

This study guide can be used for individual Bible Study, small group curriculum, or family studies.

**Small Group Leaders Note:**

The purpose of this study guide is to draw you and your group into conversation and discussion of God’s Word and its application to our lives. The questions are posed in a specific order and each of the questions has a specific purpose. As you are familiar with the purpose of each question, this will help guide the flow of the discussion.

**A high-level view of the five basic questions and their functions:**

1. Introduction (*lean in*). The goal of this first question is to get everyone in the group to “lean in” and get involved. It is normally easy to answer, fun and creates a sense of energy—so much so that you’ll see group members sometimes physically lean in as they engage in the discussion.
2. Observation (*look down*). This is an observation question. It is designed to help group members “look down” and see the relevant details and facts in the Bible passage being studied. This question establishes a solid foundation for the rest of the study. Regardless how much time someone has spent studying God’s word in their lives, everyone in the group can get involved simply by taking an observant look at what the passage says.
3. Evaluation (*look up*). What do we learn about God from this passage? This is the ultimate goal of every Bible study—to get a clearer picture of the God we worship, so that we can serve and love Him better.
4. Understanding (*look out*). This question helps group members “look out” and see the principles of the Bible passage through the lens of the world today. It builds a bridge between the facts of the passage and our understanding of it as it relates to our lives and culture.
5. Application (*look in*). Here is where group members begin to “look in” and see what God might be nudging them to change in their lives. During this part of the study, group members move from “knowing” to “doing” what God’s word says. It’s the final step of all Bible study: life change—of being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Adapted from the Liquid Curriculum series

# We Are Redeemed

## 1 Corinthians 1:2–3

June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021

### Week One

Although the name may not be recognizable to many, the term “Ekklesia” is the Greek term the bible uses to refer to the church. Although the church might seem like a simple and straightforward concept, there are important questions to answer: What does the Bible say about the church? What do we do in the church? Really, what is the purpose of the church? In our church we have attempted to state that purpose in one succinct sentence—a statement that is hopefully very familiar to you. *“We exist to glorify God by being and making disciples of Jesus Christ.”* I believe this is the perfect way to describe what the church should be all about. However, I will go one step further. I believe the only truly satisfying pursuit *in life* is to pursue the glory of God, by being and making disciples. At the end of the day, really, at the end of our lives, what will we look back on as the pinnacle of what it is we personally accomplished here in this world? What was really worthwhile?

I was recently reading a book on discipleship and it had some interesting claims. It talked about how we all want our lives to count. We want our lives to mean something. We want to devote our lives to something significant. Yet this book points out that very often Christians become sidetracked from these desires because we buy into some of the subtle lies the world tells us. However, sometimes we see God shatter and expose these lies in someone’s life. The way this writer puts it, *“He awakens people from their slumber, and they become gloriously disillusioned with the ways of this world with its empty promises and shallow amusements. People begin to suspect that the Christian life could be richer and more meaningful than they’ve been led to believe.”*

I want to challenge you with a powerful question: Have you awakened from your slumber to pursue with all that you have and are the highest goal of seeking after God with all of your heart? This is why the church exists—to help you journey toward that goal.

The challenge before us then is this: What will it take for us to allow God to wake us up from our slumber and finally become disillusioned with all the allures of this world and begin to passionately invest in eternity?

I think we all (perhaps not as often as we should) do desire to live holy lives. The question we need to ask is: what drives that desire? What is our motivation? The reason I ask this is that many of us have had mountain-top experiences—whether that be at a conference, or a youth camp—where our emotions and the temporary escape from the mundane routine of life catches us up in the desire to perhaps re-commit our lives to God, or at least, re-kindle a passionate pursuit of holiness. But then, how long does that last?

In reality, emotional motivation only goes so far. So the question is, what will motivate us to fully live for Him, day in and day out—as a regular part of life, and as a regular routine? I believe the answer is God Himself.

Unless (and until) we have before us a clear vision and picture of who God is, and understand that He Himself is the true motivation for pursuing a life of holiness, we will most likely be beginning this journey for the wrong reasons...and not make it very far down the path.

What we need to have before us is a picture or image of the unmatched beauty of God so that we can start to understand that the pursuit of holiness is not a matter of attaining the victorious Christian life—because that is ultimately self-centered. It is also not merely a matter of defeating habitual sin.

The motivation for passionately living holy lives comes through having before us a vision of the holiness of God that serves as a beacon that beckons us. It is not fear of punishment that motivates us. It is not the quest for victory over sin and our own selfish desires. The lasting motivation comes only through seeing God's love of holiness. It comes through experiencing a picture of His purity and majesty, coupled with a desire to please Him—along with developing a profound sadness over what havoc sin has wreaked on our hearts. It is only then that we can finally begin to abhor our sin and selfishness to the point that they are fully repugnant to us, and we are drawn to God for who He is.

We need to begin to desire God more than anything else.

1. How is your life different now than it was 10 years ago?
2. Dissect each part of this church mission statement: "We exist to glorify God by being and making disciples of Jesus Christ." What is involved in each of these endeavors? What does it look like practically in our lives?
3. What does sanctification look like in a believer's life? What is the process? Who is in control of the process? What are some examples?
4. Where do Christians get sidetracked from truly pursuing God in their life? What kinds of distractions or diversions keep our eyes and attention on the things of this world rather than on God? Why do you think it is so easy to fall prey to a "this-worldly" mindset?
5. What does redemption mean? What are we redeemed from? What are we redeemed for (to)?

Going Deeper:

1. From what you have heard and what you can imagine, what do you think life was like in Corinth, a major seat of pagan idolatry? How would this atmosphere affect a young church and also affect new believers? How might this compare to the world we live in today?
2. Discuss this idea: "It is possible to be very orthodox in one's doctrine and very upright in one's behavior and still not be godly."

# We Are the Body of Christ

Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:23; Colossians 1:24, 2:19

June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## Week Two

We began last week by proposing that we need to begin to desire God more than anything else. The real question is, how do we do this? As we grow in our faith and mature in our understanding of who God is, we inevitably come to the place where the allures of this world begin to grow dimmer, and the beauty and majesty of God become more and more in focus and predominant in our thoughts. We begin to understand that God is what we truly need and desire at the deepest level—even though we may not fully comprehend it. So, the first step in this journey is to explore and even learn to dwell on the majesty, wonder, and glory of God.

A question that helps us develop a proper perspective on why God is the most desirable object in the universe, was posed by C.S. Lewis. The question is: *"Why does God demand our praise"?*

This really is an intriguing question. If God is the all-glorious being He appears to be, then why would He need to not only request, but demand that we praise Him? The Westminster shorter catechism says that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. That's true, but that does not really get to the question of *why* God requires our praise.

C.S. Lewis, when he was exploring Christianity as an agnostic, found one thing about the Christian faith most disturbing. He found it strange that all religious people should clamor for us to *"praise" God*, and still more odd that God should demand praise from us. Lewis notes that we all despise the man who *"demands continual assurance of his own virtue, intelligence or delightfulness,"* and that we despise even further the crowd of people around such a one who gratify that demand. That was the picture he was getting of Christianity—that of a God who was saying, *"What I want most of all is to be told, I am good, I am great."*

What Lewis eventually came to understand is that God's revealing of Himself to us, accomplished most clearly in our praise and worship of Him, is the most loving act God can do for us. God's demand that He be praised works toward our highest good; namely, our exposure to His greatness, purity and glory.

God is the beautiful, all-satisfying object we all truly need.

But even beyond God's indescribable gift of Himself to us, Lewis offers a more subtle purpose. He goes on to describe his misunderstanding of God's desire for praise as likened to a vain woman fishing for compliments, and then offers up this pivotal quote:

*But the most obvious fact about praise; whether of God or any thing—strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless (sometimes even if) shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with*

*praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious, minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least ... I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: "Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?" The Psalmists, in telling everyone to praise God, are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value.*

*I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. (C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms).*

What Lewis is saying is that our delight of God is only partial until it is voiced in praise. Our outward praise of God deepens, completes, fulfills, and even consummates the joy that we have in Him.

Thus, God's desire that we praise Him serves to expose to us the most profitable, valuable, desirable and needed object that Humanity can experience, and enables us to most fully experience it. His self-revelation to us and His demand that we interact with Him through praise is the most loving thing God can do for us. And it is the only way for us to fully and completely experience the joy and delight that exposure to God can bring.

It is only then can we truly understand that God's love, God's justice, God's wrath, God's correction of us when we sin, God's mercy, God's provision of the payment for our sin—all of these exist because of His desire to expose us to the one and only thing we need in life—a full revelation of Himself.

When the allures of this world start to fade, and a clearer picture of Him begins to come into focus, then our life of discipleship can really begin. Our desire for Him is the ache in every one of our hearts. He alone is the answer. That is why He demands our praise. It's because when we fully focus on Him, everything else fades, and everything begins to make sense. That is the starting place for a life of discipleship—having a vision for who God is and why He deserves all of us in service to Him. This is indeed the mission of the church.

(adapted from "Desiring God" by John Piper, The Mission Statement of Bethlehem Baptist Church)

1. Describe the best team you have ever been a part of. Why was it so effective?
2. What does the phrase "body of Christ" mean? Describe it as fully as you can. What are the different elements of a body and how does that relate to the church and spiritual gifts?
3. Why do you think the Holy Spirit used this image of the church being Christ's body? What does this say about God, and about what it is we are to be about as a church?
4. Where do you see the church in general operating effectively? Where do you see possible breakdowns in how the church operates? Why do you think this is?
5. What are some gifts you or others have recognized in yourself? Where have you had the opportunity to exercise those gifts?

Going Deeper:

1. What other metaphors does scripture use to help us understand the church? Look up these verses and describe what you discover: 1) What is the metaphor? 2) What do we learn about the church from this image? a. Ephesians 5:31-32; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:7-8 b. Eph 2:19; 2 Cor 6:18; Gal 6:10 c. Eph 2:20-22; 1 Cor 3:11; 1 Pet 2:5.
2. What does the image of the body of Christ say about unity? Describe the unity (or lack thereof) you see in the church in general today. What kind of unity ought we to be striving for? What would that look like?

# We Are Unified Together

Ephesians 4:1–6

June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## Week Three

We began this series by highlighting the fact that it is the job of the church to help us experience a vision of the unmatched beauty and holiness of God. We continued the next week by exploring how this vision serves as a beacon drawing us ever closer to God by exposing us to all we truly need—namely, God Himself. It is through the teachings of the church and the fellowship of the saints that we are exposed to the life of God.

Having these ideals in mind, how then do we live out this lofty goal of being God-centered on a day-by-day basis? How do we practically navigate daily life with all its distractions and still keep our eyes and our hearts fixed on God?

The stark reality is, for the most part, our eyes are typically fixed squarely on this world, rather than the next. The worries of this life, our daily struggles, and even our hopes and dreams preoccupy our thought life and daily schedule and can often allow time for little else. But to be frank, we also simply do not know *how* to fix our gaze beyond this life to the life to come. This life is all that we have ever known. We have not been trained to do otherwise. While we may hear mention of dying to this world in Bible studies and sermons, and while we may resonate with this thought as laudable, we simply do not understand how to do it.

The starting place for living a God-centered, God-focused life is to begin to develop an eternal perspective. When we see *this life* as all there is, we cannot truly and fully live for God. As simple as it sounds, it all comes down to a mindset. The truth is, no matter how much we acknowledge that this life is brief and the coming life lasts forever, we still live, in a practical way, as if this life is all that matters.

One idea that can help us reorient our perspective is to think back about our experience in kindergarten. For someone in kindergarten, it would not be reasonable to expect them to be able to look ahead and have any kind of grasp of what life was going to be all about. We simply do not possess the perspective at that stage. We think that taking naps, finger painting, and learning to write our letters is what life is all about.

Yet, in truth, kindergarten was simply preparation for the rest of our life. The analogy then is: what if this life we are living right now is just kindergarten? What if it's merely preparation for the real life we will be living in eternity with God? What if all the things we think are so important now are simply finger painting, as compared with what is to come?

There's an old Amy Grant song that says, "...we're just here to learn to love Him, we'll be home, in just a little while." I firmly believe that we are just here to learn how to love God. This life is preparation for what is to come. Scripture testifies to the truth that God is faithful to always prepare us for what is to come.

Another image that can help us reorient our mindset for how we might put this life in proper perspective is that of military boot camp. Those brave warriors who selflessly serve their country understand that when they go to boot camp, it is only temporary. They

will not always have to get up before dawn and carry their 70 lb packs 20 miles every day they are in the military. No, all the trials and struggles they experience in boot camp are preparation for the kind of soldiers they need to be when boot camp is over. What if this life is merely “boot camp,” preparing us for eternity?

So how do we learn how to love, glorify, and worship God? What better place to learn than from the four living beings, the angelic “Zoa,” who surround the throne of God in Heaven and never cease to proclaim praise and glory to God?

When exploring how these angelic beings are described in Revelation 4, in Ezekiel 1, and in Isaiah 6, we see they have 6 wings. With two of these wings, they cover their face, with two wings they cover their feet, and with two wings they fly. We also see that they never turn from facing toward God. In whatever way they move, they still face toward the throne of God.

So what can we learn from this simple description? If we are trying to develop an eternal perspective, and learn how to properly relate ourselves to God, let’s look to the creatures who have the best possible perspective. They see God in His fullness. And what do they do? They never turn from facing God.

What an amazing lesson for us. If we seek to have an eternal perspective, what should we do? We should always keep our eyes on God and what He is doing, what His priorities are, and what He wants us to be about. We should be actively pursuing what it means to live in His presence. That is the best way to rightly orient ourselves to what truly is important—to keep our eyes on the eternal. What better picture is there of the God-honoring life—a life that is lived with an eternal perspective? These angels never take their eyes off God. The question is, are we ready to begin to live that way as well?

1. Are you the type of person to speak the truth, or keep the peace? Do you lean more towards grace or truth in everyday life? What are some examples?
2. Discuss Ephesians 4:1. What is the calling we have received? What does it mean to live worthy of that calling? How do verses 2 & 3 help us understand what Paul is asking in verse 1?
3. Read Ephesians 4:4-6. How many times does the word “one” appear? Why do you think the Holy Spirit highlights this word and idea so intensely? What is the picture of the church that Paul is painting?
4. How does the picture of unity we are called to in Ephesians 4 compare to what we see in the church today? What issues divide us? How can we combat this pull toward disunity?
5. What can you do to contribute to the unity of the church? What do you think God is calling you to do?



Going Deeper:

1. How do each of the commands given in Ephesians 4:3 promote unity? Discuss each, one by one.
2. Read Philippians 2:1-5. What do we learn about unity? What causes of disunity are highlighted here?

# We Are Free

1 Peter 2:9–25

July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## Week Four

The Bible uses various images when describing the church, such as: marriage, family, building, or vine. However, the primary image used in scripture is that of a “body.” When Christ wanted to give us a picture for how we operate as His agents in the world, He used this metaphor of a body. Yet it is so much more than a metaphor. It is an actual description for how we operate, or maybe more precisely, how we ought to operate.

This word picture, “The Body of Christ,” plays a key role in helping define the church’s function and helping us develop our ministry within the church. It can be argued that this is the most important metaphor in scripture to help us understand who we are and how we operate as a church.

There are several different ways this image of the body helps us understand the church. The first is that the church actually operates like a physical body. The collective efforts of individual parts as well as the interdependence of those parts illustrates how we work together to accomplish God’s purposes in the world. We are, in effect, His hands and feet—doing His bidding, fulfilling our roles, and getting done the things He wants to get done.

When Christ ascended into Heaven, He was no longer physically present—but He continues to work in the world through those He has redeemed. We are His physical presence. We are His ambassadors. We are the means by which He accomplishes what He wants done.

Another way the church is like a body is that every member is dependent upon every other member. When one of the parts of our physical body suffers, the rest of the body is affected. When I have a broken arm, it affects everything else my body does. In the same way, when one part of the body of Christ is not functioning how the body needs it to, everyone else in the body is affected.

However, when every member of a body is functioning how it was designed to function, the body works well. When you see a well-trained athlete do some amazing physical feat, it is because every part of his or her body is doing what it was designed to do. When every member of the body of Christ is using the gifts God has given them—when we are doing what we were designed to do—then it is a beautiful thing to watch.

Yet, more times than not, what do we often see in the church? We see what is called the 80/20 rule. We have 20% of the people doing most of the work, with 80% not really engaged. What would happen if we had the 100% rule operating—where everyone knew what their giftedness was, and they were doing what God designed them to do? Wouldn’t that be amazing?

Another ramification of us being a body is our interdependence. I need you and you need me. We all need each other. I need you to be using your gifts. And you need me to be using mine. I cannot be as good a Christian as I might otherwise be without you. Your gifts directly affect others and how they use their gifts. If you have the gift of helps,

then a person with the gift of teaching might need you to do what you do, to support what he or she does. If you aren't using your gifts, then both the teacher is affected and everyone else the teacher ministers to is affected as well. If there is a teacher in the body that is not using their gifts, then we may not be hearing the message we really need to hear.

Every member of the body—every limb, every organ—each has its specific role and function. That is why serving is such an essential rhythm in a life of discipleship. It is not just a matter of having enough bodies to clean up after the potluck. It is the fact that we all need each other, just as the individual parts of a body need each other.

What we also need to understand is that using our gifts fulfills us. Using our gifts connects us with the purpose for which God created us. When you are using your gifts, that is when you feel most fulfilled. That is when you feel God's pleasure. You are doing what you are designed to do. Your gifts are a sovereign, God-given blessing, and you must operate them. The flip side of that idea is that if you are not confident of how God has uniquely gifted you, and you are not using your gifts, then you will not be as fulfilled as you might otherwise be.

You might remember the famous line from the movie *Chariots of Fire*. It was the sprinter Eric Lidell who said in the movie, "I believe God made me for a purpose—but He also made me fast. When I run, I feel His pleasure." When you are using your gifts, you can feel God's pleasure, because you are doing what you were designed to do. When we are doing what we were designed to do, everything makes sense.

Lastly, we need to understand that we are members of one another. Paul tells us in Romans:

*For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another (Romans 12:4-5).*

This interdependence, mentioned earlier, is something that we in the West sometimes have a hard time understanding. Most other cultures in the world have a much more corporate, family, and group mentality than we do in the West. We are much more individualistic.

God allows us to be individuals, but He does not want us to be individualistic. Legs don't take us places for their own sake. Our legs walk to the store, so the body gets to the store. The legs operate according to how they were designed—for the sake of the body. Everything we do to use our gifts is for the glory of God and for the benefit of the body. Members of the body of Christ share a common bond and a common purpose together. We are all working for the edification of the body and for the glory of God.

This is why I rarely use the term "volunteer" when it comes to helping out in the church. We are not "volunteers." We are supernaturally gifted sons and daughters of God using the gifts He has given us to glorify Himself and serve one another. This image of the body of Christ is powerful and helps define what God wants us to be about in the church.

1. Growing up, who was the authority figure in your family: mom or dad? What about your family now? Examples:
2. Dissect and analyze what Peter is saying in 1 Peter 2:11. What does it mean to be aliens and strangers in this world? Do we actually live this way? Why or why not? What is the connection between being aliens and strangers and the urging to abstain from sinful desires? How do these desires wage war against our soul? What lasting effect does that have?
3. What does it mean to submit ourselves to the governing authorities (1 Peter 2:13-14)? Why are we to do this, according to these verses? When is it right not to do so? What do we learn about God from this commandment?
4. During the Covid situation, how have you seen various churches apply this passage (1 Peter 2:13-14) to their interaction with the governing authorities?
5. What do you find most difficult about submitting? Why is this such a difficult word for us to hear and apply?

#### Going Deeper:

1. What does it look like in modern culture to live as free men (v.16)? What does this freedom refer to? What does it not refer to?
2. How can we apply 1 Peter 2:18-21 today about slaves submitting to their masters? How does v. 21 help us understand this idea better?

# We Are Empowered

July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## Week Five

How do we as a church fulfill the mandate God has given us to be and make disciples? This is what we call discipleship and it is the heartbeat of our church. The commitments and priorities comprising our CVCC discipleship strategy are expressed here in the four rhythms of "Belong," "Grow," "Serve," and "Reach." You may have seen this logo on much of what we do here.



These four rhythms represent and communicate a holistic vision for what the Christian life should be characterized by. The reason we call them "rhythms" is that they are more than slogans. They are priorities each of us must intentionally commit to. They are the

"rhythms" by which we live our lives. They are measuring sticks by which we can assess progress in our spiritual growth. However, until we can infuse them into the way we think about our Christian walk, then they will be nothing more than slogans.

*First*, as we live in a connected way to the body of Christ, as we "**Belong**," we are able to do life together with other believers, other members of the family of God. We are able to share each other's burdens, experiences each other's joys, walk through trials together, and grapple with issues of faith together. We are also able to sharpen, correct, and help refine the views each of us holds of God and the world. This is the indispensable starting place for growing in our faith. We cannot grow and be transformed apart from doing life alongside other believers. We need to intentionally fight against the individualistic mindset and mentality Western culture has foisted upon us, a worldview and lifestyle that is so foreign to that which is presented in scripture.

*Next*, as we do life together, we journey together in "**Grow**"ing in our faith, walking together down the road of transformation. Sometimes churches simply assume discipleship and growth is taking place in their people, and therefore don't have a clear path and defined strategies for guiding their people through this journey. We are very intentional in how we define and chart out the goals of growing in our faith. We want to provide opportunities for learning more about God, the Christian worldview, Scripture, and how to share our faith with others. We have set up opportunities for growing together in Bible Studies, Small Groups, and Adult Bible Fellowships.

*Thirdly*, we will be sorely lacking in growth and in our participation in the life of the Body of Christ if we are not using the gifts God has given us to glorify Himself and edify the church. "**Serve**" is the message of this third rhythm. The image of "the Body of Christ" describes so well the absolutely indispensable nature of each and every one of us using the supernatural gift(s) given to us by the Holy Spirit. These gifts were given specifically so the body would function how it is supposed to function. The church, in general, has a

long way to go to get the message heard about the importance and urgency of each of us using these God-given gifts. If the individual members of the church truly understood the meaning of the image of the Body of Christ and were all using those gifts to serve each other, we would truly be the Body of Christ...and we would accomplish so much more. We would be operating as a healthy body should.

*Finally*, the last rhythm is “**Reach**.” Every one of these rhythms is crucial, but the reach idea is possibly the most neglected and sometimes even avoided in the church. “Reach” has two components. The first aspect is evangelism. We need to be about the work of spreading God’s love and His message of redemption to the world. That is the way God designed His saving work in the world—by His church doing this work and spreading the Good News.

The second component of “Reach” (and the way we accomplish the first) is through both local and global outreach. Jesus is our example in this. The ministry of Jesus was a holistic ministry, attending to the spiritual needs, as well as the material and physical needs of people. Man is more than a soul with two ears. Man is also a being with a mouth that needs to be fed and a body that needs to be clothed. This can be done in our “Jerusems,” as well as in our own Judea and Samaria—then on to the ends of the earth.

Reaching out to others with the message of Christ can be uncomfortable and challenging. But as we engage in the other rhythms and are trained and equipped in this one, outreach becomes easier and more natural. It is the natural outgrowth of the other three rhythms.

All four of these rhythms are essential—and they feed each one into the next. Each one addresses a different aspect of what it means to be a member of God’s family—and the responsibilities that come with that privilege. We need to always be evaluating how we are connecting to each of these rhythms. If we are connecting to all four, we will be living a life of transformation.

All four of these rhythms form a pathway for us to be engaging in a life of transformation. As we do, we will be fulfilling the mission of the church. As we connect to these four rhythms, we are connecting to the essential elements of following our Master.

1. When was a time when you felt strong, powerful, or in control? When was a time you felt powerless?
2. Read Ephesians 1:13-19; Romans 8:26; Luke 4:18-19. What do we learn about the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives?
3. Read Acts 1:8. What stands out to you in this powerful verse? What do we learn about the heart of God from this passage?
4. Read Philippians 4:13. Where have you see this play out in your life?
5. Where do you tend to depend upon your own strength rather than on the power of God working in you (family, work, battles with sin, ministry, witnessing, etc.)?

Going Deeper:

1. What do you believe God has asked you to do, that you don't feel equipped for? Read Ephesians 3:14-19. What is Paul saying God provides for us? What does he say the result is?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Where is God's power most evident in our lives? What does this look like in everyday life?

# We Belong

July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## Week Six

Last time we discussed four aspects of what the church should be about. These are really four non-negotiables for living a life that is pleasing to God—a life that is pursuing holiness—and a life that is being transformed into the likeness of Christ. It is the mission of the church to reveal who God is and then help provide a pathway down which it can help guide its members in journeying toward their God.

The four aspects of that pathway are “Belong,” “Grow,” “Serve,” and “Reach.” Sometimes we can over-complicate and over-analyze things to the point of *analysis paralysis*. If we can just orient our lives and our priorities around these four simple rhythms of life, we will be pursuing a life of discipleship, and be fulfilling the mission of the church. Let’s begin with the first step of “Belong.”

We were not meant to do life alone. This is why it’s crucial to get connected, to belong, to become part of the life of the body of the church. The church is a life-line for those who are hurting. The church is a family where we are loved and cared for. The church is the means by which God pours out His love into our lives. And the church is the vehicle by which we are transformed into being like Christ. This is the way God designed it.

Belonging is the first step of entering into the life of discipleship. You cannot grow in your faith outside of being connected to other believers. One image the Bible uses to express this is that of a vine. If a branch is not connected to the vine, it will wither and die. So too, when we fail to connect with our source of life, we too will begin to wither.

In addition to the vine, scripture also uses the image of a branch being pulled from a fire. When the burning branch is separated from its source, the flame will dim and eventually go out. We are all a part of one another. We need one another. If you are only connected to the church loosely, you are missing out on the kind of life God wants for you.

A story that illustrates this well is told of a pastor visiting a member of the church who hadn't been to church for a long time. This was a wise pastor. He greeted the man at the door, and didn't say a word about not seeing him for so long. They went in and sat in front of the fire. As they were talking, the man he was visiting got increasingly restless. He had a guilty conscience. Finally, he said, "You know, I know why you came. I haven't been to church very much, but you know I believe you can be a good Christian without going to church. That's what I'm doing."

The pastor didn't say a word. He reached out and got the tongs and reached into the fire, and got a coal that was aglow, ablaze with light. He separated it from the rest and laid it out on the hearth and as they sat and watched, it began to lose its fire and to fade. The glow was gone and at last it turned to a black lump before their eyes. And then the pastor got up, took his hat, and said, "Thank you, I'll be going." He didn't say another word. As he walked to the door, the man said, "Pastor, I see what you mean, I'll be at church next Sunday morning."



Transformation is not an optional step in the Christian life. It is not a step only for those who are super serious about their faith. It is an expectation of every believer. We need to examine our own lives and see if transformation is truly happening.

God has laid out a path for each of us in this life for being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. This kind of transformed life is possible. But it is something we must fully commit to. Its success is a function of opportunity and motivation. The opportunity comes only as you connect yourself to the body of Christ. When you “belong,” you can do life together with others who are spurring you along, encouraging you, helping equip you, and who are being conduits of God’s love and grace in your life.

The motivation comes only as we are awakened from our slumber, and we become disillusioned with the allures of this world—and begin to live life with an eternal perspective. It is only as we have before us a clear vision of the matchless beauty, majesty, and holiness of God that we can finally break the hold that sin has on our lives, and enter into a life of following our Master.

1. Describe a time when you were trying to stay in the background, “fly under the radar,” and not get involved in something. Why do you think this is so?
2. What are some benefits of belonging to a church? What are some benefits of getting connected to and being involved in your local church? How does being connected to other believers help you grow in your faith?
3. Read John 15:1-8. What do you see there about the importance of being connected? What else stands out about this passage? What do we learn about God from this passage?
4. John 15:2 discusses the idea that God sometimes prunes branches so that more fruit is possible. When have you experienced pruning in your life? What was the fruit that came from this?
5. Where do you feel God challenging you in terms of being more connected or involved?

Going Deeper:

1. Read Romans 12:4-5. How is a church like a body? What does this image say about how we all need each other to be connected and participating? What does it mean that each member belongs to all the others?
2. In addition to belonging to the body of Christ, we also belong to Christ. Read Romans 14:8; Psalm 100:1-5; 1 Cor 6:19-20; John 10:14. What do we learn about belonging to God from these passages? How does this truth make you feel?

# We Grow

## Ephesians 4:11–16

July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021

### Week Seven

The next of our rhythms of discipleship is “Grow.” This absolutely must be one of the primary missions of the church—to grow its people. That being said, we must take responsibility for our own spiritual growth. It does not happen automatically, or by osmosis—simply by hanging out at church. It takes diligence, effort, and even planning.

One question to ask ourselves is: how many of us put as much effort into planning our spiritual journey as we do planning a vacation? Deep, lasting spiritual change is a process; really, a journey. It does not happen all at once. It is the fruit of a developing and growing intimacy with God. Just as it takes time for human relationships to grow and develop, it takes time to learn and understand the heart of God.

Spiritual growth is a matter of spending time with God. It involves learning how to die to self and submit our will to God’s will. It is a process that involves training, pruning, refining, pain, and ultimately growth. This is something that happens over time. It is important to understand what this journey looks like. What are its goals? And what are its hoped-for results?

#### What does spiritual growth include?

- **Increasing in your knowledge and understanding of God's Word**

It is not knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Yet without possessing an understanding of what God has revealed about Himself, we do not really know whom it is we worship. Knowledge is the starting place for spiritual growth, but it is not the end-point.

- **Decreasing in the frequency and severity of your sin**

Nothing will interrupt and block growth in intimacy with Christ more than habitual sin. The goal is that there would be an upward momentum and trajectory of growth in maturity in our lives and a corresponding decrease in sin.

- **Increasing in your practice of Christ-like qualities**

Being a clear, accurate reflection of Christ to the world is the goal. We become like what we worship. The more we act like Christ, the more we become like Christ. Where do we find out what these qualities are? We have various lists of them in scripture. These qualities are called the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc.).

- **Increasing in your faith and trust in God**

A mature, grounded, unwavering faith is the fruit of a life-long pursuit of spiritual growth. “Trust, without worry”—is a great definition of faith. Our goal is to live in this kind of faith. But how does one develop trust with someone else? By going through difficult times together. What does that mean for our spiritual maturity? It means that in order to develop that trust, we will go through difficult times, and we will watch God be faithful time and time again. That is the only way to develop that trust.

## What are the goals of this journey?

- **Maturity**

The New Testament is very clear that God's will is for every believer to be spiritually mature. He wants us to be continually growing up in the faith (Eph 4:14-15).

- **Christlikeness**

Clearly we are to grow, but grow into what? The ultimate goal of spiritual growth is to become like Jesus. God's plan for us since the beginning has been for us to be like his Son. Paul tells us in Romans 8:29 that God predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son.

- **Sanctification**

The "fifty-cent" term for growing in Christlikeness is "sanctification." Sanctification involves becoming a reflection of Him in your everyday life—in your actions, thoughts, desires and goals. It is a matter of becoming more and more holy (set apart—from sin and from the world).

## What are the results of this journey?

- **Noticeable growth**

Spiritual growth is a life-long process of manifesting the acts of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21) less and less and producing Christ-like qualities more and more. It will inevitably become apparent to those around us that we are different than we used to be.

- **Noticeable fruit**

The Holy Spirit produces the fruit in us. Our part is to submit ourselves to His leading. If you are becoming more loving, more joyful, more kind, more self-controlled, etc., then you can rest assured that spiritual growth is genuinely occurring in your life. These are great barometers to gauge our progress in transformation.

- **Noticeable joy**

There is nothing in this world that compares to the joy you feel as you completely surrender your will to God's will. This is not a temporary fleeting happiness but true inward joy. This joy comes as you experience the freedom that comes with a life characterized by obedience—and when your life is a life of praise.

1. Read Ephesians 4:2. Which of these did you do well on this week? Which ones...not so much? Where do you feel you have made the most progress?
2. Read Ephesians 4:11. What did God give as gifts to the church? Contrast this gift with spiritual gifts given to individual believers. For what purpose did God give these gifts to the church (vv.12-13)? What is the result (vv. 14-15)?
3. Read Romans 8:29. What is our destiny as believers? What does it mean to be conformed to the image of the Son? What are some examples of this?
4. How do you think most people would describe what growing in your faith looks like? Where would you agree with these thoughts? What else might be added to paint a fuller picture?

5. Describe a time when you grew most in your faith. What do you think the cause was?

Going Deeper:

1. What is the difference between justification, sanctification, and glorification when it comes to understanding salvation?
2. What is the connection between growth in our spiritual walk and our knowledge and understanding of God's Word (1 Pet 2:2; Psalm 1:1-3)?

# We Serve

## 1 Corinthians 12:1–13

August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021

### Week Eight

Our church's discipleship philosophy—our understanding of the very purpose of the church—is encapsulated in the terms Belong, Grow, Serve, and Reach. We believe the Bible teaches that if we can incorporate each of these actions into our lives as "rhythms" or priorities by which we live, we will truly and actively be pursuing God. We have taken a look at the first two rhythms of life that comprise a life of discipleship: Belong and Grow. The next priority we need to explore is "Serve." There are several important questions to explore regarding what it means to live a life characterized by service. How can we best be used by God to edify the church and affect the world? How we can fulfill the purpose for which God created us by using the gifts He has given us?

The first biblical truth we need to understand is that when we are saved, God gives us supernaturally empowered gifts that are designed to glorify Him and edify the body (the church). These are sometimes called "the gifts of the Spirit." They are not the same as natural abilities. These gifts may be related to natural abilities we are born with, but God supernaturally empowers us with certain drives, talents, or abilities when He makes us His children that enable us to perform needed functions within the church. It is these spiritual gifts that are the heart of our understanding of the "Serve" rhythm. If God is gifting us these benefits, it is for a reason.

So, what are spiritual gifts? One author defines a spiritual gift as "...a Spirit-given ability for Christian service." Another author describes them as: "...divine abilities distributed by the Holy Spirit to every believer according to God's design and grace for the common good of the body of Christ." Sometimes, however, it's easier to see more clearly what something is by describing what it is not.

Our spiritual gifts are *not* just talents. God can supernaturally empower talents and abilities you already have. But the difference is that spiritual gifts are given to believers when they are born again, specifically for the purpose of glorifying God and edifying the church.

Our spiritual gifts are *not* something we earn. The definition of "gift" makes this obvious. But this is a good warning against being prideful or boastful about our spiritual gifts. If we are given a gift, we cannot rightfully take pride in it or credit for it.

Our spiritual gifts are *not* something we are born with. This truth emphasizes the fact that the gift is from God. It is given to us when we enter into the family of God. These gifts are also unique to believers.

So how do spiritual gifts work?

- 1) Everyone is given at least one (1 Pet 4:10-11, 1 Cor. 12:12-14). In 1 Peter 4 we see that we are each given a gift that we are to use to serve one another. The primary focus of this passage is that in all that God gives us, we are to glorify Him. This is done when we are "good stewards" (administrators) and use the gifts God has

graciously given us—gifts used to serve each other. These gifts are stewardships that we will be held accountable for.

- 2) Using these gifts is why we were created. In Ephesians 2:10 we see there are good works which God has created in advance for us. We need to be good stewards in using our gifts for this work, which results in glorifying God. The short answer to why we exist is to glorify God. How we accomplish this is by using the gifts He has given us to complete the tasks He has set before us.
- 3) We need to develop them (2 Tim 1:6; 1 Tim. 4:14). 2 Timothy 1:6 reminds us that we are to “kindle afresh” the gift that God has given us. “Kindle afresh” is an image scripture uses to describe stoking a dying fire. The truth behind this idea is that our gifts can be neglected. They are graciously given to us as gifts, but we have to be active in exercising and developing them.

In Ephesians 4 Paul teaches that the Holy Spirit distributes gifts according to His will—for the purpose of edifying the body so that church will have unity (Eph. 4:11-13; 1 Cor. 12). The issue of gifts can end up being very divisive. When someone has a gift that might seem more prestigious than others, jealousy can arise. But the point that Paul is making in Ephesians 4 is that this is Christ’s body. We need to take our eyes off ourselves and put them on Christ—what He is doing and what He wants to accomplish. Our own agendas need to fall by the wayside. We need to understand our role and our giftedness. If we think of an orchestra, we see that every member is there for a specific reason. If a tuba player tried to fill the role of the trumpet, it would not sound very harmonious.

We should also see that our personalities will affect how and where we use our spiritual gifts and abilities. For instance, two people may have the same gift of evangelism, but if one is introverted and the other is extroverted, that gift will be expressed in different ways. When you minister in a manner that is consistent with the personality God gave you, you experience fulfillment, satisfaction, and fruitfulness. It is fulfilling when you do exactly what God made you to do.

This Serve component is so crucial to the proper working of the body. It is what we were designed to do. It enables us to fulfill what God has charged the church to be about. And it engages us in activities that allow us to experience fulfillment and to feel God’s pleasure.

1. What was the most fulfilling job you have ever had?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 12:12. How does this idea of one body and many members play out in how the church functions? What are the different parts (roles or gifts) Paul is referring to in the church?
3. What does 1 Corinthians 12 have to say about unity? Do you think this chapter is more about gifts or about unity? Why?

4. What misconceptions do some people have about what it means to be a servant in the church? How might we correct those misunderstandings?
5. What area of service in the church have you participated in where you felt most fulfilled? How have you used your gifts in the church? In what other areas would you like to serve?

Going Deeper:

1. How would you describe what being a servant is according to scripture? How would you describe what being a leader is according to scripture? What are the differences and similarities?
2. How connected are you within your church? How could you be used to serve your church better? What do you think is holding you back from using your gifts more fully?

# We Reach

## Matthew 28:16–20

August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021

### Week Nine

“Go therefore and make disciples...” What feelings come to mind when you hear those words of Jesus? Many Christians find those words exhilarating and motivational, yet others Christians see evangelism and outreach to be frustrating and intimidating. We are not alone when it comes to feeling like we need to have more boldness. Even the Apostle Paul asked other Christians to pray for him to have boldness in sharing about Jesus (Ephesians 6:19-20).

If Paul needed courage, then we should not be surprised that we need it too. There are many reasons we may feel uncomfortable or anxious when it comes to sharing our faith. Fortunately, we do not have to go it alone.

In Acts 1:8, God promises us the power of His Spirit to energize our witnessing. This is provided to every believer, not just the spiritually mature. It doesn't matter how long you have been a believer. Sometimes newer believers have an excitement and fresh energy about their faith that can really energize their witness. When you became a member of God's family, you received God's Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). The Spirit will help you to share your faith; however, you must be willing to let the Spirit work through you.

Sometimes we take on a responsibility and burden when it comes to evangelism that can actually paralyze us in our desire to be obedient to the command to share the good news. We feel like if we don't do a good enough job, the person we are sharing with might not get saved.

That can be an unbearable amount of pressure. But when we realize that our role is to merely spread seeds—to share our story and God's story—not to convert someone, that takes a lot of pressure off. It is the job of the Holy Spirit to change hearts. It doesn't depend on the quality or even adequacy of our own presentation of the Gospel message. God is sovereign and He will save whom He chooses to save. He has just graciously chosen to use unworthy vessels like us to be the conduit of that message.

“If I knew my Bible better...” “If I knew more about theology...” These kinds of excuses can paralyze us from ever stepping out and sharing our faith as we are called to do. The reality is, when it comes to evangelism, “it's not about you.” Saving souls is God's job. You will never talk someone into the kingdom. Your job is to sow seeds. It is to simply spread the Word.

Yes, we are called to be ready in season and out—prepared with a reason for the hope that lies within us. This does require study, preparation, diligence, and knowledge of the Bible. But we cannot wait until we have attained a certain level of expertise before we begin to share our faith. We need to trust that God will give us the words we need in the appropriate situation (Luke 12:12). We must learn to be okay with saying, “I don't know”—but then follow that up with: “I would love to find out and get back to you.” We can use this idea as motivation to grow more in our understanding of the Word—rather than as an excuse for not being obedient to share with others.



We were made in the image of God. It is our job to be the clearest reflections of God that we can be to the world. We must do whatever we can to grow in our faith and live lives that reflect God's image. Yet we must also trust that it is He who changes hearts and minds. We are just tools in His hand.

Three simple thoughts ought to guide how we think about sharing our faith. 1) God loves all people and wants them to accept Jesus Christ as the one and only savior of mankind—who is our mediator and who pays the ransom for sin. 2) God uses ordinary Christians to tell others about His plan for saving humankind. 3) Obeying God means that every Christian should actively seek to make disciples. We must keep in mind, though, we are not in this on our own. Jesus has promised to help us!

Who is it that God has put on your heart that needs to receive Jesus as their savior? Think and pray about this issue daily. Make a list and keep a journal of God's working in this area through you. Take a moment every day to pray that God will give you a heart for the lost and a passion for sharing the good news with others. Then pray that God will bring into your sphere of influence someone that needs to hear about His love.

This is why we developed this pathway of four rhythms to incorporate in our lives. It is the way we not only become disciples, but disciple-makers. As we connect with the church—as we really **Belong**—we enter into the life of the body. We are connected to the head, which is Christ, and through Him we are connected to the other branches. We draw life from Christ and help from each other, which enables us to be the best kind of Christians we can be. If we are not connected, there is no way for us to grow.

Then we explored how the natural state of a disciple is to **Grow**. If we are not growing, we need to re-examine whether we are truly connected to the vine. There are so many great ways to grow together and be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

In the third rhythm of **Serve**, we explored how one absolutely essential element of growing in our faith and demonstrating what it means to be a member of the body of Christ is to be serving—using the gifts God has given us. This connects us to the purpose for which God created us. This gives our lives meaning and fulfillment.

This all leads to the next natural step of **Reach**—of sharing our faith with others—of being God's hands and feet in the world. The Reach component involves both evangelizing and reaching out to connect with the less fortunate, both locally and globally.

We do all this so that we can follow the example of the Apostles who were disciples and who became disciple-makers. We reproduce ourselves in others by making disciples of others. This is the process Jesus started when He called His disciples. As they imitated their rabbi, they became like their rabbi. And the process then repeated itself in those who followed.

Being and making disciples is our task. This is our mandate and stewardship of the faith entrusted to us. We are to glorify God by being the kind of disciples who follow our master, and who then reproduce ourselves into other disciple-makers.

1. Who was most instrumental in your coming to faith in Jesus? What role did they play?
2. What stands out to you about the "Great Commission" found in Matthew 28:19-20? What are the different elements mentioned? What is the primary focus of the command? How do we as a church obey that command? How do we as individuals obey that command?
3. What are the core elements of the gospel message (1 Cor 15:3-4; John 3:16)? What are some common mistakes that are sometimes made when people are sharing their faith?
4. What methods for sharing your faith have you seen others use that you have found especially effective? What do you think holds you back from sharing your faith more often?
5. In what ways can you fulfill the great commission in your family, in your work, in ministry? What spheres of influence are you a part of? How can you be intentional about sharing Jesus in those areas?

Going Deeper:

1. Read 1 Peter 3:15. What does it mean to "always be ready?" What does it mean to "make a defense"?
2. Read Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23. What do we learn about evangelism from this passage?

*These resources were very helpful in the creation of this study guide: "SmallGroups.com" and "Serendipity Bible for Groups." For helpful answers to many of your Bible questions, the website GotQuestions.org has often proven to be useful.*