negativity is as well, but when you are around thankful people you become thankful. When you are thankful, others will catch it and be thankful! Thanksgiving is easy, but if it is in the context of God's indescribable gift of salvation (2 Corinthians 9:15), perhaps impossible, or at the very least based on circumstances, if it is not. So your consistent ability to be obedient to the God's command to be thankful is always directly related to your consistent sight and experience of the gospel.

The more you experience the gospel, the more you want to grow. The more you grow, the more you realize you need grace. The more you realize you need grace, the more you are grateful. The more you are grateful, the more you grow.

When presenting the gospel to kids at our summer camps we use colors to explain it. This is so helpful, because you can wear the colors later as a reminder of the gospel and the importance of sharing it with others.

The colors are:

- **Gold/Yellow:** God is holy.
- **Black:** I am a sinner.
- **Red:** Jesus died in my place (blood shed) and rose again.
- **White:** through faith in Him I am cleansed, forgiven and reconciled.
- **Green:** Now I grow in my relationship with Him.
- **Blue:** Baptism, a step of obedience symbolizing what he has done for me.

As I write this, I am wearing these colors around my wrist to remind myself of the gospel and to aid in my quest to be thankful! Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

### Questions for application

- Look up on YouTube the song "Jesus Thank You", and take the time to listen to it.
- Write below why you think thanksgiving is so important to God, and why Christians sometimes struggle with this.
- How can you be more thankful?
- Share with three other people why you are thankful for what Jesus did, and how you are going to seek to be a more thankful person in the coming days.
- Read Psalm 9:1–2

## Forgiven Forgivers

*Read Matthew 18:21–35*

It is not easy to forgive someone who has sinned against you and it is even more difficult to forgive someone who has sinned against someone you love. Barna (an evangelical statistician) tells us that 1 in 4 people who claim to be evangelical Christians struggle with forgiveness.

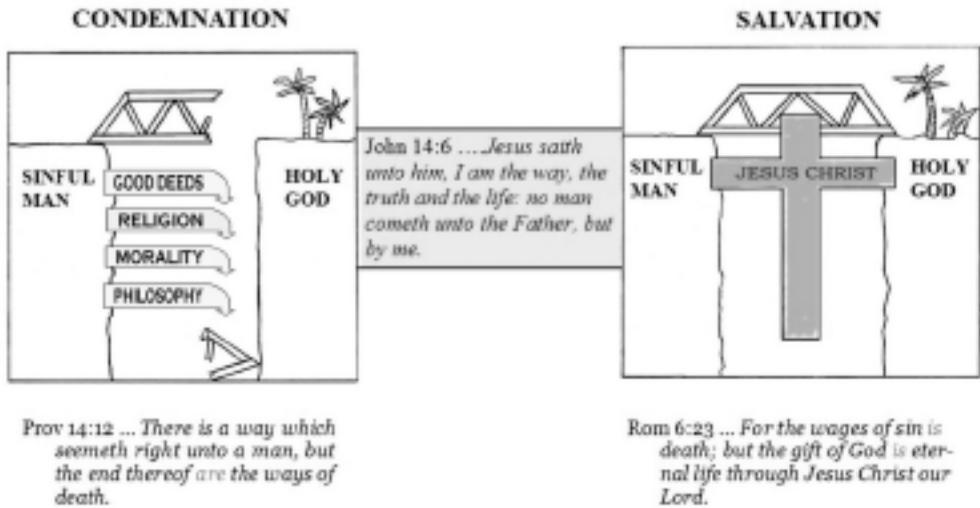
We live in a broken world, with broken people, and broken people offend us. My friend, Roy, went through the horror of having his sister raped and murdered. The murderer was caught, jailed in a very rough place, and given at least what we on earth would call justice (not sure justice for something like this can be paid on earth, but eternity waits). Roy chose to go and meet with this person, had the opportunity to lead him to Jesus and is now discipling him and helping him reach out into the prison world and see many fellow prisoners come to know Jesus. How is this even possible? Only through a proper experience of the gospel can you forgive someone like this (you can read Roy's story in his new book *The Unmistakable Hand of God*). Should you forgive someone like that? I don't know if you struggle with forgiving or not. Perhaps as you read this someone comes to mind who has hurt you deeply. Maybe you can feel the knot in your stomach start to grow, the bitterness and anger start to rise, and if you explained what the person did to you, you would probably be right and righteous in your feelings!

So, how can God demand that we forgive those who have sinned against us and ask for this forgiveness and expect us to have the strength to forgive? Worse, how can Jesus say that if I don't forgive my brother from my heart He will not forgive me. To explain this in a way that we can experience it, Jesus tells us a story, a story that should awaken in us a desire to experience the wealth of His forgiveness of us, and in that to overflow in a forgiving spirit to others. Jesus ties forgiveness of others to a proper experience of His forgiveness of us. When you understand that you are a sinner who deserves His wrath (Romans 5:6–11), then forgiving others who wrong you at such a lesser degree becomes an overflow of being forgiven.

If you struggle forgiving someone, stop trying and start focusing. Preach the gospel to yourself and realize how much you have been forgiven, and as you grow in the depth of your understanding of the gospel you will be able to apply it to forgiving others. When you grasp the forgiveness you received, you will grow in your ability to forgive others. When

you understand that your debt to God is billions worth and unpayable, then the debts that others owe you, seen in that context become relatively small. The pathway to being a forgiver is not paved with hard work, but rather an understanding of what Jesus has done for you on the cross. If you are a part of the 1 in 4 that struggle with forgiving others, focus, and in the freedom that Jesus offers you, your heart will overflow in forgiveness.

One of my favourite ways of sharing the gospel is what I call the napkin gap.



*(Bridge to Salvation. Tracts4free, tracts4free.wordpress.com)*

Remember that you are a sinner. Realize what you deserve, rejoice that you have been forgiven, and renew your heart of forgiveness.

### Questions for application

- Why do you think that working harder to forgive others usually doesn't work?
- Take the time to learn the bridge way of preaching the gospel to yourself and others.
- If there is someone you struggle forgiving. Take the time to pray for them, and as you do, pray that you would experience the richness of God's love in your life!

## Eager to Do Good

*Read Titus 2:1–14*

Sometimes I know what I am supposed to do, but feel tired. As I am writing this, we had a praise and prayer night to begin our Easter week celebrations as a church. Now as a pastor (or anyone else who believes that praising and prayer is important) I have a duty to go, but my parents needed to be dropped off at the airport, my wife was at a shower for our to be daughter-in-law, and Tiger Woods had just won another Masters, which I hadn't finished watching. But I wanted to. I had promised the pastors organizing that I would go, but I was not eager to do good.

Verses 11–14 help us understand not only why Jesus died, but also how it should motivate us to live our lives in a way that shows we have experienced the gospel richly! If we are not eager to do good, perhaps it means we have not experienced the gospel as we should. Read verses 11–14 again for a helpful pattern of what to do if you sometimes feel tired, or discouraged, or lack an eagerness to do what is good.

Notice that God's grace has appeared. Don't leave that phrase too quickly. It is powerful and meant to evoke a heart and head response that will shape our will. He has brought salvation to us, this is a reference to the gospel. This is a reference to the richness of what Jesus did on the cross for us. It is what should motivate what Titus talked about earlier on in the chapter, a doctrine that is lived out and impacts everything else. This grace does not just save, this grace also teaches. Grace, getting way more than we deserve, actually teaches us to say *no* to ungodliness and worldly passions. Grace is our trainer to avoid things that don't honour God, and then to say yes to things that do—to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age. Grace, when experienced, does not leave us at the entry point of our transformation, it changes us.

One of the great reasons that we need to constantly review the gospel in our lives is that the grace it displays, is a grace that demands our radical sacrifice (Romans 12:1–2) and it delivers the teaching we need to be a holy people (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Here we find the purpose of our redemption is tied up in our personal holiness (saying no to sin and yes to God) and our eagerness of belonging to God and being zealous for good works.

Read verse 14 again. Underline it and read it again. Does this describe you? Even when you are tired, or want to watch the Masters, or have family commitments.

If you are like me, it does not describe you as much as you would like it to—so, what to do? Well, duty demands that you are dependable even when you don't feel like it. So go! And when you do you will experience the freshness of what you get from serving God. But that is not enough. Simple duty is not all that God demands, nor provides for us. It is not enough to choose to do what is right even when you don't feel like it. There is much more for us. In fact, Jesus' death was to purchase for Himself a people who are His—eager to do what is good.

So, preaching the gospel to yourself is essential for the passion to be one who chooses right, and overflows with a zeal for good works, actions that honour Jesus, and commitment to where He has called. This is not popular in our age of doing what you feel, how you feel, when you feel, but it is essential for long term healthy honouring of Jesus with our lives. So, learn to preach the gospel to yourself, and lean on His grace to teach you so that you live life with a zeal for good works. Go hard after holiness, and healthy Christian living, and do it with a healthy experience of grace. I learned to preach the gospel to myself from Jerry Bridges, here is what he does:

**How to Preach the gospel to Yourself.** From Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins*.

“Since the gospel is only for sinners, I begin each day with the realization that despite my being a saint, I still sin every day in thought, word, deed, and motive. If I am aware of any subtle, or not so subtle, sins in my life, I acknowledge those to God. Even if my conscience is not indicting me for conscious sins, I still acknowledge to God that I have not even come close to loving Him with all my being or loving my neighbor as myself. I repent of those sins, and then I apply specific Scriptures that assure me of God's forgiveness to those sins I have just confessed.

I then generalize the Scripture's promises of God's forgiveness to all my life and say to God words to the effect that my only hope of a right standing with Him that day is Jesus' blood shed for my sins, and His righteous life lived on my behalf. This reliance on the twofold work of Christ for me is beautifully captured by Edward Mote in his hymn “The Solid Rock” with his words, “My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus' blood and righteousness.” Almost every day, I find myself going to those words in addition to reflecting on the promises of forgiveness in the Bible. What Scriptures do I use to preach the gospel to myself? Here are just a few I choose from each day: “As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” (Psalm 103:12) “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.” (Isaiah 43:25) “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6)

## Pressing On

“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” (Romans 4:7–8) “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1) There are many others, including Psalm 130:3–4; Isaiah 1:18; Isaiah 38:17; Micah 7:19; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 2:13–14; Hebrews 8:12; and 10:17–18. Whatever Scriptures we use to assure us of God’s forgiveness, we must realize that whether the passage explicitly states it or not, the only basis for God’s forgiveness is the blood of Christ shed on the cross for us. As the writer of Hebrews said, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (9:22), and the context makes it clear that it is Christ’s blood that provides the objective basis on which God forgives our sins.”

Thank you, Jerry, for helping me know what to do when I am not feeling like doing what I know to be right!

Let the experience of grace overwhelm and train you, and you will belong to God and, as His possession, pursue with eagerness good works which He has prepared in advance for you to do. I went to the praise and prayer meeting and met with the PVR later and enjoyed both. But even more importantly, I realized I need to be more filled with the Spirit and trained by the gospel so my eagerness would not be for the couch but for the Creator! O for a greater experience of the gospel and an eagerness to remind myself every day of what my Savior has done for me!

### Questions for application

- In your own words, what does it mean to preach the gospel to yourself every day?
- What do you do when you know the good you ought to do, but don’t feel like it?
- Why is it important to be one who has experienced grace?
- Why is it important to live a life that shows that grace has trained you?
- Share with someone else in your life why preaching the gospel is important to you and how you do it.

Week 4

Saturday: People

## Grateful Giving

*Read Matthew 6:10–20*

I have a confession to make. I like watching my RRSP grow. I check it about once a week, and when it is growing it makes me feel like something is being accomplished for me. There is a sense that saving is a good thing, and certainly checking your RRSP is not a sin. However, the Bible is clear that we are called to live in light of eternity and to save in light of eternity.

In fact, we have the privilege of storing up our treasures in heaven. How do we do this? As Randy Alcorn has said, you can't take it with you, but you can send it on ahead. You invest in eternity by giving to God's church and by investing in ministry that changes eternity. We live in an age where statistics are showing that people are giving less and less to the church, and spending more and more on self and entertainment (perhaps survival in our housing market in Vancouver). So, what should we do?

1. Be aware of the reality of Matthew 6 and the temptation to focus on earthly things. Our flesh would much rather be focused on our savings rather than our salvation.
2. Be motivated by God's love! 2 Corinthians 9:13 talks about the reality that how we give shows how much we are thankful for the gospel, and that in giving we help others to glorify Him.
3. Many would say that tithing is only for the Old Testament, so don't worry about it. I disagree, and think that we should tithe (Matthew 23:23), however, perhaps that is way too little. I struggle with this, and want to be more generous, but this does not change the reality that if the New Testament doesn't call for tithing (I still think it does), it does call for more than this in terms of sacrificial giving (2 Corinthians 8:3).
4. If you wait until you have enough to tithe, you will never tithe. One of the best examples in my life of giving is my mom and dad. Dad makes decisions and keeps them, and has decided to be a giver as an overflow of His thanksgiving to God. Mom loves God and wants to give at every opportunity from her heart. They have never wanted for money here, and yet give more than they live on, and in this I praise God for an example of storing up treasures in heaven!
5. Giving should be a joyful choice, but if you can't give from a joyful heart you should still give. It is like every other area of obedience, you choose to obey whether you feel like it or not, and then you go after the root and seek to be filled with the love

## Pressing On

of God so that you want to.

I like watching my RRSP grow, but even more I want to become a model for those who store up treasure in heaven. It is worth it. It makes sense—if Jesus rose from the dead, and He did!

### Questions for application

- How does where you spend and invest your money show your heart?
- How is your heart?
- Where does God want you to invest of your time, treasures and talents over the next month?
- What keeps you from being generous?



# 5

## Thankful Living

*1 Thessalonians 5*

A proper experience of grace will always lead to thanksgiving! So, if this is true, it begs the question, why aren't Christians always the most thankful people in the world? The simplest answer is that too often we are practical atheists who focus on temporary comfort for the motive for thanking Jesus, rather than eternal realities. We live in light of the present, not in light of eternity!

Our hope and prayer is that this Thanksgiving Sunday, we would not only learn together the history of Thanksgiving, but that through a new, fresh experience of the gospel of God, learn the greatness of God, and the goodness of God would yield a heart that never ceases to give praise to God! This will overflow in thanksgiving, always! The context of our passage in 1 Thessalonians is incredible and helpful to understand in our pursuit of a true understanding of thanksgiving.

*Jesus, thank you!*



# 5

## Thankful Living

*1 Thessalonians 5*

### Introduction

#### 1. Keep in step with the Spirit

- Ready
- Respectful
- Relationships
- Repaying
- Rejoicing

- Reality

- Recognize

- Reverence

- Refraining

## 2. Give thanks in all circumstances

- The gospel of God

- The greatness of God

- The goodness of God's plan



## Questions for Application

How did your family celebrate Thanksgiving when you were growing up? How do you celebrate Thanksgiving now?

Why did people in Canada start to celebrate Thanksgiving?

How come Christians around the world are not known for their thanksgiving?

- Are you?
- Is our church?
- Why or why not?

Discuss the context of 1 Thessalonians 5.

What does it mean to keep in step with the Spirit?

Discuss the nine R's that Pastor Rob gave, put them in your own words—free from the restrictions of alliteration and memory jogger aids.

## Pressing On

Do you show these marks in your own life? Why or why not?

Pick three you are doing well, and three you are struggling with, and discuss how we can learn to do these better together as a Growth Group.

The Bible commands that we be people who “give thanks in all circumstances”. How is this possible?

- How can you grow in your ability to do this faithfully, “in all circumstances”?

How does a belief in God’s gospel, greatness, and goodness help you to be thankful when things are very difficult?

How does being thankful chase away bitterness and sin for the Christian?

How does thanksgiving fit with the overall theme of pressing on?

extra notes

### Memory Verse

“<sup>16</sup>Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup>pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup>give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

### Prayer: Matthew 6:9–13

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## God Makes His Appeal Through Us

*Read 2 Corinthians 5:11–21*

The gospel motivates us to be on mission for God! This passage is worth reading twice in 31 days, but if you find that repetitive, read Ephesians 2:1–10, as the concept is the same. We are saved by grace, and we are saved for mission. 2 Corinthians 5:21 is very clear—we are the righteousness of Jesus through what Jesus has done for us on the cross. We measure up in Christ. You can't make Him love you more by what you do, or love you less because of what you don't do, or in your sin. This is the reality of grace! The cross becomes the great motivator, the love of God controlling us. Controlling us for what? Look at 2 Corinthians 5:15. He died so that we would live for Him, and in the context of 2 Corinthians 5 that means making His appeal to others. This means knowing the gospel and sharing it. So how do we do this as individuals, and how do we do this as a church? We follow a three word pattern, as those who have been impacted by grace and bought through God's grace, by the blood of Jesus.

**Invest:** This means doing acts of love, getting to know those who don't know Jesus and really caring about them. Lori (my wife) is good at this. It means actively living your life for Jesus (1 Peter 2:11–12), and in that sharing His love. This might be shovelling a walk, fixing a fence, inviting in for a meal, or many many other things. It means taking a Christ interest in others. Please remember at this point that Jesus is your target, not other people—it is an overflow of your love for Him that causes you to love others.

**Invite:** We are seeking to build a culture where we invite others into our church community. I read that 86% of people are in church because of a friend. So take the time to invite them to our outreach events, to our services, to get to know other believers. Invite them into our church family's life, and when they come be sure to introduce them to others, and connect them to people who love Jesus. We are a gospel-oriented church, so at our events, the gospel will be presented and our services will be Christ-centred.

**Include:** Always when we gather together be on the alert for people who are new to you, and express love to them. We are a loving community who welcome people who are not quite like us, and engage in conversation that seeks to know them and their interests.

If you just read that and it lost you, then let us simplify. If you know someone who does not know Jesus, love them enough to share His love with them, express the gospel to

them, and rejoice when they believe in Him and gain eternal life and a reconciled relationship with Him. We want to be a corporate community that sets off many celebrations in heaven (Luke 15:7), and each of us is a part of this! It is an awesome responsibility to be people through whom God makes His appeal! So, join us in making a culture of evangelism, join us in being motivated for mission. Bask in the gospel, believe it from the very core of your being, and bless those around you with a life lived on mission for His glory.

### **Questions for application**

- Make a list of three people you believe God wants to speak to through you.
- Pray for them.
- What ways can you invest in their lives over the next week? Month?
- What events are coming that you will invite them to?
- Share your plan with another Christian, and have them pray with you for the process of seeking to be on mission for God.
- Pray that gospel presentations would be clear so that people who know Him would bask in His love, so that people who think they know Him, but don't, would truly worship, and so that those whom God has chosen have an opportunity to respond to His grace through our gospel presentation and trust in Him.

## Glorify God

*Read: 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1*

We are called to be a people who are radically God-centred! The problem with that call is that it is not as specific as we need, and we can say it but stay focused on self. As you read that passage in 1 Corinthians, what stood out for you? The two verses that jump out of this text for me are 10:24; and 10:31. If you simplify your life, you could make all of your decisions based on these two things and you would win spiritually.

1. **Choose to do what is best for others.** Seek to die to self and choose to do what is good for your neighbour. Who is your neighbour? Jesus answered that question with a story, and in this story we discover it is anyone who comes across your path with a need. We are to be aware of others around us and then, when we see needs, choose to meet them, even when it means our own good will be sacrificed. This is a Romans 12:10 kind of life, where we see life as a competition to see who can out honour the other person. This is radically counter-cultural in a culture where it seems each seeks his good, and it will display that we are unique and belong to God.
2. **Choose to glorify God** in all you say and do. John Piper has said that we Christians need to learn to drink orange juice for the glory of God. Now the problem—what does that even mean? To glorify God means we display the greatness of who He is and what He has done by how we live.

Glory is a word in the Old Testament that meant heavy, and in the New Testament bright and shining. To glorify God we must feel the weight of who He is in all we do and say, and live our lives shining who He has made us, onto Him. It means, simply, to be radically God-centred, to always ask the question, how does this make God look? Our goal is to grow in our intimacy with God so that the impact of our lives will display the majesty of who He is. We must know Him as He has revealed Himself to us, and then choose, in light of that, to live in a way that displays His attributes to others.

“To glorify God is to extol His attributes—His holiness, faithfulness, mercy, grace, love, majesty, sovereignty, power, and omniscience, to name a few—rehearsing them over and over in our minds and telling others about the singular nature of salvation only He offers.” ([www.gotquestions.org/glorify-God.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/glorify-God.html))

**So how do we live this way?**

1. Experience His love (Ephesians 3:14–21).
2. Share His love (Ephesians 5:1–2).
3. Look at every situation in life as an opportunity to show how great He is (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Now, all of life has meaning, and what God allows into our lives becomes a significant tool to display the beauty of who He is. So we will not waste our cancer, our walk in the valley of the shadow of death, our lunches, our driving. We will live in a way that shows we believe in Him. We will choose to do what is best for others. We will choose to glorify God in all we say and do.

**Questions for application**

- How does your life show love towards others that seeks their good over your own?
- In your own words in one sentence, define what it means to live in a way that glorifies God.
- Take a moment to review your life right now. What has God allowed so that you can show how awesome He is?
- Just do it! Glorify God!

## Pursue

*Read Matthew 7:21–27*

Our goal over these 31 days was to “build in” the habit of spending time in God’s Word every day, and talking about it with others in your church family. I hope you have found this beneficial in your own walk with God. Just as spending time with your friends, spouse, or children is essential to the building of healthy relationships, so spending time with God is key to growing deeper with God. We want to be followers who are authentic in faith and solid in storms. Matthew 7:21–27 tells us how to do this. Jesus is finishing the first weekend in the Word, what we know as the Sermon On The Mount. This is really a section of Scripture that shapes the most basic issues in discipleship for the follower of Jesus. Jesus is describing what His people will look like, and He ends with a powerful story that changed my life.

I was raised in a great family, a church that wanted to follow Jesus, and a strong sense of wanting to know God’s Word and be a Christian. The problem was not with my environment, it was with my heart. I had religion, and it was a fairly good religion, but I did not have a heart that had been transformed by God. One of my wake-up calls was when a friend shared with me that he was glad I was not like all of the other Christians he knew, I was just like him. Or, perhaps shared differently, he was glad that my relationship with Jesus was not real, and I was not living a life of obedience to Jesus.

A book by John MacArthur called *The Gospel According to Jesus*, and the passage of Scripture we have as the foundation for day 31 is what God used to display my need to know Him. This passage calls for us to judge our own lives (2 Corinthians 13:5; 2 Peter 1:10) and to make sure we are in, as well as to do fruit checks on those who are leading us in our church family. This is such an important thing for us to do if verse 21 is true (and given that it is God’s Word, *it is!*).

How do we test ourselves? We build our lives on the Rock. Because this was such an impactful passage of Scripture for me, early on in my ministry, I decided to make sure I shared it each time I was called to speak at conferences or camps. I usually opened up with the story of the wise man and the fool, ending with the question: what is the Rock that we are to build our lives on. The answer of those in the church is almost always Jesus, and that is correct, but not in this text. In this text you have a wise man building his house on the Rock and a foolish man building his house on the sand. The houses

look the same, are comfortable inside, offer what every house should, and can only be told apart when the storms come. The house on the Rock stands firm, while the house on the sand blows apart.

So Jesus is not only here showing us who is authentic in their calling out of LORD LORD (verse 21), but also how to stand in the storms of life. The person who builds his house on the sand goes to church, hears God's Word, but they ignore it. The person who builds his house on the Rock, hears God's Word and applies it to his life—obeys! So as we close these 31 days, hoping and praying that we have shaped the habits of the family of God at Cloverdale Baptist Church, here is the question for all of us for moving forward.

Which house are you? We want to be a church family that hears the Word of God (a passion for the priority of the preaching of God's Word and personal Word saturation), and applies it (Rock foundation) to every area of life. Know and obey, knowledge with zeal, lives devoted to God, disciples taught to obey, houses that can withstand storms, authentic followers of Jesus.

Which house are you? May we be filled with solid rock houses, may we hear and obey!





# 6

## Life on Mission

*1 Peter 2:11–12*

If we don't learn to live life on purpose, it will just happen to us, and what happens to us is rarely gratifying. Drifting is downhill. So how do we learn to live life on mission for God, or perhaps better said, with His purpose in mind? There is one driving passion that every Christian should have, and that is to glorify Jesus. We do that by living our lives for Him and for His glory. We are to be in the world, but not of the world, and as those who are called to do this, we will be shining lights for God.

Read this text over and over again, and remember that the reason for abstaining from the sinful desires that war against the soul, and for pursuing a life that points to Jesus is so that together we can magnify His name. Your life matters, and the way you live matters, so as you *press on*, do so with a longing to be in the world, but not of the world, the way the Master desires.



# 6

## Life on Mission

*1 Peter 2:11–12*

### Introduction

### Review

- **Purpose:** honour Jesus
- **Perception:** it is worth any cost
- **Passion:** advance the gospel
- **Partnership:** striving together

### 1. Identity: *who we are*

- I am beloved *Ephesians 3:14–21; Romans 8:28–39*

- I am a sojourner and exile *Philippians 3:20*

- I am at war

**2. Immoral:** *who we are not Galatians 5:19; 1 Peter 1:13–16*

**3. Instigate:** *what we do*

**4. Impact:** *who we change Matthew 28:18–20*

### Implications

- Repent of not being on mission
- Renew our passion for God's purpose
- Rejoice in our privilege

extra notes

## Questions for Application

Review the four realities from Philippians 1:12–27. Make sure you understand what these things mean.

- Purpose: honour Jesus
- Perception: it is worth any cost
- Passion: advance the gospel
- Partnership: striving together

Read 1 Peter 2:11–12

Why is it important to know who we are if we are to live on mission for God?

What does it mean to be beloved?

Pray Ephesians 3:14–21 for each other. Knowing and experiencing God's love will change everything about us—we will be *filled to the fullness of God*.

What does it mean to be a sojourner and exile? Why should we see ourselves like this as Christians?

How can we grow in this understanding so that it impacts how we view all of life?

What does it mean to be at war with our flesh?

## Pressing On

What other kinds of warfare are we engaged in? *Ephesians 6:10–18; 2 Timothy 2:3*

How can you wage war against your flesh? List some practical things that will help you.

What are the passions of the flesh? *Galatians 5:19*

Why is it important that we do this as people on mission for God? *1 Peter 1:13–16*

What does it mean to be in the world but not of the world?

- How can we avoid a fortress mentality?
  
- How can we avoid being worldly?

What is the impact of this according to 1 Peter 2:12?

What can you as a group do to make sure that you are on mission?

Review the implications together.

- Repent of not being on mission
- Renew our passion for God's purpose
- Rejoice in our privilege

extra notes

### Memory Verse

*“<sup>11</sup> Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. <sup>12</sup> Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”*

**1 Peter 2:11–12**

### Prayer: Romans 10:1

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# 7

## Life in Community

*Ephesians 4:1–16*

The church is under attack. Attack from the outside with shouts of anger, and from the inside with self-centeredness that sacrifices purpose and passion for His glory. This should not surprise us for Jesus loves the church and any and all who are not on His team will attack His bride. In fact, throughout history the demonic realm has ferociously attacked the church, and those who walk according to the flesh typically join in the battle against that which Jesus treasures. It doesn't help that often those within the church don't act as Jesus wants, earning the statement that the church is full of hypocrites, and that church leaders don't function in a biblical manner.

This message is a call for followers of Jesus to not only love His bride, but to follow His headship and participate in the body life to which He has called us. If we want to be healthy as His followers, to “walk worthy of His calling”, we will see His church as important, know our part is irreplaceable, and rejoice in the impact we can have on the church and that she can have on us. One of the most important disciplines we can have as followers of Jesus who don't want to waste our lives, is to be a part of His church in a healthy manner!

# 7

## Life in Community

*Ephesians 4:1–16*

### Introduction

Cyprian of Carthage said, “no one can have God for his Father, who has not the church for his mother.”

John Stott states, “The church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history”.

- Christ founded the church: *Matthew 16:18*
- He bought her with His blood: *Acts 20:28*
- He identifies Himself with her intimately: *Acts 9:4*
- It is His body: *1 Corinthians 12:12; 27; Ephesians 1:22–23; 4:12; 5:20–30; Colossians 1:18, 24; 3:15*
- It is where His Spirit dwells: *1 Corinthians 3:16–17; Ephesians 2:18, 22; 4:4*
- It is key to glorifying God in this world: *Ephesians 3:10*
- The church is God’s chosen instrument for conversion and transformation: *Luke 24:46–48; Rev. 5:9; Ephesians 4:11–16*

(Great Resource: Dever, Mark: The Church; Broadman and Holman)

### 1. Important

**2. Irreplaceable** *Ephesians 2:10; 1 Corinthians 12:14–27*

**3. Impact** *Acts 2:42–47; Matthew 28:18–20*

- Built up
- Bonded together
- Beliefs right
- Burgeoning church

**Implications**

- **Value the local church:** value Cloverdale Baptist Church
- **View yourself biblically:** you matter to Cloverdale Baptist Church
- **Valor: press on:** belong and serve Cloverdale Baptist Church



## Questions for Application

How does our culture and world view the church?

Why do you think the world, the devil, and the flesh attack the church?

How can we make sure we are on God's side in the battle for the beautification of the bride of Jesus?

What is the difference between the church Universal and the local church, and why is it important to value both?

Why and how should we value the local church?

Read Ephesians 4:1–16. In this text what does it mean to walk worthy of the calling we have received?

Why do you think that immediately following this call for a worthy life we find qualities essential for producing unity in humans who are not yet perfect?

## Pressing On

How does knowing that Jesus is the head of the church (Colossians 1:15–20) and building His church (Matthew 16:8) help us to build a loyalty to the local church?

Why is your role in the church important? How does this relate to Ephesians 2:10?

What does it mean that you're irreplaceable in the church?

How can you use your gifts to build the church and make sure you're being blessed and being a blessing? Where are you serving today?

Do you know your spiritual gift? If not, how can you get to know it?

What is the *impact* that Jesus wants us to have as a church family?

Go over: *Built Up; Bonded Together; Beliefs Right; Bourgeoning Church*. Clarify each and how you see yourself being a part of this impact in our church family.

How has your view of the local church changed through this study?

What do you need to change in your life to be a healthy part of your local church?

extra notes

### Memory Verse

“<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, <sup>7</sup> rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

**Colossians 2:6–7**

### Prayer: Luke 18:1–8

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# 8

## Lifestyle of the Ready and Fully Devoted

*Luke 12:35–48*

Stephen Covey, in his book, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, writes that we should “begin with the end in mind”. To help us think this through, he tells his readers that they should take the time to write out their eulogy. I think this is a useful tool to help us understand how we should live now and to teach us how to do this.

What do you want to be remembered for? How can you live with that in mind? How does your view of who God is and what He has done change your answer? If we have a real relationship with Jesus, it will change our lives, and we will be driven and defined by that relationship. My prayer is that this text would deepen our relationship with God so that we would live in light of eternity. That we would be a people not only ready to die, but radical in our relationship with Jesus in life, here and now.



# 8

## Lifestyle of the Ready and Fully Devoted

*Luke 12:35–48*

**Introduction** *2 Corinthians 4:16–18*

**Tombstone:** *Pause now as you pass by, as you are now once I was, as I am now, so you must be. Prepare yourself and follow me.*

**1. Be real in relationship** *Verses 35–36*

**2. Be ready in relationship** *Verses 36–44*

- Be prepared

- Be light-filled

- Be eager

3. Be rewarded in relationship *Verses 38, 43; 2 Corinthians 4:16–18; Luke 12:32–34*

**Implications**

- Make sure you're ready

*Be a believer*

*Be holy*

- Make sure you're resolute

- Make sure you're revived

**Tombstone:** *Pause now as you pass by, as you are now once I was, as I am now, so you must be. Prepare yourself and follow Jesus.*



## Questions for Application

When was the last time you gave thought to Jesus' return?

Why do you think we have a tendency to overemphasize His return, or ignore its possibility?

What does it mean to store up treasure in heaven?

How can you learn to choose to do this?

Discuss the four illustrations and the three lessons from those stories in Jesus' teaching in Luke 12:

- Dressed in readiness
- Lamps lit
- Servants waiting for masters' return
- Thief in middle of the night
- Be prepared
- Be light-filled
- Be eager

How can we be people who follow these three lessons?

What does it mean to be rewarded in relationship?

## Pressing On

Read 2 Corinthians 4:16–18. What kept Paul serving in the midst of incredible pain?

Are you ready for Jesus' return? How do you know?

How can you be better prepared?

How can you use Jesus' return to motivate you to *persevere*? *1 Corinthians 15:58*

Discuss Steven Lawson's quote "revival comes when we begin to live for the world to come, not the present one."

How can you experience this kind of revival in your life?

**Tombstone:** *Pause now as you pass by. As you are now once was I. As I am now, so you must be. Prepare yourself and follow Jesus.*

extra notes

### Memory Verse

“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

1 Corinthians 15:58

### Prayer: Romans 15:5–6

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# Postwork

## What is the Gospel?

We often talk about being gospel-centred, or gospel-focused. To understand how to build a culture that is honouring to God it is essential that we understand, experience, and constantly bathe in the gospel.

To begin this growth in being a gospel centred culture, we must grasp what the gospel is. Many in our world use the term but don't understand or experience the transformation. The gospel is literally "the good news". It is good because it addresses the deepest and most desperate need of all humans. The Bible is clear that getting the gospel wrong is dangerous (Galatians 1:8–10) and leads to destruction.

It is very sad that there are many who think they are saved but are not (Matthew 7:21–27), and many who are saved by grace through faith who are not living in the fullness of what the gospel daily provides.

To experience this good news there are five realities that must be grasped, believed and lived in light of the daily experience.

1. **God:** A rich experience of the gospel is God-centred and always includes a belief about who God is that matches the revelation of Himself in His Word. There is only one true God, who is holy, who made us in His image to worship Him. His holiness refers to His separateness from creation and His absolute purity.
2. **Humans:** All humans have sinned (Romans 3:23) and have separated ourselves from God, which places us under His righteous wrath. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), and the only way for sinners to pay for sin is to spend eternity in hell separated from God.
3. **Jesus:** God loved us so much that He, according to His eternal plan, sent Jesus, His only Son into the world. Jesus lived a perfect life, thus fulfilling the law in our place. He then died on the cross, in our place, taking on Himself the sins of those who believe in Him. He rose again from the dead. In this, He conquered sin and death and displayed that God accepted this sacrifice. Thus, God's wrath against sinners who believe in Jesus has been fully exhausted.
4. **Humans:** God now calls on humans, by grace through faith, to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus alone for forgiveness. This belief in Jesus alone, is a faith that saves. When humans believe they are forgiven and reconciled to God, this new relationship becomes the centre of their lives.

## Pressing On

5. **Spirit Filled Life:** All who are saved by grace through faith are made a new creation, and seek to live a life that is surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus and devoted to His glory. This pursuit of holiness is a progression that He helps believers to pursue. The Spirit-filled life will include a desire to never ignore so great a salvation.

Mark Dever summarizes it like this:

A good way to summarize this good news is to biblically unpack the words God, Man, Christ, Response.

1. **God.** God is the creator of all things (Gen. 1:1). He is perfectly holy, worthy of all worship, and will punish sin (1 John 1:5, Rev. 4:11, Rom. 2:5–8).
2. **Man.** All people, though created good, have become sinful by nature (Gen. 1:26–28, Ps. 51:5, Rom. 3:23). From birth, all people are alienated from God, hostile to God, and subject to the wrath of God (Eph. 2:1–3).
3. **Christ.** Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully man, lived a sinless life, died on the cross to bear God’s wrath in the place of all who would believe in him, and rose from the grave in order to give his people eternal life (John 1:1, 1 Tim. 2:5, Heb. 7:26, Rom. 3:21–26, 2 Cor. 5:21, 1 Cor. 15:20–22).
4. **Response.** God calls everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and trust in Christ in order to be saved (Mark 1:15, Acts 20:21, Rom. 10:9–10).

(Some of this material has been adapted from *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* by Mark Dever, p. 43) <https://www.9marks.org/answer/what-gospel/>

The gospel is so simple that a child can understand it, and yet so profound that it will be something that those who know Jesus will spend eternity celebrating (Ephesians 2:7). The realities of the gospel are amazing, and must be grasped, believed and experienced to be saved and to live a victorious Christian life. It is not enough to know them, or even to believe them, they “must never be neglected” (Hebrews 2:3). The best way to “escape” this danger is to preach the gospel to ourselves every day.

## Keeping the Gospel in Your Testimony

**Q: Are we supposed to be able to share our faith?**

A: 1 Peter 3:15–16: “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”

**Q: Is the gospel an important part of this sharing? Can we just talk about how we helped ourselves, or our Grandma helped us, or our friend, or our auto-mechanic, or, or, or...**

A: 2 Corinthians 4:5: “For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord”; “But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” (Jude 1:20)

**Q: How can I structure my testimony?**

A straightforward way to structure your testimony is to develop it in three stages:

- **Before:** tell what your life was like before you surrendered to Christ. What were you searching for before coming to know Christ? What was the key problem, emotion, situation or attitude you were dealing with? What motivated you? What were your actions? How did you try to satisfy your inner needs? (Examples of inner needs are loneliness, fear of death, insecurity. Possible ways to fill those needs include work, money, drugs, relationships, sports, sex.)
- **How:** how were you converted? Simply tell the events and circumstances that caused you to consider Christ as the solution to your searching. Take time to identify the steps that brought you to the point of trusting Christ. Where were you? What was happening at the time? What people or problems influenced your decision?
- **Since:** how has your life in Christ made a difference? How has His forgiveness impacted you? How have your thoughts, attitudes and emotions changed? Share how Christ is meeting your needs and what a relationship with Him means to you now.

### Important tips to remember

- **Stick to the point.** Your conversion and new life in Christ should be the main points.
- **Be specific.** Include events, genuine feelings and personal insights that clarify your main point. This makes your testimony tangible—something others can relate to.
- **Be current.** Tell what is happening in your life with God now, today.
- **Be honest.** Don’t exaggerate or dramatize your life for effect. The simple truth of what God has done in your life is all the Holy Spirit needs to convict others of their sin and convince them of his love and grace.

### Things to avoid

Stay away from “Christianese” phrases. These “foreign” or “churchy” words can alienate listeners and readers and keep them from identifying with your life.

### Components of the gospel to include in your testimony: *bracelet colors*

#### Yellow

The first color on our bracelet is yellow. What does yellow symbolize? Heaven. God’s Home. This is where we should all want to go, and it is where we can go if we are in right relationship with God. This is by grace, through faith, resulting in obedience. Focus on God and His holiness (God has no sin and is morally perfect, and set apart from everyone else. There is no one like Him)! Heaven is a place to rightly want to go. The gospel is God-centred!

#### Black

But, we have one problem—we have sin in our lives. The black bead represents our sin. The Bible says that all of us have sin. Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” God does not allow any sin in heaven. So how can we get into heaven? We can’t. God says the punishment of sin is death. Death is eternal separation from God in hell. “For the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23)

At this point you want people to understand that they have done wrong things and that these wrong things have broken their relationship with God, and they can’t earn their way back—ever.

#### Red

The red bead symbolizes Christ’s blood. When we accept His free gift of salvation God washes us with his blood. God sent his Son, Jesus Christ to die on the cross in our place so that we don’t have to receive the punishment we deserve for our own sins! (Grace: It is important to talk about how this was something that we didn’t deserve, and can’t earn, even in part).

To make our relationship with God right, what we have to do is believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and accept His work on the cross as our replacement for the punishment of sin. (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 10:9–10; Ephesians 2:8–10; John 3:16–17; Acts 4:12) When we really believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, this will include submission to God and learning to follow Him with our lives. At this point you want the people to understand what it means to believe, and follow. Focus on the person of Jesus and what He has done for us. Repentance summarizes this concept well—a change of mind that impacts every area of life, a change of direction.

### **White**

Once Jesus washes us with His blood we are pure. We are no longer black with sin, but we are clean like the white bead. Because God took the place of our sin, when we die God can let us into heaven because our sin is paid for by Jesus' death on the cross. (Romans 8:1; 1 Peter 2:24; John 1:12, 29; John 3:16)

### **Green**

After we believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we want to grow so that we can become closer to God. The green symbolizes growth much like green grass grows. We can grow by reading the Bible, praying to God, going to church and learning to obey God in all of life (baptism and beyond).

“But you dear friends build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.” (Jude 1:20)

## Jeff & Hannah Godard

### Jeff Godard

Before I came to know Jesus personally, I lived for what I perceived to be the most important thing in the world—myself. I was caught up in finding things that would temporarily make me happy. Popularity, sports, and other things of this world were things I pursued which now I know can never satisfy eternally. I lived a typical life, as Will Smith might put it, the “Pursuit of Happiness.” I didn’t understand that true joy and satisfaction is found at the foot of the cross. The things that made me happy didn't last, and I knew I needed more!

Although my mom and dad had been training me in the Word since I was a baby and praying over me, I didn’t fully understand what it meant for me to be a follower of God until I was in my early teens. When I was 13 years old, I went on a “manhood” retreat with my dad to Seattle. We studied God’s word and listened to sermons along the way. This is when I believe I truly became a follower of Christ as I gave my life to Him and truly understood that meant surrendering everything I had to Him. I discovered that freedom, satisfaction, and joy are all found in surrendering to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords and living a life of obedience to Him. I realized I had done wrong things, and that I couldn't get to heaven on my own. I believed that my sins deserved death and that Jesus died in my place and rose again, and when I placed my faith in Him He forgave me and called me to live for Him.

Today I live my life for the One who died in my place and rose again. I am not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, which is why I need Him so desperately every day. I find my significance in Jesus Christ, who died for me and put his righteousness on me, so that one day, before God, I may live on in His presence for eternity. I am His child. I have come to the realization that if God is real, and if Christ truly did die for me to redeem me, not only will I live for him but I will be sold out for him. *God is real!* Everything I do and say is for His honour, glory, and to further his Kingdom. He is worth believing in and living for.

## Hannah Godard

Coming to Christ at a young age, I always knew I wanted Jesus in my life. How could I not? He was clearly the best thing that could ever happen to anyone. That much I knew without a shadow of a doubt. Growing up in a home full of people who loved Jesus made it very easy for me to give my life over to him. As I grew up and gained a better understanding of what Christianity really was all about, I realized that for my whole life up until that point, my faith was something that I “piggy-backed” off my parents. That’s not to say I didn’t love God, but my faith was not entirely my own. I didn’t fully understand who God was and is, and what it truly means to follow him. I didn’t rely on God for my every need. I still found myself needing to be validated by my friends and what people thought of me in high school. To be frank, Jesus was not everything I needed. I felt that I needed Jesus, plus a little bit extra.

At this point, I felt undeniably convicted (I believe it was the Holy Spirit at work in my heart) to make a decision. I could continue living my life with a faith that was half in, half out, and never truly feeling satisfied, or I could choose daily to surrender everything I am and everything I have to the one who made me and holds me. For me, that looked like choosing to do things like daily devotions (still something that I have to choose each day). It looked like choosing to have an awareness of the jokes I made, and the jokes I laughed at. Were they honouring to God, or was I just joking and laughing because I thought it would help me “fit in”? It was choosing to be aware of the seemingly small things in life that I had brushed off as petty, small or insignificant, down to even the shows I watched. Was that show edifying? Or was it putting garbage in my mind that dishonoured my Saviour? I have known that I was a sinner, that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sin for as long as I can remember, and assumed this to be true, but the reality of fully receiving all He was for me, and offering all I am for Him was still missing.

I decided to live my life all-in for Christ, and have never looked back since: He is my saviour and my Lord. And our God is so, so good. He has done, and continues to do, an incredible work in my life. Through Christ and what he has done on the cross, I can experience the true joy and freedom in the security of knowing my Saviour, Jesus Christ. Looking back, even in just the last three years, I can see God’s clear and sovereign hand in my life, guiding me in the path he would have me follow. In a world full of uncertainty, and at a time of life where things change so quickly, what a treasure we have knowing that our God is in control of it all. And I have found that when I choose to let him lead, He fully satisfies me. Jesus is enough.

## The Top 10 Issues Facing Canadian Christianity

### Introduction and assumptions

Who are the best three hockey players to have ever lived? Much discussion over this past year on the G.O.A.T. in football! We love lists, and they not only help us to develop an opinion and interact with others, they sharpen how we think. For those of you reading this who think like me and need closure to the questions—here you go. The best three hockey players of all time: Howe, Orr, and Iginla—okay, maybe the great one should be included (Henrik Sedin), but as a true Flames fan, I must include one of my own.

Who is the G.O.A.T. in football? Well, it has to be a quarterback from this era who plays for a great team that wins a lot—maybe Bo Levi Mitchell (you thought I was going to say that guy married to Gisele). If none of that made any sense to you, keep reading. These articles will have nothing to do with sports (well, almost nothing—they will come up later) and everything to do with the top 10 issues facing Christianity in Canada. This is not an easy list to come up with and after you have read the final article, would love for you to let me know of issues you would add or take away. What having a list allows us to do is to discuss some very difficult realities that the Canadian church had better be aware of if we want to be healthy as churches.

There are three main reasons why discussing these realities will help churches and individual Christians be more faithful to God and His Word:

#### 1. We are in a battle

This is a battle with the world, the flesh and the devil, and in this battle we must be aware of where the battle is being fought or we will be overwhelmed in the face of the enemy or lulled to sleep with the world's lullabies.

The world wants to conform us into its image, the flesh has habits that are hard to kill and the demonic realm wants anything but that which will glorify God, and they all fight together to take away from our intimacy with God and our impact for Him. Not only that, Acts 20:28–30 tell us that there will be a war against the church and that savage wolves will rise up within her to devour her, if that were possible. And given that the church in Ephesus succumbed to a lack of first love as they were distracted by so many other things, it is something we had best heed. Their planter was Paul, and Jesus' mom and best friend attended there—so, perhaps if they struggled, we might as well.

“If we fight the battle at any point except where the battle is really being fought, we might as well not fight.” (Martin Luther)

## 2. We are near the end

2 Timothy 3 tells us that in the end times we will be able to know we are in them by the doctrine and lifestyle of people, and reading verses 1–9 with the newspaper in hand will certainly let us know we are in those times. Yes the end times are from the Ascension to the Return, however, we are ever nearer Jesus' return. Because we are near the end, we must be those who will intentionally stand firm (1 Corinthians 15:58). When the Son of Man comes, I long for Him to find faith on the earth (Luke 18:8). It is all too easy to be in the world and of the world, or not in the world and not of the world, but to be salt and light is not so easy.

We are called by Jesus to be in the world and not of the world, to live good lives among those who don't know Him (John 17; 1 Peter 2:11–12), and to be obedient to this we must know what it means to be like Christ, and effective in the world. We must see where the battle is raging at its hottest points and choose to be on God's side.

## 3. There is nothing new under the sun, and yet there are new ways that old battles are being presented

Therefore it is helpful to identify and learn how to combat specific dangers facing Christians in Canada today. If we are aware of the major issues we face as a Canadian church, we will not be deceived by the devil's schemes (2 Corinthians 2:11). We will find unity and joy in victory and learn where to fortify our hearts so that we will be able to rejoice and renew our first love devotion to our God, and build His family on earth together.

### Foundations

It is helpful that we lay a few foundations for understanding both the issues the Canadian church faces and the way we can combat them. These foundations will be assumed, and the way we deal with the *Top 10* will be based on these foundations.

- God's Word is our authority: *2 Timothy 3:16–17; Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 5:17–18*
- God's Word addresses the issues we face: *Ecclesiastes 1:9; 2 Timothy 3:16–17*
- We are in a battle against the world, the flesh and the devil: *Ephesians 2:1–3; James 4:4; 1 John 2:15–16; Romans 12:1–2; Ephesians 6:10–18*
- We are swimming in the world so it is difficult for us to not be of the world  
*Romans 12:1–2*
- We are seeking to glorify God and conform to the image of Jesus *Galatians 4:19; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Isaiah 43:1–11*
- We are seeking to impact our world *Matthew 28:16–18*

## Pressing On

The order of the top 10 issues facing the church will be by priority and position. They will be dealt by building momentum then tackling them all with that built momentum and find in our victory an avalanche of joy. The issues are built from an interaction with God's Word, the culture, and 26 years of pastoral ministry. Some are internal, some external, but all threaten to keep the church off mission and in danger of diminishing the glory of God. The top 10 are mine, so you are welcome to disagree, interact on, and offer your own, as we seek to grow together and see renewed health for the church of Jesus in Canada—perhaps even a revival (Psalm 85:6)! The following top 10 are summaries from a Sunday School class I taught in 2018, they are not meant to deal with each topic in an all-encompassing way, nor are they meant to ignore other things you might think are important. They are meant to help begin a conversation that leads to God's people living for God's glory, or as Paul said in Colossians 1:

“<sup>28</sup> Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. <sup>29</sup> For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” (Colossians 1:28–29)

## Issue #1: Internal

**“Christians” Have a Small View of God**

*A “light” god.* A.W. Tozer wrote in his great little book *The Knowledge of the Holy*:

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man’s spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshipper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God.”

Sadly, many in our churches in Canada have a diminished view of God, and in their imaginations make him contingent, a buddy who is with us, or perhaps is slightly bigger or slightly smarter than us, but not even close to who He has revealed Himself to be in His Word. What comes into our minds when we think about god is more cultural than biblical, more controllable than sovereign and more contingent than powerful.

**The problem**

Who is God? How do we know God? How can we be reconciled to God? These are the questions that almost all religions seek to answer. For authentic Christianity to flourish, these questions must be answered, knowing that God wants to be known and has revealed Himself to us in His Word. The problem is that mankind seems to constantly make god up in our own image. This even happens in situations where people want to hold on to their traditional Christianity, but to somehow free Christianity from her God. They don’t like the God of the Old Testament and seek to distance themselves from Him to be more acceptable to seekers today. The emergent church diminished the gospel and God’s holiness and questioned not only the Bible’s authority but also its relevance. Although few talk about the emergent church now, its beliefs are pervasive in most evangelical churches. Open theism in fighting against a straw man of robot Christianity created a contingent, developing god who was in process. Although in reformed circles this false view of God was fought with excellence and an abundance of biblical passages, many in the pew coast along hoping it might be true so that they can continue to live as they please and maintain their freedom. Legalism loses sight of grace and places demands

on people that they cannot meet, and when people think they might meet the demands, they lose sight of God's grace and thanksgiving. The legalist, instead of seeing the frailty of their standing before God, like the Pharisees of Jesus' time, creates new laws he can obey and accuses others of ignoring them, all the while drifting from the right view of God and of grace. License diminishes the holiness of God and replaces it with a Santa Claus view of God, who wants so much for us to be happy that he will do what it takes and rarely will give us coal for misbehavior. His heart aches for our pain as he begs us to follow him and He watches helplessly as people make poor choices. His freedom trapped by our freedom, and our free will dominating His. The prosperity gospel sees God as giving us our best life now. Those who believe this see life as an opportunity for God to bless us in the here and now, rather than as joy-filled service for the King. When bad things happen to good people, it leaves them confused and wondering if Rabbi Kushner was right and God is good, but not all powerful.

Each issue needs a lot more discussion to be fully understood—that is not my goal here. My goal here is to display that this cultural cumulative attack on the greatness of God has taken its toll. The God of the Bible is being attacked and ignored, then replaced by a god much more palatable to the culture we live in. When we diminish the greatness of God and replace the God of the Bible with a god of cultural imagination we can keep all of the Christian terms, even religious commitment and, without even being aware of it, lose authentic relationship. Sadly this sneaks into the church and creates chaos and confusion, and even an anger with what the Bible teaches about God. Eventually it leaves the believer in the pretend god lost in hopelessness and despair, or apathetic and disoriented, using Christian words but missing Christ. The god of the culture can cry, even love in a culturally sensitive way, but is powerless to save. This is not new in history, (read *The Gagging Of God*, by D.A. Carson), nor is it new in biblical history (Read Genesis 3). Perhaps Romans 1–3 most profoundly lays out this sad decline into chaos, and the reality that it displays, “they did not see fit to acknowledge God” (1:28); “although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (1:21). So now that we are aware of this issue, a light god, who is culturally safe and controllable, how can we fight against it and help our own hearts and the hearts of those we influence to know the God of the Bible?

### **Awareness**

The first step in most issues is an honesty with reality—an awareness of the problem. We must be aware that this is a big deal, and something that God cares about. I do not believe that you can understand the gospel without understanding the greatness, or weightiness of God. Therefore, it is not just a peripheral issue. God wants us to know who

He is, and has revealed that to us in His Word. If we are not constantly evaluating what we believe about who He is, we will quickly find ourselves agreeing with the world and not God’s Word. There is a historical and theological order in the Bible for a purpose, and it helps us to see God clearly. God never does things in a haphazard way, and He is at work for His purpose always (Ephesians 1:11). That leads us nicely into the second solution we will need to pursue to fight a diminished view of God.

### **All views tested with God’s Word**

Let me warn you now, this is something that will be in each of the solutions to the problems of the Canadian church. We need to become more and more Word-saturated (Colossians 3:16–17), and long for this to cleanse and define our thinking (Romans 12:1–2). The main reason we are struggling is that we have lost, or perhaps never had, a deep passion to be Word-saturated and the discipline needed to make His Word central in our worldview. We need to be willing to pay the price of a passionate pursuit of God’s Word, with the key desire to know Him in a deeper more intimate manner. It takes time and effort to study and delight in the treasure of His revelation, and most in our culture would prefer Pablum, or entertainment. Make a commitment to be in the Word early each day, and constantly meditating on it day and night (Psalm 1). The better we know the Word of God, the easier it will be to battle against the world’s hypnotic attacks on the character of God. We will know God so well that all attempts to counterfeit or diminish His Name will seem for what they are. God’s Word is our key weapon, as we live in the fullness of the Spirit to fight against the ways of the world influencing the community of God.

### **Always stand in the gospel**

The gospel in its simplicity is one of the greatest weapons against any issues that Christians face. In fact, one of the greatest lessons Christians can learn is to preach the gospel to themselves every day. The gospel is the good news about what Jesus Christ has done to reconcile sinners to God. Here’s the whole story:

1. The one and only God, who is holy, made us in his image to know him (Gen. 1:26–28).
2. But we sinned and cut ourselves off from him (Gen. 3; Rom. 3:23).
3. In his great love, God sent his Son Jesus to come as king and rescue his people from their enemies—most significantly their own sin (Ps. 2; Luke 1:67–79).
4. Jesus established his kingdom by acting as both a mediating priest and a priestly sacrifice—he lived a perfect life and died on the cross, thus fulfilling the law himself and taking on himself the punishment for the sins of many (Mk 10:45; Jn 1:14; Heb. 7:26; Rom. 3:21–26, 5:12–21); then he rose again from the dead, showing that God accepted his sacrifice and that God’s wrath against us had been exhausted (Acts 2:24; Rom. 4:25).

## Pressing On

5. He now calls us to repent of our sins and trust in Christ alone for our forgiveness (Acts 17:30, John 1:12). If we repent of our sins and trust in Christ, we are born again into a new life, an eternal life with God (John 3:16).

Now that's good news. A good way to summarize this good news is to biblically unpack the words God, Man, Christ, Response.

1. **God.** God is the creator of all things (Gen. 1:1). He is perfectly holy, worthy of all worship, and will punish sin (1 John 1:5, Rev. 4:11, Rom. 2:5–8).
2. **Man.** All people, though created good, have become sinful by nature (Gen. 1:26–28, Ps. 51:5, Rom. 3:23). From birth, all people are alienated from God, hostile to God, and subject to the wrath of God (Eph. 2:1–3).
3. **Christ.** Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully man, lived a sinless life, died on the cross to bear God's wrath in the place of all who would believe in him, and rose from the grave in order to give his people eternal life (John 1:1, 1 Tim. 2:5, Heb. 7:26, Rom. 3:21–26, 2 Cor. 5:21, 1 Cor. 15:20–22).
4. **Response.** God calls everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and trust in Christ in order to be saved (Mark 1:15, Acts 20:21, Rom. 10:9–10).

(Some of this material has been adapted from *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* by Mark Dever, p. 43)

Notice it begins with the greatness of God, and this will create a deep humility in us, and, through that, a deep desire to know Him more and more!

### **Allow God's greatness to define your life**

Glorify Him. 1 Corinthians 10:31 makes this a goal we pursue, and Isaiah 43:7 tells us it is why we were created and redeemed. To glorify God is not to add to His glory, His character and the overflow of that in His works; rather it is to live in such a way as to display it. Jesus is worth my life, so when I suffer, I seek to show how someone who knows the greatness of God suffers. When I interact with others I seek to show His love as someone loved by Him (Ephesians 5:1–2), and all of my life becomes an arrow for others to see how amazing God is. When we are seeking to glorify God, we must know Him as He has revealed Himself (and ever be growing in this), and we will seek to live our lives in light of this! If we have a biblical view of God that is ever increasing in accuracy, we will be those who delight in Him, seek to obey Him always and see life through service eyes. We will be His and all in.

### **Some helpful texts to meditate on**

- Isaiah 40
- Psalm 16:8
- Job 42:1–6
- Psalm 138:2
- Hebrews 12:28–29
- Romans 1–3
- Exodus 15:11
- Proverbs 1:7
- Psalm 130:4
- Ephesians 2:1–10
- Isaiah 66:2

## Issue #2

## Low View of Truth

What is truth? Can you know truth? Why did Schaeffer coin the term true truth, or Pilate state so horrifically: “What is truth?”? The battle for the truth is not a new one. In fact, from Genesis 3 on, there has been an attack on God’s revealed reality, and this attack intensifies at different points in history. One of those points appears to be today’s Canada. One of the reasons we have the tag line as a church “Real Truth, Real Life” is because real, or absolute truth, is under such intense attack. Relativism is the prevailing worldview in Canada, even as its obvious contradictions are acknowledged. It is the idea that views of truth are relative to differences in perception and consideration—leading to the absolute truth (the only one they will hold to in public) that there is no universal, objective truth, rather each perspective carries with it its own truth.

As with most of the top 10 issues facing the Canadian church this one has some truth in it. None of us has a corner on the truth and all should be humble in our own presentation of our view of truth. However, God’s Word *is* truth (John 17:17). So in humility it should be our passion to pursue and surrender to God’s Word, and to be shaped by it. When we start to question if truth can be known, or even exists as an absolute, the danger is that we end up choosing to believe that which is most comfortable to us in our current culture or tradition. We become the ultimate arbitrator of reality as the world around us shapes us into her mould, and this is a tragedy.

Piper defines this issue of relativism in the following way, this is the belief that “there is no objective, external standard for right and wrong that is valid for everyone. So your [truth] statement[...] is wrong is relative to your standard of measurement, but you can’t claim that others should submit to that standard of assessment.”

The great cry of the relativist is “well that is just your opinion”. You have your opinion, and I have mine, and we can’t know which one is truly truth, so we allow each to be held as truth even if there is contradiction. Some in the Christian church have accepted that this is the cultural norm so have shifted from trying to proclaim the truth didactically to trying to describe the truth through narrative. I think this can be helpful, but does not address the underlying issue that without absolute truth the exclusive claims of Christ and authentic Christians become weaker by the day.

In the denomination I grew up in, they have decided that the Bible is a changing authority, a directional moral compass that is not absolute. As such the Bible is only authoritative where the community chooses, and therefore not authoritative at all. These false churches

decide what the Bible really should teach, rather than what it does teach. In a denomination where I used to serve, they decided that pragmatism was more important than careful study of God's Word. I have heard of historically conservative church groupings that now don't demand you agree with their statement of faith to join their church family. They diminish doctrine for mission, and in so doing lose the belief in the authority of God's Word. If the attack of relativism was not enough, the church itself seems to have lost a passion for doctrine, a desire to learn.

Pulpits are being replaced by stools, Sunday Schools are a thing of the past, Bible studies are a pool of ignorance, or not attended at all. When truth is relegated to a secondary passion, the gospel is quickly lost and the greatness of God languishes in the past. Christianity becomes a *feel good* religion that has little or no impact on real life. In the greater evangelical world this low view of truth has led to an experiential worship that avoids great theological realities and removed the primacy of preaching from its central place in evangelical churches. A passion for conformity to Christ has been exchanged for getting the right feeling, so taste supersedes transformation and people evaluate the impact of a service on whether they got the right feel rather than God's Word being held up as a mirror for their lives. Worship becomes a self-centred experience and preaching a tickling of the ears, and the God of the Bible and the truth of His Word are swallowed up in poetry and pithy self help teachings. So how do we as God's people respond to this issue?

### **The solution**

**God's Word is truth:** In responding to this issue, authentic Christians need the humility to understand that it is not our view of God's Word that is truth, rather it is His Word that is truth and it is absolute in its truth. In fact, God's Word defines how reality is to be seen and comes from the One who has defined reality (John 17:17). This leads us to a humility in our own belief system and a passionate pursuit of what God's Word teaches. It means we will hold our biblical convictions with passion and always be willing to check them with an open heart and well-worn Bible. We need to realize how important absolute truth is in understanding and applying the gospel (it is a heaven and hell issue, Galatians 1:8–10), and declare it accordingly. We need to realize that what we believe and how it impacts how we live changes not only our own lives but the lives of people who know us (1 Timothy 4:16). Our view of truth and its knowability will change the impact we have on those around us and our own longing to be lifelong learners! We need to value God's Word as inspired, inerrant and sufficient and call for others to do the same. This is an issue that is worth fighting for, even giving our lives for! Doctrine matters (2 Timothy 3) and unless we as a church awaken to its importance, we will quickly slip into the chaos of Pergamum.

This was the church addressed in Revelation 2:12–17, who tolerated the false teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, and this stumbling block was so ferocious that it led to Jesus warring against them with the sword of His mouth as they held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. The early church has told us that what the Nicolaitans taught was to compromise with the world and that Christianity can be syncretistic and survive (sounds familiar). It was a deviation from the truth that destroyed the church in Pergamum and is destroying the Canadian church. God’s people must know that the Bible is authoritative and develop a relational passion to know and obey it (Matthew 7:21–27). This means a priority of Word saturation and a longing to live in a Spirit-filled manner that applies what is learned, and battles for its purity in humility.

Should we re-ignite the Sunday School, the evening service, the mid-week Bible study that is in so many churches a thing of the past? I am not sure, but this I know, if we do not teach God’s people God’s Word with a passionate high value on truth, we will soon be dead or dozing and the power of God’s Word minimized by the gagging of God (Carson). If God’s people perish for lack of knowledge, the Canadian church must again awaken to the importance of biblical teaching and create a learning culture in the church that has a passion for truth (Hosea 4:6). This will include a private passionate pursuit and a corporate creativity to develop lifelong learners and liverers. A low view of God will always lead to a dull view of Scripture, so if the Canadian church is to awaken, it must begin with a renewed passion to value what God values (Psalm 138:2). We must, as God’s people, seek to be those He esteems, and in humility tremble at His Word (Isaiah 66:2). We need to be in God’s Word, seeking intimacy with God and the truth that can shape how we think, feel and live (Romans 12:1–2). God’s Truth should define how we worship (John 4:24) and be something that we value more than life itself (Psalm 19). It should form a heart that cares in humility for what we sing, preach and pray. It should create a passion to know God’s Word and to apply it, and I should become more and more essential to being a healthy church in Canada. What we believe matters, and God’s Word is truth, absolute and worth seeking by constant growth in our knowledge of it!

### **Some helpful texts to meditate on**

- Revelation 2:12–17
- 2 Timothy 3
- Galatians 1:8–10
- Isaiah 66:2
- Colossians 3:16–17
- Psalm 1
- Psalm 119
- Matthew 28:18–20

“Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me...Amen.” (Martin Luther)

## Apathy and/or Hypocrisy

“The church is filled with hypocrites”. This is the one internal issue in the Canadian church that I believe receives a much worse rap than it deserves, yet it finds its way to #3 on this list so is an obvious problem, from my perspective. Apathy is a coldness or indifference to the realities of Christianity, usually seen in those who understand the demands of the gospel but have never experienced its power. It is easy to slip into apathy in our Canadian context where Christianity is relatively easy to live in a world-friendly way—as long as you are not passionate about holiness, truth, or evangelism. Hypocrisy is when people pretend to be living a certain way, but in reality don’t conform to their claimed standards. A hypocrite cries from the street to be holy, all the while living like the world in the home and workplace. They have standards that they themselves don’t keep, thinking they are hiding their hypocrisy while so many see and hurt from it. Apathy and hypocrisy are similar in that people are not walking worthy of the calling they have received (Ephesians 4:1–2), nor really trying to. The apathetic person doesn’t really care if you know this, and the hypocrite tends to be judgemental of others while relaxed about themselves in their desire to hide their own failings. But both are falling short of the abundant life of the authentic Christian.

Why does this get a worse rap than it deserves? Because often those who accuse Christians of these attributes are themselves guilty of them, and perhaps worse, can sometimes demand of Christians what no one could live up to. If you think the church is full of hypocrites, or those who are way too apathetic, I agree with you, yet perhaps both of us (okay all of us) should look in the mirror and be sure that the problem is not us. In fact, start with humility; then those around you tend to become objects of love, rather than ridicule. For years the main reason people in Canada gave for leaving the church was that it was full of hypocrites, but what I think they really meant was that they found some conflict and didn’t believe the gospel enough to hold them through the real life situation. So the apathetic accuses the committed of being hypocrites to excuse their coasting, and the hypocrite accuses the apathetic of not being true to their faith. Both are right, but with wrong motives. Now, many are leaving church because the god of their imagination is so much smaller and less demanding than the God of the Bible, but we covered that in issue #1, so let us not digress.

Statistics are showing that the way Christians and non-Christians are living in terms of moral choices, use of time, treasures and talents are very similar, even as they claim a different moral code. So the problem, also receiving a worse rap than it deserves is real, and worth our attention and perhaps our feeling convicted and being changed.

Being humble and fully devoted to God will take away the problem, but the problem of perceived and real hypocrisy is still one that is hurting the church on a corporate level (Matthew 7:21–27).

Christianity has been described as a mile wide and an inch deep, and if this description is true then many who think they are Christians will be shocked to learn that they will spend eternity in hell. In my role helping other churches and pastors find healing, I often discover a deep selfishness and huge battle that is often lost as people live in the flesh, not the Spirit, leading to self defense and a damning hypocrisy. A good dose of Romans 8 would help, but it seems that the deadly disease of apathy and hypocrisy continue to infect many in Canada.

Just this week, another friend shared that they would never go in business again with a Christian partner, as the worldly are more ethical than the church. I do not believe this to be true across the board, but certainly the experience of many tells us it is a problem. We have those in the church who claim the relationship but just have a little religion. It would seem that Lloyd-Jones' concern about many who would think they are Christians through a decision would be missing out on an authentic relationship with Jesus has come true. I do not think this is new, as God's Word hits this problem repeatedly (Matthew 7:21–27), however I do think it is sad that people in our world think they can coast and accuse others of hypocrisy, or live in bondage to sin yet still feel comfortable with the Savior.

We live in a world where people are saying Lord Lord, and yet living as fools, declaring in lifestyle that there is no God.

So what can we do about this personally and corporately?

### **The solution**

**A pure gospel experience** *Ephesians 2:1–10; Romans 5:6–11; 2 Corinthians 5:14*

The first step to solving this issue in the Canadian church is an authentic relationship with God through an experience of the good news of the gospel. If we get the gospel right, we will always realize we don't measure up, and we will be all in because of the grace of God to us sinners who deserve only wrath (2 Corinthians 5:11–21). This experience will chase away any hypocrisy or apathy, and although Christians here will never measure up to perfection, their humility on display will remove the accusations of hypocrisy. The gospel when truly experienced always leads to a shift of priorities and passions. Jesus becomes the centre and although living for Him is not easy, and cannot be done perfectly while we are here on earth, it is something that we will pursue in joy.

### **A radical gospel commitment** *Romans 12:1–2*

The gospel is life shaping news and when believed, places those who believe in a relationship with the living God that transforms them. In view of the gospel believers are commanded to and will choose to, in God's strength, be radically committed to God. A living sacrifice, all in for His glory, for all to see (1 Peter 2:11–12).

This means the relational Christian's longing is to use who we are and what we have to the praise of His glorious grace. This is not easy as we swim in the river of the world, which tends to have a strong current, but it is the reality of those who know Jesus that they will seek to live a life worthy of His calling (Ephesians 4:1–16).

### **A deep gospel delight** *Romans 8:1*

When true believers have truly experienced the gospel of grace, and radically committed our lives to Jesus we will need to keep the gospel central or we will be overwhelmed with how far short we fall. It is impossible to grow closer to Jesus and not see more of our own sin in the brilliance of His holiness. This means we need to be people who constantly remember that because we are in Christ we will always be seen by God as pure, even as we practically pursue holiness and fail often. This is why communion and baptism are to be a central part of the ministry of the gathered local church. We need to be reminded of what makes us holy to give us hope in the struggle against our own sin. We cannot earn God's favour in ourselves before or after we are saved. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more, or less, when we are found in Christ! Thus we don't need to fake it as we pursue full devotion for we know we are living in the grace of our King, and apathy will always be chased away by the love of our forgiver!

### **A humble preferring of one another** *Romans 12:10*

Once we have experienced the gospel, and the humility that springs from intimacy with God, we are ready to enter the competition found in Romans 12:10 of seeking to out-honour one another. This is sadly missing in the Canadian church, but where the freedom of the gospel is on display, humility will be found. This means when it comes to things of self-sacrificial love, authentic followers of Jesus choose to show deference to others and with exclusive devotion to God avoid judgmentalism. Those who are, "poor in spirit" will not only inherit the Kingdom of God, they will live in His Kingdom, under His reign here on earth.

### **A growing first love devotion to Jesus** *Revelation 2:1–7*

If we do a lot of things right, but do not have a first love devotion to Jesus, then slipping into a dead orthodoxy, or fake hypocrisy is a huge danger! Thus the true followers of God keep their relationship with Him a first love priority. What should be first in our

hearts, minds and impacting our will is this love for Jesus that comes from a love from Him. This takes discipline to develop and keep, and it will impact everything else and save us from apathy and hypocrisy. It is much harder to drift into hypocrisy or legalism if you are in a relationship that God brought to you in His grace! Reminding yourself of the gospel will keep you from a cold heart, or judging others as you cling to the cross.

### **Word saturation**

We already covered this twice, never enough said, but we will see it creep up again in future articles in this series. (Colossians 3:16–17)

“If we want revivals, we must revive our reverence for the Word of God. If we want conversions, we must put more of God’s Word into our sermons”. (Charles Spurgeon)

The more we know, the more we realize we don’t know, and the more we long to know Him deeper.

### **Some helpful texts to meditate on**

- Matthew 7:21–27
- Revelation 7:1–7
- Romans 12:1–10
- 1 Kings 18:21
- Luke 14:25–35 (*I think the hardest passage in the Bible to apply*)
- Ephesians 3:14–21 (*A pathway to being filled with the fullness of God*)

## Sexual Revolution

“The church is going to hell on the coat tails of the world.” (Ken Davis)

“The church follows the world by about 10 years.” (James Houston)

The church struggles with worldliness, maybe not up to date worldliness, but worldliness all the same. We live in the world. The river of the world’s way of thinking has powerful currents that drag us along and unless Christians are fighting against this drift, pretty soon the difference between the world and the church will be negligible. The Bible is clear that being a friend with the world will make someone an enemy of God (James 4:4). Being a friend of the world means thinking like the world, or perhaps deeper, seeing life through a secular world view, and letting that worldview shape your behaviour. This then overflows into how one feels, thinks and responds to life. Being a follower of Jesus means learning to have a transformed way of thinking by renewing your mind with the Word of God (Romans 12:1–2). Too few who name the name of Christ are living like the Word would have them; so many are instead being had by the world. It would seem that this impacts the whole person, beginning with the mind, however there are certain areas where worldliness has seemed to particularly infect the church. When we think like the world, we act like the world, and even if we claim to have different beliefs this thinking controls our behaviour. Perhaps most clearly, this can be seen in the sexual sin of the world that has infected the church.

The sexual revolution, which is said to have taken place from 1960–1980, has left the morals of Canada reeling out of control. My take on the sexual revolution is that it is still in major flux and impacting the beliefs and behaviours of people in the world and in the church, and drifting if it were possible ever further away from God’s Word. Hollywood and many politicians are tripping over each other to move the sexual standards to a more inclusive and accepting stance on issues like marriage, sexual promiscuity and education of children in the SOGI agenda. It would seem this has invaded the church as well, as many churches that would have owned the evangelical label 20 years ago have accepted the SOGI agenda and are drifting on so many other issues. How does the church respond when so many of its own are secretly struggling with easily accessible pornography, and many either sadly accept their sin or join accountability groups that mutually struggle with sin, rather than pursue holiness. Many who come to faith in Jesus at a later age have pasts filled with sexual sin, or current marks from this sexual revolution that sometimes feel impossible to solve. Pre-marital sex seems to be rampant in the church and sadly extra-marital affairs impact those who claim commitment to Jesus.

Not only has the marriage definitions changed, but so has how the culture feels towards those who oppose the world's way of thinking. What was so unpopular that no president could get elected if they were open to (gay marriage) has now shifted in the opposite direction, and it is not a shift from Washington to Reagan, but from Obama to Trump. Now, anyone who wants to define biblical marriage as one man and one woman for life is met with jeers, and those who oppose the LGBTQ lifestyle could be soon met with jail. This is not Kansas anymore, and our children are swimming in a world with a belief system far different than their parents. Many in the church know what they are supposed to believe, but don't know why, and as they are inundated with temptation, what looks good, feels good, and promises satisfaction yields brokenness because it is taken and believed. So how do we respond as those committed to Jesus and His church?

### **The solution**

#### **Realize this matters**

From creation on, God created us as men and women, and wants the distinguishing characteristics of this creation clear as male and female (Genesis 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 11:2–16). Not only does this matter to Him, those who practice sexual immorality, including homosexuality, adultery and lust are in danger of eternal hell according to Jesus and Paul (1 Corinthians 6:9–18; Matthew 5:27–28). This is not a small issue, and one that we should be clear on for our own lives, driving us to the cross and obedience, as well as in love warning others of this danger. Our culture views any disagreement on sexual freedom as oppressive, so those who believe the Bible and lovingly live by it will find themselves in conflict from the world (2 Timothy 3:16), and this should cause us to rejoice that our view of God and the Bible is what leads to this (Matthew 5:11). If we are friends with the world, here focusing on the worldview of sexuality, we will quickly discover we are enemies with God (James 4:4). Our personal pursuit of purity and stand on gender and holiness, marriage and pornography matters in an eternal way.

#### **Repent**

Our focus on keeping a biblical worldview needs to be concentrated in two areas—the church and protecting those who can't protect themselves. We will address proper beliefs on marriage and parenting later as an issue of itself, but we need to educate our children (and adults) on God's standards, and encourage one another to keep them (Hebrews 3:12–14). We must also protect those in the world who can't protect themselves, meaning children being educated that sin is okay, in fact, to be preferred, and thus finding themselves broken and feeling desolate from the consequences of their sins before they are old enough to realize the consequences of their decisions. It is important to realize that we are not called to hold the world to the commands of Jesus, rather we are called to share the gospel and hold Christians to His Ways.

We are to share the gospel through our transformed lives and lips that present His gospel. So judgment in these areas of worldliness must start with the people of God (1 Peter 4:17), and show clearly that we are a people who are *in* the world, but not *of* the world. The church must have transformed thinking and living on these issues (Romans 12:1–2), and where we fall short cling to the cross and call for conformity to Jesus. Too often we take our cues from the world, and this needs to change to taking our call from the Word. Repentance includes a change of mind leading to a change of behaviour, so that God’s people in the power of the Spirit are constantly pursuing holiness (Hebrews 12:14). Before we bemoan the state of the world, and it is not good, we must look to our own lives personally, and the lives of those claiming to love Jesus and seek a biblical worldview and a passionate pursuit of conformity to Christ (Galatians 4:19). Protecting those who can’t protect themselves is a little more difficult. In our culture, abortion is often used as birth control (Focus on the Family stats), and those who choose to become transgender or live homosexual lifestyles are destroying their lives. How can we protect the children from this faulty way of thinking and living that can destroy them? A part of our response needs to be active in seeking to protect those who can’t protect themselves even as our main focus and pursuit must be the gospel transformation of individual lives. The best way to help others who are making choices that lead to destruction and separation from God is to reverse Romans 1. To help them to glorify God, to truly know Him through the gospel, and to live lives of thanksgiving will offer hope to others.

### Renew

All sin is relational, a rejection of God’s view of things and choosing to disobey His Word is always related to our walk with Him. That is why we are called to walk worthy of the calling we have received (Ephesians 4:1–7), and why almost always a call to obey in the New Testament is tied to the gospel (Romans 12:1–2). Obedience is the way we abide and is an overflow of abiding, and can be done freely when there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1) and life is lived in the power of the Spirit (Romans 8:13). To believe as we should, to live for God and not for the world, we must have a first love relationship with Him. This is why the idea of preaching the gospel to yourself every day, or taking ten looks at Jesus for every one look you take at yourself is so important! This renewal of first love will always include and need an ever deepening experience of Jesus’ love (Ephesians 3:14–21) and delight in His grace (Ephesians 2:7–10). This will give us the ability to stand firm in our convictions and behaviours as well as help us to love those who don’t know Jesus yet, even as we seek to help them with the destructive behaviour that leaves them separated from God and makes them objects of wrath. The reputation of the church (in my opinion, mostly unearned) is that we hate those who struggle in sin, and this must never be true. As fellow sinners we cling to grace and seek to live our lives in such a way that the love of God is on display (Ephesians 5:1–2) as we are salt

and light in the world (Matthew 5:13–16). This renewal of first love devotion to God will always lead to a self-sacrificial love of our neighbours (Matthew 22:36–40), and we will be a people known for our love (John 13:35). If you struggle in sin, stop sinning, and as important, start cherishing your relationship with Jesus and focus there with all your might! Now is the time to check your view of gender and marriage, as well as your pursuit of purity in action and thought. Check it in the context of relationship with God and seek to grow in intimacy so that you also grow in image conformity. If you struggle with pornography (stats are pretty high in the church, and outside of it) don't just simply stop (STOP), start deepening your walk with God so that His presence and character give you satisfaction and delight and you don't have to go to cisterns that hold no water (Jeremiah 2:12–13).

### Redo

Pursuit of godliness is always a heart issue, and even as we seek to impact our behaviours rightly, we must always be those who guard our hearts (Proverbs 4:23). Start with the gospel, stay in first love relational pursuit, and seek to have a heart that is seeking God fully (Deuteronomy 4:29). Pursuit of purity will require discipline in what we watch and allow into our minds through the gate of our eyes. Guard your eyes: Psalm 101:3. Job did this powerfully when he made a covenant with his eyes not to look lustfully at a woman (Job 31:1). Perhaps something that Christian men and women should follow all over Canada, to learn to see people through the eyes of the gospel rather than the eyes of the flesh (2 Corinthians 5:16). Where you let your thoughts wander is incredibly important, in fact, to Paul, the very heart of spiritual battle. So, guard your thoughts: Matthew 5:27–28; 2 Corinthians 10:5. This is back to the passion we have to be Word saturated (Psalm 119:11, Colossians 3:16–18), and transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1–2; John 17:17). We should spend our time embracing the gospel and experiencing God's love for us (Ephesians 3:14–21), and then as an overflow of that, be passionate about our personal holiness, the church's view of sin, and the impact we can have on the world as an overflow of those things. We need another Phinehas who sees the world as God does, and instead of driving a spear through sinners, drive saints to true *in-the-world-but-not-of-the-world* living.

### And for those who were looking for clarity

Homosexuality is sin according to the Bible (Romans 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10). Same sex attraction that is not acted on is similar to lust or heterosexual desire that is not acted on, in that the goal is perfection. The pathway is to perfect obedience even when desires are wrong, and the battle is always for motive, feeling and behaviour that aligns with God's Word. Lust is sin (heterosexual and homosexual) and will not only kill your walk with God, it might show you don't have one (Matthew 5:27–28). God hates

divorce, and although He allows it for marital unfaithfulness and/or abandonment, He makes two one and expects His children to model Christ and the church (Malachi 2:16; Matthew 19:5). Schools should not teach children that being transgender is a good or even okay choice, and to do this is dangerous to children. Those who choose this should be loved, treated with tenderness and respect, and called to be as God created them for their own good. Bullying children (or anyone) is always wrong. Christians should speak the truth in love and always live in an experience of grace that points people to the love of God as seen in the gospel of Jesus. If you are a friend of the world you are an enemy of God (James 4:4). What we need is Jesus and His gospel and greatness to impact all we believe, say and do.

### **A.N.T.H.E.M** (*John Piper: [desiringgod.org](http://desiringgod.org)*)

These are six tested and proven strategies for fighting lust. I have in mind men and women. For men its obvious. The need for warfare against the bombardment of visual temptation to fixate on sexual images is urgent. For women it is less obvious, but just as great if we broaden the scope of temptation to food or figure or relational fantasies. When I say “lust” I mean the realm of thought, imagination, and desire that leads to sexual misconduct. So here is one set of strategies in the war against wrong desires. I put it in the form of an acronym, A.N.T.H.E.M.

**A** – Avoid as much as is possible and reasonable the sights and situations that arouse unfitting desire. You were created to treasure Christ with all your heart — more than you treasure sex or sugar or anything else. I say “possible and reasonable” because some exposure to temptation is inevitable. And I say “unfitting desire” because not all desires for sex, food, and family are bad. We know when they are unfitting and unhelpful and on their way to becoming enslaving. We know our weaknesses and what triggers them. “Avoiding” is a biblical strategy. “Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness” (2 Timothy 2:22). “Make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Romans 13:14).

**N** – Say “No” to every lustful thought within five seconds. And say it with the authority of Jesus Christ. “In the name of Jesus, NO!” You don’t have much more than five seconds. Give it more unopposed time than that, and it will lodge itself with such force as to be almost immovable. Say it out loud if you dare. Be tough and warlike. As John Owen said, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” Strike fast and strike hard. “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

**T** – Turn the mind forcefully toward Christ as a superior satisfaction. Saying “no” will not suffice. You must move from defense to offense. Fight fire with fire. Attack the

promises of sin with the promises of Christ. The Bible calls lusts “deceitful desires” (Ephesians 4:22). They lie. They promise more than they can deliver. The Bible calls them “passions of your former ignorance” (1 Peter 1:14). Only fools yield. “All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter” (Proverbs 7:22). Deceit is defeated by truth. Ignorance is defeated by knowledge. It must be glorious truth and beautiful knowledge. This is why I wrote *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*. We must stock our minds with the superior promises and pleasures of Jesus. Then we must turn to them immediately after saying, “*no!*”

**H** – Hold the promise and the pleasure of Christ firmly in your mind until it pushes the other images out. Fix your eyes on Jesus (see Hebrews 12:2). Here is where many fail. They give in too soon. They say, “I tried to push it out, and it didn’t work.” I ask, “How long did you try? How hard did you exert your mind?” The mind is a muscle. You can flex it with vehemence. Take the kingdom violently (Matthew 11:12). Be brutal. Hold the promise of Christ before your eyes. Hold it. Hold it! Don’t let it go! Keep holding it! How long? As long as it takes. Fight! For Christ’s sake, fight till you win! If an electric garage door were about to crush your child, you would hold it up with all your might and holler for help, and hold it and hold it and hold it and hold it.

**E** – Enjoy a superior satisfaction. If you want to kill lust, you must fight fire with fire. Attack the promises of sin with the promises of Christ. Cultivate the capacities for pleasure in Christ. One reason lust reigns in so many is that Christ has so little appeal. We default to deceit because we have little delight in Christ. Don’t say, “That’s just not me.” What steps have you taken to waken affection for Jesus? Have you fought for joy? Don’t be fatalistic. You were created to treasure Christ with all your heart — more than you treasure sex or sugar. If you have little taste for Jesus, competing pleasures will triumph. Plead with God for the satisfaction you don’t have: “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (Psalm 90:14). Then look, look, and look at the most magnificent Person in the universe until you see him the way he is.

**M** – Move into a useful activity away from idleness and other vulnerable behaviors. Lust grows fast in the garden of leisure. Find a good work to do, and do it with all your might. “Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord” (Romans 12:11). “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58). Abound in work. Get up and do something. Sweep a room. Hammer a nail. Write a letter. Fix a faucet. And do it for Jesus’ sake. You were made to manage and create. Christ died to make you “zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). Displace deceitful lusts with a passion for good deeds.

## Lack of Longing for Gospel Impact on the Lost

There is a danger in the Canadian church that we lose the gospel, and in that the need for the gospel. Those who truly experience the gospel long for a deeper appreciation of it, even as they pursue a wider impact with it. When we lose sight of our own need, or have our thankfulness for what Jesus has done washed away by the noise around us, we could lose our passion for sharing Jesus with those who don't know Him. Paul felt this passion for the lost in such an overwhelming way that he even wished that he could be accursed for their salvation (Romans 9:3), and his heart's desire could best be defined as a quest of Jewish people's salvation (Romans 10:1) in prayer and pursuit. His ministry life was as an ambassador for Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:11–21).

The Canadian church seems to be more concerned about worship style, or traditions than it does about people around them who don't know Jesus. More concerned about self, religion and experience than the glory of God and the call to be eager to do the good works He has prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:12–14). How have we reached this point?

**The Seeker Friendly Movement:** It is hard to summarize each of these producers of the current crisis we are in, but this is the movement that decided that to reach the seeker you must be sensitive to them. I think Paul agrees with the heart of this in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, however one of the unforeseen consequences was a softening of the gospel message, and the reality that, what you reach them with you must keep them with. So in essence although many in this movement are authentic and passionate about reaching people, on the edges the gospel message was adjusted, and the seeker became the centre rather than the glory of God. In following this way of thinking, pragmatism is in danger of becoming the guard of the truths that are shared rather than God's Word. The motive may have been good, but the consequence of the movement has led to a lack of clear understanding of who God is, and what the gospel must mean. If you become like the world to reach the world, you reach the world for the world.

**Syncretism and Pluralism:** Not only has Christianity in Canada started to adjust to other religions, there are many who think that all religions (or at least the major ones) lead to the same place. This leads to an embarrassment of the exclusivity of biblical Christianity and an avoidance of not only the Old Testament, but much of what Jesus taught. Christianity can quickly become something referred to but not understood, proclaimed, but not authentic. This has led to a division not only in Christianity in general, but it has also hit evangelical Christianity hard. Tolerance has become a buzz word, and the model of

the culture and sadly much of the church is more Pilate (what is truth), than Jesus (I am the way, the truth, and the life).

If there are other ways to God, or other religions mixed with Christianity, then the passion to share the gospel with those who are lost is minimized. If all roads lead to heaven, why should we care if others get there in a different way than we do, perhaps more strongly, we would be arrogant to propagate and stupid if this is true.

**Gospel adjustment:** There is a general attack on the atonement that perhaps has always been there, but now is growing in popularity with people like N.T. Wright and Bruxy Cavey who has a wide audience in Canada. The substitutionary atonement is central to a biblical understanding of the cross (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 5:6–11), and a proper faith in the gospel (Galatians 1:8–10). On the other side of this people have a hard time grasping that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Often a performance mentality can creep into the church and leave in its wake deep disappointment in Jesus, His church, or one's self. When one is overwhelmed with hurt, or shame, sharing about Jesus becomes non-existent. Both of these attacks on the gospel create a lack of passion to share with others the richness of what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

**Diminished doctrine:** There have always been people who don't like the difficult doctrines in the Bible, and these truths get shifted depending on the culture that people find themselves in. Rob Bell has invaded the evangelical world and made belief in the doctrine of hell optional, or wrong. It is difficult in our world to understand the holiness of God, His justice, and the depth of our sin in light of who He is making it also difficult to love a God who would send people to eternal torment. If there is no hell, then many would trade the glory of heaven (clearly they don't grasp eternity) for the pleasures of today. Many so called evangelicals in Canada don't share their faith nor do they feel a need or conviction to.

As long as people feel good, and have the right music (this changes depending on the age and traditions of the person), they can think they are worshipping God without walking according to the truth. When doctrine is sacrificed, people can think they are following Jesus when actually they are missing Him all together.

**Cultural view of love and truth:** In Canada, love as the culture defines it has a priority over truth. This has left many who swim in the world and belong to the Canadian church fearful to share the gospel, or even to wonder if it is unloving to share the gospel. Truth has become a word that bigots use, and a passion for tolerance as defined by accepting everyone for who they are and where they are rules the day (as long as they are following

the world's rules). This definition of love and tolerance makes the exclusivity of the gospel difficult to share, and hard to believe. Not only has the world bought into this, many in the evangelical church have as well, and many more swim in this, and accept it against their convictions. How do we escape?

### The solution

#### Get the gospel right *Galatians 1:8–10*

This might seem obvious, but the seriousness of it is rarely shared with the same biblical conviction as the Bible. If you get the gospel wrong, not only are you in danger of not knowing Jesus, but you are in danger of being an anathema. What is that? Simply put—eternally condemned. If we preach a gospel other than the one that is found in God's Word we are to be eternally condemned, sent to hell, suffer eternal torment forever. Getting the content of the gospel right is essential to our own salvation, and our passion for sharing Jesus with others. This is horrific and essential to understand for all healthy Christians and churches! So we need to get the gospel right.

#### What is the gospel?

The gospel is the good news about what Jesus Christ has done to reconcile sinners to God. Here's the whole story:

1. The one and only God, who is holy, made us in his image to know him (Gen. 1:26–28).
2. But we sinned and cut ourselves off from him (Gen. 3; Rom. 3:23).
3. In his great love, God sent his Son Jesus to come as king and rescue his people from their enemies—most significantly their own sin (Ps. 2; Luke 1:67–79).
4. Jesus established his kingdom by acting as both a mediating priest and a priestly sacrifice—he lived a perfect life and died on the cross, thus fulfilling the law himself and taking on himself the punishment for the sins of many (Mark 10:45; John 1:14; Heb. 7:26; Rom. 3:21–26, 5:12–21); then he rose again from the dead, showing that God accepted his sacrifice and that God's wrath against us had been exhausted (Acts 2:24, Rom. 4:25).
5. He now calls us to repent of our sins and trust in Christ alone for our forgiveness (Acts 17:30, John 1:12). If we repent of our sins and trust in Christ, we are born again into a new life, an eternal life with God (John 3:16).

Now that's good news! A good way to summarize this good news is to biblically unpack the words God, Man, Christ, Response.

1. **God.** God is the creator of all things (Gen. 1:1). He is perfectly holy, worthy of all worship, and will punish sin (1 John 1:5, Rev. 4:11, Rom. 2:5–8).

2. **Man.** All people, though created good, have become sinful by nature (Gen. 1:26–28, Ps. 51:5, Rom. 3:23). From birth, all people are alienated from God, hostile to God, and subject to the wrath of God (Eph. 2:1–3).
3. **Christ.** Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully man, lived a sinless life, died on the cross to bear God’s wrath in the place of all who would believe in him, and rose from the grave in order to give his people eternal life (John 1:1, 1 Tim. 2:5, Heb. 7:26, Rom. 3:21–26, 2 Cor. 5:21, 1 Cor. 15:20–22).
4. **Response.** God calls everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and trust in Christ in order to be saved (Mark 1:15, Acts 20:21, Rom. 10:9–10).

(Some of this material has been adapted from *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* by Mark Dever, p. 43) <https://www.9marks.org/answer/what-gospel/>

(Yes, I know, we have put this in here more than once)

### **Deepen your experience of the gospel** *Ephesians 2:8–10; 2 Corinthians 5:14*

Knowing the content of the gospel is not enough, it must be experienced. This is not a one-time event, but a lifelong pursuit of ever greater impact.

When you have truly experienced the love of God, you will share it. It will compel you to look for opportunities to share your faith with others so that they can know Jesus. If you are not sharing your faith actively with others there is a very good chance that you need to deepen your experience of the gospel (Pray Ephesians 3:14–21 for a start). Right compelling (motive) is key to right action (being salt and light). The Canadian church needs an authentic experience of God’s love so that it awakens in us a true desire to share the gospel for the sake of the Name! A lack of sharing the gospel is always an overflow of not knowing the gospel and/or failure in being impacted by it. Preach the gospel to yourself every day, and go out of your way to celebrate communion with your church. Keep the gospel at the centre of your motives and behaviour and you will discover that you share your faith consistently with others around you seeking to help them to know God and build them up in their most holy faith. Let the symptom of a lack of longing for the lost to know Jesus drive your heart into gospel delight.

### **Understand your call/mission** *2 Corinthians 5:11–21*

One of the reasons that we are left here on earth is to be “ambassadors” for God and His glory. We are here to point people to Him (Matthew 11:11), and display the beauty of the gospel in our lives and through our lips. This is why we are here, and if we grasp our mission to glorify His name by representing Him in holiness and gospel sharing, we will obey our call and live it.

## Pressing On

### **Live in the world but not of the world** *1 Peter 2:11–12*

The power of the gospel is best displayed in the changed lives of God's people (Romans 1:5, 16–17). Jesus prayed that we would be in the world, but not of the world and has given us the Holy Spirit to help us to accomplish this. The gospel comes not only with words, but with power, and this power is enough to help us to abstain, and to live such good lives that others will want to know the reason for the hope we have, hear our answer and turn to Jesus.

### **Know the gospel and look for God's appointments** *2 Corinthians 5:11–21*

We believe that God is sovereign and calls His sheep to Himself (John 10). He uses His people to do this, and we should actively be aware that He has prepared good works for us to live out. Part of those works will be divine appointments that He has set for us to walk in. If we believe at the core of our beings in the sovereignty of God and His love and plan for us, then each day becomes a privilege to watch for, and walk in the divine appointments that He has for us.

### **Be Word-saturated** *Romans 9:3; 10:1; Matthew 28:16–18; Colossians 3:16–17*

This is the answer for almost every problem, so choose it, and engage in the discipline that you need to be a Romans 12:1–2 person. Every authentic follower of Jesus who has been impacted by the gospel will as they deepen this experience seek to impact others. God's people filled with God's Spirit will bear fruit! Take the time to review the content of the gospel, and to pray Ephesians 3:14–21 for your own heart. Then pray for those you know who are not followers of Jesus, that He would open their hearts and grant you an opportunity to invite them into relationship with Him.

## Spiritual Warfare

The demonic realm loves to deceive and in the battle one of their main tactics is to maximize partial truths to cloud out the reality that is taught in God's Word and the glory of the God it reveals. They love to fuel fear and half-truths so that Christians are demoralized and destroyed.

One scholar has said, "there is nothing more urgently important for all who claim the name of Christian, than to grasp and understand the teaching of Ephesians 6:10–20". That may be an overstatement, but in Canada there seems to be two extremes that the demonic realm loves Christians to play in: on the one side, that all of life is a spiritual battle and Christians have no responsibility while the demons are to blame for all sin and temptation. On the other hand, demons are ignored and treated as irrelevant, doctrinally believed in, practically irrelevant. There has been a resurgence of focus on demons in evangelical circles through getting closer to our Pentecostal wing, and through Neil Anderson's writings. Perhaps this dates me, but in my world the focus on the demonic realm was magnified in the 1990s and has been sidelined again to a vast ignorance through the dangers of that overemphasis.

Each church struggles with the extremes in a different way, and each individual Christian is also tempted with these two dangerous edges so I will address from my experience and hope that it impacts the reader. C.S. Lewis, in his amazing little book *The Screwtape Letters*, wrote helpfully "there are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."

The Canadian church is, and has been in danger of getting her doctrine of demons from the gates of hell, rather than the Word of God. Forget or focus, both bring an unhealthy Christian to his defeat. To forget is to coast in apathy, to focus is to fear and fight in chaos. If the church ignores, it will not fight in the strength of the LORD, if the church is irrational in its focus, perhaps better defined, unbiblical, then this doctrine of demons, taught by demons, will yield defeat and despair with all of the blame being wrongly placed at the feet of Satan. In my small world I have been taught that demons can read our minds, that if you touch a demon possessed human, that demon can enter you, that demons are strong and the battle real and without our prayers the angels could lose and, it was inferred, God might be in trouble. All of those things are virtually irrelevant, and some blasphemous, when we have a biblical doctrine of demons based solely on God's Word.

## Pressing On

So, the church must be aware of the problem and cleave to God's Word and not tradition or fear. The authentic Christian is called to faith, and in that faith to battle, not against flesh and blood, but against the demonic realm. We are called to watch our life and doctrine so that we can find the victorious Christian life in God's strength for God's glory, and save ourselves and others.

### The solution

The answer to this issue facing the Canadian church is that we as Christians engage in warfare with God's Word as our guide. With a war-time mentality, as the Bible describes, not in fear but full with confidence in the strength and power of God. That is too simple, so we will develop somewhat what this looks like. The Bible teaches:

#### The battle is real *Ephesians 6:10–20*

All of life includes a spiritual battle, and the demonic realm is real. Don't ignore the battle, and in that avoid victory, and don't engage as if demons are behind all that exists, but do realize that our battle is not against flesh and blood. Enter into the battle with boldness and in a biblical manner—be strong in the LORD and in His mighty power. The battle is real! Jesus displays this reality and how to fight (Matthew 4), and was perfectly and profoundly victorious! The call to following Jesus is a call to battle, and essential to victory is knowing that this battle is real.

### Never fear

Satan is not a demi-god, nor is he all-powerful or omnipresent. Chances are that no one reading this article has come across Satan's desk, and it is very likely he does not know your name. That being said, there are many demons (1/3 of the heavenly realm fell), and we are in a spiritual battle that must be fought with spiritual weapons and biblical understanding. Demons have come across your path, and know your name and want to see your faith destroyed.

In contrast to the demonic realm, God is all powerful, and omnipresent. It is never a battle of one power versus another; rather, greater is He who is in you than he that is in the world (1 John 4:4). The demonic realm has a strategy that we are called to be aware of, and in this, most importantly, we need the mind of Christ (take captive every thought) and to passionately pursue purity, by humbly obeying the Word of God planted in us (2 Corinthians 2:11) in the power of the Holy Spirit. The follower of God need never fear anyone or anything other than God. If you are in Christ you need never fear the demonic realm (Matthew 10:28) or any situation or human for you are in God's tender care, and not a sparrow falls to the ground outside of His gentle care and will (Matthew 10:29).

Way too often I hear from those in the Christian world a fear that if we mention the demonic realm they gain power, that if we teach on the demonic realm, bad things happen. This is just silly and dangerous. If Job could bless God under what must be considered one of the most severe spiritual attacks in history, surely we can as well (Job 1:21–22; 2:10) in our battles that may feel horrific but more than likely fall short of Job's.

You are a child of God and the evil one cannot harm you (1 John 5:18). Begin here, memorize this verse and others (2 Thessalonians 3:3; 2 Corinthians 12:9–10; Job 1–2) and let them drive you to confidence and freedom. As John Stott has said about the demonic realm: “They were defeated at the cross and are now under Christ’s feet and ours. So the invisible world in which they attack us and we defend ourselves is the very world in which Christ reigns over them and we reign with Him.”

### **Take captive every thought** *2 Corinthians 10:5*

The battle that rages is for the thought life of the believer, which makes Word saturation essential, and the constant pursuit of a biblical worldview is a weapon of mass destruction against the demonic realm. The authentic believer wins the spiritual battle when he or she takes captive every thought and makes it obedient to God. The battle for the mind is best fought with the Word of God. This is where Eve failed and Jesus fought in victory: *it is written!* If we can take captive every thought and make it obedient to Jesus, the victory will be ours, so we want sharp swords ready to make war on thoughts that are destructive.

### **Submit to God** *James 4:7–8*

Submission to God is the key to all spiritual battle, for it is in submission to God that our resistance of the devil is empowered. In fact, the promise to the children of God who fully submit is the flight of the demons attacking them. This is why the focus of the disciple should be on learning to obey all that God has commanded us (Matthew 29:16–20), and not be deflected from this to an unhealthy focus on demons. Surrendering to Jesus yields victory over Satan. Growth in holiness (Hebrews 12:14), in conformity to Christ (Galatians 4:19), must be the passionate exclusive focus of every follower of Jesus. Submission to God is a key non-negotiable to success in spiritual battle. Knowing God's Word and applying it is key to standing healthy in the storms of life (Matthew 7:21–27).

### **Put on your spiritual armour** *Ephesians 6:10–20*

Lots has been written on this, so will not take the time here other than to say it is a chapter of Scripture that we should know well, and put on our uniform once, and keep it on! The spiritual battle can best be fought with the armour of God on, and in pursuit of active engagement.

### **Take 100 looks at God for every look you take at the demonic realm** *Hebrews 12:1–3*

Although this should be obvious, so often in our world it is not. Our focus should be Jesus and the gospel not our flesh or the demonic realm. Our hearts should be overwhelmed with the character of God, filled with His Word, and passionate about His ways, in the spiritual battle which will occur.

### **Keep the gospel central**

Satan is an accuser and a liar (Revelation 12:10; John 8:44) and one of the key tools in his arsenal is to accuse the brethren. What this means is that he will seek to hold us in guilt, shame and condemnation. The demonic realm will often speak partial truths, and if not taken to the cross, this yields to chaos. We fight this attack on our spiritual acceptance by God, by preaching the gospel to ourselves every day, and keeping the gospel central to our lives moment by moment (1 Peter 5:8–9)! We have the opportunity to know the reality of “the faith” personally, and experientially and live our lives for God’s glory in awareness of the demonic realm’s attacks and victory in Christ.

### **Learn from biblical records of attacks**

*2 Corinthians 12:10; 2 Corinthians 11:13–15; Job; Jesus; Eve.*

Take the time to see how Eve lost by questioning God’s Word and goodness, and trusting her own senses. Rejoice as you see Job trusting in God’s sovereignty and realizing in interaction with friends that we don’t always understand the ways of God. Look to Paul and see His boasting in the midst of the battle, and living in the confidence of the grace of God. Know that God used Paul’s thorn in the flesh, messenger from Satan, to help him in his battle for holiness. Know that demons often display as angels of light, and are sneaky in their attacks rather with than the overt evil that we often watch for. Know who God is (especially in His holiness, Sovereignty and loving kindness) and what His Word teaches. Choose to obey no matter what the cost. Let your mind constantly be pulled into worshipping the King as a form of engaging the enemy. And remember that there are more with us than with them (2 Kings 6:16) and Jesus blinks and the demons flee (1 John 4:4). Depend on Him, discipline your submission, resist the devil and he will flee from you!

Let us avoid the two equal and opposite errors, and find ourselves confident in Christ, engaged in battle and focused on submission to God.

## Issue #7

## Temporary Living: No Passion For Jesus' Return

Canada is consistently in the top ten countries to live in, and last year, it was ranked number three in the world, trailing only Switzerland and Japan (in my heart, we are number one). We love our hockey, our football might be the leftovers, but the product includes more excitement in our passing games. The mountains and oceans offer a beauty rarely found in other places in the world. We have relative freedom, our standard of living is good, and it would appear that if this is all there is, it is not all that bad, or so most of those who claim to be Christians would want it to appear. I suppose our therapeutic culture would introduce us to people's problems. However, mostly, they would point to how to become more comfortable, or successful here and now (move to Vancouver). Earth is our home, and in Canada it is a great place to stay, focus on and enjoy. We don't really need or want heaven because there is so much to enjoy here.

As C.S. Lewis said in his great essay, *The Weight Of Glory*, "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

In history there has been a passion among those who know Jesus for His return, but in Canada this passion has largely disappeared. There are still the odd wacky predictions on sign boards on the side of the road but few are longing for Jesus' return, let alone preparing for it. We are either comfortable here in Canada, or believe passionately we should be and it is hard to remember that earth is not our home in the midst of the cosiness of Canada. We do hear about it in the songs of American slaves or longing from those in the persecuted church but try to shake that out of our brains so that the fogginess of materialism and entitlement can keep us discontented and yet without a longing for home. Few pastors are willing to tackle the end times and the over-reach of the previous generation reading the newspaper and the bible at the same time and making millions of mistakes has left us nervous about longing for Jesus' return (it is doubtful whether Obama, Biden, or Trump is the anti-Christ, although one never knows, I haven't heard Trudeau, but I wonder).

My mother longed for Jesus' return, and thought it would come in her lifetime. She joins a long line of faithful followers of Jesus, who made the same gentle prediction. I used to use the desire of my mom and her prediction of a soon return against her, but now know she was right, perhaps not in the timing of the return, but for sure in her ache for it.

## Pressing On

I have now joined the long line in history of thinking and hoping that Jesus' return for the church will be in my lifetime. I might be wrong, but the longing and belief that it could be tomorrow is in line with God's Word. Earth is not our home, we are but passing through.

The church has become comfortable in the world, and for her to make a magnificent difference for her Maker, this must change. The world is not our home! Believers should think more about Jesus' return and heaven than they do about sports, comfort, or any other entertainment. A tall order for someone who loves hockey, golf, baseball, basketball playoffs, football (NFL and CFL) and when those are not going, any other sport I can find (yes George, even curling). Before you jump too quickly to condemn me and my kind, where do your thoughts go when you are coasting, just about to sleep. What are your dreams for your future, what would it take to make you happy: family, holidays, marks, degrees, jobs? The church needs a renewed longing for Jesus, heaven, and His return if we are to be faithful in the vapour of our lives here on earth!

I remember the last sermon I was to preach in Salmon Arm where we had been serving the youth, being so excited to hit them hard with the truths of Philippians 1:21, until I realized that in my own life I did not see death (or Jesus' return) as gain, in fact, I wanted to stay alive long enough to have PING golf clubs, children, more education, etc. I have all of those things now, but sadly new longings and desires have been engaged. If heaven is not our longing, we will always find something more to fill the space left void, and whatever that might be cannot satisfy.

The church should be a place where we are growing towards and crying out, *to live is Christ to die is gain*, and yet it seems to have become a platitude, and we in real life instead declare with our time treasures and talents—to live is comfort to die is loss. It would be okay for Jesus to return, but please wait until I have everything I want/need for now, or perhaps the time to enjoy it a little more—after all I earned it.

### The solution

#### Relational Christianity *Colossians 3:1–4*

How much we love Jesus will have a direct relationship on our level of longing for His return. A deep desire for Jesus' return should always have at its core a relational motive. Traveling is wonderful, and some of the highlights of my life are traveling to other countries and serving Jesus there, equipping His church for fruit-filled ministry. Not only do I love serving Jesus, I love seeing new places. However, when I am apart from my family, I can't wait to get home. If you ever want to enjoy an afternoon of fun, (I have never done this) go to the airport and at the international meet and greet watch

people come home, and the joy of relational reunion. Ultimately the return of Jesus is about relational reunion with the One we love the most. The reason that many Canadian evangelicals do not long for the return of Jesus is that we have become content with a Christ-less Christianity that prefers life here without Him to eternity with Him.

So the first way to help the church with this problem is to help individuals and local churches re-ignite a passion for intimacy with the Almighty. Ensure that Christianity is a relationship that drives and defines us, rather than a religion that entertains us. If Jesus is not our first love, then we will not have a longing for His return. In fact, our first love will be what fills us with longing. Paul's longing in Philippians 1 is not for a better place, although it is better by far, but for the culmination of relational intimacy with Jesus, so He can say: "better to depart and be with Jesus by far", because He loved Jesus more than life itself! He had as His greatest passion to know Him (Philippians 3), and this passion drove His pursuits. If we want to be those who cry out, Maranatha, even so Lord Jesus come, we must be those who have a first love devotion to Jesus! Our traditions or passion for the contemporary will never satisfy—we must want more!

**Biblical worldview** *Romans 12:1–2; Colossians 3:1–3; 3:16–17*

This is our go-to solution, but like the other issues facing Canadian Christianity, the more saturated we are with God's Word the more we will long for Jesus' return. We struggle with thinking like the world, and in this think that our best life is now. We need the washing of the Word to cleanse and reshape our thinking.

We are to be aliens and strangers here (1 Peter 2:11–12), and to be holy and not friends with the world (James 4:4). We are to long for Jesus' return and realize that our light and momentary afflictions are achieving for us a glory that far outweighs them all (2 Corinthians 4:17–18). The more we learn to see life from God's perspective the more we will see Him for who He is. The most essential product of Bible saturation is a deeper knowledge of who God is and a more transforming relationship with Him! A quick study of the New Testament will not only yield an understanding of their longing for Jesus' return, but also a deeper relationship with Jesus that will enflame our hearts for Him.

**Understanding treasure** *Matthew 13:44–46*

When we love Jesus, and are Word saturated, we start to understand that earthly treasures are small and irrelevant, and Kingdom treasures well worth selling all we have for, as we follow Christ in the context of the gospel. If we are to truly value what God's Word tells us, we will happily consider all things a loss in comparison to knowing Him. He is the greatest treasure, and investing in all things related to Him is how we can store up treasure!

### **Pursuing Treasure** *Matthew 6:19–24*

When we have a biblical worldview of treasure, we will seek to store up treasure in heaven. This will yield a heart's desire to go to heaven and be where our treasure is. This shapes how we give, serve, and use our spare time. We will be more concerned about heavenly reward than RRSP's, and delight when we have opportunity to give sacrificially to God's work. If our hearts are focused on Jesus and the things He values, we will find it much easier to be those who are storing up treasure in heaven. In fact, it will be the obvious pursuit of our passions, and we will use our lives and the resources God has entrusted to us to be treasure hunters for eternity.

“He is no fool to give up what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.” (Jim Elliot)

### **Stop being a friend of the world** *1 Peter 2:11–12; James 4:4*

When we think like the world we will live like the world, and when we love the things of the world we lose the love of the Father (1 John 2:15). There are things we must turn our backs on if we are to truly long for the return of Jesus, and in this rejection, it must begin with the choosing of our friends (Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:33). We should long to be Jesus' friend, and in that to think as He wants (Philippians 2:5–9), and to obey Him always (John 15:14). This means little things matter, and must include how and where we spend our time, treasures and talents. Little choices will shape our directions.

### **Maranatha** *even so Lord Jesus come*

All those who love Jesus will long for His return and so we say, Maranatha, even so, Lord Jesus come!

Don't get so caught up in the pursuit of details about His return, get caught up in the relationship of delight. Jesus is coming again! We won't be able to understand it fully until it has happened. So, seek to know and obey the Scriptures, understand the structures of His return, but long for the Savior!

“Revival comes when we begin to live for the world to come, not the present one.”  
(Steven Lawson)

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup> For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” (Colossians 3:1–4)

## Issue #8

**Low View of Church**

“Surely you know that if a man can’t be cured of churchgoing, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighbourhood looking for the church that ‘suits’ him until he becomes a taster or connoisseur of churches.” (C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*)

The church is God’s beloved, His treasured possession, His plan for reaching the world. It is His body, His bride, His family, His temple and dwelling place. He values the local church, and those who know Him value her and serve her as an overflow of their love for Him. If that paragraph felt foreign it is because we have a gentle anti-church sentiment in the church in Canada. A low church esteem perhaps, or maybe worse a consumer mentality that dominates much of how we think of the local church. Her job is to serve me, entertain me, meet my needs in my style, or I will happily (or bitterly) go down the street to the next church that can do it better. We shop for churches rather than show the beauty of the gospel in our local family gatherings. In the current Canadian evangelical context church has become a spectator event, driven by a consumer mentality that has led to low commitment and high defection. Our individualistic mentality removes responsibility or the need for community and replaces it with entitlement and pride, and leaves the individual empty and angry.

Few Canadian Christians give sacrificially, fewer engage in self sacrificial service to the body, and most are more concerned about being loved than loving or preferring one another (Romans 12:10). This is not a new issue (Philippians 2:4–5), but it seems to be more and more the normal attitude among those who claim to be followers of God. We are busy, hurt by a previous church, hurt by other Christians, feel unloved, want our way with the color of the carpet, think our doctrine matters enough to fight, and this list could go on and on. Some write on the lack of commitment in general, but being the father of boys in sports, I know commitment exists—there are practices every day and at all times and many parents never miss anything their children are engaged in. We do not lack commitment, rather we lack commitment to the things that God values. Curtis Thomas states, “by far most of the commands in the New Testament are given to believers in the context of local churches”. The Bible assumes, commands, and encourages the believer to be an active part of the local church. What does a local church look like? Historically they have been a gathering of believers where God’s Word is preached, the ordinances are observed, biblical leadership is found, and membership matters (historically presented as where church discipline occurs). We may want to add to this list, but it should not be subtracted from. Every follower of Jesus is called to be a part of a local gathering of believers where they can actively pursue and live in community (Ephesians 4:1–16).

## The solution

The key to having a high view of the church, and to engage in her as the bride of the living God is to learn to think like the Word, not the world. In terms of the church this means 4 specific realities:

### 1. Jesus will build His church *Matthew 16:18*

Jesus names the church, and declares His ownership on it, and the word He chose was a word that is then used 114 times in the New Testament. It is a word that means a gathering of people, in this case of God's people, and often has the added meaning that this gathering has a purpose. These gathered people exist for a purpose, God's purpose for them—the glory of His name (Isaiah 43:7). Jesus owns the church, and has promised to build her. She is His to shape and to declare what she should be. The Universal Church includes every believer from the resurrection to the return. It is every believer who has lived, or lives now, who has truly believed the gospel, repented and entered into a reconciled relationship with God. Some believe that being a part of the Universal Church is enough, and being loyal to a local church optional, even distasteful. This is a demonic lie that a careful study of Scripture quickly puts to death. Almost all of the references to obedience to belonging to the church are local church commands and demands. The local church becomes a picture of the Universal Church and when churches love and serve God, they join together in a beautiful unified song that glorifies God and gathers the lost. The local church has value because of who she belongs to and who will build her.

### 2. Jesus loves the church *Ephesians 5:25–27*

I am not sure much more needs to be said than these verses for the follower of Jesus. If we love Jesus we will love what He loves, and clearly He loves the church. This assumes as you look at the context that the church will not be perfect, for Jesus is in the process of sanctifying her, and it is a call for us to feel about the church as Jesus does. In fact, we are called to be body builders and give our lives to helping the church become all that God wants her to become (Ephesians 4:11–16). His love for the church is self-sacrificial, tender and treasuring. He not only loved her enough to die for her, He also intercedes for her, and helps her to become perfect. It is an active, powerful, life changing love that His children will experience when they are a committed portion of the local church! Being a part of Jesus family in a corporate sense is assumed, when you are born again you become by virtue of that birth a part of the Church, and you then are commanded to join a local church which becomes the practical place where the commands to the visible church can be lived out. You can't love Jesus without loving His church.

### 3. Jesus' plan is the church

This is a little bit frightening for those of us who give leadership to His Bride. He has a

plan to help people conform into His image, and joining His family through ambassadorship and the church is the centre point of this plan. As a pastor has said, “the church is the hope of the world.”

**Spiritual growth** *Ephesians 4:11–16; Galatians 4:19*

The church is the place that, when each part is doing its work, will reach maturity. The church is the people (gathering) that God has chosen to use to bring about sanctification. Without her, God’s people will fail and fall. (Hebrews 3:12–14; 10:24–25) 1 Corinthians 12 calls the follower of God to build His body, to serve together, and it is in this serving that maturity comes (1 Corinthians 12:14–20). It is only in community that a follower of Jesus can reach maturity, and must always be something we pursue with passion and conviction. If you choose not to be committed and loyal to the church you will not be able to grow in your depth of relationship with Jesus as He wants you to. Galatians 4:19, although true for the individual is written to the church and together we are the temple of the living God, and are conformed to His image. The Christian is saved as an individual and saved into a family, His family, universal and local.

**Impact on the world** *Matthew 28:16–20*

This is intricately tied to the first purpose of the church for the more we are like Jesus, the larger our impact on the world will be (1 Peter 2:11–12). The church is the place where maximum maturity is grown into together (Ephesians 4:11–16). If we are not living in community the deceitfulness of sin will overwhelm us (Hebrews 3:12–14), and we will lose our passion for God’s glory, and our pursuit of His mission in the world to help people be reconciled to Him (2 Corinthians 5:11–21). Jesus chose the church to be His instrument to draw people to Himself, and it is the church that Jesus is given to, as head over all things (Ephesians 1:22–23). If you choose not to be committed and loyal to the church you will not be able to grow in your depth of relationship with Jesus as He wants you to, nor have the impact that He has called you to have on those who don’t know Him. A lack of commitment to the local church displays a lack of loyalty to Jesus.

**4. You matter to the church** *Ephesians 4:11–16; 2:10*

So far, we have focused on the church mattering to Jesus. Likewise, it should matter to you. And for your growth and impact, you matter to the church. God has prepared good works for you to walk in, and a significant part of that will be using your spiritual gifts to engage and build up the body. You are His choice to love (John 13), you are His choice to reach out, you are His choice to accomplish what the church is called to accomplish. Stated another way, each of us must see ourselves as a responsible part of the church, and it is only as each part does its work that the church is able to reach the pinnacle of who God wants us to be. If you choose not to be a part of the church you not only hurt

## Pressing On

yourself you hurt those whom God has chosen to be in your local family. If you choose to be a spectator or a critic, selfish and divisive, you will hurt yourself and Jesus' bride. Your attitude and actions towards the local church matter to God and you. *So:*

### **Be loyal to your local church**

Have a mindset that is from the Word, not the World. Where your view of the church is fleshly and full of yourself, repent! Find a church you can serve, remembering you are not perfect, nor is the local church you find perfect, but both are being perfected by a perfect Savior and LORD.

### **Be loving to your local church**

This is an attitude but it will always lead to action. Choose to live as though you loved your local church even when sometimes people rub you the wrong way or your pride is hurt. Choose to be a biblical Christian in attitude.

### **Be living with your local church**

Make the local church a *huge* part of your everyday life!

### **Getting**

Make your attendance a priority, and seek to come ready to listen and receive from God's Word and exalt Him in praise. Come expectantly to receive from God and others what He has planned for you.

### **Giving**

Give of your time, treasures and talents (spiritual gifts) to see the body built up for the glory of God. Be so filled with God, that you overflow to be a giver to others. Come to the local gathering ready to be used by God to be a blessing to others.

### **Serving**

Be a John 13 Christian and come actively looking for areas where your church needs servants and choose to serve. This is beyond where you are gifted, this is where there is a need. Often where there is a need and the good works God has planned for you will mesh, but whether you believe they will or not, actively look for places where there are needs and meet them.

### **The solution**

Be a part of the solution, not the problem. Seek God's glory first, and as an overflow of that call others to do the same in the church family. Be a unifier, not a divider. Be a

builder, not a destroyer. Prefer one another (Romans 12:1–10), and engage in the church with fullness of joy as a part of the solution, not the problem.

### Notes

#### There is a time to leave a local church

Leaving a local church should never be done lightly, or selfishly but should be done with grace, and based on biblical reasons:

- The gospel is not preached or the wrong gospel is preached: Galatians 1:8–10
- The leaders tolerate heresy from those they welcome in the pulpit.
- The church avoids preaching, or does not see it as a priority of the family gathered.
- Sin is tolerated, or legalism demanded.
- God’s Word is not believed or followed as authoritative, sufficient, inspired and the key to spiritual growth in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Leaving a church should never be easy, and always be done with grace and gentle conviction. Seek to leave in a way that honours Jesus, leaves the church as healthy as possible, and your reputation as someone who is holy and loving increased.

#### How to choose a great church

- Pray and ask God, with a healthy check list in mind—see the third bullet point.
- Ask those you trust.
  - Gospel Coalition Church
- Read and look For: 9 Marks Of A Healthy Church, Mark Dever.
- Review the things talked about in this article and look for a place to serve.
  - After the essentials are taken care of, look for a place that you fit, and will serve your family well in your current situation.
- Do they have a biblical view of God and the gospel?
- Is God’s Word preached?
- Is the gospel of grace central?
- Is there a community you can be loyal to and help build?
- Do they obey the great command and great commission in word and deed?
- Is active dependence on God a part of their culture (prayer)?
- Does the style of worship and ministry fit with your tastes?
  - This is last because it is *least* important, but if the other things are in place and you have to choose between two or three *good* churches, it will come into play.

## Honour God with Our Lips, with Distant Hearts

We live in an age many have described as a worship revival. I heard the other day that the fastest sell out in the history of the stadium the Raptors play in was for a Hillsong concert. There is a hunger for worship, a restlessness for something more, and many are stepping into this gap to help evangelicals “worship”.

This emotional response through and from music is seen as a great improvement to Christians of this last century, and perhaps even a response to Tozer’s famous words: “worship is the missing jewel of the church”. So, why does it make it onto a top 10 list of issues with the church? The worship wars of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century seem to be mostly over, and the church has settled into choosing styles that best fit and rejecting or ignoring styles different than they prefer. There is still a remnant of this battle that yells at the dangers of contemporary music or bemoans the old songs as out of date and deadly to growth, but for the most part this has been left behind. So how can this be an issue in the church that I would include in this list?

1. I believe that much of the church of North America has lost sight of the true goal of worship. Worship at its core is: all that I am responding to all that God is, all of the time. It includes and demands an emotional response as an overflow of a healthy love for God, but never as an end in itself, or with the focus on the worshipper, rather than the One being worshipped. Worship in song is a response of praise based on the worshippers’ response to who God is or what God has done for them. It is radically and exclusively God focused, even as it calls others to trust and praise Him. True worship will include a death to self (Luke 9:23) and a passion for God’s glory. Much of what passes for worship in Canada today is focused on having the right experience, rather than an eager delight in God, and so instead of worshipping God, worships self.

2. In my own ministry life, people argue about what the best environment for worship is and, in almost every case, the issue is more about the worshipper than the One being worshipped, or others who are joining them in worship. Almost never have I heard people longing to make sure that the preference of others is pursued first so that in corporate worship we can exalt God. It seems that most who are fighting for the right feeling of worship are more concerned about their own experience (or those who agree with them) than about God or the community around them. Sadly I have found this in those who *prefer* traditional, and/or contemporary styles.

3. Corporate worship seems to be a lost art, with most concerned about their own experience, rather than the community responding in praise to God. Corporate worship is focusing on God and responding to God in community. It is first and foremost God centred, and then in community a united response of love. Often what is thought of as worship in Canada is taste driven rather than community oriented, a response to a concert rather than a response to Christ. This is similar to the last one, with the added misunderstanding of corporate worship versus individual.

4. We fight about style and lose sight of what *true worship* actually produces in God's people. One person leaving a worship concert delighted in their experience and very closely after criticized their worship pastor, and the bride of Christ for how boring their worship was in their local church, and how so many missed out on what true worship is—meaning their emotional high from the concert. That is called vastly missing the point and replacing God with self, and losing sight of His glory and replacing that with flesh. Not surprising, but sad! If you are still reading, and not angry, then perhaps this is not an issue for you, but if this has impacted your emotions, or brought a gentle conviction to your heart, please keep reading. For of all of the key issues the Canadian churches experience writing on this one gives me the most trepidation. Biblically, it is clear that you can think you are worshipping yet actually be offensive to God.

- Isaiah 29:13
- Leviticus 10
- Jeremiah 2:12–13
- Matthew 15:8
- Hosea 6:6
- 1 Samuel 13
- Exodus 32
- Matthew 9:13

Deuteronomy 12:4 is clear, we are to worship God His way, not in the way of the world. But what does this mean? I have heard people share that they don't want to be like the world today, so they want to sing songs from 20 years ago or 200 years ago. What they forget is that at some time all of the songs we currently sing were contemporary. This is not a hit on older songs, or younger songs, it is a hit on those who judge the song by their preferred style and use the word contemporary to win their argument. So how do we make sure that our worship is not only with our lips, but with hearts that are close to Him, to be those who worship in spirit and in truth?

### **The solution**

**Getting worship right God's way** (*a look at the book*)

So how do we make sure this is not us?

#### **1. Exalt God His way**

This might be easier if we were living in the Old Testament, where the form is given very

clearly, but even there we find that worship if it is in form and emotion only is empty and void of any honouring of God. Worship is being preoccupied with the God of the Bible, and exalting Him with all that you are. This shows in different ways at different times in salvation history, and it is clear that God cares not only that He is worshipped, but also how he is worshipped.

There is an interesting thing that John Piper helped me see happening in the New Testament when it comes to worship. It can best be seen in the words used for worship before they are translated. The Old Testament word most used for worship (*bishtabvab*) has the basic meaning of bowing down, and carries with it the idea of reverence, respect and honour. In the Greek Old Testament, the Greek word (*proskeneo*) which means bow down is used to translate this Hebrew word. In the New Testament this is the main word that is used for worship (*proskeneo*) in the Gospels (26 times) and in Revelation (21 times), and calls for the follower of God to have reverence before God and bow down to Him and worship Him. It is a word that demands a response that is emotionally overwhelmed and physical. It is a call to bow down. Something strange happens in the rest of the New Testament, this word is only used one other time (*proskeneo*), and that is not about worship toward the God of the Bible (1 Corinthians 14:25). The word that takes its place is a word that means to serve (helpfully used in Romans 12:1–2). Piper responds to this reality that is found in the New Testament saying, “So you can see what is happening in the New Testament. Worship is being significantly de-institutionalized, de-localized, de-ritualized. The whole thrust is being taken off of ceremony and seasons and places and forms; and is being shifted to what is happening in the heart—not just on Sunday, but every day and all the time in all of life.”

This is what it means when we read things like “whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). And “whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father” (Colossians 3:17). This is the form of worship commanded in the New Testament: to act in a way that reflects the value of the glory of God—to do a thing in the name of Jesus with thanks to God. That is the basic form of living worship. But the New Testament uses those greatest of all worship sentences without any reference to worship services. They describe life. The Puritans carried through the simplification and freedom of worship in music and liturgy and architecture. Patrick Collinson summarizes Puritan theory and practice by saying that the life of the Puritan was in one sense a continuous act of worship, pursued under an unremitting and lively sense of God’s providential purposes and constantly refreshed by religious activity, personal, domestic and public.” Simply put, worship is all that I am and all that I have responding correctly to who God is, all of the time. And it will include a corporate gathering that expresses the richness and majesty

of who God is to Him, and for Him to one another, but its main focus is a life of service. A life devoted to displaying the gospel, the beauty and majesty of God in all of life!

True worship will exalt God His way! It will be radically God centred and will put into practice the great command of love towards God as an all defining pursuit, and love toward our neighbour as the supernatural overflow of that. It will be in spirit and truth, and display love to God and one another. True worship will always include experience. All of life impacted for the lifting up of His name. Exalting God His way will always include a personal experience that impacts our emotions with leads us to the second solution.

## 2. Experience God deeply

There is no such thing as an emotionless authentic Christianity nor an emotion-filled Christianity with no life change, or doctrinal accuracy. Worship that is biblical and God honouring will always include praise (Hebrews 13:15) that overflows from a heart overwhelmed by the greatness of God and His grace and lives life for Him as the obvious and sacrificial response to what He has done for us (Romans 12:1–2)!

When God's Word is understood correctly and received in faith, it will always lead to a changed life that overflows in song (Colossians 3:16–17; Ephesians 5:19). The centre of the Bible is a book of praise, that helps the followers of God to express their authentic emotions in the midst of life from a biblical worldview. When God's Word is understood and experienced, worship in praise and changed life is the obvious and natural overflow. If your emotions are not impacted as you worship God, then there is a good chance you don't have them, or you are not truly worshipping God. This solution is a call to make sure that our hearts are engaged in exalting God.

## 3. Eagerly ascribe worth to God: magnify His name

The one who is worshipping God will never limit their worship to a time on Sunday mornings, or a certain style, they will speak and sing of the greatness of God all of the time. It is a sad day when those who have the greatest modern worship experience are living the grossest lives (forgive me for this apparent overstatement and look for its truth in the lives of those who are most popular in the "Christian" world). The secular press love to share stories of how some of the modern worship movements' greatest leaders live debased lives. This should break our hearts and drive us to our knees in humility and to our feet in a passionate pursuit of lives lived for His glory. We magnify His name by singing about Him, living for Him, sharing how great He is. We display this and cause others to glorify Him when we abstain from evil and live in light of who He is and what He has done (1 Peter 2:11–12; Romans 12:1–2).

### **4. Meditate on who God is and what he has done**

If worship that flows from the hearts of God's people is to be honouring to Him, it must be based on who He is as revealed in God's Word, and what He has done. Worship that is honouring to God will always be Word-saturated. The better we know Him, the more we will be able to offer Him all of our lives. God's Word ignites worship, and true worship drives the worshipper back into their Bible, so that they can know Him more. Anything short of this is short of what God desires and requires.

### **5. Abide in the Vine and bear fruit**

Worship that is honouring to God will always be relational. In many ways this has already been the driving force behind the solution, but worth stating. Worship is not about the worshipper, although the impact on them is huge, it is about the One being worshipped. As we abide in Him, this relationship will produce praise that not only comes from a life that is impacted by His Majesty, it will also be lived for His glory.

## Issue #10

## Loss of Biblical View of Marriage and Parenting

This tenth and last issue is massive. In fact, it is hard to cover all in a few short pages. However, it deserves to be here, so we will cover this topic in a simple manner. We are no longer in Kansas when it comes to marriage and parenting. Marriage has been under attack from Genesis 3 onward, however it has intensified over the last 65 or so years in Canada. The divorce rate is substantially up, and many young people do not see marriage as something that will last, but rather a short part of the life they are called to live. The definition of marriage has changed drastically, as has already been discussed so that what would have been unthinkable 30 years ago is now the accepted norm in terms of homosexuality and marriage. In Canada we are proud of the fact that we were among the first to change our definition of marriage, and for the Christian who is biblical this change means that what the world thinks is so radically different from God's revealed desire that they are not recognizable. This has caused some to want to get divorced in society and only have a biblical marriage and pastors to stop marrying people all together in the eyes of the state. Very few would read Ephesians 5 comfortably with what it has to say about sacrificial love and submission, and even fewer are seeking to live it in a selfless manner. Much of this has to do with the sexual revolution that was covered in Issue #4, however the impact on marriage is worth singling out.

When it comes to parenting in Canada there has also been a huge shift in thinking. My parents raised their children in the church as a part of a community. They would have joyfully expected others to discipline us, when we needed it, and would have been disappointed if we were not held accountable by their community. Corporal punishment was expected and safe in public (as I experienced many times), and you would have been very rare if spanking was not a part of your toolkit when seeking to raise godly children who could benefit society. Most of my friends were from families that had both parents living at home, and usually the mom did not work outside the home. Family was perceived to be a safe place where morals and discipline were set, and where sharing meals together (without phones) was the norm (I don't remember any meals in the living room, or with the TV on, although we didn't have a TV. Nor do I remember a time when all who were home didn't gather around the kitchen or dining room table to pray and partake).

Parenting is now seen as a private process (if parenting occurs at all), and if you discipline my child I will be very disappointed with you. Sexual abuse fears have caused us as a culture to protect our children from physical contact, and even has caused parents to fear their love being misunderstood, or misrepresented. Corporal punishment does not exist, or if it does is either abusive or underground. Most of my children's friends are

## Pressing On

not being raised by biological parents who are still together and few if any share meals without phones on a regular basis (by regular, I don't mean Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter with no others).

We are not in Kansas anymore, and often the children who are being raised in the church are being raised in similar styles and situations as non-churched friends. Our views and actions have changed so that we are less biblical and more cultural in our views and actions, although our views tend to still lag a bit behind.

### **The solution**

#### **Let God's Word drive what we think**

As we get to 10, you may now realize that this is the normal solution to all of our problems. A quick read of Psalm 119 (if that is possible), and a deep read of Jesus' prayer in John 17 would certainly lead us to believe this.

We are swimming up river, and the current is getting stronger so we as God's children must learn to saturate ourselves with God's Word (Colossians 3:16–18.) In parenting and marriage, Deuteronomy 6, Proverbs and Ephesians 5:22ff are great places to start as we seek to once again understand how God wants us to view life.

#### **Let God's Word drive how we behave**

As James would say, be *doers* of God's Word! The ground is shaking and as we seek to keep our homes secure. The only way to do that is to hear and obey God's Word (Matthew 7:21–27). Husbands, wives, children, read God's Word and then choose to obey it in the Spirit's power. Parents, take the time to see what it means to honour God, and then make the difficult choices now, before you blink and your children are all grown up, to show them the greatness of God and His impact on all of life.

Our world is passionately and powerfully pushing a tolerance of anything but Bible-believing Christians and extreme haters, and we must show them that we love sacrificially and stand firm in truth.

#### **Establish ways to engage the culture and train the church**

I think that most people realize that we are in trouble as a culture in terms of marriage and parenting. This concern provides us with an opportunity to present the gospel to those lost as the ultimate solution, even as we seek to help them with some of the symptoms of not following God or valuing His Word. God's Word is best. This means that where it is not followed, and certainly our Canadian world is not following well, we can speak into the brokenness it produces, not only with God's truth about these issues

with grace, but also with the core of our hope, the gospel. We should use training and counselling opportunities to give us the greater opportunity to share about Jesus' love and reconciliation with Him that will yield reconciliation with others and the power to live transformed lives in the home, and as parents. There is hope. God's Word shares not only the best way, in fact, the only way, to an abundant life but also how to find peace and purpose in a lost and hurting world.

The church needs to re-establish God's Word's teaching on these subjects as the norm, display the beauty of the gospel through this to our world and invite unbelievers to healing and health in Jesus. The church needs models, pictures not only of what God wants (Ephesians 5:22–6:2) of Him and the church, but also for one another. Would you consider if you are godly in this pursuit of marriage or parenting to be a model for those around you of what it really should look like?

Help others who are lost, follow you as you follow Christ, not perfect, but being perfected. Not proud, but pulling in His direction. Not stalled but surrendered.

*To God be the glory!*

## Dishonourable Mentions

*These two did not make the top 10, but perhaps should have.*

### **Abortion**

Every year in Canada almost 100,000 babies are killed through abortion. We are one of the very few countries who have no restrictions on when a baby can be killed in the womb, or while still connected to the mother. The church is relatively silent, or perhaps confused as to how to respond to this horrific culture of death.

Perhaps as painful, churches are full of women who have had abortions and need to experience the healing and grace of God. The hospital of the church must figure out ways to share hope while standing firm on the horror.

### **Lack of prayer**

Most churches have lost their passion to pray together, and lack a plan to pray alone. Churches with prayer meetings in Canada are the exception, not the norm and most of these are small churches, or the prayer meetings are poorly attended.

The solution to this is to realize our desperate dependence, and the demand of God to spend time together in His presence and commit to it.

### **Other**

I will leave this for you as you think through what other issues you think the Canadian church may be facing.

## What Now?

The fact that you have finished reading this is a great sign that you are interested in the health of the Canadian church, so what should you do now that you have finished this? Well correct me so that next time I include Gretzky in the top 3, okay as #1 (2, 857 points seems to shout out GOAT), or Tom Brady, not some guy from Calgary is the quarterback being talked about. But way more important is the impact on our own lives.

### 1. Stop

Stop looking out at other churches, or even your own church. It is easy to deflect conviction and stay surface if you can keep your eyes off yourself and on to others who struggle. And you can find a lot of us who struggle. So, draw a circle around yourself and ask God to revive your first love devotion to Him, and to make you a part of the solution.

### 2. Start

Look over these top 10, or your input in them, and decide which 3 you need to work on the most. Then put a circle around your own life and ask God to change you! Go back to the article on keystone habits, and build those into your life.

Remember the church is not a building, it is the people gathered, and you are one of those. Begin with you, and let your humility cause our great God to notice you, place His great grace upon you and change you! Once you have done this for a month, in the midst of your failures and successes, find someone else who can join you in this pursuit. Start with just one other person, build in habits of success and then add to your group slowly. When you hit 14, split off, and continue to grow. Your leaven will impact God's church, and as each church experiences the richness of people filled with the Spirit and living for the LORD Canada and her churches will be radically changed!

Your interest has brought you to this place. Keep your passion for Jesus' church in Canada strong, and inspect your own life. Where you fall short build in disciplines and always grow in a way that builds others up. Keep the gospel central, and preach the gospel to yourself every day (look at keystone habits for help with this)!

### 3. Stay

Stay focused on relationship with Jesus. Do not allow your disappointment with the world, despair with your own life, or distractions take you away from what is most important!

Keep the gospel central and the focus on Jesus passionate, and you will be a part of the solution rather than the problem.

