

What's My Next Step?

Come Closer

Fairview Missionary Church | Angola, IN

Scripture: Assorted

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Jim Rohn is often accredited with the quote, "You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with." Or put it another way, "you are the average of your five closest friends." This is why parents often will long and pray for their children to have a good friend group to grow up with.

And whether we like to admit it or not, every single one of us, regardless of age, are influenced by those around us, and unfortunately, it is easier to influence us in the wrong direction than in the right direction. When I was a youth pastor, I loved to share this truth with the teenagers by asking one of the strongest guys in the youth group to come up front, and I would put a chair up there, and I would have him stand on the chair and have his feet hanging off in just the very back part of his heel on the chair.

And then I would get like a seventh grade girl, a petite girl, that would stand next to the chair, and I would say, "Okay, I want you to try to pull her up, and I want her to try to pull you down." And inevitably, because just the very back part of his foot was on the chair, he would get pulled down, and it would remind us that we are more easily influenced in the negative direction than in the positive direction.

You see, who we allow in our inner circle of friends is very important because it truly does determine who we become. I like to think of my friend groups as a target, and the bullseye, or the very center of my target, are my closest friends. And when I think about my closest friends, we have similar values. Our life is familiar. We have a similar worldview. And oftentimes, I want to be like them.

I value something in their life that I want to learn from, or I want to grow from. Now, as we move away from the bullseye, I have more and more friend groups or circles or people that I hang out with, but as you move away from the center, we become less and less similar. Therefore, we naturally are less and less close. Now, I intentionally still want people in my outer rings of my target who aren't Jesus' followers.

I intentionally try to get to know and make friends with people who are not walking with Jesus so that I can share Jesus with them because that's the most important part of my life. But who you spend time with and who you learn from matters. And this doesn't change as you get older. If you want to be wise with money, hang out with people who are wise with money. If you want to be healthy, hang out with healthy people.

So don't hang out with me, all right? I'll take you to get ice cream every time we're together. If you want to be foolish, hang out with fools. If you want to be generous, hang out with generous people. And if you want to be close to Jesus, hang out with people who are close to Jesus. Today, we're going to pick up where we left off last week with this idea of taking our next steps toward Jesus. We are trying to answer the question, what is my next step?

How do I grow in my relationship with Him? I shared with you last week that some of these steps are sequential in order, where you need to take the first one before you take the next one, but others of them don't follow that pattern, and they kind of trickle into your life as you allow them to. But it is true, and I shared this as well,

that these steps that we talked about last week, and the ones that we're going to talk about this week, are not a surprise. They're not a secret.

There's no magic formula. But if you talk with individuals who have a close relationship with Jesus, they will tell you these work. This is how you grow in your relationship. Now, we're all at a different spot in our journey. Every single one of us that comes here today are at a different point in our journey with Jesus.

Some of us are still trying to figure out if we want to get on that journey, and other people have had a relationship with Jesus for decades, but there is one thing that remains true, no matter where we are at in our journey, that we serve a God who never says that's close enough. Don't come any closer. He is constantly desiring and longing that we would grow closer to Him. And so we talked about some of these steps last week.

Let me recap or remind you of those steps. The first step was salvation. This is the very first step in your relationship with Jesus. It's when you invite Jesus to be the Lord of your life. It is that point that Scripture says you repent of your sins or your mistakes, you recognize your need for Him, and you turn to Him. The second step that we talked about after salvation is the party that celebrates inviting Jesus into your life, and we call that baptism.

This is the public proclamation of your personal faith. It is the reception to your wedding. It is the time that as a family of believers, we all get to celebrate a transformed life. And so we have this baptism. The third step, which this is now where they don't necessarily fall in order, but we talked about prayer, or learning to communicate with God, learning how to hear His voice, learning how to share with Him your emotions, your feelings, your day, what is going on, not just asking Him for things, though that's part of it as well, but also learning to recognize His voice.

And the fourth step, we said, is reading the Scriptures. This is when you begin to learn who God is. Again, I believe that the Scriptures that we have is one of God's most important ways that He reveals Himself to us. It is a way for us to learn about Him, to learn about the story of how God has called us to Him and to learn about what is going to come. And so we learn about who God is.

Today I want to add some more steps or disciplines that you and I can either begin for the first time or maybe start again that will help us grow in our relationship with Jesus. And again, I remind you, they are not magic, they're not secret, they're ones that you all have probably heard of before, but they do require discipline and effort. And so part of our prayer for today is going to be, "God, will you give us the discipline?"

Will you give us the effort and the strength to take that next step, even though it might be difficult?" And as you have probably guessed, one of these steps does have to do with your friendship circle. It's an important part of our journey towards Jesus. So let me pray and then we will jump in. Heavenly Father, as we gather before you today, we are grateful that you are a God that never says that's close enough.

We thank you that you are a God that desires to have a relationship with us, and that you do continually draw us towards you, and that we can get as close as we want to get. Father, we also acknowledge and admit that some of these steps are difficult to take. They do require a commitment. They require discipline. They require effort.

And so, Father, I pray that You would grant us that discipline that is necessary to sometimes take that next hard step because we desire to grow closer to You. And so Father, would you continue to speak to us this morning? We ask this in Jesus' name, amen. The apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come, the old is gone, the new is here.

When we repent of our sins, when we admit our mistakes before a loving Heavenly Father and we submit to the Lordship of Jesus, something changes in us. And the older you are when you make this commitment, the more

obvious that change is. Many of us may have submitted to the lordship of Jesus as children, and so that change maybe wasn't as dramatic.

But if you're here today and you gave your life or surrendered your life to Jesus as an adult, then there was a pretty dramatic change that happened according to Paul. When you submit to the Lordship of Jesus, your view of the world changes, your outlook on life changes, your eternity changes, and as your mind shifts, and as it begins to focus on different things and different things become important, those who knew us before will notice the difference.

And that shift in our thinking begins to cause a strain on our relationships. It begins to cause a struggle, whether we want to or not, even though we may try to not make that happen, just who we are begins to change. The apostle Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The person without the Spirit, the person who has not proclaimed Jesus as Lord, does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit." Do you hear what Paul is saying there?

I think you've all had this happen in your life, haven't you? Where you're having a conversation with somebody and you're talking about your worldview, and that worldview is shaped by your relationship with God, and they look at you and they just kind of tilt their head like you're an alien. Have you had this happen? Because they don't view the world the same way that you and I view the world if we have proclaimed Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

And so it's because of that that God has called us once we have confessed Jesus as Lord to join a community of believers, to join a community of people who are like-minded, that see the world with the same spirit that we see the world. And so the next step for many of you may be joining this community of believers, a circle of people who understand you.

As you go through life, you are going to need individuals, friends who are in that inner circle of your life that can understand you and encourage you in your journey. And you might be thinking to yourself, "Pastor, you're preaching to the choir, we're here, we're part of this community," right? But let me just tell you that being a part of the community is more, it's so much more than just attending a service on Sunday morning. That is a good start. It's good that you are here, but it goes beyond that, being a part of community.

And I think the best description we have in Scripture of what it means to be a part of a community of believers comes from Acts chapter 2, starting in verse 42, when we get this early definition of the church and look at how they are described. We are told that 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 that were performed by the apostles, and all the believers were together, and they had everything in common. They would sell property and possessions to give to anyone who was in need. 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.

This is a crucial step in your faith journey, is surrounding yourself with a family of faith, but I also know from experience it is extremely difficult. If you come to know Jesus as your Lord and Savior later in life, it becomes extremely difficult for your friends who are not on that journey with you. They don't understand why you view the world differently.

They often, just because of how you are living, not because of anything you say or anything you do are going to feel judged. They're going to feel abandoned. They're going to feel like you somehow now are living a life that you think you're better than everybody else. And it doesn't matter how hard you try to convince them that you are not judging them, you are not looking at them any different, and you are trying to do your best to stay as

connected as they will let you, I am here to tell you that more than likely, those friends that do not know Christ will eventually move to the outer rings of your bullseye of relationships as much as it may hurt you.

And this is difficult. It's hard because good friends, great relationships are hard to come by. You may try to keep your old friends, and you might say to yourself, "You know what? We still have a lot in common. We're just going to take this faith piece, and we're going to put that aside, and we're just going to kind of continue to be close. But can I just tell you in my now 22 years of experience here at this church, but 25 years of experience of ministry, that is nearly impossible, and I rarely see it work.

I rarely see it work. You might say, well, we still root for the same sports team. We still have the same hobbies. Of course, we can still hang out. We can just put this faith thing aside, just like sometimes we want to put the politics thing aside, right? And say, well, we can still get along, we still like each other, but eventually it just begins to break down. And they begin to move aside, maybe even some of the things that you used to do for fun with those friends. You now say, "You know what? I'm not going to do that anymore.

You go ahead, but I'm not going to," and so they feel judged. What is important to you has changed, your values have changed. And so I have come to find that if you are a believer in Jesus and your closest friends, your inner circle of friends are unbelievers, and you can stay true to your Christian values and morals, you are the extreme exception, not the rule. You are the exception. It's not impossible, I'm not going to say it's impossible, but you are the exception, not the rule.

Paul points this out in 1 Corinthians 15:33, when he writes to the church there in Corinth, he says, "Do not be misled. Bad company corrupts good character." Every single one of us, if we surround ourselves with people that do things that we don't want to do, will eventually find ourselves doing those things we don't want to do. It's just the way we are created. And this is hard because I understand it's difficult to make new friends.

It takes work, it takes effort, it takes time, and you will feel like you are starting over, and there is probably not a single person in here today that has ever tried to make a friend or tried to develop a relationship and was rejected or turned away, and that stays with you for a long time, doesn't it?

Every single one of you probably has a picture in your mind of somebody that rejected you or turned you away, and you're thinking in your head, "Man, I still feel that pain, I still feel that hurt." And by the way, I just want to remind you that when I say you should have a close circle of Christian friends, that doesn't mean that they need to attend Fairview Missionary Church, right? We're talking about the kingdom of God, we're talking about like-minded people just being a part of the body of Christ.

But having Christian friends in your inner circle can be life-giving. They are friends that truly are invaluable when you're going through a trial or a difficult season, when you're going through heartache, to have other people that also love Jesus and are going to point you towards Him and encourage you. Those are all beautiful things that happen when they also know Christ.

The author of Hebrews says in chapter 10 verses 24 and 25, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, encourage each other, and not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day approaching." I know there's something that happened in my generation, and it's probably not the first generation that ever happened, but I had a lot of friends growing up that would say this to me.

Well, I can be a Christian and not go to church, right? I can love Jesus and not go to church. And honestly, even as a pastor, I can look at them and say, yeah, you're not wrong. You can love Jesus and not go to church, but you're missing out on what God has created you to be a part of. You're missing out on what God wants to have as a part of your life. You're missing out on this step toward Jesus where you can surround yourself with like-minded people. Now, at the same time, I am not ignorant.

I fully understand that we are all sinful people, right, in here, every single one of us. We all make mistakes, and I guarantee every single one of you has at least one person in this congregation that probably drives you bonkers, right? Don't look, don't make eye contact, okay? But every single one of us, I mean, we're human beings, and so it can be difficult. We are a community, I get that. It's like family. You love them, but sometimes you just don't like them, right?

That's what it is, and so we have to fight through this because the enemy will try to cause whatever he can to make a crack in a relationship or a crack in a church where you say, "Yeah, I'm still going to go to that church, but I'm going to sit on the south side of the sanctuary because I know so-and-so sits on the north side," right? And so we have to work on that. The enemy is constantly trying to tear us apart, but being a part of a family is what God has called us to do. And so maybe your next step is surrounding yourself with like-minded Christ followers.

That's the one I'm going to spend the most time on. These next two will probably be a little shorter. If you say, "You know what, Pastor, I'm good, I've got a life group, I've got people I connect with, I have people that are around me." Maybe your next step in your faith journey is learning to serve others. The apostle Paul uses this analogy as he is writing to the Corinthian church and he compares the believers to a body, which is why we call ourselves the body of Christ, right?

And he says, "Listen, just like our body is one person but has all these different parts, so we as a church all have a different part and we have a different function." Look at this, he says in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, starting in verse 12, "Just as a body, though one has many parts, but its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.

For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free, he could throw in there male or female, all of the differences that we could have, all of us are part of the same body, and we were given the one spirit to drink. Even so, the body is not made up of one part, but of many. Now the foot should, now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not, for that reason, stop being a part of the body.

And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not, for that reason, stop being a part of the body. For if the whole body were an eye, which that would look pretty strange, right? Where would the sense of hearing be? And if the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts of the body, the people in the body of Christ, every single one of them, just as He wanted them to be. For if they were all one part, where would the body be?

What would it look like? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. You and I were created with a very specific list of gifts and talents and passion and abilities so that you and I could play a role and a function in the body of Christ that no one else can play. Did you hear that? You have a specific role, a specific function, and if you are not fulfilling your God-given role or function, then the entire body is not running at full potential.

And there's lots of different gifts and talents that God has given to those in the body of Christ in order to expand the kingdom of God and to make us a body that is functioning how we were called to function. Some people have, as their gifting and their passion, kids ministry, serving the younger ages is perfect for them. They just brighten up and they have energy, unending energy to work with the young children and to love them and to point them towards Jesus.

And so some people are gifted that way. For some people it's youth ministry. You love working with the teenage years. For others of you, maybe working in the men's ministry or the women's ministry. Some of you might say, "You know what? Leading others like that, that is just not my gifting, but for you it's maintenance and understanding that we have a building and we have property and we have things that break down and you just say, I love working with my hands. And I can look at an engine and I can take it apart and put it back together again and I can look at a toilet and find out, hey, it's not working and this is why it's not working.

For some of you, you've been given leadership ability. You're good at making decisions and seeing things for the big picture. For others of you, it's worship, it's leading us in worship. You're skilled, you're talented with instruments or vocally and so you can lead us before the throne. For others, maybe it's being an usher or a greeter and you just always have a smile on your face and maybe you're an extrovert by nature and you just love making people feel welcomed. For others, maybe you're good with money and finances and so you could join the team that counts the offering.

For others, it's serving on the mission team and looking for people that we can support. For others, maybe it's teaching a Sunday school class or leading as a small group leader. Here is what I have discovered. If you love anything about being a part of this body of believers, it is because somebody is using their gift and serving this body. If you love the children's ministry here at the church, it's because God has placed the perfect people in this church for this time to love on the children and to do all of the administrative stuff behind the scenes, to love the kids, to teach the kids.

It is because they're working to serve this body. If you love the youth ministry here at the church, it's because God has called the right people here that are serving in those positions that are doing what God has gifted them in in order to help teenagers take their next step toward Jesus. If you love that you can go to the bathroom and flush the toilet and it works, it's because God has called the right people here. To make sure that the bathroom is clean and to make sure that when you flush it, it actually flushes and to make sure that the parking lot is a place where you can park your vehicle.

You see, the beautiful thing about the body of Christ. And I love that Paul points this out is that not one single part is more important than any other part. They are all necessary. And somehow we can fall into the trap of believing that some parts are more valuable or more important, maybe because they're more visible or more seen or whatever else. But Paul says, no, every part of the body is important, and if one part is missing, then the whole body suffers.

And so maybe this is new for you and for years. It's possible that when you come to a church, you have always asked the question, "What can the church do for me?" And maybe now your next step toward Jesus is to ask the question, "What can I do for the church? What can I do for the body? How has God created me? What gifts and talents do I have that I can use to serve others and to minister to others?"

Because we truly are better together than we are apart. And I believe if you are not serving in any way whatsoever, you are missing a great step toward Jesus. And again, let me promise you, even when you are serving in the areas where you're gifted and where you're passionate and where you feel comfortable, there are still going to be trials and it's going to be difficult. I'm not saying it's always going to be easy, it's going to be hard. Remember, we are still a family that is made up of sinful people.

We still make mistakes, we still do things we shouldn't do, we still say things we shouldn't say, but I promise you, you will grow if you use your gifts to serve others. And now finally, this one's going to be really short because we just had an entire series about this that I only do once a year, but maybe your next step is learning to give or to share. And when I say this, I'm not just talking about money, I'm talking about time and energy, I'm also talking about sharing your faith story with others, learning to share your life with others.

In Acts 20: 35, we read, "And everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work, we must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." You and I need to learn to be generous with our time, with our talents, with our treasures. Something truly, truly beautiful happens in our hearts when the riches and the treasures of this world lose their hold on you, and you learn to be more giving.

I'm reminded of the opening words in Rick Warren's book, "The Purpose Driven Life," as we are trying to grow in our faith. Do you guys remember the very first line of that book? He says, "It's not about you." Isn't that a great

line? That could just be the whole book, right? It's not about you. This is truly a sign of maturity in life, but it's also a sign of maturity in your faith. It's learning to put others before yourself.

It's learning to say, "You know what? Their needs can be more important than my needs. Their wants can be more important than my wants." Maybe your next step of faith is learning to be generous and to care for the poor and the orphan and the widow. You know, there are times in my life that I'm not sure if what I am doing is exactly what God wants me to do, but when I am serving other people, I know without a shadow of a doubt I'm doing what God wants me to do. Because God calls us to care for those, to love others.

God calls us to look at those that the world has put on the fringes of society, to say they're not important, and yet God allows us to have His eyes to view them and to say, "No, God loves that person just as much as He loves me and just as much as He loves somebody else." Your next step might be praying for those eyes that they would be open to see people how God sees them and how He views them.

As we close today, I want you to truly think through your journey with Jesus, wherever you're at right now, and as I talk with individuals, I do find often that people go through these seasons or cycles of their faith where they will come into my office and say, "Pastor, can I ask you a question?" Yeah, sure. My faith has just felt a little stagnant lately. It feels like I'm just spinning my wheels, like I want to pray, but he's far away, or I want to do this, and I just feel like he is far from me.

And I often will ask them, what is the last step you have taken toward Jesus? What is the last way that you have put yourself out there and really said, "God, I want to grow in my relationship with you." It's easy for us to just feel like we're going through the motions with nothing to show for it, and that can be because we have not taken our next step. There is always more than what you currently have. There is always more in your relationship with Jesus than what you currently have.

You can always grow deeper. Even if you have a good prayer life, it can be better. Even if you're reading the Scriptures, you can study it more. Even if you come to church on Sunday morning, you can get involved and get plugged in. Even if you serve in the Children's Ministry, which you will not find me do, right? You guys know this, we're all gifted in different ways, and here's what I didn't tell you about the way we serve. If you are serving somewhere only because there's a hole and you need to fill it, but it's not your passion or gift, how many of you have ever done that, right?

It wears you out, it's not fun, and so it's not good for the people that are even there. We all need to be serving where God has gifted us. That doesn't mean that we don't step in every once in a while because there's a need, but if God has given you a passion, serve in that area, maybe we are stagnant in our faith because we've gotten too inward-focused and not thinking about others. Relationships take work.

They don't just happen, they don't just prosper. When is the last time that you have taken a step of faith and done something different or tried something new? It doesn't matter if you're a new believer or if you've had a relationship with Jesus for decades, you need to take another step. And maybe it's one of the seven that we talked about. Maybe it's salvation. For the first time, you're coming and you're saying, "Yeah, I want to submit to Jesus." Maybe it's baptism, it's that celebration or it's prayer. Maybe it's studying the Scriptures. Maybe it's joining a community or serving or giving.

What are you practically going to do to take your next step? Here is my prayer as we close. Don't leave this place and say to yourself, "I'm okay where I'm at with God. I'm good, I'm good." Have the desire to grow and make the commitment to take that next step. What is it, practically, and make the decision to do it? Again, it's discipline. It truly is self-discipline, it's effort. Make the step, take the effort to do that.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, thank you that you love us where we are. Thank you that you continually call us closer. Father, I'm grateful for this body of Christ that you have allowed me to be a part of, even though we are

just one small part of the greater kingdom. I'm grateful for the many people here that serve and love others, for the many I have been able to learn from, to glean from.

God, I pray that you would make our next step obvious. That even as I was talking today, there was one of those that in everybody's mind and heart, they said, "Yeah, I need to do that. I need to learn to be more generous. I need to learn to serve. I need to learn to build this friend group out of those that I want to learn from and grow from. Maybe it's salvation, maybe it's baptism.

Lord, whatever it is, continually draw us closer to you. Thank you for loving us. It's in Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.