

FOR THE 317



CONNECTING PEOPLE TO JESUS
A LIFE GROUP EXPERIENCE

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We are so excited for you to be journeying through this #FORTHE317 content. In this material, you'll get to see, talk about, learn, and experience what God is up to HERE at The Creek, a local expression in the 317 of God's redeeming and transforming work.

This little book is intended to help you get all that you can out of the various Scriptural texts we'll be walking through as well as help to equip you and your life group in being the hands and feet of Jesus in our community!

This book contains a note taking section for each time you listen to the main teaching, life group covenants, devotions for five out of seven days, reflection questions, and some space to journal what God might be inviting you into. The key is to be intentional and slow and to be sure to share what stirs in you with your community. Like a teabag in hot water, we want to allow the Scriptures and devotions each week to seep into the very core of who we are.

Ideally, the general rhythm of this content will look like this:

STEP 1

Meet as a group to watch and discuss the week 1 video using the group guide

STEP 2

Group members do the week 1 devotionals throughout the week

STEP 3

Meet as a group to recap week 1 devotionals & watch and discuss the week 2 video

STEP 4

Group members do the week devotionals throughout the week

STEP 5

Rinse and repeat with the subsequent week of content

To get the most out of this series, we'd recommend the following:

- Fill out the participant covenant
- Commit to engaging the 317 content slowly and intentionally each week
- Take notes on the teaching each week
- Journal your thoughts on the reflection questions for each week
- Bring your book to life group each week
- Use your thoughts and notes from the book to engage in group discussion
- Find a time as a group to plan a Serve Experience (Week 8) and plan time for your Scripture experience (Week 9).

As individuals and as a group, be sure to plan ahead and prepare for your experiences, commit to meeting regularly, think through group logistics (childcare, hosting, etc.), and pray!

There is nothing quite like the local church. God's desire is that every local church would learn to grow in an ever-deepening relationship with Him, that every local church would learn to love one another and maintain other-worldly unity, and that every local church would be an opportunity for those seemingly far from grace to connect to Jesus.

THAT'S WHO WE WANT TO BE AT
THE CREEK

ARE YOU READY? LET'S DIVE IN.

THE CREEK

A life group is a community of disciples intent on loving God, loving others, and making disciples in order to connect people to Jesus.

We are a community: As the family of God, we meet regularly to eat, pray, and share life together. Community is the place where transformation into Jesus' likeness happens best.

We are disciples: As disciples of Jesus, we make it our aim to be with Jesus, become like Jesus, and do what Jesus did. Through practice, teaching, community, and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are learning what it means to love God, love others, and make disciples as apprentices of Jesus.

We want to connect people to Jesus: As people with a purpose in the Kingdom of God, we seek to proclaim and manifest the good news of Jesus and do justice in our community so that our message is grounded in words and deeds. We partner with God by giving our time, talents, and resources to see the Kingdom of God come in Indianapolis as it is in heaven.

Knowing that there are seasons and times for flexibility, in order to accomplish our goal of transformation into Christlikeness we are asking every life group participant to commit to:

- Attending your life group weekly (even when it gets tough!)
- Reflecting on the devotional material to enhance group time and contributing to group discussion based on the sermons
- Practice being with Jesus, becoming like Jesus, and doing what Jesus did
- Live and champion the seven rhythms of Rooted
- Being vulnerable and authentic
- Caring for your group members
- Speak the truth in love and humbly receive loving accountability
- Pursue unity with other group members

CONFIDENTIALITY

It is our desire to promote a safe environment for sharing the most important things in life. We want to provide a place where people can reveal openly and confidently the broken areas of their lives without judgment or condemnation. We are not here to "fix" one another. We encourage openness, vulnerability and intimacy during discussion, accountability, and prayer times. In order to ensure a safe haven for personal sharing, we ask that each life group member enter into an agreement of confidentiality.

Everything in this group is confidential, but according to Indiana law, we do have a duty to report abuse or neglect of a person whether they are a child or an adult. In addition, information may be shared for the express purpose of resource recommendations, accountability, discipleship, or for legal and safety reasons.

I agree to uphold the above commitments, to show up consistently both physically and mentally, and to keep all things shared by my group members confidential at all times unless what is shared falls under the aforementioned exceptions.

SIGNED: _____ **DATE:** _____

¹¹ Indiana Code 31-33-5-1, Indiana Code 12-10-3-9(a) and 12-10-3-2(a)

#FORTH317

WEEK ONE

#FORTH317

INTRO QUESTION + 1 MINUTE OF SILENCE + PRAYER (5 minutes)

Spend some time allowing each person to share about what life has been like since finishing Rooted. What have your highs been? Your lows?

Next, begin your gathering with one minute together in prayerful silence.

[Why silence? Our world is so busy, distracted, and bee-like, with technology filling in any gaps in between. With all that moving, it can be hard to hear others and hear the voice of God. As we gather together, let's press pause and enter into a moment of quiet so that we can hear what God is saying to us and through others.]

Once you have sat in silence, acknowledging each other's presence and God's presence, centering yourselves on Him, have someone pray to open your time together.

TRANSITION TO WATCH THE WEEK 1 "#FORTHE317" VIDEO (about 20 minutes)

Let your group know that for the next 12 weeks, you'll be watching a short teaching from our lead pastor, Dan. You'll want to have this video set up and tested to make sure everything is working properly ahead of time.

READ SCRIPTURE + DEBRIEF THE VIDEO IN SMALL GROUPS (40 minutes)

Split your group into smaller groups to read the following Scriptures and go through some of the questions below (*There are several here. You'll want to pick out a few ahead of time that you want to be sure to hit; otherwise you'll be constrained with your time*):

- What stood out to you from Dan's teaching? What challenged you? What resonated?
- What do you think when you hear that you are a part of God's story? Is this something you think about often?

- When you hear that God's storyline includes "Creation, The Fall, Redemption, and Renewal," how do you see that storyline in your own life?
- **Read Acts 17:24-28.** How do you see the intentionality of God creating you and placing you in His storyline right where you are—in the story of the culture you're in (your family of origin, your workplace, your sphere of influence, etc.)?
- **Proverbs 29:18** says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." How does having a clear vision help us as followers of Christ? As a church?
- As you think about the vision being the "desired future state," how would your life look different if your desired future state was to "connect people to Jesus?"
- If the mission is "the steps we need to take in order to accomplish the vision," how do you see "loving God," "loving people," and "making disciples" being steps to connecting people to Jesus? How would they connect in your own life?
- Dan talked about the priorities being like the primary colors that will help us mix any other color on the spectrum. Which of the 7 priorities (Worship, Gospel, Kingdom, Scripture, Identity, Community, and Generosity) would you say are already priorities in your life? Which ones do you need to maybe focus on a bit more?

TRANSITION BACK TO ONE LARGE GROUP + DISCUSS (10-20 minutes)

Ask a few questions about each person's time in their smaller groups:

- Which questions did you discuss in your smaller groups? What were some things that came from your smaller group discussions? What lingering questions do you have about loving God?
- How is God inviting you to respond after tonight's discussion?

FINISH WITH LOGISTICS + PRAYER
(15-20 minutes)

Be sure to keep everyone up to date on the latest group info. Here are some considerations to keep in mind:

- This week, our devotions will dive a little deeper into someone of the things discussed and asked tonight. Be sure to set aside some time each day, just like in Rooted, to sit with them and the Lord. You'll have some time next week to reflect on your devotions together as a group.
- If you haven't already, take a few moments to go through your group's covenant together. Ask everyone to spend time this week prayerfully considering what it will mean to be a part of this life group, committing to uphold the church's vision, mission, and priorities as well as honoring the life group covenant together. Day 4 of the life group content will allow people space to think more deeply about it too. You can either pick up the signed covenants tonight or have the group bring them back next week signed.
- Plan a Serve Day with your group. In Week 8 of this series, we'll be talking about our church's priority of "Kingdom" so you'll want to begin talking through ideas with your group about how you could potentially serve the 317 during that time frame. Maybe your group knows of a project that could be done, or maybe you'd like to continue the relationships you formed in Rooted and serve with the same organization you connected with during your Serve Experience. If you need recommendations for serving, feel free to contact the Life Group Minister.
- Consider having each person in the group pair off with another group member, challenging these "buddies" to meet for coffee or a meal and make a relational connection. If you do this, consider challenging folks in your group to check-in with their "buddy" by text or phone call at least once each week through the 317 series.

Finally, finish your group session with prayer. You might designate someone in your group to write down everyone's prayer requests and then send them to the whole group for everyone to be praying about through the week.

1. What is on your heart that you need prayer for?
2. Who in your life needs prayer?

Have someone close your time together by interceding for the requests that were shared.

Your story began before you were born. When you entered the world, God's story was already in motion. God intentionally prepared a place for you in the fabric of it. When He created you, He invited you to join Him in His epic redemptive story that was well underway.

God's story began with the beauty of creation in **Genesis 1-2**. In **Genesis 3**, sin entered the storyline. The Fall became something woven into the story of all humanity. But God had a plan of redemption from the very beginning. **1 Peter 1:20** tells us that Christ was chosen as the spotless Lamb of God before the creation of the world. The story doesn't stop with our redemption. Our God is continually redeeming us, inviting us to live in His resurrection, and there will come a day when God renews everything (**Revelation 21:1-5**).

God's story is one of redemption and renewal. You've been invited to be a part of it. God didn't haphazardly place you into the storyline without intention. When He created you, He did it with a specific place and time in mind.

Read Acts 17:24-28.

Like any story, your story is filled with intrigue, action, comedy, and tragedy. In every moment, God is present. He holds every moment of your story—both the beautiful and the tragic. Nothing is outside His view. He knows every detail and loves you anyway. Your story matters more than you think. It matters to God because He authored it. It matters to those who need to hear it and know the love of God.

Our stories are still being written. We don't know what the rest of our stories hold, but we do know something about our future. **Revelation 12:10** tells us what will happen to our enemy, the devil. We know the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of His Christ will come. In **Revelation 12:11**, we see how speaking our stories plays a role in defeating the enemy: "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." Whenever you voice what God has done in your life, you declare who He is. You demonstrate with hard evidence what God is capable of doing. It's no wonder the enemy wants us to live without understanding the intersection of our story with God's. If we see the connection and share our stories with others, people will see God for who He really is—a redeemer, a healer, a defender, a rescuer, a Savior, and a King.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How have you seen the intersection of God's story (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Renewal) with your own story?

Where have you seen God in your own story? How have you seen the reality of **Acts 17:24-28**? How can you see the ways God positioned you intentionally in the places you are and have been?

Take some time today to write out some of the milestones where you have seen God's story intersect with your own.

The Scriptures are clear. The way that God is bringing about healing, redemption, restoration, and provision is in large part through His Spirit-empowered Church (just take a look at Paul’s words in **2 Corinthians 5:18-20**). Of course, Jesus makes that all possible through His accomplished work on the cross, while God is working through His Spirit and through His people to accomplish His purposes.

As we work through this #FORTHE317 study, our hope for you is that God will bring you clarity of the vision He’s given us as a church, revealing to you the unique role you play in carrying out that vision. It’s one thing for you to understand where we believe God is directing us as a church. It’s an entirely different thing for you to envision yourself playing an active part in it.

And that’s exactly what these next twelve weeks are to be—an invitation. An invitation into the story God’s already been writing in you and around you. The intersection of The Creek’s story and your very own.

Over the next twelve weeks, we’ll be digging one by one into the singular vision, the three-fold mission, and each of the seven priorities we hold at The Creek. We want to pick each of them up, give you space to examine them, and listen to see where God might be calling you next.

Today, let’s take a bird’s eye look at the 317, taking time today and tomorrow to capture your initial beliefs about each section of The Creek’s vision, mission, and priorities. Like an initial visit to the doctor, assess where you are with each of these. Think of this exercise as a bit of a “you are here” marker on a GPS map. It is difficult to know where you need to go if you don’t know where you are. This exercise shouldn’t bring guilt or shame, but awareness. God wants us to grow; and in order to do that, we have to be honest about where we are right now. So, take a deep breath, remember you are loved as you are, but also know God is inviting you on a deeper journey with Him.

VISION • TO CONNECT PEOPLE TO JESUS

The Creek’s vision is two-fold. First, we want to connect people who do not know Jesus to Him. Second, as followers of Christ, we want to stay connected to Jesus, the vine (**John 15:1-5**).

MISSION • LOVE GOD. LOVE PEOPLE. MAKE DISCIPLES

The Creek’s mission (the steps we take to accomplish our vision) is based in the Great Commandment, Jesus’ summation of the law in **Matthew 22:37-39**, and in the Great Commission, Jesus’ instructions to His disciples in **Matthew 28:18-20**.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What is your understanding of The Creek’s vision to “connect people to Jesus”? How do you see this being important for the church? How do you see this to be important in your life? Is this something you are currently living out? What might God be inviting you to in this area?

What is your understanding of loving God, loving people, and making disciples? How do you see this being important for the church? How do you see this to be important in your life? Is this something you are currently living out? What might God be inviting you to in this area?

Of these three areas, which is the most difficult for you?
Which is the easiest?

How can your life group help you live these out more fully? What would it look like to live out these areas in a covenant community as you move forward in your life group?

Yesterday we began our intake assessment by looking at where we are right now with The Creek's vision and mission. Today we'll look at The Creek's priorities.

Like primary colors in a color palette, these priorities can be combined to allow us to paint any color on the spectrum. When we live out these priorities, we will see the mission and vision move forward. Remember, these elements are *all* important. We want each one to be present in the life of every person at The Creek. These are priorities that matter to Jesus, too. They help to shape us into His image as they show up in our lives with intention.

As we move through these twelve weeks, we're going to define these areas with more detail; but for today, let's take an honest look at where we are with these priorities and how we would currently define each of them.

Beneath each priority below, write your working definition of it, look up the Scriptures, and take a moment to answer these questions for each one:

1. *Is this priority important to me?*
2. *How is this priority being exemplified in my life?*
3. *What might God be inviting me to in this area?*

WORSHIP—We seek God's presence and honor in everything we do (1 Corinthians 10:31 & Psalm 27).

GOSPEL—We proclaim the good news of Jesus and center our lives on His teaching and example (Philippians 2:6-11 & Romans 1:16).

KINGDOM—We desire to see the fame and deeds of God renewed in our day, in Indianapolis and around the world (Matthew 6:10 & Habakkuk 3:2).

SCRIPTURE—We delight in God's Word and live it out on a daily basis (2 Timothy 3:16 & Hebrews 4:12).

IDENTITY—We receive God’s love and embrace our adoption as sons and daughters (1 John 3:1 & Matthew 3:17).

COMMUNITY—We value relationships and build our lives together as family (Romans 12:10, Acts 2:42-47, & Ephesians 2:19-22).

GENEROSITY—We share our resources to enrich others and advance God’s kingdom (Acts 4:32, Acts 20:35, & 2 Corinthians 8:9).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Of these seven areas, which are the most difficult for you?
Which are the easiest?

How can your life group help you live these out more fully?

What would it look like to live out these areas in a covenant community as you move forward in your life group? Explain.

As a church, we could have all the signs in the world hung around the 317 and hung around our building saying we believe in “connecting people to Jesus,” “loving God,” “loving people,” and that our priorities revolve around things like “worship,” “gospel,” and “generosity.” But words are only words until they’re experienced.

As a church, we don’t want to just talk the talk. We want to walk the walk, too.

One of the most integral arenas in which God’s story intersects with your own is in your life group. It is good and appropriate to make sure that you’re on board with your local faith community, actively contributing to the vision, mission, and priorities of the church you call home. But where that “stuff” gets lived out is vitally important as well.

That’s what life groups are. Your life group is intended to be the visible, tangible expression of The Creek’s vision, mission, and priorities.

Take a look at **Ephesians 2:1-10**:

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

You may be familiar with that passage. But one thing that often gets missed is the communal aspect of it. Did you notice the plurality with which Paul speaks here? He’s not talking to just individuals; he’s talking to the Ephesian church—the micro-expression of the big “C” Church.

Let’s look at that passage again. This time translating it with emphasis on the plurality with which Paul speaks.

*“As for **you all**, **you all** were dead in **your all’s** transgressions and sins, in which **you all** used to live when **you all** followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of **us** also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of **our** flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, **we** were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for **us**, God, who is rich in mercy, made **us** alive with Christ even when **we** were dead in transgressions—it is by grace **you all** have been saved. And God raised **us** up with Christ and seated **us** with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to **us** in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace **you all** have been saved, through faith—and this is not from **yourselves**, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For **we** are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for **us** to do.”*

Amazing, isn’t it? Paul is saying here that the entire Ephesian church has **together** walked in darkness, they have all **together** been made alive in Christ, and now they **together** have been created to do good works which God prepared in advance for **them** to do. And the same is true of **US** at The Creek and for you and your life group.

Today we're going to spend some time looking back at the week, using the Examen. We're inviting God to show us where He's been at work—where His story intersected with ours.

The Examen is a prayer practice for discerning the voice of God and the activity of God throughout the day. It fosters gratitude and creates deeper awareness of God-given desires in one's life. The Examen is not about completing a task, but about building a relationship with God.

BE STILL

Read Psalm 46:10. Find a quiet place where you can be alone with God. Get into a comfortable position and allow yourself to relax. Quiet your mind, your body, and your heart before God. Pay attention to your breathing for a moment. Breathe in deeply the love of God and exhale the stress and distractions of the day. Try to turn down the volume on your random thoughts and preoccupations.

There's nothing magical about praying. Prayer is a conversation with God. So, invite God to be with you in this time. Ask God to help you to be grateful and honest as you look back on the day. Let yourself see your day as God sees it.

PRACTICE GRATITUDE

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:18. Gratitude cultivates our hearts and minds to see God working. Gratitude, practiced often enough, helps us find God in all things and can transform the way we look at our life and at other people. So, review the day, naming the blessings, from the most significant and obvious to the more common and ordinary. Don't feel that you have to mechanically go through the day hour by hour or make a list of all the day's gifts. Instead, savor whatever gifts God shows you.

With God present, go back through your day. For what/whom are you grateful? As things come to mind, pause and express your gratitude to God.

PRAY THROUGH YOUR WEEK

Read Psalm 139:23-24. Ask God to guide you through the past week. Invite Him to lead you day by day as you answer these questions.

Noticing God's Story: As you review your week, where did you see God's story at work around you? Were there places where you partnered with God in His redemptive work? Were there places where you avoided it?

Noticing Your Unique Story: Did you notice any places where God uniquely positioned you? Where did you see God's story intersect with your own?

Noticing the 317: Did you notice any situations or circumstances where you connected someone to Jesus? Where you connected with Jesus in a deeper way? How did you love God, love people, or make disciples this week? As you look back at the list of our 7 priorities, how did they show up in your walk with God this week? Thank God for these moments.

REJOICE AND SEEK FORGIVENESS

Rejoice in the moments God brought you closer to Him today. Confess the moments when you resisted God's presence and ask for His forgiveness. Thank God for the gift of awareness. Receive God's grace for your entire day. In Christ, there is no condemnation.

LOOK TO TOMORROW

Just as God was with you this week, He is faithful and will be with you tomorrow. Invite God to be part of it. Ask Him for a greater awareness of His presence. As you think ahead to tomorrow, where do you need God's help? Invite Him to help you. Is there a specific gift of grace you need? Thank Him for His grace.

WEEK TWO

CONNECT PEOPLE
TO JESUS

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE + PRAYER**(5 minutes)**

For this week, begin your gathering with five minutes together in prayerful silence.

[Why silence? Our world is so busy, distracted, and bee-like, with technology filling in any gaps in between. With all that moving, it can be hard to hear others and hear the voice of God. As we gather together, let's press pause and enter into a moment of quiet so that we can hear what God is saying to us and through others.]

Once you have sat in silence, acknowledging each other's presence and God's presence, centering yourselves on Him, have someone pray to open your time together.

OPENING QUESTIONS**(5-10 minutes)**

- What stood out to you from your devotions this past week? How did God speak to you?
- Any questions on the life group covenant? What was Day 4 like for you to go through? Did anything stand out or challenge you? *(Feel free to collect any remaining life group covenants at this time.)*

TRANSITION TO WATCH THE WEEK 2 "CONNECTING PEOPLE TO JESUS" VIDEO (about 20 minutes)

Let your group know that like last week, you'll be watching a short teaching from our lead pastor, Dan. You'll want to have this video set up and tested to make sure everything is working properly ahead of time.

READ SCRIPTURE + DEBRIEF THE VIDEO IN SMALL GROUPS (40 minutes)

Split your group into smaller groups to read the following Scriptures and go through some of the questions on the following page. *(There are several here. You'll want to pick out a few ahead of time that you want to be sure to hit; otherwise you'll be constrained with your time).*

- What stood out to you from Dan's teaching? What challenged you? What resonated?
- What is your honest reaction when you think of connecting people to Jesus? What emotions or thoughts does that trigger?
- Connecting people to Jesus is a twofold vision: we ourselves must live connected to Him and we must help others get connected to Him. Which one of those is most challenging for you? Which sounds more inviting? Why?
- **Read John 15:1-5.** When Jesus says to remain in Him, what images does that conjure up? What is Jesus inviting you to?
- God is the gardener, cutting off what is dead and pruning what is alive to make it bear more fruit, but sometimes we want to hold onto those branches that He's working to remove. What is God cutting or pruning in your life that you need to release?
- **Read Mark 10:45 and Luke 19:10.** Then, reflect on what Dan said during his video. What did Jesus say His mission was while on earth? What stories of Jesus come to mind what you think of Him serving others or seeking the lost?
- **Luke 15** assures us that all of heaven rejoices when someone lost is found. How does that affect the way you see yourself and your relationship with God? Is there a perspective change that needs to happen in light of God's love and grace?
- How can your group find radical ways to get people to Jesus like the friends of the paralytic man in **Mark 2**? What are some ways this can become a constant focus of your group?
- Dan said the older brother in **Luke 15** had three options. Review those three options and compare his decision with the decision of Jesus, our "older brother." Do you have any older brothers—people who loved you enough to come get you and bring you home and who celebrated with you?

TRANSITION BACK TO ONE LARGE GROUP + DISCUSS
(10-20 MINUTES)

Ask a few questions about each person’s time in their smaller groups:

- Which questions did you discuss in your smaller groups? What were some of the things that came from your smaller group discussions? What lingering questions do you have about connecting people to Jesus?
- How is God inviting you to respond after tonight’s discussion?

FINISH WITH LOGISTICS + PRAYER
(10 minutes)

- This week, our devotions will dive a little deeper into some of the things discussed and asked tonight.
- Continue planning your Serve Day with your group. In Week 8 of this series, we’ll be talking about our church’s priority of “Kingdom” so you’ll want to continue talking with your group about ways you could potentially serve the 317 during that time. Maybe your group knows of a project that could be done or maybe you’d like to continue the relationships you formed in Rooted and serve with the same organization you connected with during your Serve Experience. If you need recommendations for serving, feel free to contact the Life Group Minister.
- Be sure to keep everyone up to date on the latest group info. If you didn’t last week, consider having each person pair off with someone else in the group, challenging these “buddies” to meet for coffee or a meal to make a relational connection. If you do this, consider challenging folks in your group to check in with their “buddy” by text or phone call at least once each week through the 317 series.

Finally, finish your group session with prayer. You might designate someone in your group to write down everyone’s prayer requests and then send them to the whole group for everyone to be praying about through the week.

1. What is on your heart that you need prayer for?
2. Who in your life needs prayer?

Have someone close your time together by interceding for the requests that were shared.

A man working in an orchard was walking through the trees in mid-summer. He noticed that many of his trees had dead branches. In trying to find a solution, he decided to paint hundreds of wooden apples. Then he filled a wheelbarrow with his beautifully painted apples and walked through the rows of trees. As he came to a tree with a dead branch, instead of cutting it off, he would take a handful of apples and painstakingly hang them from the branch. Then, he'd move on to find the next dead branch. Harvest time came, people came to buy his apples, and the orchard keeper was ruined because his attempts to create his own fruit had failed.

This week, we're going to dive deeper into our vision: **to connect people to Jesus**. A vision statement is a statement of a preferred future, a dream we want to come true. That preferred future then drives the decisions and plans—the mission and priorities—of the organization. For us at The Creek, that dream is seeing as many people fully connected to Jesus as possible.

When we talk about our vision of connecting people to Jesus, it only makes sense to start with Jesus Himself. For those of us who follow Him, our lives are tied with His. In fact, we receive our lives in exchange for the life He laid down for us. He is our focus and our chief desire. Read Jesus' testimony about Himself and about His followers in **John 15**.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:1-5)

As you reflect on Jesus' statement about connecting to Him here, note in the space below what specific words or phrases jump out at you. *What does it mean to you to "remain" in Jesus, the true Vine? What does that look like practically for you?*

To see our community, our city, and our world connected to Jesus, we must be connected to Him. HE is the true Vine. Israel no longer is (**Jeremiah 2:21**). While God planted them, they did not remain in Him. They were too busy coming up with their own way of doing things, wanting to be like the other nations. They sought after other gods and they betrayed the LORD their God. Because of that, Israel was both fruitless and barren. They were cut off.

Jesus has now come and He tells us that He is the true, the genuine, and the proper Vine—the one who will never be cut off because of His perfect relationship and obedience to the Father.

And that brings us back to our friend with the orchard. If he had worked with the trunk, the roots, and the soil around the trees, instead of focusing on curating an image of fruitfulness, he would have had no need for fake apples.

It's easy when talking about connecting people to Jesus to look at the fruit, to make sure we're seeing as many apples as possible ripen for harvest. But in God's upside-down kingdom, our eyes should not be on the fruit but on the vine, because when our focus—our vision, you might say—is on the vine, the fruit will grow, *naturally*. And it puts the growth of the apple in the hands of the only One who can truly do the growing.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Have you ever tried to curate an *image* of fruitfulness in your life? What were the results? What was the longevity of that fruit?

What fruit are you trying to create in your own strength today? What would it look like for you to attend not to the fruit, but to the “trunk, the roots, and the soil” in that instance? How might doing that be more beneficial than operating out of your own strength?

As you envision making The Creek’s vision real in your life or in the fabric of your life group, what things come to mind when you think about making that a reality? Where are you on track with that? What needs to be pruned? What’s dying that needs to be cut out?

Write a prayer thanking God for the abundant life you have as a branch in the vine. Thank Him for allowing His life and love to flow through you.

In this week's video, Dan shared three stories from **Luke 15** about the heart of God to see people connected to Jesus. When the lost sheep, coin, and son were found, there was an amazing celebration. Things just aren't right when something is lost (think of the last time you were ready to leave your house only to notice that you couldn't find your car keys), but when lost things are found, our natural reaction is to rejoice.

Let's look at one person in one of those stories: the father who had lost his son. We associate the father in the story to God, and rightfully so, but I wonder if there are times we should model ourselves after the father who loved the one who'd left as well as the one who'd stayed.

Read all of **Luke 15:11-32** and then check out these snippets from the story in **Luke 15**:

"...He got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." (v. 20)

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate." (vs. 22-24)

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" (vs. 31-32)

The father looked, welcomed, and advocated for both of his sons. His desire was to be with both of them, and he knew things wouldn't be complete without either of them.

When we start to adopt the love of the father for his children, we yearn for everyone to be connected, we fervently look for them, run to them even when they're far off, rejoice when they arrive, and advocate for one another to have the same joy. As Henri Nouwen says in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*,

*"Celebration belongs to God's Kingdom. God not only offers forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing, but wants to lift up these gifts as a source of joy for all who witness them. In all three of the parables [in **Luke 15**] which Jesus tells to explain why he eats with sinners, God rejoices and invites others to rejoice with him. 'Rejoice with me,' the shepherd says, 'I have found my sheep that was lost.' 'Rejoice with me,' the woman says, 'I have found the drachma I lost.' 'Rejoice with me,' the father says, 'this son of mine was lost and is found.' All these voices are the voices of God. God does not want to keep his joy to himself. He wants everyone to share in it. God's joy is the joy of his angels and his saints; it is the joy of all who belong to the Kingdom."*

I imagine the father going about his day, always in a position to see down the road—stealing glances while branding cattle, mending fences, shoeing horses, sitting every evening on his porch, just watching the road, waiting and knowing his son would be back. Maybe this is the picture that comes to mind when we think of **Colossians 3:17**, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

No matter what we're doing, perhaps we can adopt the posture of the father: one eye on our work and one eye scanning the horizon, ready to welcome home the one who is lost for the glory of God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Put yourself in the **Luke 15** story. How do you picture the father in the story of the lost son? What's his expression when his son leaves? What is it when the son returns? How does he speak to the older brother?

Do you remember when you first started your relationship with Jesus? Was there rejoicing? How can you share that rejoicing with others who are starting theirs? If not, what can you do to make that a reality for others?

How often are you looking for people who are "still a long way off?" What tends to keep your eyes on the imminent so that you're not able to look at the person who is a long way off? How might looking with God's eyes change you in those situations?

After spending time studying the father yesterday, it only seems fair to look at the sons today.

Spend a few minutes re-reading and re-familiarizing yourself with the **Luke 15:11-32** story. Here's a section we want to hone in on:

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father." (Luke 15:13-20)

People find themselves in various stages of the younger son's story. Sometimes they demand what's theirs so they can leave, live however they want, and only wind up reaching the end of their rope. Lost without a hope to be had. Maybe that sounds familiar. Perhaps you know someone who's in a pit, working on their speech to convince their father to take them back. Maybe that was (or is) you right now. Don't forget that the father is scanning the horizon, searching in love for his child.

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"
(Luke 15:28-30)

Then there's the older brother. He experienced a different kind of lostness and maybe you identify with him: faithfully serving, never straying or breaking the rules. Dan mentioned three options the older brother had: (1) saying good riddance when his brother left, (2) celebrating with others upon his return, or (3) leaving the comfort of the house to go get him and bring him home. We could safely say the older brother in the story chose poorly.

And we get to make our own choice.

- If we're in the shoes of the younger brother, will we allow God to bring us home? Will we let God find us? Will we let God love us? Will we let God know us?
- If we're in the shoes of the older brother, will we forego entitlement? Will we emulate the love of the Father? Will we get rid of the pride and ego? Will we get rid of the comparison? Will we get rid of the resentment? Will we get rid of the craving for attention and status and the "atta-boys" or "atta-girls"?

Maybe we can follow the example of another "older brother" who left His home to come looking for those who are in the pit. That's the choice Jesus made; he came to selflessly serve others to draw them to salvation (**Mark 10:45, Luke 19:10**).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Has there ever been a time in your life you felt like the younger son? What was that time like? What did your speech say? What was your perception of God in that time?

Has there ever been a time in your life you felt like the older son? What internal characteristics were present that led you to that point?

Who's your younger brother? Who are you willing to leave the comfort of home to bring back with you? Spend time thanking Jesus that He took on that role of bringing you back, and ask Him for the strength and grace to be able to do the same.

Now that we are starting to understand God’s heart for all of His children, and our potential roles in the story, let’s use our imaginations a little today.

Read Mark 2:1-12.

Whether or not you’re familiar with the story, take time to read through it a few times as though you haven’t heard it before. Get comfortable and take a few deep breaths as you acknowledge the presence of God with you through His Spirit.

On the **first reading**, try to envision the scene: the people, the house and other buildings, the weather. Take it all in.

On the **second reading**, put yourself in the story. Who are you? What do you see from your particular perspective? Listen to the voices of the conversation. Imagine making the hole or seeing the hole being made. Notice the reactions of everyone.

On the **third reading**, let the scene come more to life and listen for any invitation you might be receiving. Notice the love of the four friends and how much they must have trusted Jesus to heal their friend.

Take time to pray and journal in the space below through what you noticed. What did you see? What resonated with you? What stood out to you?

In his video, Dan said, “We need a little more radical in our lives.” He was referring to the lengths we might be willing to go to see everyone we know connected to Jesus. The friends in Mark were willing to break into a house through the roof to get their friend in front of Jesus.

Now that you’ve stretched your mind a little, let’s stick with using your imagination. What are some ideas you can come up with? Use the space below these bullet points to make a list and get started.

Maybe there are particular names and faces that come to mind that you can reach out to in a special way.

- Maybe there are gifts to give or ways to serve someone nearby that might open a door to a new relationship.
- Maybe there are neighbors, colleagues, or family members that you can share your story with, telling them how Jesus has changed your life.
- Pray for inspiration, get a little radical, share your ideas with your life group, and be open to the possibilities. God might really surprise you with the opportunities He provides.

The following year, the orchard owner reopened his orchard after his near-disastrous plan for selling fake apples. The people who came, while perhaps skeptical due to last year's "crop," found trees filled beyond comparison with ripe, juicy, and delicious apples—apples that were better than any they could remember. Many found the orchard owner and asked about the drastic change. "Nothing special," he would tell them, "I just learned that the secret to really great fruit lies not with the fruit, but with the tree."

When we hear a vision like "connecting people to Jesus," it's easy to keep our eyes on the fruit and to work hard with good intentions to create fruit that looks good. And we can become preoccupied with the idea that others should be connected without thinking also of ourselves.

When we live our lives focused on Jesus, staying connected to the Vine, the fruit will grow naturally, and it will be the kind of fruit that is not only appealing, but satisfying to anyone who comes and eats it.

Read the following passages below. In each one, mark out words or phrases that stand out to you and jot your notes in the empty spaces. As words or phrases stand out, reflect on what it is about those words or phrases that resonates so. In other words, *what is God teaching you through these verses?*

"...And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (Hebrews 12:1-3)

"But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." (Jeremiah 17:7-8)

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." (Colossians 3:1-4)

The Bible makes it clear, when we are following Jesus and we fix our eyes on Him, the fruit of our lives will grow to an exponential harvest. The Creek's vision statement is a simple one, but we believe there is incredible, world-changing power when we keep Jesus as our focus, stay firmly connected to Him, commit ourselves to seeing others through the eyes of the Father who loves all His children, and stop at nothing to connect as many people to Jesus as possible. Let's go!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The fruit we bear is one way to prove how connected we are to Jesus. How is the fruit of your life? Is there evidence of connection?

As you read the three scriptures above, what stands out to you about vision? What can you infer about what the Bible says is important in accomplishing our vision?

What might be stopping you from being more deeply connected to Jesus? How can your life group encourage and hold you accountable to remove those obstacles?

WEEK THREE

LOVE GOD

BEGIN WITH READING JOHN 15:1-17 + PRAYER**(5 minutes)**

Have someone in your group read **John 15** out loud. Have the group sit and reflect on what they hear. Allow the words to sink into your soul. Focus on abiding in Jesus as you hear Him speak through His Word.

Then, once the passage is complete, have someone pray for your time together.

OPENING QUESTIONS**(5-10 minutes)**

- What stood out to you from your devotions this past week? How did God speak to you?
- How does our culture define love? Does that definition ever seep its way into how you think about loving God? How so?

TRANSITION TO WATCH THE WEEK 3 "LOVE GOD" VIDEO**(about 20 minutes)**

Let your group know that just like last week, you'll be watching a short teaching from our lead pastor, Dan. You'll want to have this video set up and tested to make sure everything is working properly ahead of time.

READ SCRIPTURE + DEBRIEF IN SMALL GROUPS**(30-40 minutes)**

Split your group into smaller groups to read the following Scriptures and go through some of the questions on the following page. *(There are several here. You'll want to pick out a few ahead of time that you want to be sure to hit; otherwise you'll be constrained with your time).*

- What stood out to you from Dan's teaching? What challenged you? What resonated?
- **Read Mark 12:28-30.** How do you love God with your heart, mind, soul, and strength? Which one are you best at? Which one are you needing to grow in?
- **Read Psalm 139:1-18.** How does the Psalmist's relationship with the Lord compare/contrast with yours? What similarities are there? What differences?
- When you think about your love for God, does it tend to be done out of things like duty or social pressure or for status? Or do you love the Lord out of delight? Explain.
- What barriers do you feel are keeping you from loving God? Are they internal? External? Explain.
- **Read Revelation 2:1-5.** Has there ever been a period in your life where you've felt like you've "abandoned" your love for God? What did that feel like? How did that impact your relationship with God and others?
- As you sit and think about it, in what ways have you experienced God's love in your life?
- What does "loving God" have to do with being for the 317?

TRANSITION BACK TO ONE LARGE GROUP + DISCUSS
(20 MINUTES)

Ask a few questions about each person’s time in their smaller groups:

- Which questions did you discuss in your small groups? What were some of the things that came from your small group discussions? What lingering questions do you have about loving God?
- How is God inviting you to respond after tonight’s discussion?

FINISH WITH LOGISTICS + PRAYER
(10 minutes)

- This week, our devotions will dive a little deeper into some of the things discussed and asked tonight.
- Continue planning your Serve Day with your group. In Week 8 of this series, we’ll be talking about our church’s priority of “Kingdom” so you’ll want to continue talking with your group about ideas where you could potentially serve the 317 during that time frame. Maybe your group knows of a project that could be done or maybe you’d like to continue the relationships you formed in Rooted and serve with the same organization you connected with during your Serve Experience. If you need recommendations for serving, feel free to contact the Life Group Minister.

Finally, finish your group session with prayer. You might designate someone in your group to write down everyone’s prayer requests and then send them to the whole group for everyone to be praying about through the week.

1. What is on your heart that you need prayer for?
2. Who in your life needs prayer?

Have someone close your time together by interceding for the requests that were shared.

This whole week we are going to look at the first part of our mission as a church. Last week in our #FORTHE317 series we talked about how our vision is to “Connect People to Jesus.” If you think about it, the realization of that vision can only happen when we do the first part of our mission: Love God.

When we went through Rooted, we asked and discussed the question: “Who is God?” And while you may be still figuring out who God is, the next logical question for Christians to ask is “Ok, if that’s who God is...how do I relate to Him?” And specifically, we should ask, “What does it look like to love that God?”

Jesus told his followers that the greatest thing we can do is to **Love God**. But, in talking about loving God, there’s more to that than meets the eye. Reason being, love is just a difficult concept to define in English. We use the same word in so many different ways. You may love your spouse, you may love the mountains, and you may also love pizza. We use the same word to describe how we feel about people, places, and things even though most of us would say that we don’t love those things in the same way or for the same reasons.

So when we talk about our love for God, what do we mean and why?

When the Pharisees tried to test Jesus they asked Him, “Which is the greatest commandment?” This is a tough question because there are over 600 Mosaic Laws to choose from. Which one would/should He choose as more important than the rest? Jesus replies, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the single most important thing God asks of us.

But it isn’t enough to know that we should love God, at some point, we have to stop and ask, “Why?” God does not demand our love out of some baseless sense of ego or selfishness. Our love for Him is based on the fact that He loved us first and He loves us best. John says, “We love because He first loved us” (**1 John 4:19**). When we see how God has loved mankind throughout history and how He continues to love us personally, it is only right and natural that we would love Him. Paul said in **Romans 5:8**, “But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” We were lost and enemies of God but He still loves us enough to allow His Son to be tortured, humiliated, and murdered so that we could spend eternity with Him.

As author Max Lucado says, “Nails didn’t hold God to a cross. Love did.”

The cross is the greatest example of love that has ever been and that will ever be. Author and Christian philosopher C.S. Lewis in his book *The Four Loves* defines the highest form of love as agape and describes it as a selfless love that is passionately committed to the well-being of others. Jesus demonstrated perfect love because He sought our well-being at the expense of His own. This is why we “love” God. Tomorrow we’ll dive into defining that love a bit more, but for now, spend some time reflecting on the questions below.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How is your love for God similar or dissimilar to your love for other things in life (family, food, etc.)? How does your love for God compare and contrast to the relationships in your life?

How would you describe how your love for God has grown throughout your life?

Take a moment to write out the reasons you love God, it could be 1, 5, 100.

So, yesterday we began looking at what it means for us to love God. One distinction that's important for us to make on that journey is the difference between "head knowledge" of God's love and "heart knowledge" of God's love. It's one thing to know cerebrally that God loves you. It's another thing to have the love of God poured into your heart by the Holy Spirit and have it transform you (**see Romans 5:5**).

The overwhelming majority of people who interacted with Jesus during His time on earth would describe Him as loving, kind, and gentle. An exception would be the Pharisees. Jesus was notably harsh with them, calling them hypocrites, fools, whitewashed tombs, and full of greed. So who were the Pharisees and why was Jesus so harsh with them?

The Pharisees were a devout sect of conservative Judaism that prided themselves on knowledge and strict observance of the Law. These men were the religious leaders of the early Jewish community. They held positions of authority, esteem, and influence. At first glance, it seems strange that Jesus would have such an adversarial relationship with them. After all, we're supposed to know the Scriptures, right? We're supposed to live under the authority of the Word of God, no?

So why, on the one hand, do we see grace and mercy when Jesus speaks with prostitutes, thieves, and social outcasts, but on the other, we see Him condemning religious leaders?

What the Pharisees missed was that knowledge about God and correct doctrine ≠ love for God. They had lots of head knowledge and theological training but the result was pride, not love.

**THEY KNEW ABOUT GOD
BUT THEY DID NOT LOVE HIM.**

Jesus condemned their self-righteousness in **Matthew 23** saying, "You are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity." These guys talked the talk, but they couldn't walk the walk.

In **Revelation 2** we see a church that seems to be doing everything right. They were known for their hard work, patience, calling out false apostles, and enduring trial after trial. In spite of all this, in **Revelation 2:4** Jesus says to that church, "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." They did everything right, but they had forsaken the love for God that they once had.

It's important to say here that having the correct doctrine, the right theology, and the right facts about God are all still important. If your facts about God are wrong, then you might wind up "loving" the wrong god altogether! But in our information-heavy culture, that's not usually the temptation for us. Our temptation is to know about God but not love him.

Greg Morse when writing about Pharisee-ism says, "It is a scary reality that the road to hell is not only paved with good intentions, but good deeds and theological precision as well." In other words, we can grow in our knowledge about God while at the same time our love for him shrinks.

As the old hymn truthfully says: We are all prone to wander. And typically, when we think of that kind of wandering, images of drugs, violence, or sexual immorality pop into our minds. The truth though? While we might not ever wander into any of those vices, we might just wander towards something just as deadly: a heart far from loving the Lord.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What do you think the difference is between head knowledge and heart knowledge of God? Why are both necessary? Which one do you tend to emphasize?

Where do you see aspects of “Pharisee-ism” at work in your own heart and life?

Are your Bible reading, church-going, spiritual disciplines growing your love for God, your knowledge about Him, or both? Explain why.

Based on your answers to questions 1 through 3, what do you need to do to ensure you are not neglecting truths about God NOR neglecting actually loving God?

On Day 1, we looked at Jesus' response briefly when he was questioned by the Pharisees about which commandment out of ALL the commandments in the Old Testament was the greatest (which was meant as a trick question).

Jesus responded to this question by saying that all of the commandments are summed up in one: Loving God with your heart, mind, and soul.

When Jesus told the Pharisees that the greatest commandment was to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind, he was referring to a passage back in Deuteronomy (the fifth book in your Bible).

In **Deuteronomy 6**, in what is called the Shema, the text says, "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*"

The parallels between the words of Moses and the words of Jesus are clear. But Jesus exchanges "might" for "mind" - not a contradiction of Scripture, but an addition. He draws out and expands on Deuteronomy. Jesus would have known the Shema and likely prayed it daily as was Jewish custom (and still is the custom for Jews today).

To the Hebrew writers of the Old Testament, the heart represented the center of a person's being. To them, people thought with their hearts (see **Genesis 6:5** where the author references "the thoughts" of men's hearts). In **Matthew 22**, Jesus is drawing out that implication and adding another dimension.

- When Jesus says "heart" he means our passions, emotions, affections.
- When Jesus says "soul" he means our whole being, the totality of what makes us a person including our bodies (according to the Bible, humans don't have souls...Humans are souls, but we don't have time to dig in that right here).
- When Jesus says "mind" he means our intellectual devotion, thoughts, and decision making.

In short, we are to love God with, well, our everything - our affections, bodies, and thoughts

On the surface, it seems like God is asking a lot from us. To love Him with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind certainly seems like a tall order. Don't, however, allow the Enemy to convince you that the commands of the Lord are burdensome. **1 John 5:3** clearly says they are not.

Author Jon Bloom says, "...We can only experience this greatest love because the greatest Lover loved us with an infinitely greater love first." God holds nothing back in His love for us. But what are we holding back in our love for Him?

God is not demanding our performance or even our righteousness but our passions, affections, thoughts, and ultimately our entire being. In giving those things to the Lord, the Scriptures teach us that we'll find Ultimate Love, true Joy, and never-ending Peace. Why? Because God is love (**1 John 4:8**), in God's presence there is fullness of joy (**Psalms 16:11**), and because He is the Lord of peace (**2 Thessalonians 3:16**).

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) has estimated that 900,000 Christians have been killed for their faith in the last decade. These men and women did not lay down their lives because of a sense of duty, obligation, or even obedience. They laid down their lives because of their boundless love for God. Has our love for God consumed our hearts, our souls, and our minds in that way?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What is something or someone that you feel like you love with your heart, soul, and mind - something that consumes your affections, your thoughts, and your body? Compare and contrast your love for that person or thing with your love for God. What do you notice?

How are you loving God with your heart, soul, and mind? Write out 1-2 sentences for each.

Are there aspects of your life where you are not loving God? What is holding you back? Explain.

When you think about your love for God, does it tend to be done out of things like duty or social pressure or for status? Or do you love the Lord out of delight? Explain.

On Day 1, we introduced these ideas about what it means to “love” God. On Day 2, we dove into the careful distinction of loving God not just with our heads, but also with our hearts. On Day 3, we reflected a little more about loving God with our hearts, souls, and minds. And today, on Day 4, we are going to look a bit at a great relational barrier we sometimes face when it comes to loving God.

Growth in relationships never happens without intentionality, purpose, and trust. You can probably think about a dating relationship or a marital relationship or even a familial relationship where those three characteristics are present (and as a result, the relationship flourishes) and you can probably think of a relationship in your life where those three characteristics are missing (and as a result, the relationship suffers).

The same principle is true of our relationship with God. Distance does not make the heart grow fonder, it actually may make the heart wander. (Side note: This doesn’t mean that we lose our salvation in those moments. Think of a marriage between husband and wife. The two may be struggling in their relationship, but that doesn’t mean that they aren’t married. It just means they’ve got some things to work on).

One of the hard parts about loving God can be the fact that maybe you haven’t had great experiences in loving other people.

C.S. Lewis says in his book *The Four Loves*, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken.”

Maybe you know this to be true from personal experience and you feel like even if you wanted to love, the painful memories of the past have shattered you in such a way that you don’t even know where to start.

But unlike our relationships with people, *there are no skeletons in God’s closet.*

We never have to fear finding out some dark secret. He will never betray us in the way that our friends and families potentially have. We are free to search out the heart of God with boldness because there is only beauty there.

Take some time to read and ponder **Hebrews 1:1-3.**

In the space below, write out what it means to you that, “God speaks to us through his Son.” Also, write out your response to this question: If God has spoken to us through his Son (his character and his actions), what does that reveal to you about the character and nature of God? Or, in other words, what is God saying to you through Jesus?

God is so passionate about a relationship with you. God assumes all of the risks. He has already extended Himself to us. The only chance of rejection comes from us because He will never turn you away. God smiles when He sees you coming.

To truly love and trust God means that we must continually strive to understand the love He has for us. Brennan Manning says in his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out*, “There is an essential connection between experiencing God, loving God, and trusting God. You will trust God only as much as you love Him. And you will love Him to the extent you have touched Him, rather than He has touched you.”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Are there painful experiences in your past that have hindered your ability to love God? What would need to happen for you to give them to God?

Do you agree with the statement, "There are no skeletons in God's closet?" Why or why not? If you disagree, what skeletons do you think are there?

Write out 1-5 barriers keeping you from loving God better. It could be busyness, bitterness, or fear. What would it take to remove them?

In the words of Brennan Manning, how has God touched you? Or, in other words, how have you tangibly experienced God's love in your life?

WEEK FOUR

LOVE PEOPLE

BEGIN WITH 5 MINUTES OF SILENCE + PRAYER (5 minutes)

For this week, begin again in silence (you may be noticing a trend!). Just like we learned this week in our devotions, abiding in Jesus is how we bear fruit. Begin your gathering with five minutes together in prayerful silence, abiding in the presence of the Father.

[Why silence? Our world is so busy, distracted, and bee-like, with technology filling in any gaps in between. With all that moving, it can be hard to hear others and hear the voice of God. As we gather together, let's press pause and enter into a moment of quiet so that we can hear what God is saying to us and through others.]

Once you have sat in silence, each acknowledging each other's presence and God's presence, centering yourselves on Him, have someone pray to open your time together.

OPENING QUESTIONS (5-10 minutes)

- What was your experience like with Lectio Divina this week and sitting with **Isaiah 40**? What were 2-3 characteristics of God that stuck out to you? Explain.
- What would you say are the top 3 things Christians are known for being or doing in our world today? Do you think "loving people" would be on that list? Why or why not? Have each person share at least one opinion.

TRANSITION TO WATCH THE WEEK 4 "LOVE PEOPLE" VIDEO (about 20 minutes)

Let your group know that just like last week, you'll be watching a short teaching from our lead pastor, Dan. You'll want to have this video set up and tested to make sure everything is working properly ahead of time.

READ SCRIPTURE + DEBRIEF THE VIDEO IN SMALL GROUPS (30-40 minutes)

Split your group into smaller groups to read the following Scriptures and go through some of the questions below (*There are several here. You'll want to pick out a few ahead of time that you want to be sure to hit; otherwise you'll be constrained with your time*):

- What stood out to you from Dan's teaching? What challenged you? What resonated?
- When was a time you experienced followers of Jesus to be...less than loving?
- When was a time when you saw an exponential outpouring of love from Christians towards you? How did that impact you?
- **Read John 13:35.** Clearly, in that passage Jesus says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." But pretend for a moment that you hadn't heard this verse before. If you were to finish Jesus' sentence for him (By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you _____), how would you finish it? How do you think people outside of the church would finish that sentence?
- **Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-7.** Which of the different definitions of love in these verses do you feel like you are strong in (ex. "being loving by being patient," "being loving by being kind," "being loving by not envying...")? Which do you feel like you could grow in?
- Who in your life do you find hard to love? Why is that?
- What groups of people do you find hard to love? Explain.
- What truths about God or yourself do you think you need to ponder to help you love that person or those people?

As we get started this week, we are launching into the second part of our mission. Last week, we reflected on how the first part of our mission is to Love God. But the second part of our mission is just as important. We are to *Love People*.

That has probably become slightly cliché, right? I don't think anyone hears this and immediately thinks, "No thanks! I'm good. Loving people? Not my thing!" No one says that. BUT, there are subtle things in our lives that get in the way of us loving other people (think: pride, ego, selfishness, prejudice).

When we talk about loving people, one of the first things we need to understand is that all people are created in the image of God.

Read Genesis 1:1-27.

In the space below, note what you notice about the difference between humans and creation? Note the details of how humanity was created and its role in creation.

In **Genesis 1**, God speaks the universe into existence. He creates the wonders of far-off galaxies and the beauty and intricacies of various flowers and trees. Then, in **verse 24**, God begins to create beings that move, breathe, run, hunt, eat, and reproduce. Next, in **verse 25**, God says, "It is good."

But then, **Genesis 1:26** sees a shift in the creation narrative. It says, "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness... so God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'"

"In the image of God he created them..."

Imago Dei is the phrase we use to describe that verse's reality. In Latin, it means "image of God" and is used to describe humanity's divine spark, humanity's inherent worth and dignity, humanity's difference between them and the animal kingdom.

With this in mind, **Genesis 1** teaches us two vital ideas:

1. Every single individual is made in the image of God.
2. Individuals have a higher dignity, worth, and nobility than anything else in creation.

Or as theologian John Calvin puts it:

"We should not regard what a man is and what he deserves: but we should go higher – that it is God who has placed us in the world for such a purpose that we be united and joined together. He has impressed his image in us and has given us a common nature, which should incite us to providing one for the other. The man who wishes to exempt himself from providing for his neighbors should face himself and declare that he no longer wishes to be a man, for as long as we are human creatures we must contemplate as in a mirror our face in those who are poor, despised, exhausted, who groan under their burdens..."

To view people as possessing the *Imago Dei* is to be who God created us to be. To deny individuals as possessing the *Imago Dei*, in thought or in action, is to miss the mark of our divinely ordained purpose.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What are your thoughts, feelings, and questions about being made in the image of God? Write what comes to mind.

What are your thoughts, feelings, and questions about possessing greater nobility (worth, value) than any of God's other creations? Write what comes to mind.

When was a time in this past year when you may have missed the mark in looking at others in thought or action in that way?

PRACTICE FOR THIS WEEK

As you go throughout your week – from the house to the grocery store and everything in between – pay special attention to people that annoy you or irk you.

When you notice those feelings, stop what you're doing and pray for that person. Then, ask yourself, "How would my view of this person change if I viewed them as the *Imago Dei*?"

You'll have a chance to reflect on how this went for you in your group time and at the end of this week's devotionals!

Yesterday, we looked at how God made people in his image full of dignity, value, and worth. One of the hard parts about seeing people in a full-blown *Imago Dei* kind of way is that we struggle to love them as God loves us.

Think with me about marriage in our culture for a second. So many marriages today are struggling because of the “50-50 principle.” I don’t know where we learned this, but many have believed the myth that if one person brings 50% and the other brings 50%, together, they’ll create a 100% healthy marriage. And friends, that just isn’t the truth. The 50-50 myth actually leads to:

- *Keeping score*
- *Being critical*
- *Complaining about needs not being met (think phrases like “it’s not fair”)*
- *Resentment*
- *Bitterness*
- *Trying to fix each other*

Essentially...it leads to *conditional* love. And as you can see, that leads to some problems. If someone experiences conditional love, they’ll always feel like they’ve got to earn their partner’s approval, never quite making it. That, or they’ll have to constantly worry about the relationship shattering before their very eyes at one wrong misstep – leading to incessant worry, fear, anxiety, and stress.

Read Ephesians 5:21, slowly, three times.

After each time reading, write any thoughts that you have in the space below. What words stand out? What do those words mean to you? What would living those words look like for you in your own context?

Some Bible translations exclusively link this verse to marriage. However, in context, this verse instructs us how we should approach all relationships. Look at the breakdown of this verse:

- “Submit” – to give up one’s own right or will for another
- “...Out of reverence for Christ” – not out of our own feelings toward that other person but out of the respect and devotion we have for our God

Notice this verse does not say submit to one another *only if they submit to you* or if they reciprocate or if they make it easy! Our ability “to give up our own rights” for others is not conditional on whether we get that back in return but based on our reverence for Christ alone.

It’s a simple, yet incredibly difficult task: unconditional love for all people. That’s what honors God. That’s what will connect people to Jesus. That can change the world!

Imagine visitors walking into our church and seeing thousands of people from all different backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and classes loving God, loving each other, and living life together for our city? That kind of love makes God look glorious and that makes His Church look beautiful.

And all of this stems from the fact that we are unconditionally loved by God. That’s a truth that needs to be reiterated one more time (at least).

YOU ARE UNCONDITIONALLY LOVED BY THE CREATOR, RULER, AND REDEEMER OF THE COSMOS!

One of the shortest and yet most profound verses in all the Bible is this simple sentence: “We love, because God first loved us (1 John 4:19).” Maybe John’s second-best verse comes a few verses earlier in **verse 11** when he says, “If God loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

Any love we have to give flows directly from our understanding of just how we are loved by God.

In love, God designed us to bear His image.

In love, God gave us the freedom to make choices.

In love, God rescued us from our choices through Jesus' death and resurrection.

In love, God invites us to love others with the love He gave us.

"God's unfailing love for us is an objective fact affirmed over and over in the Scriptures. It is true whether we believe it or not. Our doubts do not destroy God's love, nor does our faith create it. It originates in the very nature of God, who is love, and it flows to us through our union with His beloved Son." - Jerry Bridges

"Though we are incomplete, God loves us completely. Though we are imperfect, He loves us perfectly. Though we may feel lost and without compass, God's love encompasses us completely. He loves every one of us, even those who are flawed, rejected, awkward, sorrowful, or broken." - Dieter F. Uchtdorf

It boils down to this: You can't love people with the love of God if you don't believe God loves you.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do you ever feel like people put "conditions" on their love for you? How does that make you feel?

Think of someone in each of the 3 categories of relationships in your life: (1) a work relationship; (2) a spiritual relationship (say a person in your life group); and (3) an intimate relationship (a child, a spouse, etc.). Do you have any conditions for any of the people in each of these categories? What are they? Are they appropriate to have?

Do you need to confess any "conditions" you've placed on loving others? Take time to write a prayer to God confessing those.

Meditate on **1 John 3:16** and then **Philippians 2:2-11**. How does the love of God made known by Christ's work on the cross impact how you should love your kids? Your spouse? Your co-workers?

On Day 1, we learned that each and every person is created in the image of God, the *Imago Dei*. And yesterday we looked at how God's love towards us is the foundation of us loving others.

While I'm sure no one would willingly say that they disagree with those two things (recognizing that everyone is made in God's image and that they are worthy of the kind of love that God loves us with), if we're being honest...we also probably know someone we'd deem *that person*.

You know who I'm talking about – we see them coming from down the hall, down the street, across the church lobby, and we inwardly groan.

Our minds begin to race: *Did they see me? Did they see me, see them? Is there someone nearby I can start a conversation with before they get to me?*

But alas, there they are in front of us. So we force a smile, say "hi," engage in a little chit-chat, and look for the quickest way out of the encounter.

We all know *that person*.

When Jesus kicks off his ministry, he begins it with healings, exorcisms, and the best sermon ever preached – all taking place in **Matthew 5-7**. It's surprising that Jesus was so popular because, if you look closely, some of his words are very challenging.

Take a look at **Matthew 5:46-48** from the Contemporary English Version:

"If you love only those people who love you, will God reward you for that? Even tax collectors love their friends. If you greet only your friends, what's so great about that? Don't even unbelievers do that? But you must always act like your Father in heaven."

Ouch. Notice that this was not a suggestion, but rather a command from God. God commands us to love difficult people. When we love difficult people, it's a sign that we understand how much God loves us. But, admittedly, it's not easy.

Yesterday we were reminded that we are created in the image of God (the *Imago Dei*), that God loves us more than anything else He created. For us to "act like our Father in heaven", we must learn how to love all people as He loves us.

Let's pause right there and ask...

Who in your life (family, a co-worker, neighbor, brother or sister in Christ) is difficult to love? Write down any names that come to mind.

What makes you want to avoid that individual? Is it their attitude that's the problem or is it actually yours? Is it that they stand too close, make awkward comments, have bad breath, have hurt us in the past? Or is it about our preference to be around people we know and like? Is it their quirks? Or is it maybe a lack of humility, forgetting we have quirks too? Write your thoughts in the space below:

Most likely, the reason *that person* is *that person* is because they're people with foibles just like you. God's commands are rarely easy, but they are important. Here are five ways to grow in your ability to love that person.

Take some time and practice the following steps below:

PRAY FOR YOUR OWN HEART.

Ask God to soften your heart towards this person, to put off anger and irritability, to put on meekness and kindness, to understand this person's struggles, and to meet them with compassion (**Colossians 3:12-14**).

PRAY FOR THAT PERSON.

Ask God to be at work in their hearts, drawing them to Himself and helping them see how much He loves them (**John 3:16-17**).

MOVE TOWARD THEM, NOT AWAY FROM THEM.

Although our tendency is to steer clear of that person, try intentionally moving toward them. Find ways to actively love that person. Habitual love has a habit of changing the hearts of others as well as our own. Write down 2-3 ways you can serve that person in the next week or so.

GIVE THEM GRACE, JUST AS GOD GIVES GRACE TO YOU.

Remember God's grace poured out for your own daily sins. Pray to God right now to help you bear with them and love them well (**Colossians 3:13**).

REALIZE THAT, YOU TOO, COULD BE THE DIFFICULT PERSON IN SOMEONE ELSE'S LIFE!

Have you ever considered if you're the thorn in someone else's flesh? Don't be oblivious to your own shortcomings and sins. Spend some time thinking through your week. Was there a time when you could have been that person to someone else? Make a plan to apologize if the Lord stirs something in your heart and brings someone to mind.

God will be honored and our hearts will find deeper contentment as we seek to love people just as Christ loved us when we were his enemies.

Yesterday we worked through what it looks like to engage *that person* in our lives, but what if *that person* is actually *those people*?

Hear me out: Have you ever considered the idea that there might be prejudice lurking beneath the surface in your own heart? (Probably not the way you thought this devotional would start, huh?)

Truth is, there probably is. The word prejudice has Latin origins and means to “pre-judge based on opinion.” Still doubting if it’s true of you? Consider this:

- *How do you determine the quickest line to get into at the grocery store?*
- *How do you choose what to wear?*
- *How do you decide where to sit at church?*
- *How do you choose a doctor, what car to buy, what career path to take?*

Based on previous experience, research, or sometimes just a hunch, we “pre-judge” decisions all the time. According to Psychology Today, Dr. Eva Krockow suggests the average person makes 35,000 choices a day. If you sleep an average of seven hours daily, that’s over 2000 choices every waking hour! And many of those choices are based on what you have “pre-judged” about a situation or a person.

Few people walk around proudly exclaiming, “I’m prejudiced!” That’s a stigma we want nothing to do with. The truth though? We all make pre-judgments about people before we really get to know them based on any number of factors:

- *Appearance (think: clothes, hair, skin color, physical attributes, tattoos, piercings)*
- *Behavior (think: introvert/extrovert, speech accent, arrogant/insecure, habits)*
- *Status (think: car, home, income, job, influence, success, followers on social media)*

And the list could go on...We do this based on our experiences and our opinions which makes it incredibly difficult to love them the way Jesus loves them.

Read Luke 7:36-50.

I love this story! Imagine the scene: Jesus is eating dinner one night when a prostitute comes into the home, kneels down at Jesus’ feet, and starts weeping, drying her tears with her hair. Then she anoints Jesus with expensive perfume (very likely bought with the money she earned working).

Don’t miss these two important facts:

1. While the religious people began passing judgment, Jesus forgave her sins.
2. Those who claimed to know God saw her like they wanted to see her, but Jesus saw her for who she truly was... a child of God in need of hope and forgiveness.

Yesterday we were challenged on our tendency to avoid difficult individuals. And Jesus was noted for his mysterious want to meet with people who didn’t think, act, or look like him. But think with me also about the people groups Jesus went out of his way to interact with: prostitutes, tax collectors, hypocrites, lepers, criminals, outcasts, the poor, the hurting, the needy, and the rejected.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What “pre-judgments” do you think you tend to make of other people?
Are there certain ones that you feel like are made more often than others?

Have you ever experienced someone writing you off not because of your character but because of a certain people group they associated you with?
What did that feel like?

In what ways have you seen a “pre-judgment” about someone lead to distance in your relationship with that person or people group?

Who are *those* people to you?

When was a time when you “pre-judged” someone and were proven wrong about your judgment?

Like going to the eye doctor to fix a vision problem, spend time asking God for new eyes – the eyes of Jesus. Pray that you would see all people, particularly the people you have pre-judged, like he sees them. Spend time confessing prejudices you have. Confess them knowing that God will forgive (1 John 1:9).

In 2015, Justin Bieber released a song that has over 1.3 billion streams on Spotify. It's called "Love Yourself" and it's about a relationship that ended because one person was self-absorbed. So, because they couldn't love the other person well, the Biebs suggested, "You should go and love yourself."

While many do struggle with a healthy sense of self-worth, our problem isn't usually loving ourselves enough. It's only loving ourselves. As humans in a fractured world, we all struggle with self-absorption. And this keeps us from loving people in a God-honoring way.

Look at this painfully accurate assessment of the effects of self-absorption in our culture from Psychology Today:

"Our relationships are damaged, sometimes irreparably, by a self-preoccupation that undermines the closeness, or intimacy, that all relationships require if they're to be nurturing and resilient. Constant self-absorption undermines our capacity for empathy and true understanding of the thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires of others. It's extremely difficult to clearly appreciate the world that exists outside ourselves when most of the time our focus is directed inwards."

A lot of our self-centeredness, however, is just the water we swim in. As David Foster Wallace writes,

"Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realest, most vivid, and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it's so socially repulsive. But it's pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of.

The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real."

Wallace is right. Selfishness is the air we breathe. Everything from Burger King's, "Have It YOUR Way," to UPS's, "What can brown do for YOU?" leads us either consciously or subconsciously to think first and foremost of ourselves.

Read Luke 10:30-37.

In the space below, jot down a couple of ways you see selflessness on the part of the Samaritan. Then reflect on what characteristics of the Samaritan need to be true of you in order to love others well.

When Jesus was asked which commandment was greatest, he gave a two-part answer: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (which we covered last week). But then he said, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

So, is Jesus telling us to literally love others as we love ourselves? Or is Jesus challenging us to see others as equally valuable in God's sight? The answer is probably a bit of both! If there's one glaring area we can grow in, it's learning to love others like ourselves.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do you feel love for yourself (not in the selfish sense, but in the self-worth sense)? Why or why not? How has this hindered or helped your ability to love others?

How have you seen love for your "self" (in the selfish sense) get in the way of you loving others as God loves them?

What is one habit you might be able to put in place to help you minimize self-absorption and maximize loving that person and loving those people?

Write a prayer to God about developing a heart of selflessness like the Samaritan man in **Luke 10**.

WEEKLY RECAP

As a result of the devotions and your reflections this week, what is one thing God is saying to you?

As you went throughout your week – from the house to the grocery store and everything in between – did you notice anyone that fit into the category of that person or those people? People that annoy you or irk you?

What was it like stopping to ask yourself, "How would my view of this person change if I viewed them as the *Imago Dei*?"

How did that change your disposition towards them?

WEEK FIVE

MAKE DISCIPLES

BEGIN WITH 5 MINUTES OF SILENCE + PRAYER (5 minutes)

For this week, begin your gathering with five minutes together in prayerful silence.

[Why silence? Our world is so busy, distracted, and bee-like, with technology filling in any gaps in between. With all that moving, it can be hard to hear others and hear the voice of God. As we gather together, let's press pause and enter into a moment of quiet so that we can hear what God is saying to us and through others.]

Once you have sat in silence, acknowledging each other's presence and God's presence, and centering yourselves on Him, have someone pray to open your time together.

OPENING QUESTIONS (5-10 minutes)

- What stood out to you from your devotions this past week? How did God speak to you?
- What was it like this week asking the question, "How would my view of this person change if I viewed them as the image of God?"
- Did God change your heart about anything? Did He invite you into anything? Did He teach you anything?

TRANSITION TO WATCH THE WEEK 5 "MAKE DISCIPLES" VIDEO (about 20 minutes)

Let your group know that just like last week, you'll be watching a short teaching from our lead pastor, Dan. You'll want to have this video set up and tested to make sure everything is working properly ahead of time.

READ SCRIPTURE + DEBRIEF IN SMALL GROUPS (30-40 minutes)

Split your group into smaller groups to read the following Scriptures and go through some of the questions below *(There are several here. You'll want to pick out a few ahead of time that you want to be sure to hit; otherwise you'll be constrained with your time):*

- **Read Matthew 28:18-20.** What does it mean to make disciples according to this passage?
- What was something from this video that deepened your faith or challenged you?
- In this video, Dan quoted **Romans 12:2** saying, "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold." Then he said, "As followers of Jesus, our goal is not to look like the world around us, but to look like Jesus." How do you discern what beliefs or practices you believe because of your discipleship to Jesus and not just because it's what the culture around you (family, friends, etc.) believes?
- When was a time your values or way of living was confronted as you pursued discipleship to Jesus? How did it feel? What did you do?
- Dan also mentioned that a "disciple" is a "student" or "apprentice" of someone else. Do you see Jesus as your Rabbi (Teacher) and yourself as His student? Why or why not? What has that looked like practically for you?
- What is something you have learned recently from Jesus as His student? And how have you integrated it into your life?
- What is the goal of Christian discipleship? Why is pursuing discipleship to Jesus so important?
- Why do you personally pursue discipleship to Jesus?

On December 26, 1960 Vince Lombardi and his Green Bay Packers stood in defeat as the Philadelphia Eagles beat them 17-13 – a game in which Green Bay was favored to win. A couple months later following that crushing defeat, Lombardi stood in front of his men as they prepared to embark on the 1961 football season – men who, months earlier, had championship dreams slip through their fingers.

What do you say to a group of men that had laid it all on the line only to come up 4 points short to get them ready to play a whole other season? Lombardi started training camp with something in his hand that needed no explanation.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “This is a football.”

With those five words, Lombardi made his point loud and clear. If you want to win a championship, you’ve got to know and execute the fundamentals. He challenged them each day to nail the basics of the game. Six months later, the same group of men gathered together to hear another one of Vince Lombardi’s speeches. This time it was to celebrate their NFL Championship and their 37–0 victory over the NY Giants. By remembering the fundamentals, they had become the best in the league at the tasks everyone else took for granted.

Take a few moments to reflect on some of the things you think make a good church. What are the fundamentals to a church? Jot down your answers below:

Okay...question: Did discipleship come to mind?

There’s a Christian writer/speaker by the name of Neil Cole who I heard recently make a really convicting statement. He said, “Ultimately every church will be evaluated by only one thing, its disciples. Your church is only as good as its disciples. It does not matter how good your praise, preaching, programs, or property are. If your disciples are passive, needy, consumerist, and not moving in the direction of radical obedience, **your church is not good.**”

That quote says something not only about the fact that churches should be making disciples, but also about the *kind* of disciples it should be making. As a church, we have got to get discipleship right.

This is what Jesus commissioned his followers to do. Before Jesus’ ascension, he looked at His followers and said in **Matthew 28:19-20**,

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...”

Discipleship is to the church what the football is to the game of football. It’s at its heart. It’s at the core. That’s why as a church, we are going to commit ourselves to making disciples and that’s why as a church we have included it in our mission. The third part of The Creek’s mission statement is to “Make Disciples.” If we are known for anything, it has to be that the folks at The Creek made disciples of Jesus who loved God passionately and loved people intentionally.

As we go about the next couple of days, we are going to be looking at what discipleship is.

Ok, if we are learning to disciple under Jesus and not under the world, what does that look like?

Let's look at **Matthew 4**. Go ahead and read **Matthew 4:18-22**.

After Jesus had finished preaching the gospel, he began calling people to "follow Him." In the verses you just read, Jesus comes across two groups of people and invites them to be His disciples.

Jesus was a 1st century Rabbi (or Teacher). In fact, many times throughout the gospels He is referred to as such (see **Mark 10:51; Luke 19:39; John 1:35-39, 3:1-4, 6:25**).

Rabbis would teach, interpret the Hebrew Scriptures, and would take certain people "under their wings" to show them how to live a life pleasing to God. These people were called disciples.

When Rabbi Jesus calls these fishermen in **Matthew 4**, he is calling them to disciple under Him. A disciple is a student, learner, follower, or apprentice – kind of like how today one might apprentice under a master welder or how a student fresh out of college might be a student teacher under a more experienced educator. Discipleship was a bit like that... except it went a little deeper.

Put simply, a disciple oriented their life around three main goals:

1. *Being with their Rabbi*
2. *Becoming like their Rabbi*
3. *Doing what their Rabbi did*

BE WITH THEIR RABBI

Disciples in Jesus' day weren't like students in a classroom, showing up a couple times a week for a lecture. They wanted to be with their Rabbi 24/7. As Jesus' disciples today, we want to do the same.

Jesus said before He went to the cross at one point (much to the bewilderment of His followers) that, "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you" (**John 16:7**).

Jesus is talking here about the Holy Spirit. Because Christians have the Holy Spirit dwelling inside them (**Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17**), we have the presence of Jesus with us wherever we go. It would be to our *disadvantage* if we didn't lean into God with us.

If Jesus is truly our Rabbi, it follows then that one goal we should orient our lives around is ***being with Jesus***.

BECOME LIKE THEIR RABBI

Rabbis in Jesus' day also wanted to mold their followers into the kinds of people who would naturally do the same kinds of things and live the same kind of life that they themselves lived.

Jesus' call as a Rabbi is the same. His call doesn't end with just being with Him. He also wants to help His disciples **become** the kind of people who would look, live, and love just like Himself (Notice, in **Matthew 4:19** how Jesus says, "I will **make you** fishers of men..."). If Jesus is our Rabbi and we are His disciples, this means that another goal we should orient our lives around is ***becoming like Jesus***.

DO WHAT THEIR RABBI DID

Rabbis in Jesus' day also expected their disciples to learn to do the kinds of things that they themselves did. Jesus, as a Rabbi, was no different. If Jesus is our Rabbi and we are His disciples, this means that the final goal we should orient our lives around is ***doing what Jesus did***.

- *Jesus prayed, so we pray.*
- *Jesus disciplined others, so we disciple others.*
- *Jesus read the Scriptures, so we read the Scriptures.*
- *Jesus cared for the sick and the broken, so we do too.*

You get the point...If Jesus is our Rabbi, we should ***do what Jesus did***. We'll dig a little deeper into these three areas in the next three days, but for now, pause and reflect on the questions on the next page.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do you see Jesus as your Rabbi (Teacher)? Why or why not? If yes, what have you learned from Him? If no, how has this devotional challenged your thinking on seeing Him in such a light?

In what ways have you seen yourself grow to become more like Jesus?

Which of the three aspects to being a disciple (being with Jesus, becoming like Jesus, doing what Jesus did) are you most naturally drawn to? Which do you find hardest? Explain.

What do each of these three aspects of being a disciple look like for you practically?

This week we've been talking about discipleship to Jesus. And we even narrowed discipleship down into three distinct goals:

1. *Being with Jesus*
2. *Becoming like Jesus*
3. *Doing what Jesus did*

Let's look at those a little more in depth today.

BE WITH JESUS

Take a few moments and read **Philippians 3:8**, **Galatians 4:9**, **1 John 4:8**, and **2 Peter 3:18**.

Pastor/author John Mark Comer writes,

"Our primary goal as followers of Jesus is learning to live in a constant state of connection to the Spirit. This is how we are able to be with Jesus, our Rabbi. We must invite Him into every moment and learn to always be in two places at once—at home and with Jesus, at work and with Jesus, on your commute and with Jesus. Bring His presence into the routine of your daily life."

Inherent in this endeavor of inviting Jesus into every moment of our lives is the idea that God is both personal and knowable. Sure, there may be times that we are unaware of God's presence, but as Christians, God's presence is living within us. Peter tells us that upon our baptism into Christ, God's Spirit comes to reside within us (**Acts 2:38**).

When we talk about "being with Jesus" today, we are referencing the idea that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, access to God has been achieved for us (**Ephesians 2:18**). And because of that finished work, we don't have just access to God, but now we can have a personal, experiential, real relationship with the God of the Universe. That's what the word "know" means in the verses you read at the beginning of today's devotional. It refers to a personal knowing, not just an abstract knowledge of facts about God.

Unfortunately, there are many Christians who never realize that this kind of relationship is available to them.

Many believers find themselves, as author Skye Jethani notes in his book *With*, living life **UNDER** God (meaning God sets up the rules and we do what He says without any personal relationship with Him), **OVER** God (meaning we set up the rules we want to follow and have no real relationship with God), **FROM** God (meaning that we have a transactional relationship with God, only seeking Him for the things he might be able to give us), and **FOR** God (meaning we busy ourselves with serving God, reading our Bible, and going to church all without actually doing it without God's presence in our lives).

And while there's some truth to these ways that people relate to God, the main way that we are able to relate to God is the same as how Jesus related to God. We are to live life **WITH** God.

If you read through the gospels, you'll begin to see that Jesus lived life with an awareness of God's presence in His own life (**John 5:19**; **John 14:10-11**).

What does this look like for us as Jesus' disciples?

Thomas Kelly writes in a book called *A Testament of Devotion* that,

"There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings. The secular world of today values and cultivates only the first level believing this is where the real business of mankind is done...But we know that the deep level of prayer is the most important thing in the world. It is at this deep level that the real business of life is determined."

This is what Paul means when he exhorts us to "pray without ceasing" (**1 Thessalonians 5:17**). Though it may seem odd at first, Christians, as Kelly teaches us, are able to order our thought life to be on two levels at the same time, in the day to day and at the same time aware of what God is doing, is up to, is saying, is leading, is directing.

And as we practice listening to the Spirit of Jesus, we'll soon learn to truly live life *with* Jesus every moment of every day.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do you think God can be known? Why or why not? If yes, what does it mean to “know” God?

Would you say you live life “with” God? If yes, what does this look like for you? If no, how would you describe how you relate to God?

In Thomas Kelly’s description of ordering our mental life, which level do you feel like you primarily operate on – level 1 (the “thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs”) or level 2 (the “behind the scenes” awareness of “gentle receptiveness to divine breathings”)? Explain.

Have you ever experienced Level 2 thinking? When? What was that like for you?

How might you be able to tangibly practice cultivating Level 2 thinking – a deep awareness of God’s presence and voice in your life?

Yesterday we began looking at a life of discipleship. We began by touching briefly on living life with Jesus. But today, we get to touch on the second characteristic of discipleship: Becoming like Jesus.

BECOMING LIKE JESUS

Jesus' invitation is to follow after Him. He is inviting us to become the kind of person He is – to think like He thinks, to act like He acts, to live as He lives in the power of the Holy Spirit. What we need to realize, however, is that Jesus isn't the only one with that sort of invitation.

Part of making and being disciples means realizing that our culture and our world are doing their best to disciple us. As theologian Ronald Rolheiser writes,

"Culture today is so powerful and alluring that it often just swallows us whole. It's beauty, power, and promise generally take away our breath and our perspective. The lure of present salvation – money, sex, creativity, the good life – has for the most part entertained, amused, distracted, and numbed us into a state where we no longer have a perspective beyond that of our culture and its short-range soteriology."

And this is really no different than Jesus' words in **Luke 6:39-40**.

Take a few moments to read those verses.

Jesus here begins His parable by asking two questions: "Can the blind lead the blind?" Answer? A resounding "no." Then He asks another question, "Will they not both fall into a pit?" Answer? A resounding "yes." Then, Jesus goes on to say that a disciple is not above His teacher and that disciples actually undergo a training process to become like their teacher.

This parable is to two audiences: (1) Those who are the leading, teaching, directing, guiding, and instructing folks in a philosophy where life can be lived apart from God and God's Kingdom; and (2) Those who follow these so-called sages.

Jesus' point here is not to bash alternate philosophies of life for the sake of bashing them. Jesus' concern here is to get people to think. He wants to point people to reality. Jesus wants to point people to what is actually true. He wants to point people to himself!

But why exactly are these words so important?

Philosopher Dallas Willard once wrote, "It is one of the major transitions in life to recognize who has taught us, mastered us, and then to evaluate the results in us of their teaching."

As we just mentioned, we are shaped by all kinds of people, experiences, and cultural scripts. Many times our values, habits, lifestyle, etc. are shaped by our family of origin, what we see on social media, and what we see in our social circles. BUT, it could be that in many of these cases, we have a case of the blind leading the blind.

- What if the values embedded in me by my parents aren't in accordance with reality?
- What if my view regarding the purpose of humanity is more akin to what my friends think than what the Bible says?
- What if my vision of the good life is shaped more by social media than by the life of Jesus of Nazareth?

Well, I don't have to guess. If I, who am blind, follow another who is blind, then I will end up in a pit.

Who then can see? Well, that's Jesus' point.

As Jesus says over and over again throughout the gospels, He alone is the one who sees clearly, loves unconditionally, lives rightly, thinks purely, acts righteously. He alone is the one who can teach us to become all that we were created to be (**see John 6:35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 11:25; 10:11, 14; 14:6; 15:1, 5**).

As His disciples, one of our goals is to learn from Him how to love and live. It's a process. It takes training. We aren't born naturally able to look, live, and love like Jesus. It takes transformation.

As we gradually realize that we are creatures shaped by the water we swim in, we must always consider what is in accordance with the way of Jesus and what is not regarding how we think, how we feel, and how we act.

We might ask ourselves questions like the following to help:

- Does my life align with God and his kingdom? In what ways does it? In what ways does it not?
- Am I really loving God with all of my heart, mind, soul, and strength?
- What does how I allocate my time say about how I love God and love people?
- What does where I spend my money say about my love for God and my love for people?

Like the tide that gently carries an unaware swimmer, our culture has the potential to gently pull us farther from the way of Jesus. It's through training, reflection, and intentionality to become disciples of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit, that we are able to make sure our lives are pointed in the right direction.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In what ways do you feel pressured to live, act, think, or feel a certain way by the culture around you (be it culture at large, your family, etc.)

When was a time in your life when you “followed the blind” and wound up in a pit?

Pick two or three of the questions from the different lists above. Reflect on your answers and think about what in your life or the culture around you impacts the answer you gave.

What does “becoming like Jesus” look like practically for you?

After looking at becoming like Jesus yesterday, today we'll be looking at the final aspect of discipleship: doing what Jesus did.

DOING WHAT JESUS DID

When we look at Jesus' life and ministry, we quickly see that He was for something bigger than Himself – Jesus was about seeing justice and peace invade the earth. Part of apprenticing under Jesus is taking up that same mantle.

Read Matthew 4:23-25.

Did you notice what Jesus does here? He doesn't just talk the talk, He walks the walk. His proclamation of the gospel went hand in hand with his manifestation of the gospel. Jesus' announcement of God's kingdom being now available to all was made obvious through His healing, exorcisms, and restorative work in Galilee. That's because in God's government, Satan, sin, and death have no business being present. Jesus brings a word of repentance but He also brings it with tangible acts of love. He preaches the gospel, but He also brings healing, shalom, justice, and peace over a spiritually, socially, and culturally broken world.

And if we keep on reading, we quickly see later in the gospels that Jesus sent His disciples to accomplish the same things He began doing in His ministry!

Read Luke 9:1-2.

For Jesus and the disciples, it was their demonstration (with their hands and feet) of the gospel that gave credibility to their proclamation of the gospel. And the same thing could be said for us too. We walk the walk of life in Christ so that, when the time is right, we can "talk the talk" with those who need to be told about salvation in Christ Jesus.

But what does this walking look like? In our day and age, it means we engage in both personal piety and in love of our neighbor. Many times Christians can swing to one extreme or the other. Some churches can heavily focus on personal piety at the expense of loving their neighbor. At the same time, however, some other churches might do the exact opposite. They focus on justice and community, but they neglect prayer, devotions, fasting, Sabbath, simplicity, etc.

As a church, we don't want to be one of the churches marked as having been about only one of those without being concerned about the other. We want to be a people who are marked as being concerned about BOTH! Why? Because Jesus was concerned about both!

Jesus' life was characterized by both personal piety (**Luke 5:16**) and by loving the broken (as we just read in Matthew). As His disciples, we need to move to be a people who do the same as our teacher. We move to pray and fast, to meditate on the Scriptures, to practice Sabbath AND we move into the brokenness around us to give our message weight and confidence.

And we do BOTH because as Pastor Jon Tyson writes,

"As a result of human sin, systemic evil, and spiritual warfare, our world is broken and far from God. Although God created the world to be good and holy, our world and our city are full of hatred, violence, division, pride, greed, injustice, addiction, pain, disease, and death. Our city desperately needs to be healed, restored, and renewed. Only God can bring about the renewal we long for, and He has chosen to do this through the proclamation of the gospel – 'the good news of the victory of Jesus' – and the advancement of His Kingdom through His people."

In a culture that's all about personal advancement, God is inviting His people to join Him in both their private prayer closets and on their city's public streets. This is where "being WITH Jesus" comes into play. If we truly seek God as our Treasure, we'll want to go where He is. If that's around the communion table, shouldn't that be where we want to go? If that's in the Scriptures and prayer, shouldn't that be where we want to go? And if He is found in the poor and needy (**Matthew 25**), shouldn't we want to go there too?

What followers of Jesus have known since the inception of Christianity is that God has called us to join in His mission – to be light in the midst of the darkness. To do that, we are invited to disciple under the One who did it best – Jesus. If we want to be a church that is #FORTHE317, may we be a people who live **WITH** Jesus, **BECOME** like Jesus, and **DO** what Jesus did. All three of these work in conjunction with one another. They are symbiotic.

As we are **WITH** Jesus, we become like Him. As we **BECOME** like Him, we **DO** what He did. As we **DO** what He did, we **BECOME** like Him. As we **BECOME** like Him, we wind up spending more time **WITH** Him. It goes on and on and on until Christ returns and we can fully join Him in glory.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

When you think about “doing” the things that Jesus did, what feelings begin to bubble up in you?

If the temptation in “doing what Jesus did” is to swing between Extreme #1 (personal piety) and Extreme #2 (loving neighbor), which extreme do you feel you drift to more easily to? Explain.

Think over the last month of your life. What has personal piety looked like for you this month? What has loving your neighbor looked like for you? What has your motivation looked like in your doing? What does looking over your past month reveal to you?

What practical way can you “do what Jesus did” this week?

As you reflect on this entire week, which aspect of discipleship do you want to press into more this year (being with Jesus? Becoming like Jesus? Doing what Jesus did?)? How can your life group help you in that?



WEEK SIX

WORSHIP

INTRO QUESTION + 1 MINUTE OF SILENCE + PRAYER (5 minutes)

Spend some time with each person sharing one simple way you saw God work this week. Also, take some time to share your memory work from this past week.

Next, begin your gathering with one minute together in prayerful silence.

[Why silence? Our world is so busy, distracted, and bee-like, with technology filling in any gaps in between. With all that moving, it can be hard to hear others and hear the voice of God. As we gather together, let's press pause and enter into a moment of quiet so that we can hear what God is saying to us and through others.]

Once you have sat in silence, each acknowledging one another's presence and God's presence, centering yourselves on Him, have someone pray to open your time together.

TRANSITION TO WATCH THE WEEK 6 "WORSHIP" VIDEO (about 20 minutes)

You'll want to have this video set up and tested to make sure everything is working properly ahead of time.

READ SCRIPTURE + DEBRIEF IN SMALL GROUPS (30-40 minutes)

Split your group into smaller groups to read the following Scriptures and go through some of the questions below (*There are several here. You'll want to pick out a few ahead of time that you want to be sure to hit; otherwise you'll be constrained with your time*):

- What resonated with you the most from the video? What challenged you most?
- How did the teaching shape your understanding of what worship is? Explain.

- Read through **Revelation 4:2-11** together. What do you notice about the picture of worship given here?
- When you reflect on Abraham's willingness to obey God (**Genesis 22:1-19**) and David's desire to not offer a sacrifice that costs him nothing (**I Chronicles 21:18-30**), how does that compare to your current view and practice of worship?
- Two pressing questions about worship are: "Who or what are you worshiping?" and "Is the object of your worship worthy of worship?" How would you respond to those questions?
- With worship as a priority, we want to seek the presence of God. How do you seek God's presence? What does that look like in your life? What obstacles get in the way? How does seeking God's presence affect you?
- Read **Romans 12:1** and **I Corinthians 10:31**. On a practical level, what does it look like to "offer our bodies as a living sacrifice" or to "do it all for the glory of God?" What keeps you from doing this? What encourages you to do it?

**TRANSITION BACK TO ONE LARGE GROUP + DISCUSS
(20 MINUTES)**

Ask a few questions about each person’s time in their smaller groups:

- Which questions did you discuss in your smaller groups? What were some of the things that came from your smaller group discussions? What lingering questions do you have about being and making disciples?
- How is God inviting you to respond after tonight’s discussion?

**FINISH WITH LOGISTICS + PRAYER
(10 minutes)**

Be sure to keep everyone up to date on the latest group info. Here are some considerations to keep in mind:

- This week we’ll be diving into the topic a little deeper in our daily devotionals. This includes a practice called the Prayer of Examen. Take a few moments to invite your group members to look at the prayer before you finish.
- In two weeks, we’ll be talking about our priority of “Kingdom.” This would be the week for you to have your Serve experience. If you haven’t already, try contacting one of our local partners to see how your group might be able to serve in our community! You can see a list of The Creek partners at www.thecreek.org/serve.

Finally, finish your group session with prayer. You might designate someone in your group to write down everyone’s prayer requests and then send them to the whole group for everyone to be praying about through the week.

1. What is on your heart that you need prayer for?
2. Who in your life needs prayer?

Have someone close your time together by interceding for the requests that were shared.

This week’s devotions will look a little different than the last several weeks. You’ll note throughout this week that instead of having reflection questions just at the end, there will be some sprinkled through each day’s devotions on this week’s topic: Worship.

Worship has been a hot topic since the beginning of the church. No, seriously. For centuries, people have argued, fought, and even entered into “wars” about it. There have been so many different ideas about it, that at times, we’ve lost sight of what God intended it to be.

Worship is such an integral part of our relationship with God. It’s a way we connect with Jesus. It’s how we both love Him and love others. It makes us better disciples. We want to make Worship a priority where what we do is “all for the glory of God.” We want to seek God’s presence and honor in everything we do.

And everyone has an opinion about it. How it should happen. When it should happen. Who it should happen for. Most of the heated discussion around worship stems from defining worship as music alone. Scripture tells us worship is so much more than the songs we sing. It is beyond musical preference or style. It is beyond a weekly gathering. It is so much more.

According to the New Bible Dictionary, the word “worship,” is rooted in the Old English word ‘weorthscipe,’ meaning ‘worth-ship.’ The term “originally referred to the action of human beings in expressing homage to God because He is worthy of it.”¹

The first thing we need to understand about worship is that it’s not an adjective in the Biblical definition. We use it in this way often when we say “worship music” or “worship service” or “worship leader.” But the definition of worship is a verb. It’s an action.

In *The Way of a Worshipper*, Buddy Owens writes,

“Authentic worship is a response to an authentic encounter with the living God...When we worship God, we declare His worth. But in order to declare God’s worth, we must first discover His worth. And that brings me to a question: What is God worth to you? To the extent you can answer that question, you’ll be a worshiper. Your life will reflect His value, both in the things you say and, more convincingly, by the way you live...We worship God, not to win an audience with Him, but because He first came seeking an audience with us.”²

Worship actually begins with God. It begins with His inherent worth, His pursuit of His people, His love and grace given to us, His power and authority over us. Worship begins with the love of God. God is the initiator of all worship by design. He is the Creator of it all. He first came seeking an audience with us. He reveals himself and only then do we respond.

So, what is God worth to you? Take a moment to sit with that question and journal your response.

¹ I. H. Marshall, “Worship,” ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1250.

² Owens, Buddy, *The Way of a Worshipper*, (), 17-18

Read Psalm 96 in your Bible.

In **verse 8** of this Psalm, the Psalmist invites us to “ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name.” According to dictionary.com, The word “ascribe” means “to give, provide; to credit or assign, as to a cause or source; to attribute.” This text invites us to credit or attribute God the glory He is due because of who He is. What does it mean to “ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name?” What would that look like on a daily basis? Use the space below to note your thoughts.

Read through **Psalm 96** again. Make a list of the actions of God, the Creator, and a separate list of the actions of creation and man. What is attributed to God and what is attributed to creation? What do you notice as a result?

Today, as you wrap up your time with God, take a moment to write your own letter or Psalm to God, telling Him what He is worth to you.

So far this week, we've defined worship as ascribing worth, directing your affection and devotion toward someone or something, and responding to a perception of ultimate worth. We've looked at the Hebrew and Greek understanding of the word worship as bowing down before someone in reverence. We've discussed God as being the only one worthy of our worship.

As we continue our conversation of worship, we want to look at what Scripture says it means to honor God in everything we do. What does it look like to live "all for the glory of God?"

Romans 12:1 says,

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."

The Greek word for worship in this text is *latreia*, which means "service, worship, the state of a hired laborer, the business, or duties." This understanding of the word worship should stand out to us especially as we expand our understanding of worship as a verb.

This text is showing us that when we worship (*proskyneo*—bow down), it will lead us to worship (*latreia*—service, duties). When we bow our knee to Jesus, we will be about His business. *Because we bend the knee to Jesus, our lives will be different. We will serve Him and bring Him honor and glory as we surrender.*

1 Corinthians 10:31 says,

"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

In this passage, Paul is addressing questions about whether believers should eat food sacrificed to idols. He simply says, whatever you do, just do it for God's glory. If what you are doing brings honor and glory to God, it is right and good.

Remember how we looked at worship as a verb instead of an adjective at times (i.e. worship music, worship service, worship leader)? Well, Paul is inviting us to infuse worship into everything. Let's say we do use worship as an adjective. We can make a case for worship driving (driving that brings glory to God), worship grocery shopping (grocery shopping that brings glory to God), worship conversations (conversations that bring glory to God). This list could go on and on: worship sports, worship studying, worship reading, worship talking, worship working, worship resting. If worship is the focus, it will bring glory to God. If we bow down in worship, it will make its way into absolutely everything. This is what Paul is inviting us to do. Worship Jesus with our very lives by bringing Him honor and glory in everything we do.

So, what does that look like exactly? Let's continue to read some of **Romans 12** to see what Paul suggested.

Read Romans 12:1-21. As you read the text, notice all of the actions described.

Which actions stand out as you read through the text? Which are easiest for you to do? Which are more difficult? Why are they difficult? Which ones do you need to invite the Holy Spirit to help you with? Which ones do you need accountability in order to grow in them? Note your observations in the space below.

Throughout this week, we've been defining worship, naming where our affections and devotion truly resides, naming Jesus as the only One who can bear the weight of our worship, and inviting Him to be a part of everything we do.

As a part of our desire to worship Jesus as a priority in our church, we want to seek the presence of God. That may seem like a strange thing to seek out. Why would we want to do that and ultimately what does that look like?

Let's begin with a simple question: Do you know the God of the universe wants to just be with you? Really. Take a moment to read that question again. Do you really know it? Write out your answer. How does thinking on a question like that make you feel?

God created us for relationship with Him. When sin entered the story, that relationship was broken. Jesus left heaven, put on flesh, and came down. He became Immanuel, "God with us." He went to the cross and gave His life to mend that broken relationship once and for all. He rose from the grave, conquering sin and death so we could experience the love of God in its fullness. When Jesus went back to heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to be our guide, to live in us so we would have the indwelling presence of God—Christ in us.

God has always wanted to be with His people. His presence is what changes us. As we worship Him, we will seek Him in all we do.

Today we're going to read through some Psalms, the "prayer book" of the Bible. These Psalms are prayers written to God. Today, we get to make them our prayers, too.

As you read through each Psalm, think about what it means to seek God's presence in your life. Read through each Psalm slowly. Mark words or phrases in each that stand out to you. Invite God to show you what it means to desire to seek His presence.

Read Psalm 27:1-14.

What stands out to you in this Psalm? Which words or phrases are most significant? What is God inviting you to with these words? Write a prayer below based on the words of this Psalm.

Read Psalm 84:1-12.

What stands out to you in this Psalm? Which words or phrases are most significant? What is God inviting you to with these words? Write a prayer below based on the words of this Psalm.

Read Psalm 63:1-11.

What stands out to you in this Psalm? Which words or phrases are most significant? What is God inviting you to with these words? Write a prayer below based on the words of this Psalm.

Just like a multi-faceted diamond, worship has many nuanced definitions that matter in our complete understanding. Worship is ascribing someone or something ultimate worth. It's bowing down in surrender (proskyneo) to that person or thing. When we bow down, we're stirred to action (latrīa—service, duties). As we worship, what we worship makes its way into everything we do. A part of worship is pursuing God's presence with us, turning our attention to Him.

We can pursue God's presence, but what does that look like in practice? In our everyday ordinary lives, how does it play out?

Adele Calhoun writes,

"We all live our lives in the presence of God. In fact, we cannot not live our lives in the presence of God...Yet we become so preoccupied with the to-do list and so overwhelmed by the pace of life that we forget to look for God sightings in our day." ⁴

Luke tells the story of a woman who faced the same dilemma and Jesus was right in front of her.

*Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. **Luke 10:38-39** (ESV)*

Martha was a hostess. She welcomed the weary, traveling Jesus and his companions into her home. Jesus needed rest and she provided a place for it. There were preparations that had to be made and making those preparations was not Martha's downfall.

When a group of people was welcomed into a home in ancient Israel, there were many hospitable expectations. Food had to be prepared. Feet had to be washed. Serving had to be done. Welcoming Jesus and his disciples into her home was a generous gesture on Martha's part.

Martha's sister, Mary, was captivated by Jesus' teaching. While Martha gathered the necessary items to put together a respectable dinner, Mary was sitting. She was still. Not moving. Not serving. Not paying attention to the obvious to-do list. She had stopped to rest at the feet of Jesus.

Martha's problem was not the preparations themselves. Her problem was that she was distracted. The Greek word used here is *perispao*—"to be drawn off from around; to be so overburdened by various distractions as to be worried and anxious."⁵ Martha was distracted—drawn away—by doing actual ministry. She was serving Jesus and was drawn away from Him. So much so that it caused her worry and anxiety.

In her distraction, Martha saw Mary sitting and doing nothing, so she decided to take action.

*And she went up to [Jesus] and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." **Luke 10:40** (ESV)*

Martha went straight to Jesus. It's best to go straight to Jesus with your questions and anxiety. Jesus responded.

*He said, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." **Luke 10:40-42** (ESV)*

It would be easy to assume Martha should have just chosen to do exactly what Mary did. Mary chose to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to Him. Mary's eyes were fixed on Jesus. But there's a tension that exists. The work still had to get done. Someone had to cook dinner for these guests. Someone had to care for these weary wanderers. Doing the work wasn't the issue.

Martha was distracted—fixed on the tasks at hand. She was focused on the producing, not the presence of Christ. Her eyes saw tasks versus the people right in front of her for whom she was doing the work. She was looking at the next thing that needed to be done and she missed Jesus in the process. *And He was right in front of her.*

⁴Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 72.

⁵Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition, V 1, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 313-314.

WEEK SEVEN

GOSPEL

BEGIN WITH 1 MINUTE OF SILENCE + PRAYER (5 minutes)

For this week, begin your gathering with five minutes together in prayerful silence.

[Why silence? Our world is so busy, distracted, and bee-like, with technology filling in any gaps in between. With all that moving, it can be hard to hear others and hear the voice of God. As we gather together, let's press pause and enter into a moment of quiet so that we can hear what God is saying to us and through others.]

Once you've sat in silence, each acknowledging each other's presence and God's presence, centering yourselves on Him, have someone pray to open your time together.

OPENING QUESTIONS (5-10 minutes)

- What stood out to you from your devotions this past week? How did these devotions enrich your view or worship? How was the Examen practice this week?
- The word "gospel" isn't used much these days, but it does come up occasionally. Where and how does the word "gospel" get used today? What sort of connotations does that word have for you?

(Hint: think about when someone "accepts something as gospel," when someone says that something is the "gospel truth," or when someone refers to "gospel music".)

TRANSITION TO WATCH THE WEEK 7 "GOSPEL" VIDEO (about 20 minutes)

Let your group know that, just like last week, you'll be watching a short teaching from our lead pastor, Dan. You'll want to have this video set up and tested to make sure everything is working properly ahead of time.

READ SCRIPTURE + DEBRIEF IN SMALL GROUPS (30-40 minutes)

Split your group into smaller groups to read the following Scriptures and go through some of the questions below (*There are several here. You'll want to pick out a few ahead of time that you want to be sure to hit; otherwise you'll be constrained with your time*):

- When you were growing up, what was your view of what the gospel was?
- How does Dan's teaching change or challenge or deepen your understanding of the gospel?
- Would you consider Jesus your Lord? Why or why not? Why do you personally find it necessary to submit to Jesus' lordship?
- In this video, Dan said that our priority of the gospel means at least two things: (1) that we proclaim that Jesus is Lord and (2) that we center our lives on his teaching and example. How do you see these two facets of our gospel priority at work in your own life?
- If Jesus' lordship in our lives means that Jesus gets from us whatever he asks. He gets, as Dan mentioned, "What he wants, when he wants, and how he wants it." When was a time in your life where, regardless of your own preferences, you gave Jesus what he was asking you to do? When was a time you didn't hand over to Jesus what he was asking of you?
- How is Jesus a different kind of Lord or King than earthly lords and kings (i.e. Jesus is loving, compassionate, just, etc.)? How does this difference make submitting to His lordship easier?
- Have different people in your group split up the following passages so as to read them privately. After doing so, ask those folks to share their paraphrase of whichever verse they were given with the group and what that specific passage has to say about the gospel (see **Mark 1:1, 14-15; Romans 1:1-4; Galatians 1:6-9; 1 Corinthians 15:1-5; Ephesians 1:11-14, 3:6, 6:18-20; Philippians 1:27**).
- Based on these Scriptures and Dan's message, how would you describe the gospel in your own words?
- Who is someone you can begin praying about an opportunity to share the gospel with?

TRANSITION BACK TO ONE LARGE GROUP + DISCUSS
(20 MINUTES)

Ask a few questions about each person’s time in their smaller groups:

- Which questions did you discuss in your smaller groups? What were some of the things that came from your smaller group discussions? What lingering questions do you have about the gospel?
- How is God inviting you to respond after tonight’s discussion?

FINISH WITH LOGISTICS + PRAYER
(10 minutes)

Be sure to keep everyone up to date on the latest group info. Here are some considerations to keep in mind:

- Continue planning your serve experience together as needed.
- In two weeks, we’ll come to our priority of Scripture. For that week, you’ll have an opportunity to experiment with another practice together. For week nine, you’ll be given the space to read through all of the book of Philippians together as a group in one sitting. Don’t worry, we’ll provide instructions for that week when you get there. All you need to make sure people bring is their Bibles and a pen!

Finally, like each week, finish your group session with prayer. This week, end your time by praying specifically for the people in your life that you want to share the good news of Jesus with.

Use the following prompts from Scripture to pray for that person both tonight and throughout this week:

1. I pray, Lord, that You draw _____ to Yourself. **(John 6:44)**
2. I pray that _____ seeks to know You. **(Acts 17:27)**
3. I pray that _____ hears and believes the Word of God. **(1 Thess. 2:13)**
4. Holy Spirit, I ask You to convict _____ of his/her sin and reveal his/her need for Christ’s redemption. **(John 16:8; 1 Thes. 1:5)**
5. I also ask that You give me (and/or my fellow disciple) the opportunity, the courage, and the right words to share the truth with _____. **(Col. 4:3-6; Eph. 6:19-20)**

This week we are going to be taking a look at our priority of "Gospel." And before we dive in, we want to pause a moment and think about that word. Think back to a time before hearing Dan's message on our priority of the Gospel. If someone had approached you and asked, "What is the gospel?" what would you have said?

Take a few moments and, in the space below, write out your response to the question, "What is the gospel in one word?" What **one word** would you use? Then, to the side, reflect on why you chose that word.

Round two: If you had to answer the question, "What is the gospel in one sentence?" What **one sentence** would you write? Again, to the side, reflect on why you wrote what you wrote in that sentence.

Last round: If you had as much space as you wanted to answer the question, "What is the gospel?" what would you write? Use the space below to do so. For the last time, to the side, reflect on why you wrote what you wrote in that paragraph.

It's probably a helpful exercise to sit and articulate what the gospel is since it's so foundational to who we are as followers of Jesus. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, this gospel is of "first importance..." (1 Corinthians 15:3).

The gospel is at the core of who followers of Jesus are. Tomorrow you'll get some passages to dig into to help you think about what the gospel is according to various Scriptures throughout the Old and New Testaments.

But, for now, let's just simply rest in knowing that the word "gospel" literally means "good news." But, what exactly is news? **News is something that happens in the past, and as a result, everything is now different.**

For example, when the Chicago Cubs won the 2016 World Series, everything changed. They had not won a World Series in 108 years. To Cubs fans, this news was cause for great joy. To Indians fans (whom they beat in the World Series), it was a stumbling block, and to everyone who didn't care about baseball...well, the whole ordeal probably seemed like foolishness (see 1 Corinthians 1:21-24). But you get the point. The Cubs won. Kyle Schwarber, Kris Bryant, Javier Báez, and others have become household names in the world of baseball.

The Cubs were now the champions. The 2015 champs, the Kansas City Royals, no longer were. Everything was different.

You can probably think through the course of your life and identify different pieces of news that changed your life in both large and small ways (and also in good ways and bad). Maybe it was the news of a college acceptance letter, the news of your favorite sports team making it to the championship round, the news of a new child on the way.

- *Something happens in history*
- *The world is different as a result*

In Jesus' day, the word "gospel" was a message and a declaration that spread throughout the land when a great military victory was won or, in certain cases, when a new king was born.

For our purposes here today, we can rest on the declaration that the core of the gospel is this: **Jesus is Lord.**

That, in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, something happened as a result of which everything is different. A victory had been won. Sin, Satan, and death have been vanquished. Jesus is King.

Ultimately, Caesar is not in charge, America's president is not in charge... Jesus is. He is the cosmic Ruler of the Universe. And it is that reality, as Christians, we shape our lives around.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What is an example of a piece of news that radically changed your life?

How is narrowing down the gospel to simply, "Jesus is Lord" compare and contrast to how you defined it above?

Has the reality that "Jesus is Lord" actually changed something in your life or is it just something you say with words? If so, what has changed? If not, why not?

Every piece of news has a backstory. Imagine living a thousand years in the future and reading a headline out of a newspaper in the year 3016 that just said, “Cubs Win the World Series” (yes, we’re hitting on the Cubs again)! If you had no cultural context for that statement, you might really be left confused. *Baby bears winning something? World series? Series of what? The whole world is involved? There was a world-wide competition of baby bears? What is happening here?*

You see how that could get slightly confusing, right?

The gospel of Jesus Christ is no different. It can sometimes be a little confusing to folks. That’s because the gospel isn’t just a piece of news in a vacuum. It has a context. It, too, comes with a story (both past and future) that helps shed light on its meaning and implication.

So, what is that story? Take a few moments to watch this video from our friends at Bible Project (bibleproject.com/videos/heaven-and-earth/).

In the opening pages of the Bible, in **Genesis 1 and 2**, we read about God’s good, created world. In this world, there was life, peace, responsibility, relationship, justice, and peace – all things that make for human flourishing were had in the Garden of Eden. Humanity was in right relationship with God, humanity was in right relationship with each other, and humanity was in right relationship with the Earth.

Humankind was given the responsibility to *rule and have dominion* over the Earth (see **Genesis 1:26, 28**). Unfortunately, they idolized themselves, wanting to be like God, and they rebelled. Because of this act of rebellion and their faulty dominion, humanity’s relationship with God, humanity, and the earth was fractured and broken (see **Genesis 3**). And this brokenness plays itself out throughout the entirety of the Old Testament as Israel is given the task to rule on God’s behalf so as to be a blessing to the nations (see **Genesis 12**). Time and time again, however, they fail. And because they fail, they end up in exile.

Despite Israel’s mishaps, mistakes, and disordered desires, it was foretold that a prophet like (but greater than) Moses, a king like (but greater than) David, and a priest like (but greater than) Aaron would come to lead the people of God rightly – someone who wouldn’t look to his own interests (like Israel), but would live a life fully surrendered to God. This someone was referred to as Israel’s “Messiah” or “Christ.”

This is who the New Testament writers refer to Jesus as – the person that was fully surrendered to God’s will, the person who would bring redemption and salvation to God’s people, and the person who would reign and bring about God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus is God’s Messiah. He is the Christ (**Matthew 16:16**).

Of course, some folks disagree (see for example **John 7**) and Jesus is crucified.

At the cross, however, we see that Jesus wins a decisive victory over evil, Satan, Sin, and death through suffering love (not through military might or prowess). On the cross, God was tortured and put to death. Jesus’ blood was poured out. His side was pierced. Jesus became the propitiation for sins. As our sacrificial Lamb, Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice. He was better than any sacrifice ever made before. In fact, he was the ultimate, once and for all, sacrifice. The sacrifice to end all sacrifices (**Hebrews 10:1-14**). And to top it all off...on the cross, Jesus became King.

There’s no question this is how the gospels portray the events of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection and this is even a theme picked up by Paul and others (see **Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:15-20**). With Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel’s story, having conquered over the dominion of darkness and now being enthroned as Lord of the Universe, he is bringing renewal and restoration to *all of creation* (**Colossians 1:20; Ephesians 1:10**).

That story is a little different than how we talk about the gospel usually... The gospel isn’t just that humans can go to heaven when they die, the gospel’s implications bring about the redemption and restoration of the entire cosmos since it was marred by sin (**Romans 8:20-21**). This is what is meant when we read about the coming of a New Heaven and New Earth (**Revelation 21**) with no more tears, death, or pain.

This is important for us to realize because if the gospel is just about “going to heaven when we die” then we miss out on all of creation being redeemed and restored. The Gospel doesn’t just deal with the sin problem that begins in **Genesis 3**. The Gospel is about bringing you, me, and all of creation (**Genesis 1**) into a *new creation* (**Revelation 21-22**). But, if our gospel message centers on Jesus’ lordship, then we get BOTH the forgiveness of sins *and* the redemption and restoration of all creation.

The famed story expert Bobette Buster once remarked, *“Narrative is our culture’s currency; he who tells the best story wins.”*

We’ve already begun talking about the Gospel story, but today we want to shift a bit and talk about other stories that try to compete with the gospel. To do that, though, let me start with an illustration...

I remember hearing recently of a guy who visited the Dallas Cowboys stadium for a game and, in doing so, felt like he landed on “planet football.” He had never been to a professional football game before so going to this game was eye-opening for him. He said that everything in and around AT&T Stadium was telling a compelling story to bolster the allegiance of people who were already Cowboy fans and to win the allegiance of people who weren’t.

How did the Cowboys tell this story?

Well, this guy went on to explain how everything from the parking lot banners with the big, blue Dallas Cowboy star on them to the memorabilia you could buy everywhere outside and inside the stadium, to the amount of people sporting Cowboys apparel, to the cheerleaders urging the fans to cheer for their hometown team, to the giant endzone to endzone screen which was used to pump up the crowd inside of the stadium and replay only positive Dallas Cowboy plays, to past Cowboy players coming out at halftime to help invigorate the crowd... it all told a compelling narrative. That narrative essentially consisted of the following: Cowboy fans unite! THIS is our year. We have the guys to WIN. We can BEAT any team. We need YOUR help.

That was the story of the Cowboys. And they actually tell that story really well to win the allegiance of people everywhere. But, they’re not the only ones telling a story like that.

If you just pay attention to the companies, organizations, and people around you, you’ll see that everyone is telling a story to win, as one writer says, your “mind space and brand allegiance.” They know that if they get that, then they’ve got your time, your money, your support, and your evangelistic efforts (just think about how die-hard sports fans will buy the apparel, spend time watching the games, voice their support for their teams, and then find any reason to talk about it with their friends!).

With the gospel story in mind from Day 3, one thing that’s important for us to do as followers of Jesus is to reflect on what story or stories we are living out of. An important life axiom goes like this: ***The story we live in is the story we will live out.***

We talked about how much we are formed when we chatted about discipleship. A part of coming under the discipleship of Jesus is realizing what stories have been forming us so that we can be intentional about allowing God’s story to reshape our thinking, feeling, and acting.

We each have a story or a framework that we live by – this story could have been shaped for us by our family of origin, our culture, our country, our friends, our desires. Or...it could be some conglomeration of ALL of these.

Some people live according to the American Dream (“I’m just concerned with my two kids, nice house, and white picket fence and nothing else”), others by materialism (“I’m concerned with what I can get out of life”), others by secularism (“God is not really involved with my everyday life”), some by liberty (“I’m only concerned with my own individual freedom in any and every matter”).

The list goes on and on and on.

The question for us, though, is this: Are we living by some made-up story with certain promises that will ultimately leave us bankrupt or are we living in accordance with the gospel story?

Being intentional about living in God’s story has always been a quintessential part of being God’s people. This is why if you read through the Psalms, you see A LOT of remembrance going on. The Psalms will often poetically retell God’s saving work in the history of the people of Israel to help the reader learn to live in the reality of God’s story as opposed to any other.

At this point, we've spent four days on the gospel, its story, and how the stories of the world intersect with it. But, let's get a little more practical. One question we have to ask is, "How does knowing all of that change things for us?" Another way to ask that question is basically like this: "So, Jesus is King...so what?"

Our response to the gospel is what we call "faith." It deals with our initial and ongoing response to Jesus' lordship. But faith can be kind of a tricky word to wrap our minds around.

If you had to define "faith," how would you define it? Use the space below.

Now, read **Hebrews 11:1-40**. What does this passage teach you about faith? Note some thoughts in the space below.

Dallas Willard points out that in many churches, people live by what he calls "bar-code faith." He says,

"Think of the bar codes now used on goods in most stores. The scanner responds only to the bar code. It makes no difference what is in the bottle or package that bears it, or whether the sticker is on the 'right' one or not. The calculator responds through its electronic eye to the bar code and totally disregards everything else. If the ice cream sticker is on the dog food, the dog food is ice cream, so far as the scanner knows or cares."

Many Christians view their belief in the gospel as simply believing in the right things so that, when they are "scanned", so to speak, at the pearly gates by God, they'll be able to get into Heaven.

But this kind of thinking has led many Christians to believe that they can just waltz into heaven without being very...well, heavenly. That's not real faith, though. Faith and belief have more to do in our lives, hearts, and minds than just getting us into the good place. Faith is more than mental assent to some ideology or person. Rather, faith is total trust, absolute allegiance, and willing surrender.

For our purposes, when we think about the gospel as being "Jesus is Lord," a good way we might think about faith in Jesus is by thinking about it as...

Trust in Jesus to be a loving, good, compassionate, just, and merciful King who will provide all that we need

Surrender to King Jesus so that his wants are our wants and his desires are our desires

Allegiance to King Jesus, putting Him above anything and everything else in our lives

Easier said than done, I know. But it gets easier when you realize the kind of King Jesus is. Jesus is the kind of king that empties himself, puts on humanity, and allows himself to be crucified.

So when we put our faith in Jesus, not to earn our salvation, but to accept the free gift of grace (see **Ephesians 2:8-9**), we are trusting, surrendering, and pledging allegiance to someone who knows human suffering, who is trustworthy, who is good, who is holy, who is righteous, who is just, and who has a plan to renew all things.

There are no skeletons in God's closet. He would never lead us astray, manipulate us, or laud his power over us vindictively. In surrendering and placing our faith and allegiance in King Jesus, we are surrendering to love.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

If faith is like trust, in what ways have you trusted in other things (yourself, the stock market, etc.) to give you everything you need?

If faith is like surrender, what do you have still to surrender to King Jesus?

If faith is like allegiance, what things pull your allegiance away from him?

What is holding you back from total trust, total surrender, or total allegiance to Jesus (fear, pride, distrust)? Write a prayer to God expressing your feelings and thoughts. Receive his forgiveness, mercy, and love.

WEEK EIGHT

KINGDOM

BEGIN WITH 1 MINUTE OF SILENCE + PRAYER (5 minutes)

For this week, begin your gathering with five minutes together in prayerful silence.

[Why silence? Our world is so busy, distracted, and bee-like, with technology filling in any gaps in between. With all that moving, it can be hard to hear others and hear the voice of God. As we gather together, let's press pause and enter into a moment of quiet so that we can hear what God is saying to us and through others.]

Once you've sat in silence, each acknowledging each other's presence and God's presence, centering yourselves on Him, have someone pray to open your time together.

OPENING QUESTIONS (5-10 minutes)

- What stood out to you from your devotions this past week? How did these devotions enrich your view of the Gospel? How about your view of your own faith in regards to the Gospel?
- When Jesus prays, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," what do you think he means by "kingdom?"

TRANSITION TO WATCH THE WEEK 8 "KINGDOM" VIDEO (about 20 minutes)

Let your group know that, just like last week, you'll be watching a short teaching from our lead pastor, Dan. You'll want to have this video set up and tested to make sure everything is working properly ahead of time.

READ SCRIPTURE + DEBRIEF IN SMALL GROUPS (30-40 minutes)

Split your group into smaller groups to read the following Scriptures and go through some of the questions below (*There are several here. You'll want to pick out a few ahead of time that you want to be sure to hit; otherwise you'll be constrained with your time*):

- Look through history and name some of the most powerful, largest kingdoms you remember.
- Compare those kingdoms to the kingdom of God that Dan described.
- As you reflect on the Gospel priority from last week and on this week's Kingdom priority, how do they align with one another?
- What are the biggest differences between living in God's kingdom and living in America? How does that make Kingdom living harder? How is it easier?
- Originally, the kingdom of God and earth were in perfect alignment. Why is it important to remember that? What does that tell you about God's design?
- Last week, we learned that Jesus' lordship in our lives means that he gets from us whatever he asks. He gets, as Dan mentioned, "What he wants, when he wants, and how he wants it." How does that align with how things work in God's kingdom? What similarities do you notice?
- Dan talked about the goal many Christians have: "Go to heaven when we die." He compared it with the goal Jesus has for his followers: "To bring heaven to earth while we're alive." If you put those on a pendulum, what are the perspectives of people at each end of the pendulum? Where do you find yourself today?
- Read **Habakkuk 3:2**. Talk about the fame and deeds of God. Remember them. How might those deeds be repeated in our own time, in our own city?
- How do you move from the, "It's a large church, I can sit back and listen to others' good reports" mindset to the "I'm going to leverage everything I have to see the kingdom brought about" mindset?

If the message of the Gospel is *Jesus is Lord*, and we are Christ's ambassadors bringing that message to the places we live, the next logical question is, "How, then, shall we live?" Let's start to answer with our next priority: Kingdom.

When God created the world, he created it in a state of shalom. "Shalom" is a fantastic church word that simply means "peace." This peace is not just an absence of fighting or strife, but it's the peace that comes from God's goodness in our lives. Shalom exists when God's peace is fully realized in the earth. Shalom was God's design for creation.

Where'd it go wrong? Sin. When we, God's creation, decided to rebel against him and to go our own way, we lost shalom. Heaven and earth were split from one another. And it wasn't just any split; it was a deep, wide, insurmountable chasm. We used the free will God gave us to deny him and set ourselves up as royalty. We can see the result of that brokenness everywhere we look. The world is hurting, yearning for the shalom that it was designed for.

But the Gospel reminds us there's good news. Really good news. His name is Jesus. Not only did he come to rescue us from our sins to make us right with God, but he came to bring shalom. That's why he gave sight to the blind, gave strength to the legs of the paralyzed, he opened deaf ears, and so much more. He was heaven embodied. Shalom was being restored in Christ Jesus. As Mark tells us...

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" **Mark 1:14-15**

Jesus brought the kingdom of God near: the kingdom that had been fractured since the creation of the world. Everywhere he went, he did and said things that brought God's shalom to people who were hurting. He didn't just pray that God's kingdom would come, he actively brought the kingdom with him.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What is your understanding of shalom? How have you seen the absence of God's shalom in your own life? Where have you seen signs of its presence?

Imagine what it might have been like to grow up in first-century Israel, learning about God's holiness and the divide between us and God's kingdom. What if you'd heard Jesus say, "The kingdom of God is at hand?" How revolutionary must that have sounded? How revolutionary is it in your own life today?

Take time to review some of Jesus' miracles (you could try **John 2:1-11; Luke 5:1-11; Mark 1:40-45; Matthew 8:5-13; Matthew 8:23-27**). Look for the restoration of God's shalom in each one. What do you notice about each of these about where shalom was missing and how Jesus brings shalom? How does any of this apply to your own life?

While Jesus was praying for and actively bringing the Kingdom, he also taught about it. He compared it to a lot of different things: a hidden treasure (**Matthew 13:44**), a mustard seed (**Matthew 13:31-32**), a landowner (**Matthew 20:1-16**), a fishing net (**Matthew 13:47-50**), a merchant (**Matthew 13:45-46**), just to name a few.

A few more to highlight:

- It was prepared for us from the beginning of time. (**Matthew 25:34**)
- It is worth anything we would give up for it. (**Mark 9:47**)
- It is unattainable without sincere faith. (**Mark 10:15, Mark 10:23**)
- When we seek it first, we will be supplied with what we need. (**Luke 12:31**)
- We have been sent by Jesus to proclaim it. (**Luke 9:2, 9:60, 10:9**)

What is “kingdom” and why did Jesus put such an emphasis on it?

Biblically speaking, kingdom refers to a reign, not a realm. The “Kingdom of God” or the “Kingdom of Heaven” isn’t some alternate dimension. It’s for right here on earth.

If you look at the Lord’s prayer and how Jesus teaches his disciples to pray (**Matthew 6:10**), you’ll see that Jesus connects “Your kingdom come” with “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” because one relates directly to the other. Where the will of God is done, that is where his kingdom has come.

God rules heaven, absolutely and without rival. When Jesus prays for the will of God to be done on earth as it is in heaven, he is praying that God’s will and his rule would be established on earth in the same way it is in heaven—not that Christians would occupy more land, resources, or money as in an earthly kingdom. Jesus is establishing an upside-down kingdom where those things don’t matter.

For most of the life of the church, believers have occupied very little. Yet they have established God’s kingdom around the world. Scripture was written largely by oppressed people for oppressed people, and the gospel is exploding around the world among oppressed people. God’s kingdom is not made up of material wealth or territory; it is found anywhere the will of God reigns in the hearts of his people (which we’ll talk more about tomorrow).

But maybe that’s why Jesus used so many metaphors to describe the kingdom. There isn’t a single earthly definition that fits, except perhaps this main idea: the kingdom of God is anywhere where God’s will is being done whenever and however he sees fit.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Take some time to read 2-3 of the passages above in context with their stories. Notice how Jesus is responding in each one. Apply those responses to your own life. See how you might be inspired by Jesus’ view of the Kingdom. What analogy or metaphor that Jesus used to describe God’s kingdom stood out to you? Why did it resonate? What did it teach you?

What does it mean that Jesus established an upside-down kingdom? How does that impact your understanding of our Kingdom priority?

We've seen that Jesus has established an upside-down kingdom. And we also know from what Dan shared in his teaching on Kingdom that a kingdom is simply a region where a king is in charge.

When we apply that to God and His kingdom, we're tempted to begin by thinking really big, right?

Obviously, God is large and in charge, right? We know that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and everywhere all at once. But because of this knowledge, we can be tempted to forget about the places where God does not yet rule.

Of course, he reigns over the entire Universe, but there's also a sense in which (until Christ returns) Satan rules in this world (see **2 Corinthians 4:4**).

We can get into a rut thinking about how big God's kingdom is and how His rule spans the entire cosmos that we actually miss out on how God's kingdom works itself into our own lives. And how God is looking to take territory away from the Devil. For those not under God's rule, Jesus is looking to take ground in their lives for the first time. For those who already claim Christ to be their King, Christ is always looking to take new ground in our hearts and lives. That's why Paul exhorts the Ephesians, "Do not give the devil a foothold" (**Ephesians 4:27**).

God may rule over the Universe, but He also deserves to rule over your little corner of the world too.

This can be scary, yes. But remember what we touched on last week? Jesus is the kind of King we can trust. He is good. He is compassionate. He is trustworthy. He is just.

There are no skeletons in God's closet.

It's crucial to note that God's kingdom is small enough to be able to start within each and every one of us. If God's kingdom is the place where He reigns, that means your heart can be one of the starting points of where His kingdom intersects with yours.

Jonathan Edwards, an 18th century theologian, said, "*The seeking of the kingdom of God is the chief business of the Christian life.*" If the kingdom of God is where the will of God is done, then it should start with us. Is the will of God done in our hearts? Can we look at our hearts and say, "God's kingdom has come, and His will is being done in my heart"?

Read **Ephesians 4:14-21**. Are there areas in your heart where Jesus does not rule? Jot down some of your thoughts in the space below.

You might think of the kingdom of God and how it grows as a bullseye, with yourself in the middle. As God's kingdom comes to reign in you (the bullseye), it then has the ability to come into your family (the next ring around the bullseye). Then, it could have the opportunity to be in your extended family (the next ring out). Then, in your neighbors, co-workers, and social groups (the next ring out). And so on and so on. You get the picture.

If you wanted to identify where the kingdom exists, you would need to start with yourself. Then it grows in concentric circles out from you. Those rings are going to be different for each of us based on the influence we have and the people we're in contact with.

Take some time to identify those kingdom circles. Draw a bullseye below and label those rings of influence. Your finished 'kingdom map' could have as little as 3 rings and as many as 10 rings. Think about all the places in your life where you interact and have influence with others: your household, neighborhood, work environment, school, life group, organizations, etc. There isn't a wrong answer, as long as identifying them can help you add intention to doing your part to making God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. As you draw out our 'kingdom map,' ask the Holy Spirit to help you identify one way you can bring God's kingdom to bear in that specific circle - in yourself, in your family, in your neighborhood, et al. *Be prepared to share this map with your life group.*

“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two-by-two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’” (Luke 10:1-2).

Imagine your life group as a kingdom community, serving alongside one another to bring shalom to the world around you, focused on seeing God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Imagine how that might change not only the people you would serve, but also each member of your group.

Imagine God’s kingdom coming into your own heart and flooding out of it with power from the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, through his example, shows us how to bring about His kingdom. And, really, it comes as we live in the way of love. The kingdom of God comes through agape. It comes through the giving up of our own wants, ideals, desires, preferences, hopes, and goals so that others can flourish instead of ourselves.

This isn’t some weird form of asceticism, this is following after the footsteps of Jesus.

When you have time, I’d encourage you to Google famous artists’ renditions of Jesus’ crucifixion (Maybe Google “Christ Crucified” by Diego Velazquez, maybe Google “The Crucifixion” by Matthias Grunewald, or maybe Google “Christ on the Cross” by Peter Paul Rubens).



Christ Crucified
Diego Velazquez



The Crucifixion
Matthias Grunewald



Christ on the Cross
Peter Paul Rubens

Christians believe that when we look at Jesus, and Jesus on the cross, we are seeing the character of God on display (see **Hebrews 1:1-4**). And Christ on the cross, like these many paintings show us, does not operate out of coercion or force. Christians follow Jesus’ example.

Jesus opted to change the world through co-suffering love. And we do the same.

We choose to empty ourselves. We choose to enter into the mire of burdened people. And we choose to suffer with those around us.

You see, it’s easy to equate Kingdom with “work”—doing things for God, being active and busy in his service. The problem is that when “work” and “progress” become the goals, then that means that the ends are justified by whatever it takes to get there. It doesn’t matter if we bring God’s kingdom in a loving way or not. What matters is that the work gets done.

Not true. That doesn’t fully encapsulate Jesus’ heart for God’s kingdom. Jesus, knowing our hearts and minds, wanted to see God’s kingdom come to every area within us and in the world, but he wanted it to come about in the right way: through Love.

We are workers being sent into the fields of harvest, but as CIY teaches our high schoolers every year, kingdom work is not about the work, it’s about the King. It’s about following in His footsteps, taking on His mindset, and living out Paul’s vision for the Christian life when he says, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me” (**Galatians 2:20**).

Dan referenced **Habakkuk 3**, which says,

*“LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds,
LORD. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known.”*

This is our prayer at The Creek when it comes to our priority of Kingdom. We want to see God’s fame and deeds repeated in our day. It starts with God, and it flows through each of us as we keep our eyes out for where He’s working and we choose to bring whatever we have to make it happen. We bring about His kingdom through love.

And what’s glorious about this is that you’re not a lone wolf in this endeavor. You have a pack.

We’re not asked to do this alone. Just like Jesus sent followers out in pairs and in groups, He’s doing the same thing with your group.

Let’s do what we can to bring shalom to the world around us and to see God’s fame and deeds repeated in our day.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

If you were writing the same prayer that Habakkuk wrote thousands of years ago, how would you write it? In what ways would you want the fame and deeds of God to be known and repeated in our city and in our day?

Spend some time prayerfully reading **John 13:1-17**. Ask God to show you in these verses how Jesus' example informs how you need to think about bringing about His kingdom. Where is God challenging you? What is something new He is teaching you? Where in your life recently have you not exemplified the way of Jesus as described here in **John 13**?

Ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his field, including yourself and your group (And aren't you glad God called you to the harvest fields but he didn't call you to do it alone? He's given you a group of people to serve alongside). Spend some time in gratitude, thanking him for providing you with people and resources that can be used to bring His kingdom to earth. Look around at the places where He's at work and see with your group how you might join Him in that work. Then make a plan to go do that.

WEEK NINE

SCRIPTURE

BEGIN WITH 1 MINUTE OF SILENCE + PRAYER (5 minutes)

For this week, begin your gathering with one minute together in prayerful silence.

[Why silence? Our world is so busy, distracted, and bee-like, with technology filling in any gaps in between. With all that moving, it can be hard to hear others and hear the voice of God. As we gather together, let's press pause and enter into a moment of quiet so that we can hear what God is saying to us and through others.]

Once you have sat in silence, acknowledging each other's presence and God's presence, centering yourselves on Him, have someone pray to open your time together.

OPENING QUESTIONS (5-10 minutes)

- What stood out to you from your devotions this past week? How did these devotions enrich your view of the kingdom?
- This week we're talking about our priority of Scripture. What is your current rhythm of reading the Bible? Do you love it? Hate it? Find it hard? Explain.

TRANSITION TO WATCH THE WEEK 9 "SCRIPTURE" VIDEO (about 20 minutes)

Let your group know that just like last week, you'll be watching a short teaching from our lead pastor, Dan. You'll want to have this video set up and tested to make sure everything is working properly ahead of time.

READ SCRIPTURE + DEBRIEF IN SMALL GROUPS (30-40 minutes)

Split your group into smaller groups to read the following Scriptures and go through some of the questions below (*There are several here. You'll want to pick out a few ahead of time that you want to be sure to hit; otherwise you'll be constrained with your time*):

- What was the role of the Bible in your family growing up? Was it a central part of your family's life? Was it on the periphery of your family's life? Where is it at in your own life? Explain.
- What stood out or resonated with you from Dan's message about our priority of Scripture?
- Read **Psalm 19:7-11**. Which metaphor that Dan used about Scripture (light, food, a filter, gold) resonated with you most? Explain.
- Read **Psalm 1**. Would you use the word "delight" when it comes to how you view the Bible? Why or why not? What word would you use instead?
- How has Scripture been influential in your spiritual growth? When has Scripture challenged how you think or live?
- Who is someone in your life whose walk with God you admire? What role does the Bible have in their life?
- Are there questions or struggles you have about the Bible? What are they?

TRANSITION BACK TO ONE LARGE GROUP + DISCUSS (35 MINUTES)

This week, you have the opportunity to read through a whole book of the Bible together. Take a few moments to have everyone turn to Paul's letter to the Philippians. The reading of this letter should only take your group about 15 minutes.

One of the things you'll want to do, however, is pause in between each chapter that is read and allow people to pray. It may feel a bit awkward at first. That's okay.

Your goal will be to have one person read Philippians 1 aloud for the group, to then open up space for people to pray to God thanking him for whatever specific word or phrase resonated with them in that chapter. You'll then proceed to do the same thing with the following chapters of Philippians (chapters 2-4).

Once you've read and prayed all the way through this book, ask a few questions like...

- What was this experience like for you?
- How did reading through the entire letter in one sitting deepen your faith?
- Is there a thought or an action after reading all the way through Philippians that you feel like God is inviting you into?

FINISH WITH LOGISTICS + PRAYER (10 minutes)

Be sure to keep everyone up to date on the latest group info. Here are some considerations to keep in mind:

- This week, our devotions will dive a little deeper into some of the things discussed and asked even tonight. Be sure to set aside some time each day, just like in *Rooted*, to sit with them and the Lord. You'll have some time next week to reflect on your devotions together as a group.

- Has your group completed your serve project? If so, let us know about what you did and where you went! Have someone in your group share with the life group minister what your group accomplished and any cool stories that came as a result! You can email your group's story to the Life Group Minister.
- If your group hasn't completed a serve project yet, there's still time! In fact, there's never a *bad time* to serve our community or church. Feel free to continue having that discussion with your group about *what you'll do to serve and when you'll do it*. Check out www.thecreek.org/serve for ideas!
- After this week, you'll only have three weeks left of the #FORTHE317 series (talking about our priorities of Identity, Community, and Generosity). You'll need to begin discussions with your group about "what's next?" Consider some of the following conversation points...

Discuss your meeting day, time, and place. Is it still the best for everyone?

Discuss joining in with The Creek's sermon content and what that will look like. If you're not sure, don't hesitate to reach out to the Life Group Minister about what the upcoming content is and what it will look like!

Discuss current expectations of the group. You might ask: *Is this group meeting your expectations? Why or why not?; What can we be doing as a group to grow closer to one another?; What can we be doing as a group to help one another grow closer to God?*

Finally, finish your group session with prayer. You might designate someone in your group to write down everyone's prayer requests and then send them to the whole group for everyone to be praying about through the week.

1. What is on your heart that you need prayer for?
2. Who in your life needs prayer?

Have someone close your time together by interceding for the requests that were shared.

This week we're diving into our fourth priority: *Scripture*.

At The Creek, we believe that the Holy Scriptures—in their entirety—are inspired by God and wholly true and trustworthy in all they affirm. We also believe that all the teachings of the Bible, when properly interpreted, are to be believed and obeyed. This is because the Bible is our supreme authority in every matter of belief and conduct.

So, let's talk about the Bible.

To get started, take a moment to scan this QR code and watch this 5-minute video from our friends at Bible Project who will walk us through what that Bible is (*just open up your smartphone's camera and scan the code!*):



A search for "Holy Books" on Google will result in more than 300 titles, all claiming to be holy. Have you ever wondered what makes the Bible unique among so many others? What makes the Bible special? What makes it holy?

The Bible is not a single book; it's more like a library. It actually consists of 66 books, written over roughly 2,000 years by 40 different authors from three continents, who wrote in three different languages. It is the best-selling book of all time, with over five billion copies in print.

Anyone who searches for reasons to believe the Bible is reliable and accurate will have no difficulty finding ample research to support that conclusion. With minimal effort, one can quickly discover documentation of ancient Biblical manuscripts and other non-Christian ancient sources. This makes it impossible to logically conclude the Bible is unreliable. For example, when you read the Bible, you quickly realize that it is full of prophecies. There were 48 prophetic passages written about the Jewish Messiah. Mathematician Peter Stoner determined that the statistical probability of one man fulfilling all 48 is 1 in 10^{157} (10 to the 157th power—that's the numeral one followed by 157 zeroes!) Jesus Christ fulfilled every prophecy of the Messiah's first coming.

The Bible you have on your coffee table contains the same Old Testament that Jesus read and taught from in the synagogues. The New Testament you hear read in our church is the same that was circulated among the first churches soon after the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. These facts certainly make the Bible unique, but uniqueness isn't the same thing as holy. What makes the Bible holy? The answer can be summed up with one verse, "*All Scripture is God-breathed*" (**2 Timothy 3:16**).

The Greek word used for the phrase "God-breathed" is *theopneustos*. "Theo" means "God," and "pneustos" means "to breathe." Consider the power and uniqueness of the breath of God. We see it in **Genesis 2:7** when God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living being. The Bible is the living, breathing Word of God and that's what makes it holy.

There's no other book like it. No other book contains the very words of God. Throughout the pages of the Bible, God reveals himself as the God who sees, hears, knows, and rescues. The God who sees and hears you is the same God who wants you to see and hear Him! How can you and I see and hear God?

The answer may not be as complicated as you think. We see and hear God when we read our Bible. Good news! It is possible to grow in your love for God's word. It is possible to enjoy reading Scripture, and the best news is this: God will reveal himself and speak to you through His Word.

The number one way God reveals himself is through His written Word—the Bible.

If we want to know God, we must **know** our Bible.

If we want to love God more, we must **love** our Bible.

If we want to hear God speak, we must **hear** our Bible.

Be encouraged today, friend—if we ask God to give us eyes to see Him, He will! If we ask God to give us ears to hear Him, He will!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How did you view the Bible growing up? How has your view of the Bible changed over time (if at all)?

What does your rhythm of being in the Bible look like currently? Are you satisfied? Why or why not?

What are the biggest obstacles preventing you from reading the Bible as much as you would like?

When it comes to the Bible, what other questions do you have that you wish you had better answers for?

Ok, so we want to acknowledge that the Bible is special amongst other "Holy Books." It's unique. It's the Word of God. It's not just one book, but it's a compilation of 66 different books. It's more like a library with poetry, narrative, and discourse as the main genres.

But we also want to be a place where we not only affirm what Christians have been saying about the Bible for two thousand years, we also want to be a people **who delight in God's word and live it out on a daily basis.**

In Dan's message, he talked about this. And in talking about delighting in God's Word, he gave us four different metaphors to consider Scripture as. He said the Word of God is like a compass (**Psalm 119:105**), he said it's like food (**Psalm 119:103; Jeremiah 15:16**), he said it's like a filter that gives us truth (John 17:17), and he said that it's like pure gold (**Psalm 19:9-10**).

Those are all great reasons to delight in something. If you find something to be useful like a compass, nourishing like food, helpful like a filter, and valuable like gold, then odds are you'll delight in that something!

Think with me now about the nature of "delight." The Psalmist says in **Psalm 1:1**, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers but *His delight* is in the law of the Lord..."

Why is it that the *blessed* person is the one who *delights* in God's law? Could it be because the psalmist knows that what you delight in determines the rest of your life? Think about that.

What you delight in will determine where you walk, it will determine where you stand, and it will determine where you sit. Delight is a function of the heart. And your heart determines everything about you. For example...

- If you delight in a hobby (take photography for example), you will be moved to buy the equipment, buy a nice camera, spend time taking photos, spend time editing photos, download certain programs, talk about and share your photos, and so on.
- If you delight in a sports team, you'll be moved to watch every game, see them in person, buy their gear, and teach your kids about supporting them!
- If you delight in your kids, your life will revolve around them (getting them to practices, taking them on trips they want to go on, buying them the latest and greatest, etc.).

You get the point. Delight is a function of the heart. And your heart determines everything about you.

That's why the Psalmist says that the "blessed" or "happy" person is he or she who delights in God's "law" or "word." The "not-blessed" person actually ends up, in the Psalmist's point of view, walking, standing, and sitting in places he or she doesn't actually want to be. That person winds up listening to the counsel of the wicked, standing with sinners, and sitting with scoffers.

Our world is full of what the Psalmist calls the "counsel of the wicked."

When I was growing up, I would have known *exactly* what the counsel of the wicked meant. The counsel of the wicked was basically anyone who told me to have sex before marriage, go out and get drunk, or be an atheist. And there may be truth to that, but I think in our culture, it's more subtle.

All around us (online, on TV, through advertisements, in people's conversations, etc.) we hear our culture telling us to acquire more, be more successful, look younger or sexier, and get even with those who hurt you and by sheer inundation, the world has a way of convincing us of what a blessed and flourishing life looks like.

I heard one pastor give examples of what the counsel of the wicked would be like in our day. Here's what he said: "The counsel of the wicked tells you..."

- To live as if it were not true that you are an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God's universe.
- To believe as if God is not real or present, active in your life.
- To live as if the outcomes of my life are on my shoulders and I control them and so I must have that constant pressure on my life.
- To live as if satisfying my desires and appetites is central to my well-being...and a wise strategy for living."

These are the kinds of things that the writer of this psalm is warning us against. And to avoid going down a path we actually, ultimately do not want to go down, we need to heed His advice and delight in God's Word. Why? Because God's Word reveals reality. It tells us what is truly true about life, faith, meaning, existence, purpose, God, mankind, evil, suffering, and salvation.

This week, we began thinking about our priority of “Scripture” by talking about what’s special about God’s Word. On Day 2, we talked about delighting in God’s Word. Today, let’s talk about what happens when the Scriptures that we are supposed to delight in don’t *feel* very delightful?

Yesterday, in one of your reflection questions, you had a moment to consider if you experience delight in the Scriptures or not. And you also had some space to reflect on and why or why not.

Whatever your answer was, oftentimes delight is found missing in someone’s time reading or studying the Bible for a couple reasons:

1. Faulty expectations of the Bible
2. Uncertainty with how to engage the Bible

Today, we’ll look at the expectations we bring to the Bible and what expectations are appropriate to have. Tomorrow, we’ll look a little closer at how we can engage with the Scriptures.

Many times in life, feelings of frustration or defeat can surge up within us when we have an expectation of something but that expectation is not met.

If you’ve ever grown frustrated with a person, it’s probably because that person didn’t meet some spoken or unspoken expectation you held. If you’ve ever grown frustrated with an object (say your car not starting), it’s probably because you had an expectation that it would start when you turned the key over in the ignition!

So, think for a moment...what are your expectations of the Bible? When you come to do your study or devotional time, what are you expecting out of that time? Jot down some of your thoughts in the space below.

Many times, we can get frustrated with the Bible when we view **what it is** and **what it’s purpose is** wrongly.

C.S. Lewis once wrote,

“The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know WHAT it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used. The first thing is to understand the object before you.”

And he’s so right. We will delight in our corkscrews when we come to them knowing precisely what they are and what their purpose is. We probably won’t find them very delightful if we expect that corkscrew to hold a painting to the wall like a nail or regular screw. If we come to a cathedral thinking that it’s there for our entertainment, then we will be left wanting. It was built to facilitate worship, not amusement.

So, if you had to think about what the Bible *is*, how would you answer that? Note your response in the space below. **What is the Bible?**

Now, if you had to say what the purpose of the Bible is, what would you say? Note your response in the space below. **What is the purpose of the Bible?**

Sometimes people think that...

- The Bible's primary purpose is FOR changing our behavior, so it IS a divine rule book.
- The Bible's primary purpose is FOR teaching theology, so it IS a theology answer book.
- The Bible's primary purpose is FOR hearing from God, so it IS a divine "love letter."
- The Bible's primary purpose is FOR teaching us a kind of mathematical, scientific truth, so it IS a science textbook.

The list could go on. The hard thing is that there are semblances of truth in these visions of what the Bible is FOR. We absolutely learn God's rules for living, we absolutely encounter good theology, and we most certainly come to God's Word to hear God's voice.

But the Bible isn't *primarily* a divine rule book, a theology answer book, a divine love letter, or a science textbook.

Rather, the Bible is a story. Just like on Day 1, take a moment to scan the QR code below with your phone's camera to watch another video from our friends at Bible Project to teach us about the Story of the Bible.



So, the Bible is a story. And, specifically, the Bible is a story that points us to Jesus. Jesus, in fact, says about as much in **John 5:39**. He says to the Pharisees, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; but it is they that testify about me!"

When we search the Scriptures looking primarily for anything other than Jesus, we're bound to run into some problems. Like John the Baptist, the Bible points us to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (**John 1:29**).

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

How is this way of looking at the Bible's primary purpose different than what you had thought previously or had thought growing up?

For this Day 4, we're going to talk about a few different ways you can engage with Scripture. Like a piece of good music or art, you don't need to know the ins and outs of its background to enjoy it and allow it to move you. Similarly, you don't necessarily need to know the language, the history, or the culture that surrounds whatever Bible passage you happen to be reading in order to get something from it or to allow it to challenge you.

You just have to allow God's Spirit to move in you as you read. There are multiple ways you can do this.

Followers of Jesus throughout history have been reading, meditating, and re-reading the Scriptures and have found several ways to meet God in His Word. Below are several ways you can engage the Bible individually, as a family, or even as a community.

The goal for today is to read through some of the different ways to engage with the Bible below and pick one to do that is maybe less familiar to you. Then, when you go to your life group next week, you can share which one you chose and what that was like!

Without further ado, here are six ways that you can engage Scripture:

1. READ SCRIPTURE ALOUD AS COMMUNITY

Many different people engage with Scripture in many different ways today – some people read it first thing in the morning, other people read it at their favorite local coffee shop, and still others listen to it on an app. When the early church first started engaging with the Scriptures, they didn't even have their copies of the Bible. In postures of humility and surrender, they would listen to large portions of it being read aloud in community. To practice this way of engaging the text...

GET COMFORTABLE

You'll be reading for the next 20 or so minutes, so make sure that you're in a place, position, and posture to be still, attentive, and open to God.

ESTABLISH THE READER(S)

Decide who will read it. One person can read the whole thing, a few of you can split it, or (what we would recommend) each person can read some of it until the whole passage is read. Spend a moment to decide how you will break up the text and who will read.

INVITE THE HOLY SPIRIT

Take a deep breath and settle in. Have one person invite the Holy Spirit to help you all to listen in a posture of surrender and to form you by what is read.

READ

Spend time reading the entire text in one sitting aloud together.

SILENCE & PRAYER

After the last verse is read, don't rush onto the next part. Take a moment in silence and stillness, letting the words reverberate inside your mind and soul. After a bit, have someone pray to thank God for the experience of this practice.

DEBRIEF

When you have finished in prayer, discuss what stood out, what your experience was like, what new thoughts and insights you have from this practice.

*Some good Scriptures to read aloud are **Ruth, Esther, Isaiah 40, Psalm 139, Matthew 5-7, Philippians, 1 John, James, et al.***

2. LECTIO DIVINA

Psalm 1 says, “Blessed is the man...whose delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night.” Meditating on Scripture is different than studying Scripture. In studying, we are coming to the text to learn. In meditating, we are coming to meet with Jesus.

To do this, followers of Jesus have been practicing a discipline called Lectio Divina (which just means “Divine Reading” for many years. In Lectio Divina, Jesus’ followers allow the Scriptures (in cooperation with the Spirit) to lead them into further intimacy with God as they move slowly, carefully, and repeatedly through the same text. Here’s how to do it:

PREPARE

Before beginning, be sure to turn your phone off and leave it another room. Situate yourself comfortably in a quiet, solitary place. Calm your body and quiet your mind before God as you work to prepare your heart to receive what God has spoken through the text, and to respond accordingly. Finally, invite the Holy Spirit to guide your thinking and feeling as you read.

LISTEN

Read the passage. Sit quietly for a moment before you begin. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak and show you what the Lord wants for you in this passage. Mark words or phrases that stand out as you read.

LINGER

Read the passage again out loud. Are the same words or phrases you marked the first time still standing out? Write them down. How do these words or phrases apply to your life right now?

LEARN

As you read the text for a third time, ask yourself, “How is God inviting me to respond? What does He want me to be learning from this?” Write out what comes to mind.

LEARN

Read the passage one last time and answer these questions:

- *Why is God showing me this now?*
- *What does this mean for my life?*
- *What needs to change in my life?*
- *How do I need to live differently?*

*Some good passages to begin with Lectio Divina are Scriptures like **Exodus 32, 1 Kings 1-2, Daniel 6, John 4, John 9, Acts 3-4, et al.***

3. IMAGINATIVE PRAYER

Another way Jesus followers have been engaging with the Scriptures is through a practice called Imaginative Prayer. In this discipline, readers of the text actually imagine themselves in its story, encountering what is being written through their senses and creativity. Here’s how to engage with the Bible in this way:

Read a portion of the Bible.

Visualize what is happening in the story. Take some time to imagine what the scene was like. Listen to the words spoken in the text again as if you were one of the first hearers of them.

Now begin to imagine the scene as if you were right in the middle of it.

- *Who are you in the story?*
- *What do you see?*
- *What do you hear?*
- *What do you smell?*
- *What’s your position?*
- *Who else is there with you?*
- *What are you feeling?*
- *What’s the mood of the crowd?*
- *What is your response to all you experience?*
- *What questions do you have?*
- *What fears do you have?*

Don’t worry about historical accuracy. Just allow God to bring the story to life. The people we read about in Scripture were real people who walked the earth and had feelings and thoughts much like ours.

What are you noticing from your responses?

As you listen again, notice how you sense God inviting you to respond. What are His invitations from this story for you today?

*Some good passages to begin with Imaginative Prayer are Scriptures like **Genesis 16, Joshua 2-4, 1 Samuel 17, Mark 5, Luke 7, Acts 17:22-34, et al.***

4. PRAYING SCRIPTURE

A fourth way that you can engage with the Bible is by praying it. To engage with the Scriptures this way, slowly read a text multiple times. Then, after finishing that section of Scripture, write out a prayer that expresses what that portion of Scripture prompted within you.

For example, if you were to read **Mark 10:13-16**, where Jesus says “Let the children come to me...” you might wind up writing a prayer like the following:

Father, you are indeed father to all the children of the world. Your kingdom was made for people such as these. Help me to become like a child—trusting, surrendered, and dependent on you, O God. For you are my Provider, my Deliverer, my Help, and my Refuge.

Your prayer could be longer than that or shorter. There is no right or wrong way to go about it! The key is to slowly and prayerfully engage the text and to be real and honest before God.

5. MEMORIZATION

One of the best ways to engage with Scripture is by memorizing it.

Christian philosopher Dallas Willard writes that,

*“Our concentration on Jesus will be strengthened by memorization of great passages (not just verses) from Scripture. Passages such as **Matthew 7, John 14-17, 1 Cor. 13, and Col. 3** are terrific “soul growing” selections. This practice of memorizing the Scriptures is more important than a daily quiet time, for as we fill our minds with these great passages and have them available for our meditation, “quiet time” takes over the entirety of our lives.”*

God once spoke to Joshua and told him,

*“This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success” (**Josh. 1:8, NASB**).*

One of the ways we can follow in Joshua’s footsteps is by memorizing God’s Word.

6. STUDY

Another way that you can engage with the Bible is through the practice of study. This is the practice where we primarily like to land as Westerners, which has both positives and negatives. But this practice is intended to help the learner engage their mind and focus their attention on the Scriptures so as to help them understand and apply biblical truth to the entirety of their lives. There are three main steps to Bible Study:

OBSERVATION

In this step of study we are asking, “*What do I see in this text?*” This might involve asking questions like:

- Who is involved in this text?
- What is actually happening in this text?
- What places or buildings are present in this text?
- What time period is this text?
- What metaphors, analogies, or commands are present in this text?

INTERPRETATION

In this step of study we are asking, “*What does this mean?*” This might involve asking questions like:

- What is the author who wrote this text trying to convey?
- What would the hearers of this text have thought upon reading this text?
- What does the historical/cultural background of this text have to do with its interpretation?
- What kind of literature is this text? How does that shape how this text should be read?
- What does this text mean in its literary context?
- What do these individual words or phrases mean?

APPLICATION

In this step of study we are asking, “*What do I do?*” This might involve asking questions like:

- Is there an example to follow? Or *not* to follow?
- Is there a command to adhere to?
- How does this shape my current reality practically?
- What do I do as a result of this story?

SUGGESTED RESOURCES TO HELP STUDY THE BIBLE:

- Check out Bible Project! www.bibleproject.com
- A helpful online tool is blueletterbible.org
- N.T. Wright’s *For Everyone* Commentary Series: Choose a book of the New Testament and pick up one of NT Wright’s short *For Everyone* commentaries on that book. These commentaries are short, accessible, and could be read in small sections each day.
- Find a good study Bible. A couple good ones are the *ESV Study Bible* and the *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Commentary*.
- You could also buy a Bible Dictionary, other Bible commentaries, or other Bible background books such as (*The New Testament in its World* by N.T. Wright and Michael Bird).

At the end of WW2, the Communist party of Romania seized power. They ended up rigging their election and then they moved quickly to ensure that no one could stop them from being the ones large and in charge.

In order to consolidate their power, the Communist party did two things: (1) The new regime enacted a new security force that led to unbelievable repression; and (2) They changed the history books.

The revolutionaries knew that the way to consolidate and maintain their power was to control the way the Romanian story was told. It wasn't enough to flex their political muscle; if they were to succeed long-term, they would need to capture the Romanian imagination. And so they decided to retell Romania's story and rewire the Romanian people, to make clear that the Communists were the heroes, not the bad guys.

By the mid-1980s, electricity and gasoline were rationed and food was scarce. The government has stepped up their surveillance by hiring more secret police.

At the same time, all across the country of Romania secret gatherings began to take place: "video nights" they were called. The power in these "video nights" wasn't in that they provided the Romanian people an escape from their harsh lives for two hours every so often. Rather, the power was in what these movies revealed about life outside of Romania. An uncensored, foreign film punctured holes in the Iron Curtain and allowed Romanians to peer into another world. Women saw western fashions for the first time. Men saw new kinds of cars on the street. Everyone who saw the films were astounded at what life looked like on the "outside." As one Romanian noted, "The films changed your perspective on life...they changed what you were looking for, what you wanted. You developed through the films."

Just a few years after these video nights became common in Romania, the Iron Curtain fell and the Romanians deposed their dictator. On the streets, a different vision of the world won. A different future took hold.

As Christians, we need to realize that the Scriptures are to us what those "video nights" were to the Romanians. For us, the Scriptures peel back the curtain of the counsel of the wicked and reveal reality. God's Word isn't just fun to read because, like a good history book, it contains interesting stories or good historical information. God uses His Word to mold us to look, live, and love like Jesus.

If you remember back to when we talked about discipleship, we talked about how much the world is forming us whether we realize it or not.

For Christians, one of the ways we pursue formation unto Jesus is by engaging in God's Word. We allow the authority of God to enter our lives through the living and active Word of God.

Before we ever think about going off to thump someone in the head with our Bible verses, the Bible is something we allow to challenge us. We read Scripture not to arm ourselves with Bible-verse-bullets in case we ever feel threatened by "culture," but to have our own lives reordered with God's wisdom (see **Romans 12:1-2; Psalm 1; Psalm 19; Psalm 119; 2 Timothy 3:16-4:4**).

Dan mentioned in his talk a quote from Eugene Peterson who said,

"Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it. We take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus' name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son."

If it weren't for the video nights in Communist Romania, those people would have never known what life looked like "on the outside." But because of those video nights, the Romanians had a picture of reality and that picture of reality prompted them to live and think differently.

As Christians, we come to the Scriptures to meet with God and to have our worldview and lives shaped by them so that we might become a transformed people who Love God, Love People, and Make Disciples well.



WEEK TEN

IDENTITY

INTRO QUESTION + 1 MINUTE OF SILENCE + PRAYER (5 minutes)

Spend some time each sharing one simple way you saw God work this week.

Next, begin your gathering with one minute together in prayerful silence.

[Why silence? Our world is so busy, distracted, and bee-like, with technology filling in any gaps in between. With all that moving, it can be hard to hear others and hear the voice of God. As we gather together, let's press pause and enter into a moment of quiet so that we can hear what God is saying to us and through others.]

Once you have sat in silence, each acknowledging each other's presence and God's presence, centering yourselves on Him, have someone pray to open your time together.

OPENING QUESTIONS (10 minutes)

- How did these devotions impact how you approach or view Scripture?
- This week we're talking about our priority of Identity. Imagine someone came up to you and asked, "Who are you?" and you knew that they weren't going to leave you alone unless you give them an answer. How would you answer that person?

TRANSITION TO WATCH THE WEEK 10 "IDENTITY" VIDEO (about 20 minutes)

You'll want to have this video set up and tested to make sure everything is working properly ahead of time.

READ SCRIPTURE + DEBRIEF IN SMALL GROUPS (30-40 minutes)

Split your group into smaller groups to read the following Scriptures and go through some of the questions below (*There are several here. You'll want to pick out a few ahead of time that you want to be sure to hit; otherwise you'll be constrained with your time*):

- What resonated with you the most from the video? What challenged you most?
- How did the teaching shape your understanding of what worship is? Explain.
- When you think of your identity, what comes to mind? How would you define your identity?
- Consider these statements:
 - I am what I do.*
 - I am who others say I am.*
 - I am what I have.*
 - I am what I say I am.*

Be honest and take a moment. Do any of these resonate with you? Which ones and why?
- What messages from culture, experiences, family of origin have contributed to the way you view your identity? Which of those are in line with God's vision of you and which are not?
- Read **Ephesians 1:3-14**. How does Paul lay a foundation for our identity in this passage?
- What God says about Christ is also true of you when you become his child. Is this something you believe? Would anything in your life change if you lived as though it were true?

TRANSITION BACK TO ONE LARGE GROUP + DISCUSS
(10-20 MINUTES)

Ask a few questions about each person’s time in their smaller groups:

- Which questions did you discuss in your smaller groups? What were some of the things that came from your smaller group discussions? What lingering questions do you have about loving God?
- How is God inviting you to respond after tonight’s discussion?

FINISH WITH LOGISTICS + PRAYER
(15-20 minutes)

Be sure to keep everyone up to date on the latest group info. Here are some considerations to keep in mind:

- This week, our devotions will dive a little deeper into someone of the things discussed and asked even tonight. Be sure to set aside some time each day, just like in Rooted, to sit with them and the Lord. You’ll have some time next week to reflect on your devotions together as a group.
- After this week, you’ll only have two weeks left of the #FORTHE317 series (talking about our priority of Generosity). You’ll need to begin discussions with your group about “what’s next?” Consider some of the following conversation points...

Discuss your meeting day, time, and place. Is it still the best for everyone?

Discuss joining in with The Creek’s sermon content and what that will look like. If you’re not sure, don’t hesitate to reach out to the Life Group Minister about what the upcoming content is and what it will look like!

Discuss current expectations of the group. You might ask: *Is this group meeting your expectations? Why or why not?; What can we be doing as a group to grow closer to one another?; What can we be doing as a group to help one another grow closer to God?*

Finally, finish your group session with prayer. You might designate someone in your group to write down everyone’s prayer requests and then send them to the whole group for everyone to be praying about through the week.

1. What is on your heart that you need prayer for?
2. Who in your life needs prayer?

Have someone close your time together by interceding for the requests that were shared.

Who are you? Not a question we'd like to be asked early on in a new relationship. We're comfortable with "what do you do?" and other pleasantries, but the question of "who we are" requires a little more substantial answer.

This week we'll be discussing our fifth value: *identity*.

So many layers compete to find their way into the fabric of our identity. Sometimes the message is "I am what I do" or "I am what I have." Other times it's "I am who others say I am" or even "I am who I say I am." Our culture, life experiences, and the messages we received along the way all contribute to the way we view and ultimately define ourselves. Maybe one of these messages resonates more deeply than the others. Maybe they all have a voice.

All of us long to be fully known, to be told we have value, to be loved as we are, but underneath it all, we fear it might never happen. So, we parade around, silently begging for the approval of others or trying to convince ourselves that we really don't care—when we really do. We produce and perform, doing our song and dance, hoping someone will really see us, all while fearing we might never be known, valued, and loved at all.

We wrestle with belonging. We fear we aren't enough and never will be. We fear failure because if we fail, then who are we? We grapple with putting forth enough effort to be valuable in God's eyes, as though we have to earn His love. The enemy whispers that it's impossible for us to be loved in our broken state. He hisses, "You're not worth anything." *And we believe it.* We may believe God knows us, but it's difficult to imagine God actually knowing us and loving us anyway. It seems too good to be true.

But it *is* true. God made a way for us to step off the stage. We no longer have to live afraid. The God of the universe knows you fully and delights in how He made you. You are the Beloved of God—fully known and fully loved.

Read these words by Henri Nouwen in his book, *Life of the Beloved*:

"Aren't you like me, hoping that some person, thing, or event will come along to give you that final feeling of inner well-being you desire? Don't you often hope: 'May this book, idea, course, trip, job, country, or relationship fulfill my deepest desire.' But as long as you are waiting for that mysterious moment you will go on running helter-skelter, always anxious and restless, always lustful and angry, never fully satisfied. You know that this is the compulsiveness that keeps us going and busy, but at the same time makes us wonder whether we are getting anywhere in the long run. This is the way to spiritual exhaustion and burn-out. This is the way to spiritual death.

Well, you and I don't have to kill ourselves. We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before parents, teachers, spouses, children, and friends loved or wounded us. That's the truth of our lives."¹

Today we're going to sit with the truth found in **Psalm 139**. This may be a passage you've heard before and it may be a brand-new Scripture for you. Either way, take a moment to invite God to show you something new about your identity in the words you read today.

Throughout the Psalms you will see the word *selah* printed in your Bible. The Psalms were a songbook of sorts for God's people. This word indicated a place where, as you read the text, you would take a pause or a break.

As you read through this text, take a *selah* or a short pause between each stanza or paragraph as it's listed in your Bible. Ask God to show you what He'd like to say to you through the passage.

¹Nouwen, Henri, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 35-36.

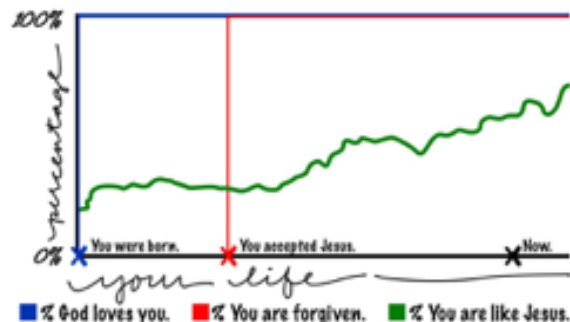
As we're building a complete picture of our identity, it's important to understand that our identity is a double-sided coin. Just like we discovered yesterday, we are God's beloved. He knows us intimately and deeply loves us. This truth is woven throughout the Bible. At the same time, however, we must be honest about the part sin plays in our identity. We are both the beloved *and* sinners in desperate need of a Savior. Today we're going to look at how sin plays a role in our identity.

Our culture's system of economics says we should get what we deserve, be paid whatever wages we have earned. Romans tells us we have earned death because of our sin (**Romans 6:23**). This is where God's economy differs from ours. He exchanges the life of His son simply because of the worth He sees in us, because of His love for us. Christ demonstrates His love for us by dying in a heinous manner while we are still sinners (**Romans 5:8**). He went to the cross knowing we would choose sin. *Love held Him there*. Understanding why He would do it is difficult. We don't love that way, but God does.

God gave us a gift of grace, unmerited favor. We do not deserve the forgiveness or the acceptance, but God gives it anyway. It is a free gift, available to all who believe in Jesus. We are saved by His grace, not by anything we have ever done (**Ephesians 2:8**). *Nothing* we can do will ever erase our sin and shame. Our sin can *only* be covered by the blood of Christ.

We regularly confuse God's level of love, acceptance, and forgiveness toward us with our rate of growth as we come to look more like Jesus. We misunderstand, thinking they are somehow dependent upon one another. They are not. This mix-up leads to confusion and prevents us from understanding how God loves us.

Take a look at this explanation:



Notice the blue line measuring God's love for us. Before you were born, out of love, God knit you together (**Psalms 139**). You bear His image and His likeness. When He formed you, He loved you. Before you were even born. Before you took a breath. Before you sinned and then even when you did. There is nothing you could ever do to make God love you more. There is nothing you could ever do to make God love you less. Ever. That line is non negotiable. It's not up to us. It originates with a loving, gracious Father and is truly unconditional—not because we are lovable, but because it's God's nature to love (**I John 4:8**).

God loves us, but sin forges a great chasm. Our Holy God cannot be in the presence of sin. We need something—Someone—to bridge the divide between a sinful people and a Holy God. We need a cure. A cure that is two-fold is what God provides—a *double cure*. Today, we'll look at the first part of the two-sided cure and tomorrow we'll examine the second.

The first part of the cure we need is forgiveness. We need our sins erased and atoned for. Examine the line calculating our level of forgiveness. When we choose Jesus as Savior and surrender our lives to him, we jump from the 0 percent mark on the forgiven scale to the 100 percent mark on the scale—no stops along the way. The shift is drastic and radical. This forgiveness is only possible because of the cross.

There is no condemnation for those in Christ, only forgiveness, acceptance, love (**Romans 8:1**)³. His work on the cross takes away our sin and shame. Period. Nothing is required on our part to receive forgiveness other than confessing we are sinners in need of a Savior and choosing to accept the gift of grace Jesus offers by being baptized into Him. His pain covers our shame. Completely.

² I was first introduced to the "Double Cure" by Jack Cottrell at Cincinnati Christian University in my Doctrine of Grace seminary course. This concept helped me on my journey toward grace.

³ What this Scripture tells us is that those who are "in Christ" are not condemned. Forgiveness is given to those who choose Jesus as their Savior and surrender their lives to him. If you have not done that and made your confession of faith public through baptism or have questions about what next steps you would need to take, have a conversation with your group leader.

Yesterday we looked at how God loves us, how we are forgiven, and how we needed a double-cure for sin that God so lovingly provided. Today we will continue to dig into the second part of the cure for sin—*sanctification*.

Remember our graph from yesterday? Take a look at the squiggly, unpredictable green line. Notice its ups and downs. Do you see how there really is no pattern to it, no real rhyme or reason?

God desires to grow and change us. He longs for us to be formed into the image of Jesus. This line is the gradual, slow process moving us from our sinful state to looking more like Jesus. It measures our growth and spiritual maturity. This line is called *sanctification*, or the process of becoming holy—becoming more like Christ.

The problem we have, though, is we often mistake this unpredictable line for God's love and acceptance of us or our measure of forgiveness in Christ. It's not tied to either of those lines whatsoever.

When we measure our worth and forgiveness based on this line, we flirt with disaster. If we are moving in the right direction, we begin to think we are somehow more valuable than someone who might not be as far along as we are. We might judge them, elevating our own worth, allowing pride and self-righteousness to creep in. The opposite can also be true. If we believe others are further along in the journey, then we think we are somehow less valuable to God. Neither of these is true, and both are playgrounds for shame. Becoming more like Jesus is a slow journey with ups and downs. You can take steps forward and just as quickly spiral down again. All of us struggle in it. Sometimes we do it well, and other times, not so much. Basing our value and worth on this line will prove uncertain every time, leading us to an identity rooted in our performance and not in the love of God.

Sin is separation from God. Whatever your sin is, it separates you from God. God has no degrees of separation based on your offense; every single sin ever committed requires the exact same price to redeem it. No sin is exempt from needing the blood of Jesus to restore it. The same covering is required for us all.

Just as in the beginning when sin entered, God made a sacrifice and a covering for Adam and Eve; Jesus gave His life to cover you and remove completely the shame of your sin, once and for all (**Hebrews 10:10**).

When we believe it takes our work and effort to earn God's love, we begin to believe we had something to do with our redemption. "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it" (**Ephesians 2:8–9 NLT**). We cannot take credit for the grace we've been shown. God gifted grace. It's not a reward for good behavior. If it were, you better believe we'd all be thinking more about how great our performance was instead of how remarkable our God is. He is the source of it all, and we are the recipients of the gift.

Read Ephesians 2:1-13.

As you read, answer these questions.

What was your life like before Christ? What did it look like to be "dead in your transgressions...when you followed the ways of this world"?

When was the last time you felt the full weight of your sin, nailing Christ to the cross? In order to fully understand the gift we've been given as beloved sons and daughters of God, we must fully understand the weight of our sinful nature and what it did to Christ on the cross. Take a few moments to reflect on how Christ suffered to give you the gift of grace so freely. What is your response to that gift? Write a prayer to Jesus in response.

How do you view grace? Because of God's great love for you, you've been made alive in Christ. You've been forgiven, raised up with Christ, and seated with him. How do you feel in response to that truth?

If the definition of grace is "unmerited favor," how have you seen "unmerited favor" poured out by God into your life?

How does it change things knowing grace is a gift of God, something you cannot take credit for? Have you ever tried to take credit for your own salvation or tried to earn God's love or favor? What was that like?

What would you like to say to Jesus in response to this passage? Take a few moments to pray a prayer of response to **Ephesians 2:1-13**. You can even take a few moments to read through the passage again before you pray.

As we continue our conversation about identity, examining the truth Scripture gives, let's talk about an important word that contributes greatly in forming our identity in Christ. It's a word I'm sure you've heard before, but it may very well be difficult to explain to someone else. What's the word? *Righteousness*.

Now, before you just put down your pen and Bible, quitting altogether, let's look at what Tim Keller has to say about this "churchy" word. I think you'll find it very interesting and vital to the priority we're discussing this week.

"Now the trouble with the word righteousness is, I'm a person (a regular American type), and when I think of the word righteousness, right away the first thing I think of is a stiff, starched shirt... That's not really it. In the Bible, the word righteousness is a relational word. It's a word that really means to be right with somebody. It means to be received. It means to find favor. It means to be welcomed, and the opposite of righteousness is not immorality. The opposite of righteousness is rejection."⁴

Keller goes on to list examples of what this "rejection" looks like. He includes being dressed inappropriately for some official occasion. When you're wearing inappropriate attire, you feel naked, vulnerable, anxious. It seems as though you're not "right" with the host or the others at the event. Keller also uses the example of a job interview. At every job interview, they are looking at your attire, your references, your resume, the answers to your questions. They are looking at every little thing about you they can.

Ultimately what we need is a verdict. We want to know where we stand. Are we "right" with others? We're looking to others to find the answer and to give us a verdict.

Keller tells the danger of this others-referenced verdict:

"What happens is over the years, thousands and thousands and thousands of these verdicts are coming in, and they accumulate. As time goes on, you develop your own standards for what you believe will make you acceptable. You see, righteousness is a sense of being acceptable...It starts to come on in, and it becomes part of that standard of righteousness...You can shrug off a lot of things people say, but over the years what your parents have said, what your friends have said, what those people who didn't want to marry you said, what those people who turned you down said, or the people who told you did a great job at the audition or in the contest or on the job application, all those things have sunk in, and you have come up with your own standards...This is what sin is. Sin is we will go and establish our own righteousness. We'll say, 'If I achieve that standard, if I can do that, then I know I exist. Then I know I'm acceptable in my own sight and in the sight of significant others and, in some general way, in the sight of God.' Everybody does that. Everybody has a set of standards. Everybody goes about seeking to establish their own righteousness."⁵

Paul, of all people, had every right to brag about the standards his life met, but he had something to say about his own righteousness.

Read **Philippians 3:3-11**.

How do you respond to Keller's definition of righteousness as you read this passage?

⁴Keller, Timothy, "Finding Our Identity, Part 1," (sermon preached October 29, 1989).

⁵Ibid.

Read through the passage (**Philippians 3:3-11**) again, putting yourself in the place of Paul? How do you “hustle” for your own righteousness? Where do you need to lay down seeking to establish your own righteousness and accept the righteousness you’ve been given in Christ?

Is there anywhere you need to be “made right” with God? Is there an area of sin in your life that needs to be confessed? Take a moment to bring it before our loving God, inviting His forgiveness—the gift that is already yours in Christ.

Read **Philippians 3:3-11** one last time.

Spend time praying the words of this Scripture as you invite God to redefine your identity as the Beloved in Him.

A big part of fighting and winning the battle with our identity comes in understanding who God says you *really* are. Knowing you belong to Christ and you are his own child brings a freedom no other truth can.

Take some time today to read through this list of statements and the scripture references rooting them in truth. Allow these truths to really soak into your soul. Ask yourself if you really believe this is true. Spend some time writing your responses to these truths under. Be honest with God. Be honest with yourself. You may be struggling to believe some of them. Tell him. Ask for help understanding what he says about who you are. Spend time thanking him for his word and his truth.

WHO YOU ARE IN CHRIST

Truth: I am a child of God.

Jesus came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:10-12 NLT).

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are (1 John 3:1a NIV)!

My Response:

Truth: I have been bought with a price. I belong to God.

You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20 NLT).

Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. Others were given in exchange for you. I traded their lives for yours

because you are precious to me. You are honored, and I love you (Isaiah 43:1, 3-4 NLT).

My Response:

Truth: I have been adopted as God's child.

Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son (Ephesians 1:4-6 MSG).

My Response:

Truth: I have been redeemed and forgiven of all my sins.

For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins (Colossians 1:13-14 NLT).

My Response:

Truth: I am complete in Christ.

For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. So, you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority. For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead (Colossians 2:9-10, 12 NLT).

My Response:

Truth: I cannot be separated from the love of God.

I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39 NLT).

My Response:

Truth: I have not been given a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, love, and a sound mind.

For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. So never be ashamed to tell others about our Lord...With the strength God gives you, be ready to suffer for the sake of the Good News (2 Timothy 1:7-8 NLT).

My Response:



WEEK ELEVEN

COMMUNITY

INTRO QUESTION + 1 MINUTE OF SILENCE + PRAYER (5 minutes)

For this week, begin your gathering with one minute together in prayerful silence.

Next, begin your gathering with one minute together in prayerful silence.

[Why silence? Our world is so busy, distracted, and bee-like, with technology filling in any gaps in between. With all that moving, it can be hard to hear others and hear the voice of God. As we gather together, let's press pause and enter into a moment of quiet so that we can hear what God is saying to us and through others.]

Once you have sat in silence, each acknowledging each other's presence and God's presence, centering yourselves on Him, have someone pray to open your time together.

OPENING QUESTIONS (10 minutes)

- What stood out to you from your devotions this past week? How did these devotions enrich your view of identity? How was your time sitting with who God says you are in His eyes?
- This week we're talking about our priority of Community. What role have relationships or community played for you in growing closer to Jesus over the course of your life?

TRANSITION TO WATCH THE WEEK 11 "COMMUNITY" VIDEO (about 20 minutes)

Let your group know that just like last week, you'll be watching a short teaching from our lead pastor, Dan. You'll want to have this video set up and tested to make sure everything is working properly ahead of time.

READ SCRIPTURE + DEBRIEF IN YOUR LARGE GROUPS (45 minutes)

Go through some of the questions below with your entire group (*There are several questions here. You'll want to pick a few that you think will lead to the best discussion for your group*):

- What stood out to you or challenged you most from Dan's talk about community?
- What has forming community been like for you over the course of your life? Easy? Hard? In between? How would you describe the depth of camaraderie and friendship of those communities you've been a part of? What made the friendship deep? What made it surface level?
- In this talk, Dan mentioned three images of community: (1) a coffee shop; (2) a living room; and (3) an oxen's yoke. Which of these three images and their representations of community are you most familiar with? Which of these three images are you hoping this life group will be?
- What would it take for you to feel like this group has reached the goal of being "yokefellows" like Paul talks about in **Philippians 4:3**? What sorts of reasonable commitments and expectations for one another should we have in order to realize that goal?
- Take a few moments to have individuals look up a few of the following passages on community: **Proverbs 27:17; John 15:12-13; Acts 2:44-47; Romans 12:10-18; Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Hebrews 10:24-25**. Once they have found the passage in their Bibles, have those people read the verse aloud and try to come up with one key principle from that passage about God's desire for community.
- What thoughts, questions, feelings or tensions do you have about community right now that you feel need to be talked about but haven't been brought up yet?

FINISH WITH LOGISTICS + PRAYER
(15-20 minutes)

Be sure to keep everyone up to date on the latest group info. Here are some considerations to keep in mind:

- This week, our devotions will dive a little deeper into some of the things discussed and asked tonight. Be sure to set aside some time each day, just like in Rooted, to sit with them and the Lord. You'll have some time next week to reflect on your devotions together as a group.
- After this week, you'll only have one week left of the #FORTHE317 series. You'll need to begin discussions with your group about "what's next?" Consider some of the following conversation points...

Discuss your meeting day, time, and place. Is it still the best for everyone?

Discuss joining in with The Creek's sermon content and what that will look like. If you're not sure, don't hesitate to reach out to the Life Group Minister about what the upcoming content is and what it will look like!

Discuss current expectations of the group. You might ask: *Is this group meeting your expectations? Why or why not?; What can we be doing as a group to grow closer to one another?; What can we be doing as a group to help one another grow closer to God?*

Finally, finish your group session with prayer. You might designate someone in your group to write down everyone's prayer requests and then send them to the whole group for everyone to be praying about through the week.

1. What is on your heart that you need prayer for?
2. Who in your life needs prayer?

Have someone close your time together by interceding for the requests that were shared.

In Dan's message, he mentioned how one of our priorities as a church is *community*.

In our culture today, however, community seems a little hard to come by. In the age of Instagram, Facebook, Amazon.com, Kroger Clicklist, et al. where do we get our community? In a day when diseases can make us hesitant to have proximity with others, what even *is* community? In a time when more people *form* their own communities (like the 90's sitcom show *Friends*) than previous times when people were born into their communities (think small-town America in shows like *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Andy Griffith Show* or the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*), what should Christian community look like for us?

That's what we'll be diving into in this week's devotionals.

In shows like *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Andy Griffith Show* or the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, the community portrayed consisted mainly of one's family. The Ingalls family all were there for one another out on the prairie – father Charles, mother Caroline, and their daughters. Andy Griffith had community with his son Opie, Aunt Bee, and even their funny cousin Barney Fife. And what made life so wonderful for George Bailey was all of his small-town connections he had maintained since he was a child – his mother Irene, his wife Mary, his brother Harry, and so on.

In shows like *Friends*, you have sort of the opposite of the three examples of above. In *Friends*, Rachel, Ross, Chandler, Joey, and others don't make community by staying put in their small towns and caring for their friends and family over the course of their lives. Instead, they find community by leaving their family of origin and forming new relationships together in the big city. The result is a mixed group of 20-somethings who do life together with only the occasional appearance by members of their family.

There are obviously pros and cons to both the situation found in the shows and movies like *Little House on the Prairie* and the situation found in *Friends*. What's interesting, however, is how our culture's conception of community has changed since *Little House on the Prairie* in the late 19th century to what community looks like in the late 20th century in *Friends*.

So in a cultural milieu with ever-changing ideas of what community is, what community looks like, and what community should be like, what are Christians to do as they form Christian community? What does it look like to live in faithful Christian community in our day and age?

In the gospels, Jesus' call to *himself* is actually a call to *community*. When Jesus calls the disciples to follow him, he's not just calling them to follow him individually, one person each in their own way, just them and Jesus, and with no interaction with anyone else! No, His call was a call to a life of discipleship *within* the context of a group. And this group was made up, quite literally, of people who would have otherwise never "hung out."

Take, for example, Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot (see **Mark 3:13-19**). Matthew had a history of working for the Romans and collecting taxes from the Jewish people (which also probably meant that he extorted his own people too). Simon, as a zealot, was about as far away from Matthew as one could possibly be on the political front. As a zealot, Simon had bought into the vision that one must do whatever it takes to overthrow the Roman government, including acts of violence, terrorism, and even holy war.

So, Jesus invites both of these guys into his "life group" and you can be sure that things were probably tense. Two political arch rivals...in close proximity...yikes! And, honestly...how relevant is *that*?

What made the difference for them (a.k.a. why they didn't attack each other) was that this community was different. Jesus was at the center. Their allegiance to Jesus trumped their political ideologies and they remained bound together despite their differences – all because Christ was a greater adhesive than what the world's ideas could pull apart.

Just as Jesus called his initial group of disciples together, so too is he calling groups of people together today. This is what we call "the church." And the church is made up of people with different political ideologies, non-essential theologies, socio-economic statuses, ethnic backgrounds, ages, sexes, races, and so many more variations it'd be impossible to list them all.

And yet...even with *all* of these differences between us, we are held together by a greater sameness: Jesus himself.

Sometime around 1410, Andrei Rublev painted a picture of God. The image depicts three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit gathered around a table.

If you're able, take a moment to Google "Andrei Rublev Trinity icon 1410." You'll see the painting. What does this picture tell you about the nature of God? What invitations do you sense this picture is giving you? Take a few moments to reflect on this and jot down any reflections in the space below.

In the picture, as the Trinity are seated they are positioned with an openness to the viewer inviting each person who reflects on the image into the communal moment they are sharing together.

This serves as a good starting point for us as we continue our conversation on community.

One of the reasons as to why we pursue community is because God Himself is a community. Christians, since the first followers of Jesus, have maintained that the God we worship is a triune God. In fact, to sum up our belief about God as a church, we'd say that, "We believe in one true God, Creator of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

This means that at the core of God's being is His being a community. And not just any kind of community. God is a community of love.

In the book of John, as Jesus is giving some of his last words, Jesus relays some really interesting insights into the nature of God.

In **John 17:22-24**, Jesus says the following:

"The glory that you have given me I have given to them [those who believe], that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me... because you loved me before the foundation of the world."

Did you notice Jesus' words in just these three verses here? Three things to note:

Jesus says of God that they "are one" (verse 22)

Jesus says that God loved believers
"even as you loved me" (verse 23)

Jesus says that God loved him "before the
foundation of the world" (verse 24)

And lest we forget about the Holy Spirit, the Bible tells us that it is the Holy Spirit who co-existed eternally as God (**Genesis 1:2**) and who is the person in the Godhead who acts as the conduit of the love found within the Triune God (see **Matthew 3:16-17; Romans 5:5**).

This tells us three things about the nature of God that we have already looked at: (1) That God is a community; that (2) God is a community of love; and that (3) God has always been a community of love.

Now, as people who are created in the image of God (**Genesis 1:26-27**), who are striving to look, live, and love like Jesus (**Romans 8:29; Ephesians 4:13**), and who are partakers in the divine nature (**2 Peter 1:4**), it follows that we should be trying to both live within and embody that kind of community here and now.

As we discovered yesterday, Jesus calls us to community – not just to follow him individually. Because of this, there is a sense in which Christians do not *form* community. God has already formed our community for us. Our community is the group of believers both across the world and our local context. Our aim is to *realize* the community that God has already purchased by the blood of his Son (**Acts 20:28**).

Realizing that community means that we fulfill or live up to the many different ways that God’s community is talked about in the New Testament. In the Bible, the church is referred to as...

THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

(Ephesians 5:25-33; Revelation 19:7-9; 21:9; 2 Corinthians 11:2)

A BODY

(Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 10:17; 1 Corinthians 12:7ff; Ephesians 5:23)

GOD’S HOUSE

(Hebrews 3:6; 1 Timothy 3:14-15; 1 Peter 4:17)

A TEMPLE

(1 Corinthians 3:11; 6:19; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5-7)

A FAMILY

(which we’ll talk about tomorrow)

Christian community first and foremost should resemble these various metaphors. And at the center of that resemblance should be love. As Jesus says, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (**John 13:35**) and as Paul says, “If I don’t have love, I have nothing” (**1 Corinthians 13:2**).

So...to sum up: God has always existed as a community of love. We, as His people, are both invited into that community and called to embody that kind of community here on earth with His people – the Church.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What new thoughts or questions do you have about the character of God or about the nature of Christian community?

Spend some time looking up the Scriptures for one of the different metaphors for the Church that you read about above. What do you learn about God’s people from these verses? Do you feel like you’re living up to the metaphor? Why or why not? What’s getting in the way?

When have you experienced the church as a community of love in your own life? When have you personally experienced the church being...*less* than loving?

On Day 1, we talked about how Jesus calls us into community. Yesterday, we talked about a theology of community which centered on the idea that God is a community of love that we are to join in on and to embody here on Earth. Today, we are going to expand on the idea of what it looks like to embody a community of love here on earth by talking about how the church is the family of God.

Alan Jones writes, "In the waters of baptism we are reminded that we are not born in a vacuum, nor do we journey entirely alone...Being reborn, being made alive, involves being born into a community. So there are strings attached to this adventure."

When it comes to Christianity, it seems as if Christians only ever talk about two aspects: (1) being made right with God and (2) becoming more like Jesus throughout one's life.

And...rightfully so! **But**...when we place our faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior, we need to know that we are at that point not just fully justified (i.e. made right with God), not *just* beginning to be sanctified (i.e. becoming more like Jesus), we are *also* placed into a new family – we are "**familified**."

In **Mark 3:31-35**, we read of Jesus' mother and brothers looking for him until they eventually find him and stop outside of one of the homes that he is in. The people inside alert Jesus that his family is seeking him. And, rather controversially, Jesus responds to the notion that his biological family is seeking him by asking, "Who are my mother and brothers?"

What? Why even ask that, Jesus? You know who your family is!

And then Jesus continued after posing his rhetorical question by looking at those he was with saying, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother!"

By saying this, Jesus was *radically* reorienting how people thought in his day.

In Jesus' day, your blood family ties, especially those between siblings, were the closest relationships one could have. But Jesus comes in, disrupts that line of thinking, and essentially says, "Relationships amongst God's children are to be the closest relationships you have in life – even above blood family ties!"

A bit crazy? Perhaps. People thought so too of Jesus.

However, if you look closer throughout the New Testament you'll see that there is a huge emphasis on God's new family being central – everything from Jesus talking about what it costs to follow him in **Mark 10:28-30**, Jesus' new surrogate family operating out of a common fund in **Luke 8:1-3**, Paul's use of brother/sister language in his letters (for a few examples see **Romans 16:1**, **1 Corinthians 1:10**, and **Colossians 1:2**), to Paul's theological foundation that we have all been adopted into a new family as sons and daughters like in **Ephesians 1:5**.

Now, this is not to say that, as Christians we should abandon our biological families. Of course not! Paul lays out in a couple of letters in the New Testament the roles of husbands, wives, and children in the home. Families are important to God.

At the same time, however, the New Testament's teaching on this is very clear: Your faith family is an *essential* part to your spiritual journey. There is no such thing as having Christ without His church. You can't have God as your Father without at the same time having fellow Christians as your brothers and sisters.

And if that is the case, well that has huge implications for how one does community!

In the early church, we see the sharing of resources (see **Acts 2:44-45**), the sharing of hearts (see Paul's example in **1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:8**), the commitment level each person had with one another (see Jesus' words about reconciling with a brother in **Matthew 18:15-17**), an emphasis on unity (**Ephesians 4:3**), as well as all sorts of commands to love, encourage, honor one another, and bear one another's burdens.

All of that is to say this: *Your life group is one of the tangible expressions of the family of God in your life.*

We live in a unique time in human history. At no other point in human history has our ability to leave the people most proximal to us been easier or more encouraged. With the advent of technology like the internet, the cellphone, the car, Netflix, etc. it is so easy to opt out of our local communities emotionally, mentally, and even physically should we so desire. And sometimes, we are even encouraged to do so with cultural mantras like, "Anything that costs you your peace is too expensive, let it go..." or "If it doesn't make you feel fabulous: don't do it, don't buy it, don't keep it..." floating around.

And while some of the heart behind those sentiments is valid, those kinds of ideas can wreak havoc on one's relationships. *What if a relationship becomes burdensome? What if bearing with a brother or sister in Christ is hard work and emotionally taxing? What if walking with someone through an addiction doesn't feel fabulous? What if, what if, what if...?*

Stop for a moment and think about what sorts of thoughts, mantras, or questions like the ones above that you maybe wrestle with that actually might hurt your chances of being in committed relationships with others. Jot down your thoughts in the space below.

Many times in relationships, when the going gets tough, we opt to get out. We try to get out of dodge. The same thing happens in life groups...

- If the group doesn't go "deep enough"... well, time to find another group.
- If people are too needy in the group...well, that's too much, we didn't sign up for that.
- If someone disagrees with us and we don't wanna put up with it...sayonara!
- If the group doesn't meet our expectations...we get frustrated, don't talk about it, and ghost everyone.

Today and tomorrow, we'll be looking at some problems that life groups encounter that prevent them from being all that God intends for them to be. Today, we'll be talking about what we call the "Let-down" stage of life groups.

It is said that group life can often be broken down into 3 main stages: *A Honeymoon Stage, A Let-down Stage, A Covenant Stage.*

In **Stage 1**, you begin your group and everything seems to be going great. Everyone is getting along, people are coming to the group consistently, people are praying for one another, your group is serving, you're sharing vulnerably, and you feel like this group could really be something special. Then, as time goes on, your group enters stage 2.

In **Stage 2**, schedule conflicts start to arise, people start to get on each other's nerves, you find out that someone has different views than you on certain topics, people begin to feel burdensome, the group time doesn't go "deep enough," and things just are no longer what they used to be. Then comes the potential for stage 3.

Upon arriving at **Stage 3**, you have a choice. You can either hunker down and covenant with this group of people or you can leave.

You probably experience something similar to these three stages with many things in life – school, hobbies, friendships, etc. And just like with everything else in life, where we have the option to commit to a hobby, or a sports program, or a job, or a marital relationship when it gets tough, so too do we have the option to do the same with our life groups. It is the task of every life group to move past Stages 1 and 2 and into Stage 3.

If you remember from Dan's talk, he spent a good amount of time talking about the covenantal relationships we believe God is calling us to as a church family. In doing so, he talked a lot about oxen and yokes and how we are to be "yokefellows" with one another. He got this from **Philippians 4:3**. Here's what he said about that and how that relates to covenanting with one another as a group:

"The picture of an oxen's yoke takes us deeper than the public space or personal space, it's private space. Private conversations aren't for everyone...just for the few people intentionally included. Private space allows for more than just casual or committed friendships to develop, it allows for covenant friendships to develop. Just like oxen that have been yoked together, a covenant friendship is one where two or more people can say:

God has called us to one another, God has brought our relationship together for the purpose of pursuing Christ together, for the purpose of mutual encouragement, for the purpose of advancing his kingdom.

Covenant friendships aren't just people you work out with at the gym, or people you play sports with, or people you grab meals with, or go shopping with, though you might do those things with covenant friends. The real quality of covenant friendships is that you can say: 'Because God has called me to you and you to me, because he has united us together, my life is fully open to you, any question you want to ask, ask it. Any concern you want to share, share it. Any challenge you want to offer, offer it. We have complete access to one another's lives. There is nothing that's off-limits.'

And it's not just about character formation and having a Christ-like attitude and disposition; it's about the kingdom output of our shared relationship. Two oxen yoked together aren't just close to each other, they're not just good friends who know everything about one another, they do work together. Covenant friends are able to say God has joined us together for us to combine our efforts and our resources, our energy and passion, in order to bring him glory, in order to love and serve people, and in order to move the kingdom of Christ forward through our relationship."

Your group will inevitably reach Stage 2 and upon reaching Stage 2, you'll have to make the decision whether to enter into Stage 3 or not – the stage of covenantal relationships. It'd be well worth your while for you to really think about what kind of group you want to be a part of, what your expectations are of the group, and if your expectations are in line with the purpose of the group or not.

If you want to know what will kill your life group fast, look no further than a group's inability to express their expectations, work through any conflict, and resolve to covenant together.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What kind of group do you want your life group to be? What are you hoping to get out of your life group? What are your expectations of it?

Read **Philippians 4:3**. When you read the above description of covenantal relationships, is that something you are searching for in your life group? In what ways are you personally contributing to this community being covenantal in nature? In what ways have you personally hindered that from happening?

Write out a brief paragraph of why you think covenanting with a community will serve your spiritual growth well. Then, write out a second brief paragraph about how *not* covenanting with a community will hinder your spiritual growth.

Do a Google search on the most invasive species in the world and more than likely you'll see something about the Cane Toad. Gross, right? The Cane Toad was introduced in many places like the Philippines, Hawaii, Florida to combat certain insects. Little did folks know that the toad would be a much worse problem. With a heartiness and strength to fight against any would-be predators, a skin that releases toxins to shoo off anything that would eat it, and a reproductive ability to lay thousands of eggs a year through just one female toad, these beasts have become a force to be reckoned with.

Yesterday, we began talking about how the "Let-down" stage of life groups can be the life group's killer. And while life groups may not have to worry about any amphibians ruining their weekly gathering, there are some other things that can occur within a life group that are as ugly as toads.

Here are five life group "killers" that, like the Cane Toad has done to environments around the world, will wreak havoc on your life group being all that God intends for it to be:

KILLER 1: SHAME

Researcher Brené Brown defines shame as the, "Intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging."

All too often, life groups, once safe havens for all kinds of spiritual maladies, become shame factories. A snide remark, a flippant joke, a dismissive criticism, a passive aggressive comment is all it takes and people begin to feel that maybe this isn't the safest place for them to bring their hurts, habits, and hang-ups. As pastor Timothy Keller writes, "Instead of being a hospital for sinners (where triage happens), they [churches] become a museum for saints."

Don't let shame ruin your life group.

KILLER 2: BITTERNESS

Hebrews 12:15 exhorts Christians to, "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled."

Bitterness, anger, frustration can all well up within us when we have misguided expectations. Expectations are not misguided when they are stated clearly and agreed upon.

All too often, in life groups, people will allow things that irk them or bother them to build up pressure inside of them until they can no longer take it anymore. At that point, they either leave a group or explode on unsuspecting victims.

Be a life group that doesn't "let the sun go down on your anger" (**Ephesians 4:26**). Instead, resolve to be "quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (**James 1:19**) and to confront people lovingly if you have something against them (**Matthew 18:15-20**).

Don't let bitterness ruin your life group.

KILLER 3: GOSSIP/SLANDER

The third killer that can infiltrate your life group is gossip and slander.

Paul writes in **Ephesians 4** to "put away falsehood" (**4:25**), to "speak the truth" (**4:25**), to not allow any "corrupting talk" to come out of your mouth (**4:29**), but only that which is "good for building up" (**4:29**). He goes on to say that Christians should, "Let all...clamor and slander be put away from you..." (**Ephesians 4:31**).

Make it your aim to speak truth to those in your life group. Make it your aim to assume the best. Make it your aim to trust. Make it your aim to put away falsehood and seek clarity where clarity is needed. It does no one any good to get secondhand information, nor does it do anyone any good to spread false information.

Don't let gossip or slander ruin your life group.

KILLER 4: PARTIALITY

This killer is less known than maybe the first three we've looked at, but it can be just as deadly if not nipped in the bud. Our culture applauds inclusivity (and rightfully so!), but as we discussed earlier on in the #FORTHE317 series, there are parts of us that are just inclined to make judgements about people. And sometimes, whether we are aware of it or not, those preconceived ideas that we hold to can prevent us from showing the same care or concern for some people as others.

James writes about this in **James 2:1-9**. James says, "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism...If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers."

I'd encourage you to read all nine of those verses and commit to being a life group that is invitational to everyone in the group, is inclusive of everyone in the group, is ready to jump at a moment's notice to help, not just the people whom everyone likes, but those who are less popular as well.

Don't let partiality ruin your life group.

KILLER 4: IMMORALITY

This last invasive enemy of life groups probably goes without saying, but maybe not. Immorality will ruin your life group. And that goes for both immorality interpersonally between group members and immorality that goes on personally for just one member.

Paul, using a food illustration, writes in **1 Corinthians 5:6-7** to the Corinthian church saying, "Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are."

Here, Paul is addressing the Corinthians that were allowing someone in their church to go on sinning deliberately. He compares that person to yeast in dough that affects the whole lump, even at a molecular level.

You may agree and see how interpersonal immorality could lead to a group's demise, but personal holiness matters just as much as interpersonal holiness. It follows that if a life group is intent on looking, living, and loving like Jesus and helping one another do that, then each person must be committed to that goal both in a group sense and in a personal sense.

If one person goes on sinning deliberately, then he or she will slowly begin altering the course of the group. No longer is the group about following hard after Jesus. It becomes something else entirely.

Don't let immorality ruin your life group.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Which of these five life group killers do you feel like you are most prone to commit yourself? When has one of these shown up in your relationships and hurt that relationship? How has one of these killers shown up in a relationship and hurt you personally?

What are some other life group "killers" not listed here that you think could be just as detrimental? List 2-3 and why.

What practical steps or commitments do you think your group needs to make to ensure that none of the above "killers" ever get so bad in your life group that your group suffers as a result? List out 3-5 (*You'll have a space in your next life group gathering to discuss these commitments!*)

WEEK TWELVE

GENEROSITY

INTRO QUESTION + 1 MINUTE OF SILENCE + PRAYER (5 minutes)

For this week, begin your gathering with one minute together in prayerful silence.

Next, begin your gathering with one minute together in prayerful silence.

[Why silence? Our world is so busy, distracted, and bee-like, with technology filling in any gaps in between. With all that moving, it can be hard to hear others and hear the voice of God. As we gather together, let's press pause and enter into a moment of quiet so that we can hear what God is saying to us and through others.]

Once you have sat in silence, each acknowledging each other's presence and God's presence, centering yourselves on Him, have someone pray to open your time together.

OPENING QUESTIONS (10 minutes)

- On Day 5 of this past week's devotionals, we read about 5 "life group killers" (shame, bitterness, gossip/slander, partiality, and immorality). What practical steps or commitments can our group make to ensure that none of these "killers" affect our group?
- This week we're talking about our priority of Generosity. When was a time that someone's generosity towards you changed your life (either drastically or in some small, but meaningful, way?)

TRANSITION TO WATCH THE WEEK 12 "GENEROISTY" VIDEO (about 20 minutes)

Let your group know that, just like last week, you'll be watching a short teaching from our lead pastor, Dan. You'll want to have this video set up and tested to make sure everything is working properly ahead of time.

READ SCRIPTURE + DEBRIEF IN YOUR LARGE GROUPS (45 minutes)

Go through some of the questions below with your entire group (*There are several questions here. You'll want to pick a few that you think will lead to the best discussion for your group*):

- When was a time in your life you felt like God was giving you an opportunity to give, but you decided not to? When was a time you responded positively to God's invitation to give? What happened?
- What stood out to you or challenged you most from Dan's talk about generosity?
- Just like we talked about in Rooted, Dan talked about how our willingness to be generous stems from whether we view what we have as being from God. Are there things in your life that you think *do not* come from God? What are they? How does **Deuteronomy 8:17-18** challenge this? How does that sit with you?
- In this talk, Dan mentioned two stories of generosity: (1) From **Exodus 35**; and (2) From **Mark 12**. What do you learn about generosity from these two stories? Where are you challenged in your own generosity from these stories?
- If you sense a twinge of wanting to not be generous, where do you think that comes from? What's holding you back?
- In this message, Dan said you can usually break people into four categories: The person who doesn't give, the meager giver, the obedient giver, and the joyful giver. Which category would you say you fall into? Explain. What would it look like for you to move into joyful giving if you're not there?
- What would it look like for you practically to be 1% more generous?
- What thoughts or questions or feelings or tensions do you have about generosity?

FINISH WITH LOGISTICS + PRAYER
(15-20 minutes)

Be sure to keep everyone up to date on the latest group info. Here are some considerations to keep in mind:

- This week, our devotions will dive a little deeper into some of the things discussed and asked even tonight. Be sure to set aside some time each day, just like the past several weeks, to sit with them and the Lord.
- After this week, you'll only have one week left of the #FORTHE317 series. You'll need to begin discussions with your group about "what's next?" Consider some of the following conversation points...

Discuss your meeting day, time, and place. Is it still the best for everyone?

Discuss joining in with The Creek's sermon content and what that will look like. If you're not sure, don't hesitate to reach out to the Life Group Minister about what the upcoming content is and what it will look like!

Discuss current expectations of the group. You might ask: *Is this group meeting your expectations? Why or why not?; What can we be doing as a group to grow closer to one another?; What can we be doing as a group to help one another grow closer to God?*

Finally, finish your group session with prayer. You might designate someone in your group to write down everyone's prayer requests and then send them to the whole group for everyone to be praying about through the week.

1. What is on your heart that you need prayer for?
2. Who in your life needs prayer?

Have someone close your time together by interceding for the requests that were shared.

I imagine she got up that morning, like every morning, thinking of her dear husband, who was now gone. She lived in a small room with very few things to call her own, just enough food to get by. She and her husband had moved to Jerusalem for business and had no other family near, so when he died, she was left alone.

Soon after waking up, dread started to set in. Today, she had to go to the temple to take her offering. She had done all she could to save as much as she could, and what she came up with wasn't even worth a measly penny. She could have just skipped it. No one would have noticed. What good was a penny going to do? But she had to give. She wanted to give. She had faith in her Jehovah Jireh – the God who Provides. So she made her way to the temple.

When she arrived, she walked among others who were making a big deal about their large gifts. It's ironic that the offering boxes were shaped like trumpets, because some who gave were tooting their own horns—making sure as many people as possible knew how much they were giving. She tried to sneak through those people and be as inconspicuous as possible, hoping no one would notice.

But someone did notice. As He watched the gifts being given, He saw through all the show to the heart. He saw that the gifts filling the temple coffers were coming from empty hearts. Until she arrived. He didn't miss her. In fact, as she approached, He called His followers around. "Watch this lady...she's about to give what no one else has given today." They watched with rapt attention. And when they saw what she gave, they must have been a little disappointed.

They saw a small, insignificant offering.

Jesus saw a heart poured out.

They saw a woman hiding from people. Jesus saw a woman shouting from the rooftops to her God that she trusted Him completely...and there wasn't a greater gift given that day.

This week as we wrap up our #FORTHE317 content, we're going to investigate generosity, particularly looking at the heart behind our generosity. Generosity, perhaps as much as any of our priorities, is a declaration of our faith and trust in God to protect and provide for us.

Generosity goes beyond giving obediently, and it goes beyond giving money. At the heart of generosity is love. Thomas Aquinas says, "To love is to will the good of the other." Sounds like love and generosity are cut from the same cloth, doesn't it? Maybe that's why **John 3:16** makes so much sense. "For God so **loved** the world, he **gave** his one and only son..." Generosity is one of the leading actions tied to love - and that's what our mission, vision, and priorities are all about.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Read the story of the widow's mite in **Mark 12:38-44**. Imagine the scene for yourself. What is Jesus' reaction to what she gives? Why did he call his disciples around? What does that tell you about Jesus? What did you learn about generosity from this story?

What do you think *has* to be true of the widow's worldview that enabled her to be that generous? How does her outlook differ from the others giving large amounts of money? In what ways is her view of the world same or different from yours?

Compare Jesus' reaction to this widow to his reactions to other acts of faith. Read **Matthew 15:21-28** and **Matthew 8:5-13**. What does this tell you about Jesus? What does it tell you about yourself?

Refresh your memory of the story Dan told about the woman who bought cookies to snack on while waiting for her plane and the man who sat next to her and kept eating them along with her. They reached the end of the bag of cookies and the man split the last one with her, all before she stood up to leave and noticed that her bag of cookies was still there next to her, unopened. The whole time she was thinking he was the one bold enough to take from her when she, in fact, was the cookie thief. One of the most striking elements of the story is the kindness and generosity of the man who owned the cookies.

While the Bible doesn't specifically mention God's generosity very much, it does tell of his goodness, kindness, and faithfulness; how he gave us this world to live in, how he gave us Jesus to save us, and how he continues to provide for our needs today—all of which are facets of his generosity.

Let's look at how the Bible depicts God's goodness and his resulting generosity. As you read each passage, mark down the phrases that demonstrate God's generous nature.

PSALM 8:3-4

PSALM 36:5-8

MATTHEW 6:25-34

2 CORINTHIANS 9:8-11

1 TIMOTHY 6:17

JAMES 1:17-18

Jesus manifested all of those remarkable qualities of God when he came to earth. Every day of his ministry was a day of giving: hope, salvation, healing, time, company. He constantly and generously gave. Read how he publicly announced the beginning of his ministry in **Luke 4:16-21**.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

*Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them,
"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

He declared his intentions to give fresh life to the hopeless, to free the oppressed, and to proclaim the Lord's favor. That's the same work we're invited to do as God's agents in the world.

Read about Mary's extravagant gift to Jesus in **Matthew 26:6-13**. What does it teach you about giving as an act of worship? How can our giving to the church or to others act as the same kind of worship?

When have you been able to give generously to someone and then see God multiply the effects of that gift? How did it impact your own worship of God? How did it impact the recipient's worship?

We know God is generous; we know what He's given us through Jesus. It's easy to look at Him as our example and see generosity poured out. The problem sometimes becomes our desire or ability to follow that example.

Do you remember the four types of givers that Dan pointed out?

1. *Some people don't give.*
2. *Some people give meagerly.*
3. *Some people give obediently.*
4. *Some people give joyfully.*

Take time to honestly evaluate where you are in your current giving. Evaluate where you'd like to be. What's a simple step you can take to get there? What thought patterns or underlying beliefs about your world are undergirding your ability or inability to be generous (Example: "What if I don't have enough?" or "I'm not sure God will come through for me.")? Note your reflections in the space below.

In **Matthew 6:24**, Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." This word "mammon" shows up in some translations like this one, the New King James; maybe you've heard it before and wondered what it meant. Mammon basically means "greed" or "the greedy pursuit of gain." It's easy to denounce mammon and say we shouldn't be greedy. But, like all of Jesus' teachings, there is a deeper truth and freedom that only he can offer.

It would be easy to say that mammon refers to collecting an excess of material possessions: nicer homes, faster cars, greener lawns, more luxurious bath towels, etc. But what if mammon referred also to things we buy for safety, food on the table, a good education, a fully funded IRA. It's easy enough to point our finger at one group and say it's excessive while saying the other items are necessary for living. But Jesus wants us to realize that anything we count on for security, anything we would not immediately give up for the sake of his kingdom, anything we trust for our lives that isn't him, it has in some way replaced him in our lives. It's an insidious truth that sneaks in for all of us, and it's why Jesus warned so heavily against it.

Money isn't evil, nor are the things it can buy. We have freedom to make [wise] purchases and enjoy God's goodness and abundance. The question is about control. Do we use our things to control life, to make sure we get the outcomes we want? When we look at our heart of hearts, are we trying to work a system, do a program, match a percentage? Or are we looking at others with enough love and living a modest enough lifestyle to meet a need when we see it?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Read these two parables: **Luke 10:30-37** and **Luke 12:16-21**. Compare the main characters in each story. How are their perspectives different? Which one do you currently relate with more?

Greed is a sneaky sin that can sneak up on us without us seeing it. How can generosity be an antidote to greed? How does giving help us keep a proper perspective on the things we own?

Spend time in prayer, asking God to forgive any lack of trust, confessing times when you held on too tightly when you should have let go, and accepting his great loving mercy and grace as he speaks truth to you. It's easy to feel condemned when the subject of money and generosity come up, but know that, in Christ, there is no condemnation.

The best part of a Dairy Queen ice cream cone is the very bottom. The way the melted ice cream drips down into the little compartments that provide structure to the cone is special. It makes them a little chewy and a little crunchy. You can eat the whole thing in one bite, except it's not really a bite; it's more like crushing it with your tongue. And when you do, the ice cream squeezes out of it like a little eruption of sweetness. It's one of life's greatest pleasures.

It's important to understand that as I tell you about my daughter. She and I have been on a few trips to DQ for butterscotch dipped cones—the king of the ice cream cone. We share a love, not only of the butterscotch dip, but also of that heavenly last bite of cone. The whole time we're talking, I know what's coming...she's going to ask to have my last bite. That question tests the love I have for my daughter, almost as much as anything. But the thing I've learned is that one of the few things I enjoy more than that bite is watching her take that bite. It's worth it. Every. Time.

Generosity isn't about giving away what's left after we've had our fill or have gotten all we want. Generosity isn't even about us. It's an opportunity to look at someone else and choose their good over our own. It's a realization that there is enough true goodness for all of us, no matter what we give away. That story isn't about how good and generous I am as a dad, it's about a shift in perspective from wanting what's best for me to wanting what's best for the people I love. And weirdly, the way life works is that by giving away what we hold dear, we actually find even deeper fulfillment.

That's what Jesus says in **Matthew 10:38-39** at least. Take a few moments to read that passage. In what ways do you think you might have missed out on true fulfillment by holding onto something? In what ways have you experienced true life by giving something or a part of you away? Jot down your thoughts in the space below.

That's what generosity is all about. The steps to generosity are sometimes measured, sometimes spontaneous. Sometimes big, sometimes small. But they always have the same effect of making us more generous. Generosity is born from love and it makes us more loving. Giving not only makes us more dependent on God, it makes us more like him.

When that becomes true of us, we don't give out of guilt of compulsion or because we're told; that's not how Jesus operates. We give because we love. And we love because God first loved us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do you have a story of giving that changed your perspective from self-centered to other-centered?

How might a desire to love others through generosity change the way you order your priorities when it comes to your finances? Are there things you can sacrifice in order to be ready to meet needs?

What would becoming 1% more generous look like for you practically?

APPENDIX I: ROOTED RHYTHMS



Daily
Devotion



Prayer



Freedom from
Strongholds



Serve the
Community



Sacrificial
Generosity



Share Your
Story



Celebration

APPENDIX II: ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dear folks that have helped to make this project possible and dear folks who will use this book,

Any project like this takes many minds to complete and many hands to complete. I know I couldn't have done it on my own. So I wanted to give some shout outs and some words of thanks before this is all said and done.

Special thanks (in no particular order of course!) for the completion of this project goes out to Clare Rice, Tom Harrigan, Laura Dingman, Kim Harvey, Brock Pickett, Leslie Huckstep, Chad Monahan, Dan Hamel, Jared Ensminger, Eric Denney, Parker Radecki, Rhett Morehouse, and the entire GO! Team at The Creek.

This project wouldn't have been possible without all of you! Thanks so much!

I also want to say a big "THANK YOU" to all of our wonderful life group leaders! There's no point of even making content like this unless we have people facilitating conversations to explore the things found herein. So, thank you, thank you, thank you for all you do on a week in and week out basis to help our church "Connect People to Jesus!"

I think I can echo Paul's words towards you all when he said to the Thessalonians, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father you work of faith and labor of love..." (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3)

Grace and peace,

Emerson

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