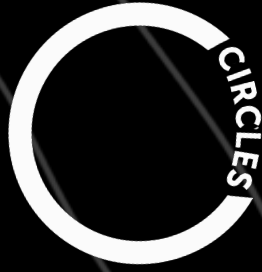


PRIORITIES



CIRCLE 01/04: **HOW TO STOP PROCRASTINATING**

I am a procrastinator.

My office looked used to look like an episode of hoarders — coffee cups, papers, and random coats cluttered almost every square inch. Stacks of paper were piled on my desk like little monuments representing my lack of productivity. It was bad.

A specific moment proved my procrastination was a problem. One summer, I was planning a mission trip across the country with 40 students. This complex task required months of paperwork, planning, and problem-solving. Just three days before the trip, I was going over the tickets before printing confirmation numbers. I counted to myself, "35...36...37...wait, this can't be right." My heart started beating like a techno song. Forty-four people were going on this trip, but we only had forty-three tickets.

Anxiety took over. I could feel my heartbeat in my neck. My chest got tight. I imagined the horror of telling a parent that their fundraising was done in vain because their child can't go. Then I started checking off names to figure out who I left out. After I crossed out all 43 students and leaders, I was confused. Everyone seemed to be accounted for — everyone except for me.

I forgot to buy my own airline ticket. And I only discovered this sixty hours before we boarded the plane because I had procrastinated printing the boarding passes. I had no idea what I was going to do. I started drafting my resignation letter before my phone rang. Literally moments after my dreadful discovery, I got a sympathetic phone call from a parent explaining why their child couldn't go on the trip. To this day, I worry that I sounded oddly excited when she called me. I immediately hung up, called the airline, and explained that I had to change the name on one of the tickets. I stuttered, "You see, I accidentally misspelled Jennifer Dillinger — it was actually supposed to read Jackson Garrell." Strangely enough, they changed it for me.

Procrastination reveals misplaced priorities. It's one of the devil's favorite tools for tricking God's people. When you find yourself procrastinating, you are ultimately putting a life-changing purpose that God has given you on hold.

God's plan for you is not procrastination — it's obedience.

READ: John 14: 23-24

Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me."

This tense exchange takes place while Jesus is comforting his disciples. They are stressed because Christ kept mentioning his oncoming death. He wasn't talking about the far-future anymore. They could sense that he was referring to soon-to-come events. The thought of losing Jesus caused the disciples to panic and become overwhelmed. Jesus redirected their stress by reminding them that they get to be a part of something much larger than a single person: They are invited to a greater purpose.

We are invited on the same journey. Jesus calls us to "obey his teaching." He's not describing obedience out of obligation, but out of love. To sum this up, "you have work to do."

Procrastination is ultimately an expression of misplaced priorities. Jesus laid out work for you to do, lives for you to impact, and goals for you to achieve. Don't put your obedience on hold. I've heard it said, "Delayed obedience is disobedience." The hours in your day are the currency of your life. It's uncomfortably easy to put off today what we could do tomorrow, but then tomorrow comes, and we put it off again. Ultimately, this starts an overwhelming cycle where procrastination prevents you from doing the things that really matter. So how do we stop procrastinating and plug into our greater purpose?

The ultimate way to fight procrastination is to put your priorities into place. Here are two tips to help you do that.

1: Submit

Submission is your first step. You must submit to Jesus at the beginning of this journey. Jesus is not going to force you to follow Him. Rather, we need to willingly lay down our preferences and open up our schedule to God-honoring activity. Submission starts when you say, "Jesus, your way is greater than my way. I will do whatever you say is best for me — starting today."

2: Start

The clock is always ticking. You never know how much time you have, so it's crucial to be urgent in your obedience. I have heard so many students say that they will start doing the things right "someday." Here is a tough truth — "someday" is one of the most dangerous phrases you can say as a Christian.

We say things like:

Someday I will invite them to church.

Someday I will start making things right with my family.

Someday I will start a small group.

Someday I will share the gospel.

Someday I will make a difference.

More often than not, "someday" never comes. Next thing you know, you are looking back on your life as a series of regrets over procrastinated responsibilities. Don't push off "someday" what you can start doing today. You don't need to have it all figured out; you just need to start moving.

What is God calling you to do today that you keep putting off until someday? Whether it's a person that needs help, a book that needs writing, a song that needs to be recorded, a project that needs creating, or a dream that's developing within your heart, just start.

Don't delay obedience. You cannot control your outcomes tomorrow, but you can control your obedience right now. Today is earlier than tomorrow. Now is better than later. Just start. You'll be happy you did.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Do you tend to work ahead or procrastinate?

Q2: When are people likely to delay their obedience to God? Why?

Q3: What might we miss out on by delaying our obedience to the greater plans God has for our lives?

Q4: Do you think of obedience being an action out of obligation or love? What's the difference?

Q5: How might your life change if you submitted yourself to Jesus and obeyed him from a position of love rather than obligation?

Q6: What's one thing you think God has been telling you to prioritize that you've been procrastinating? How can you start being obedient this week?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Romans 5:3-5

Philippians 4:12-13

2 Corinthians 4:8

Philippians 4:6-7

John 16:33

Joshua 1:9

Job 2:11

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 02/04: **HOW DO YOU SPEND YOUR TIME?**

What do you think of when you hear "pop-up church?" Most people envision a trendy church with fog machines that gathers in a public place downtown every Sunday. I grew up in a pop-up church, but mine wasn't like that at all. My home church was a 100-year-old congregation that met in a high school gym. People wore suits. Everyone sang hymns. It was a traditional church in every way imaginable. So why was such an old church suddenly a pop-up? It's a sad story. Our historic building burned to the ground. As a child, I watched in distress as smoke poured from the roof like the exhaust from a train and flames flickered around the white steeple.

In the blink of an eye, our church was homeless. We found ourselves without a building. Thus, we had to get creative to hold gatherings. It all started with a trailer full of gear. Teams would set up the auditorium like the pieces to a liturgical lego set. The preparation process was brutal. We had to lay out six 200 foot floor mats. Each one weighed nearly half a ton. Teams lugged massive boxes that made a portable stage. After all that, the hard work started. We had to run miles upon miles of cable to connect all the production and video equipment. Lastly, we laid out 850 chairs in perfect rows.

When we first started, this process took nearly five hours. Fortunately, it got faster as we practiced. At first, we thought no one would want to attend church in a musty gym with flickering lights, but the congregation expanded quickly. We thought no one would want to spend half their Saturday setting up chairs, but our volunteer teams kept growing. We thought all of the demanding set-up work would crush everyone's morale, but it changed the culture for the better.

Our church thrived when it required the most work. It seems counterintuitive, right? More work = More enjoyment. That doesn't sound right. You'd assume the opposite. Where did all this positive change come from? I can assure you that it wasn't the joy of stacking chairs. All this positive change happened because we had to come together to achieve it. Community was the catalyst. There was no way just the core staff could handle it. There was no way just a small group of volunteers could do it. The task required all of us to work together to accomplish something bigger than ourselves.

As you take an inventory of your priorities, ask yourself this question. How do you spend your time? Your calendar reveals your core values. Our teams sacrificed our Saturdays because we valued Sunday service. If you spend a lot of time with your friends, you value relationships. If you spend a lot of time trying to make as much money as possible, then you value wealth. If you spend a lot of time looking in the mirror, then you value appearance. Ultimately, your hours are the currency of your life. Which poses the question -- how are you spending your time? Your daily practices reveal your priorities.

When it comes to our priorities, it's not just about changing our practices. It's also about having the right perspective on them.

Your priorities are exposed by how you spend your time. Your calendar is full of top-priority tasks that range from school to science fair projects. Those things are important, but your ultimate priority is people. Constantly discover new ways to help people, provide for people, and serve people. Take an honest look at what you do. Now ask, what am I doing for others?

READ: Colossians 2:23-24

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

In this passage, Paul proposes a new perspective on work. "Whatever you do," you should do it as if you are serving the Lord. Yep, you heard that right — "everything" you do. Whether you are doing homework, walking in the park, washing the dishes, or delivering pizzas, every task should be done with a mindset of ministry.

When you do this, you will have a better attitude about your work. It's easier to get excited about your role when you realize you aren't just working for your boss. Rather, you're working for Jesus. You are serving God in everything you do. Serving goes beyond work — it's worship.

Here are three changes that you will see when you adopt a lifestyle of service.

Serving helps you find your people. When you serve on a team, you have the opportunity to develop deep and meaningful friendships. People choose where to serve based on their passions and priorities. If you love making people feel cared about and included, serving on your church's Hospitality Team would help you meet like-minded friends. If you love your sport, volunteering in your community's local youth league would help you meet people who feel the same way. Ultimately, finding friends who share your passions and priorities help propel you forward with purpose.

Serving helps you find your place. The Apostle Paul compares the church to a human body. Every body part has a specific purpose that allows the body to move forward. When you serve, you are joining people with different skills, passions, and personalities — working together for a common goal. It helps you see your role in the context of something much bigger than yourself. Your role, however mundane it may seem, can impact someone's eternity when it plays a part in leading someone to Jesus. What you do today can have ripple effects into eternity.

Serving helps you find your purpose. When God works THROUGH you, He ultimately works WITHIN you. The Bible teaches that God planned good works for you to do long before you were even born. When you live out those plans, you are walking in a purpose that was custom-built for you. It's powerful to find yourself doing something while saying, "I was born for this."

Whether you are setting up chairs for a portable church service, feeding people at a local soup kitchen, sitting down to encourage a friend in need, or writing a post to give someone hope, you are working “for the Lord” (Colossians 2:24).

Does how you spend your time show your heart for people? When you live a life of purpose, people become one of your top priorities. Strive to serve your community. Dedicate yourself to helping those in need. Work hard to see life-change happen. God will turn your work into worship. We cannot wait to see what God wants to do through you.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: What are some healthy ways to spend your free time that prove you prioritize your own physical, emotional and spiritual health?

Q2: What are some unhealthy ways to spend your time that may reveal mis-placed priorities?

Q3: What would it look like to serve God with all of our time?

Q4: How can you serve God with your time when you are obligated to be spending it in structured ways (school, work, practice, etc.)?

Q5: Do you currently serve anywhere in the church or your community? If so, how has it impacted you?

Q6: How would you like to commit to serving God and others with your time this week?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

Colossians 3:12-14

Psalms 30:11-12

Psalms 105:1-3

Psalms 56:12

Psalms 95:1-2

2 Corinthians 9:11

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 03/04: HOW DO YOU SPEND YOUR MONEY?

Everyone has random little things that trigger their stress receptors. Minor instances can create big emotional reactions for many of us. My trigger used to be money (and snakes). When I first moved out of the comfort of my mom's house to start a new life seven hundred miles away, I had no idea how obvious that character flaw would become. Cash problems made me crazy. Paying rent made me red in the face. I would snap at people for refusing coupons. I would make rude statements to my newly-wed wife whenever she returned from Target. I found myself in a downward spiral at the kitchen table while opening our cell phone bill.

In 2016, my unhealthy relationship with money became both apparent and appalling. Unpaid bills stacked up. Debt seemed insurmountable. I spent too much money on French cheeses. Financial issues led to numerous fights and sleepless nights. Something had to give if I was going to fully live.

Let me be vulnerably honest. I was greedy. We often assume that greed is reserved for the wealthy, but that is far from the truth. Anyone can struggle with greed. Some of the wealthiest people in the world are the most generous. I was in the lowest tax bracket, but I lived like Ebenezer Scrooge. I was a stressed wreck, and money was often the cause. When you uncover your stressors, you also pinpoint the places where you lack trust. I didn't have a money problem; I had a trust problem. I failed to trust God with my finances, which ultimately led to an inescapable feeling of emptiness.

I was a pastor who didn't give to the church. It makes me tremble to admit that, but it's true. The justification wasn't hard. "I give a lot of time to the church; I don't need to give my money too," I would reassure myself during my long drives home. "God doesn't need my money anyway," I would recite while spending the money I should have been tithing. I desperately needed a new way to approach finances.

The Holy Spirit spoke to me in September of that year. Not through a loud voice from heaven, but from the passenger seat of my car. He spoke through my wife. "We really should start giving to the church," she calmly suggested. Immediately, conviction hit me like a pile of gold bricks. This was an intervention moment. That night, we wrote a likely-to-bounce tithe check to the church and dropped it in the offering plate the next morning. We hardly had enough money to cover the bills after that, but we knew it was the right thing to do. The next week, a generous gentleman randomly wrote me a check for twice the amount of our tithe check. This was God's way of saying, "You can trust me. I got you." As we have grown in our generosity, God has never failed to provide for my family. The more we seem to give, the more he seems to provide.

READ: 2 Corinthians 9:6-8

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

When discussing generosity, Paul leverages the illustration of sowing and reaping. This language jumped off the pages for the farmers sitting in the pews of the Corinthian church. Most of the men in this service probably had dirt under their fingernails from an exhausting morning in the fields. They understood that they had to labor over seeds in order to produce a crop to feed their families.

Harvest requires sacrifice. If a farmer stores up all his seeds in a vault and refuses to plant them, he won't have a harvest. His family won't have any food. The same is true for you. If you have a need, consider planting a seed. This passage promises that you don't just receive what you give. You will receive more than you give. Don't think of this like a money-back guarantee; instead, think of it as a guide for life. You get what you give. If you need love in life, share love with others. If you need kindness, be kind to others. If you need encouragement, encourage others. If you want God's blessings, actively chose to bless others. The same was true in our finances. If you sow generosity, you will reap generosity.

This is why God set up the expectation of tithing in scripture. In the Old Testament (Malachi 3:6-10), God commanded His people to give ten percent of their income back to the church. This isn't because God wants to take money from your bank account; it's because He wants to take greed out of your heart. Generosity proves that God is our top priority. Greed is a curse, and generosity is the cure.

Here are three things that happen to you when you give.

God rewards you. Paul promised the Corinthians that God would "bless them abundantly" when they gave. When we give, God gives back. This does not mean giving is like a gamble, where we treat God like a slot machine. We aren't generous because we want a return on investment — that's backwards. Think of it like this. God has given you everything you have. From the roof over your head to the money in your banking app, God has blessed you with every single thing. Since God has given you so much, shouldn't generosity be your natural response? The promised reward is just an added bonus.

God rearranges your priorities. You can put your trust in possessions, or you can put your trust in God. One can change in a moment, and the other hasn't changed for all of human history. The correct choice is obvious. It's impossible to pursue greed while also pursuing God. If you spend a few minutes flipping through the pages of a magazine, you will see that our culture worships money, possessions, and status. Amazing things happen when we swim against that cultural current. Your hope is in your savior, not your savings. Your security is in your Creator, not clout.

God transforms you. Paul says, "God loves a cheerful giver." Simply put, generosity makes you happy. We often think that happiness is found in a new pair of shoes, a nice car, or a few extra zeros at the end of our bank statement. It's like a drug. You will feel happy for a moment, and then you'll suddenly crave more. Contrary to what the commercials may claim, wealth will never help you find fulfillment. The happiness will

inevitably fade away. Greed is like drinking salt water. You'll fill up, but you will never be filled. Generosity is the cure for greed.

A generous lifestyle puts your priorities in order, fights greed, and helps you feel fulfilled. Your priority is not possessions or power; it's God. He will provide for you, so give with a good heart. Show generosity whenever you have the opportunity. It will change your life for the better. Giving is the God-honoring way of living.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Who is the most generous person you know? What are they like?

Q2: How can you be generous in areas besides financial generosity?

Q3: If how much money you have doesn't determine if you are generous or greedy, what does?

Q4: What is the purpose of the tithe?

Q5: If you make an income, how can you be generous with your money this week? If you don't make an income, how can you be generous in another way this week?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Luke 6:27-38

Matthew 5:41

1 Timothy 6:1-19

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Titus 3:4-5

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Luke 10:25-37

Matthew 5:41

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 04/04: WHO DO YOU SPEND YOUR TIME WITH?

Have you ever had a day unfold in the worst way possible?

Let's rewind to a freezing February morning I faced a few years ago. I could hear the faint sound of birds chirping while lying in my cozy bed. I peaked one eye open and realized the sun was beaming through my window. "What time is it? What day is it?" I thought to myself. I went to grab my phone, only to slap around my empty nightstand. It wasn't there. That faint sound of birds was actually my phone that somehow traveled under my bed in the middle of the night. I had slept through not one, not two, but three alarms.

I had a meeting at 9:30, so I threw on a hat to cover my bed-head and darted out of my second-floor apartment. While walking out of my apartment, I tripped over a bag of trash and fell down the entire flight of stairs. It was like an avalanche made up of me, my backpack, and trash. Laying there, groaning and surrounded by garbage, I should have just called it a day. I didn't.

Desperately in need of a caffeine kickstart, I hurried to the drive-through to get some coffee. After an annoyingly long wait, I finally held a piping hot cup of coffee in my hands. I took a sip and noticed that something tickled my lip. My stomach churned. There was a twelve-inch long human hair lodged inside the little oval-shaped opening of the coffee cup. This barista just served me a Chewbacca latte. All of this chaos unfolded before I even had my first meeting of the day.

Sadly, my bad morning morphed into a bad afternoon. It was mistake after mistake and challenge after challenge. Finally, I called it quits a couple of hours early. I retreated to my office to do some writing and watch YouTube videos about cruises. My quiet time was interrupted by my wife wrapping her arms around me from behind. "Hello, my little love marshmallow," she said. (Okay, she didn't call me that, but it's a nickname I would love to have one day. So take a note if you're reading this, Liz.) It was a small gesture that made a big impact. Immediately, my stress began to shrink. A weight lifted off of my shoulders. It didn't change any of the things that happened, but being around someone I love helped me contextualize my conflict. Sure, it was a bad day, but I have a good life.

When we gather together with friends and family, it puts the wind in our sails. It's rejuvenating, isn't it? There's a reason why. You were created for community. When God made you, He gave you social DNA. People are designed to live in packs. This crucial concept was central to the early Church in Jerusalem.

READ: Acts 2:24-27

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying

the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The people of the early church had a hard life. They were poor. They were constantly afraid of arrest or assassination. They dealt with drama at the local well. It was hard to be a Christ-follower in 34 AD. But their struggles only made their community stronger. Luke, when recording the history of the Church in Acts, said that they devoted themselves to fellowship. This Greek word, *koinonia*, translates to "deeply connected community." They knew that they needed each other in order to make it, so they prioritized their people.

To them, church was so much bigger than a thirty-minute sermon once a week. Daily, they prayed together, ate together, took communion together, celebrated together, and worshipped together. For them, church was not a gathering — it was a lifestyle. Church happened around dinner tables, in living rooms, and while playing in the park.

The people you surround yourself with will have a major impact on your life. There is so much power in prioritizing the right people. It's easier to accomplish big goals when you have good friends to cheer you on and keep you accountable. Spending time with positive people will give you a more positive outlook. When you face pain, like loss, grief, sickness, or doubt, your friends will be there to help you pick up the pieces.

Good friends will take you far.

It's not just helpful. It's healthy. In 2015, an Australian clinical research firm concluded that the secret to a longer life wasn't just health, genetics, kale, and essential oils. It concluded that having close friendships into your old age increases your life expectancy dramatically. It improves your survival rate in your seventies by almost 50%. This study isn't just talking about Twitter followers or Facebook friends. It's talking about authentic, real-talk-having, help-you-move-for-the-third-time, send-you-memes-in-the-middle-of-the-night friends.

Prioritize surrounding yourself with good people. Focus on forming a community that helps you grow closer to God and become the best version of yourself. Here are three questions to ask about your friends:

Do they have tough talks with you?

Good friends will have tough and awkward conversations with you. Surround yourself with people who are willing to call you out on your shortcomings and reach out to you when you begin isolating yourself.

Do they celebrate your victories?

Someone's reaction to your success says a lot about them. A healthy friendship celebrates the victories and grieves the losses with you. They won't come across as jealous of your victories or joyous at your defeats. Pay close attention to how someone responds to your accomplishments.

Do they push you closer to Jesus?

Hebrews 10:2 says, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds," Most importantly, you want your friends to nudge you closer to Jesus. The author of Hebrews calls us to "spur" each other onward. What is a spur? It's those little hooks made of metal that riders kick into the side of a horse to help them move forward faster. From what I can tell, spurs are used as a last resort when riding a horse.

Here is the thing about spurs — they are certainly a little uncomfortable. You need friends who are willing to get uncomfortable for you. Authentic community, just like spurs, can be uncomfortable, but it's always for your own well-being. If you want to move forward, you might need a little nudge.

Good friends spur you on by keeping you accountable, challenging you on your sin, praying with you, and talking about God with you. The right friends are a crucial ingredient in growing your faith. Prioritize friends who will spur you towards Jesus.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Think of a friend who has a positive influence on your life. What are they like?

Q2: Think of a friend who has a negative influence on your life. How have they caused your priorities to change?

Q3: What kind of friends should you prioritize and give access to influencing you, your priorities, and your decisions?

Q4: How can you be a friend who spurs others forward in their relationships with Jesus?

Q5: Commit to praying for an encouraging a friend you'd like to prioritize this week.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Micah 6:8

Matthew 5:44

Romans 13:8

1 Peter 4:8

1 Corinthians 2:9

John 13:34

1 Corinthians 13:1

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.