



## **STUDY GUIDE**

# WEEK ONE - OCTOBER 2

## WORSHIPING



Be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as you come to study. Pray: ***"What do You want to teach me/us in these moments?"***

Opening question:

***"How have you followed the Spirit's lead this past week?"***

**READ:** Psalm 100

**Overview:** We're wired to worship—something! It's part of our created DNA. The challenge is we sometimes put other people and things in the place rightly deserved by God—on the throne of our heart. If we're not careful, we can find ourselves worshiping creatures or created things rather than the Creator of all things! Yet, God is always working to get our attention and put Him in the place of primary importance in our lives.

For example, all of us have experienced times in our lives when we've seen something that has us pause and recognize there's Someone greater than us who deserves our praise and worship. The splendor of mountains—the expanse of the ocean—the changing of the seasons—a spectacular sunrise or sunset—the magnificence of fall colors—the miracle of childbirth. Each of these, at one time or another, has taken our breath away and led us to worship. Thankfulness is at the heart of a worshiper. When we come to worship, we can't help but thank God for who He is and what He has done.

Psalm 100 is a literary masterpiece that gives us instructions for what we need to do as we come into the presence of God in worship. When studying Psalm 100, we get the impression it's inappropriate for us to barge into God's holy presence without taking the proper actions and necessary steps. God's willing to meet us anywhere, anyplace, and anytime—but we need to come into His presence with heart and mind, body and soul that acknowledge the presence of the King.

**Points to consider:**

### **1) WORSHIP IS A RESPONSE FROM ALL PEOPLE TO WHAT GOD IS DOING. (Psalm 100:1)**

We're told to "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth!" This is a repetition of Psalm 98:4. The original word signifies a glad shout or to give a blast (as on a trumpet) such as loyal subjects give when their king appears among them. Since we don't see royalty very often, in our culture, it would be like shouting at a celebrity to get their attention. The phrase "Shout for joy" means a triumphant shout or battle cry. We're not raising our voices to draw attention to ourselves. We shout for joy because the Lord is among us. It's how we acknowledge the greatness of God. As we walk down the path to worship God, we simply cannot be quiet.

- What would you say is our usual response to worship?
- Do you think we approach worship acknowledging joy as we find ourselves in the Lord's presence?

## **2) WORSHIP BEGINS WITH GOD'S GOODNESS. (Psalm 100:2)**

The psalmist here speaks of a specific and personal activity of praising God. We glorify God by ascribing to Him the honor and adoration due Him because He is God. Worship is a time when we set aside time to acknowledge God's goodness and to lift our voices in both shouts of praise as well as song.

Our shouts eventually turn to song. Music is the form through which we often express our gladness, our joy, and our praise. Our songs are not intended to create our gladness, but to express it. Through our singing, we approach God. There are 575 references to praise, singing, and music in the Scriptures. At the very center of the Bible is a 150-song hymnal known as the Book of Psalms. From the beginning, music has been an essential link between God and His children. Throughout history, music has played an important and essential part in our worship of God.

Concerning the music we use, there is both a danger and a concern. Some believers tend to worship musical style instead of worshipping God. Music is a vehicle that stirs the emotions and expresses the feeling in our hearts. But music is not worship. It's part of the protocol that prepares the heart and sets the stage for the encounter with God. Music is a sacrifice of praise—not a synonym for worship.

So what is worship in this specific context of praise and adoration? The Puritan Stephen Charnock called it "nothing else but rendering to God the honor that is due Him." He said God "wants to cultivate within us the adoration and admiration of which He is worthy. He wants us to be astonished at the inconceivable elevation and magnitude and splendor of Almighty God."

- When we worship, do you think we become more caught up in the style and mode of worship than in gathering to acknowledge God's goodness in our lives?
- How open are we to following the Holy Spirit's lead in our worship?

## **3) WORSHIP PUTS GOD IN HIS RIGHTFUL PLACE AND REMINDS US OF OUR RIGHTFUL PLACE. (Psalm 100:3)**

To KNOW the Lord is God is to ACKNOWLEDGE Him. In worship, we recognize we're entering into the presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords. Here, we acknowledge Jesus is our Savior and submit to Him as Lord. We remind ourselves as to whom God is—and, at the same time, we're reminded of who we are, too. God is Creator, and we are the created. God is a shepherd, and we are His sheep. God is the Supreme Commander, and we are His people. We're completely dependent on Him for everything. In other words, God is God—and we are not.

- In worship, do you think we give God His rightful place—or do we tend to slip into a mode of making it all about us?
- Do you think we give consideration to what God experiences in our worship?

#### **4) WORSHIP LOOKS FOR REASONS TO BE THANKFUL. (Psalm 100:4)**

Drawing an analogy from the temple, the psalmist informs us as to how we can open the door into God's presence. The gates were a part of the outer wall that surrounded the temple grounds. People entered the temple complex through the gates. As we enter into God's presence, we enter His gates with thanksgiving. Here, we thank God for what He's done. Once through the gates, the worshiper enters the courts with praise. Here, we extol God for who He is. We get a sense of movement from the outside to the inside—moving closer to the presence of God.

Praise isn't worship—it's that which sets the stage for worship. Praise anticipates what's to come—entering the presence of God. Praise precedes worship. Praise is the way into worship, and worship is the way into an encounter with the Living God. Author David Edwards, in his book, *Worship Three Sixty-Five*, writes: "When we praise God, we are ringing the doorbell, making our presence known, letting Him know that we have come to see Him. When He hears our praise, He gets up to open the door and invites us to come in. When we go inside, we move from praise to worship. In other words, praise is the vehicle into God's presence, and worship is what we do once we get into God's presence."

While God is everywhere (omnipresent), God's revealed presence occurs when we worship God. God has chosen to manifest Himself in the praises of His people. David wrote of God, "But You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel" (Psalm 22:3). God is enthroned in our praises. Thus, our praise creates the atmosphere for an audience with the King. We come before God with thanksgiving and praise on our lips and in our hearts.

- Do you think that we come to worship with a sense of anticipation that we'll encounter the living God—or do we tend to come to worship because it's "what we do" on Sundays?

#### **5) WORSHIP REMINDS IS THE LORD'S LOVE AND GOODNESS ENDURES FOREVER. (Psalm 100:5)**

What do we know about the name, the person, the character, the nature of God? The psalmist reminds us that "The Lord is good;" He is gracious and kind. "His love (or mercy) is eternal." The word for love here means covenant love. God has bound us to Himself in a covenant or contract that He'll never revoke or abandon. "His faithfulness endures through all generations." God is not fickle or forgetful. He doesn't change His purpose or break His word. Worship came before us—and it will last after us.

Someone has said there are two kinds of worshipers: Flatlanders and Highlanders. Flatlanders live in only two dimensions. They're well versed in the faith; they know the lay of the land. They know the routine—and they love it. The only problem is they're living in the horizontal realm. They don't know there's an "up" to life.

Highlanders, on the other hand, are simply Flatlanders who have discovered worship! They're constantly pushing up, up, up to experience God. What a privilege we've been afforded to have an audience with the King. Let's not take it for granted. Let's do what is needed, following the protocol, to meet with Him.

- How easy is it to get caught in the Flatlander mentality?
- What needs to happen to move to becoming a Highlander?

## **RESPOND**

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it? (How are going to respond? / What are the next steps?)*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Whom do you need to tell about it? (Accountability)*

# WEEK TWO - OCTOBER 9

## DISCIPLING



Be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as you come to study. Pray: ***“What do You want to teach me/us in these moments?”***

Opening question:

***“How have you followed the Spirit’s lead this past week?”***

**READ:** 2 Timothy 2:1-7

**Overview:** The relationship between the Apostle Paul and his apprentice, Timothy is a model for anyone who wishes to take discipleship seriously. Paul models through his own life that a life lived as a disciple is only part of the journey Jesus invites us to travel—the other half is to become a disciple who discipled others. Just as Ananias and Barnabas had invested in Paul as a new convert, Paul spent his life investing in dozens of others—the most prominent of whom was Timothy. At the time of this writing, Paul is in prison in Rome and sees that his end is near. He’s encouraging Timothy to remember and accept his call to ministry. We can see the act of discipling Timothy never ended for Paul as he continues to do all he can to get Timothy to grow and become the disciple God has always wanted him to be.

If we’re going to be disciples who make disciples, this text has five important truths to keep in mind.

### **1) THE GRACE OF JESUS IS THE SOURCE OF POWER FOR DISCIPLES. (2 Timothy:1)**

Many of us try to get by with our skills, abilities, savvy, or personalities—but we’ll never do anything of consequence in the Kingdom apart from the GRACE of JESUS. When we realize we’re saved by GRACE, it’s a game changer. It also gives us greater courage and resolve to live as His witnesses in the world.

What has God called you to do for Him in and through your life? Big or small, listen carefully: No one is asking you to fulfill God’s call with your own ability, ingenuity, strength, wisdom, or determination. Everything that’s asked of you is based on Christ’s strength within you. This implies success depends upon your trust in God and your commitment to lean upon Him for continued strength.

- Do you think we look to God as our source of power—or do we tend to rely on our own strength?
- Do you think we realize how freeing it is to know: ultimately, our success or failure is rooted in our obedience—as well as the movement of God’s grace in and through our lives?

### **2) DISCIPLES ALWAYS LEARN FROM AND TEACH OTHER DISCIPLES. (2 Timothy 2:2)**

Paul was seeking to remind Timothy he wasn’t a one-man show. This reminds us of something we all need to hear: We’re a part of the Body of Christ – the Church – called to be in ministry and mission together. We need to be open to enlisting the help of our fellow saints who serve with us.

Paul is encouraging Timothy to take the teaching of the Gospel he'd received from Paul and in turn take that teaching and pass it on to other faithful followers. Everyone one of us has the same basic mission—to proclaim and share the Gospel—with the realization we're ALL in this together.

- Who discipled you? Who invited you to join them in worship or a Bible Study? Who explained the Gospel to you in a way you could understand and helped you cross the line of faith? Who taught you the Scriptures?
- Who are you discipling? To whom are you witnessing? Who are you inviting? Who are you teaching?

### **3) DISCIPLES UNDERSTAND SUFFERING IS PART OF THE LIFE OF FAITHFULNESS. (2 Timothy 2:3)**

While we may not always want to hear it, we need to understand God didn't promise we'd get a pass on hardship and heartache in our lives. He did, however, promise to be and remain with us. What we really need is to develop a theology of suffering in which we understand God does some of His greatest redemptive, refining, and renewing work in our lives—not during times of ease, but during times of trial and suffering.

- What might happen if, in our times of trials and suffering, we ask God what it was He was seeking to teach us in the midst of them?

### **4) DISCIPLES ARE COMMITTED TO AND WILLING TO SACRIFICE FOR SOMETHING BIGGER THAN THEMSELVES. (2 Timothy 2:4-6)**

Disciples resemble a soldier, an athlete, a farmer as they're committed to something bigger than themselves while willing to sacrifice and endure for a greater goal.

- Do you think we understand what it means to sacrifice?
- What does sacrifice mean to you?

### **5) DISCIPLES REFLECT AND LOOK FOR APPLICATION WHEN THEY RECEIVE INFORMATION. (2 Timothy 2:7)**

Paul's letters were calls to action. They would be read aloud in worship with the expectation the truth revealed would lead to life-changing, world-altering action. We need to hear that! We're called to not only read the Word, to hear the Word—we need to be doers of the Word, putting it into action.

*"Be thoughtful," Paul says. "You'll hear many wise words, but they'll do you no good unless you reflect, see the truth, and apply that into your life."* Wherever we are in our Christian lives—still near the beginning, moving toward maturity, or nearing the end on a few years—reflect, for the Lord will give you insight.

### **RESPOND**

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it? (How are going to respond? / What are the next steps?)*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Whom do you need to tell about it? (Accountability)*

# WEEK THREE – OCTOBER 16

## SERVING



Be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as you come to study. Pray: ***“What do You want to teach me/us in these moments?”***

Opening question:

***“How have you followed the Spirit’s lead this past week?”***

**READ:** Luke 10:38-42

**Overview:** One way to think about the various ways we’re suggesting we learn to live grace-fully is to think of each habit—each practice—as a muscle. A basic study of human physiology teaches us muscles must be used, or we lose them. The same can be said about our spiritual lives—we have spiritual muscles we need to exercise if our souls and our church are going to be as strong and healthy as they need to be. Worship, spiritual disciplines, and giving are all examples of these muscles. During the last two-and-a-half years, we must confess—some of our spiritual muscles have become weaker. While we’re working diligently to get back into spiritual shape, for most of us—serving is the muscle that’s suffered most.

While we need to understand nobody can do everything—on the other hand, everybody can do something—and if everybody does something, then everything will get done. God has gifted each and every one of us with some unique contribution to make for His Kingdom work, in and through the Church—and our church will be lacking and incomplete unless we find our place and make our individual contribution.

In our scripture passage for today, Mary and Martha are two women in Scripture who supported our Lord’s earthly ministry. In Luke 10:38-42, we read the familiar story of Martha getting upset with her sister Mary because she wasn’t helping her. Ultimately, Jesus commended Mary and corrected Martha. This story is one of opposites. Maybe you know a “Martha” or a “Mary.” Maybe you see yourself in one of them. Stop comparing yourself to others—or others to you. Don’t just tolerate one another but celebrate and appreciate your differences. Affirm each other. Mary could have helped Martha, and they both could have sat at His feet. Martha could have brought her work with her. Whatever you do, make the right choice. Jesus said, “...one thing is necessary” (v.42).

There are powerful lessons for those who wish to live grace-fully in this story:



### **1) DISCIPLES LET JESUS USE WHAT THEY HAVE. (Luke 10:38)**

Martha willingly let Jesus use her home. With this act, she takes the place in a long line of faithful servants who allow God to use what they have: Moses let God use the staff in his hand—David let God use his sling and five smooth stones—Mary allowed God to use her womb—Paul allowed God to use his intellect—Peter let Jesus use his fishing boat—a nameless woman allowed Jesus to use her tears and hair. Something happens when we choose to follow Jesus—we shift from owners to stewards and open our hands to allow God to use what we have for His purposes.

- Do you think we understand the difference between being owners and stewards?
- What needs to happen in order to come to God with open hands and allow Him to use both what we have and who we are for His purposes?

### **2) BE SURE TAKE THE TIME TO BE TAUGHT BY JESUS. (Luke 19:39)**

In this story, Martha welcomed Jesus into her home. There's a big difference between challenging someone and welcoming Him. The Gospel writer Luke wants us to ask ourselves, "Do I put Jesus to the test, or do I welcome Him into my life?" In the prior story in chapter 10, a lawyer cites the two great commandments—to love God and to love our neighbor—but the emphasis, through the parable of the Good Samaritan, is on love for our neighbor. In this story, we see an example of what it means to love God, as Mary sits at Jesus' feet. If we only had the story of the Good Samaritan, we might allow service for God to take precedence over devotion to God. But the story of Mary shows us devotion to God must be the basis of all our service for Him. Worship must undergird our work.

Three times we see Mary in scripture—and during all three, she is at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10, John 11, John 12). There's a difference in doing something FOR Jesus and being WITH Jesus. Mary hung on His every word! Sitting is an act of submission. Spending time with Jesus is about knowing God and listening to Him. The siblings Lazarus, Martha, and Mary became close friends of Jesus. He felt at home in their house. He wanted to be with them. Does Jesus feel at home in your house?

- Do we take the time to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn from Him—to fellowship with Him, to worship Him?
- What needs to happen for you to take the time to be with Jesus?

### **3) BEWARE OF GETTING SO BUSY YOU MISS JESUS. (Luke 10:40)**

Martha is a homemaker. She's hospitable and hardworking, but she isn't happy. She's distracted, worried, pulled in many directions, uptight, and upset. Martha was so busy it became a burden and not a blessing. She lost the joy of serving. Don't get the wrong idea—people need to work and serve one another. In fact, the Bible teaches us we aren't saved BY good works but to DO good works. The issue here is Martha took her eyes off Jesus and put them on herself. We have to make sure our serving doesn't become self-serving. We need to ask ourselves, "Who is the focus of your act of service? You or Jesus?" We're called to serve the Lord with gladness—to serve without complaining, to serve without calling attention to ourselves. Martha complains about what Mary is NOT doing. When people get distracted, they easily become divided. Martha's mad at Mary—and ultimately, she's mad at Jesus.

- What causes you to become distracted, worried, and pulled in multiple directions—and ultimately, you miss time with Jesus?

#### **4) DEVELOP BALANCE BETWEEN BEING AND DOING. (Luke 41-42)**

Every day, we're faced with a whole host of tasks, appointments, and things that need to be done. It's easy for us to become distracted and allow these things to take precedent in our lives. Let's face it—there'll always be many things pulling at us. Jesus makes it quite clear one thing is necessary: to daily sit at the feet of Jesus and learn from Him, to listen to His word and ask Him what He wants us to do. Our call is to submit—saying, "not my will, but Your will be done." We likewise need to understand this doesn't dismiss us from doing. We need to take what we hear and learn from Him—and then put it into action. A disciple of Jesus knows how to balance both time with Him and then going and serving in His name.

- What tends to get in the way of keeping "being" and "doing" in balance for you?

#### **RESPOND**

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it? (How are going to respond? / What are the next steps?)*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Whom do you need to tell about it? (Accountability)*

# WEEK FOUR – OCTOBER 23

## BEING GENEROUS



Be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as you come to study. Pray: ***“What do You want to teach me/us in these moments?”***

Opening question:

***“How have you followed the Spirit’s lead this past week?”***

**READ:** 1 Kings 17:2-16

**Overview:** The Northern Kingdom of Israel had a rough beginning. It came into existence following the death of King Solomon. The ten northern tribes refused to accept Solomon’s son, Rehoboam as their king—and as a result, they named Jeroboam their king. He was a bad king—not only because he was not of the house and line of David, but because he immediately led the ten northern tribes headlong into idol worship—erecting golden calves for worship in Dan and Bethel. As a result, while the Southern Kingdom of Judah had a mix of good and bad kings—the Northern Kingdom of Israel never had a good king. Over a 200-year period, their worship of idols led them to gross sexual immorality, child sacrifice, and open antagonism toward and the killing of God’s prophets. Of all the kings, Ahab was the worst.

God sent the prophet Elijah because idolatry had accelerated in Israel during the reign of King Ahab and his evil wife, Queen Jezebel, and the Israelites began looking to other gods to meet their needs for power, prestige, and fertility. In the first verse of 1 Kings chapter 17, Elijah declared the heavens would close and there would be no rain or dew for years. This declaration was intended to awaken Israel from their decades-long spiritual slumber and rebellion against the Lord. God used Elijah and all he did to establish Himself as the God of gods, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords.

Life would not always be easy for Elijah—but here, at the beginning of his prophetic leadership, we learn some important lessons about the way God works in the lives of those who are faithful. The Lord provides Elijah’s needs—both in the natural order (water from the brook) and the supernatural order (ravens bringing bread and meat in the morning and night). Elijah then meets a selfless, generous widow after the brook dries up, and the Lord tells Elijah to go.

An attitude of scarcity is common when things do not come easy. We can become tight-fisted as inflation rises and uncertainty is the prevailing headline. It’s easy to argue against being generous and advocate for frugality when we look only to our own resources.

## Points to consider:

### **1) DISCIPLES TRUST GOD OVER THE NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL. (1 Kings 17:2-6)**

After God told Elijah to deliver his “no rain” speech, God took Elijah out of Samaria and sent him east across the Jordan. It seemed like a good plan, but there’s only one problem. East of the Jordan can be a dry, barren, foreboding place. Yet, God provided in the form of water from a brook (natural) and bread and meat delivered by ravens (supernatural). Some of us have learned to trust God—even in times of scarcity.

- Do you find it easy or difficult to trust God in times of scarcity?
- What makes it easy? What makes it difficult/trying?

### **2) DISCIPLES TRUST GOD EVEN WHEN SENT TO DARK PLACES. (1 Kings 17:7-9)**

After the brook dries up, God sends Elijah toward Tyre and Sidon—which was the land of the Philistines. Sidon was a spiritually dark place. Elijah moved from the desert to enemy territory. At the time, it must not have made sense—but Elijah trusted God. God told him to go, and Elijah acted in trust and obedience. Every day, we witness faithful people stepping outside of their comfort zone in order to shed light in dark places. Volunteers go behind prison walls to share the light of Jesus. The deeply hurt and wounded model grace and mercy by meeting with their greatest offender and offering forgiveness. Others share faith in Jesus with someone who is without hope. The list goes on...

- Where are the dark places God sends you? Do you trust Him?

### **3) DISCIPLES ACT IN FAITH WHILE SHARING THE WORD OF THE LORD AND CHALLENGING OTHERS TO LIVE BY FAITH. (1 Kings 17:10-14)**

In obedience, Elijah travels to Zarephath near Sidon where he encounters a widow gathering sticks near the gate—meaning she was so poor she couldn’t even buy what she needed. Elijah asks her to bring him some water and bread—the same thing God had provided in the desert—and the woman explains her state of desolation. She’s almost out of flour and oil and is about to make one last meal for herself and her son before they starve to death. Elijah challenges her to trust God and make two small loaves (one for him and another for her and her son)—promising God won’t allow the flour and oil to run out. Not only had Elijah learned to trust God to provide in the desert, but he’s also teaching this Philistine widow and her son to trust God as well. He was leading her to trust Someone with whom he was well acquainted. Can you imagine?

- Can you recall someone who shared the Word of the Lord with you and challenged you to live by faith?
- Who is God calling you to share the Word of the Lord with and challenge them to live by faith?

### **4) DISCIPLES UNDERSTAND PROVISION COMES TO PROVIDERS, BLESSED PEOPLE BECOME BLESSINGS, AND WHAT IS GIVEN IS GIVEN BACK TO US. (1 Kings 17:15, 16)**

The widow did as the Lord commended her through the prophet Elijah, and God provided for the woman, her son and Elijah. We learn an important lesson here: when God’s resources are used according to God’s instruction, there’ll always be more than enough to meet our needs. We simply cannot out-give God.

## **RESPOND**

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it? (How are going to respond? / What are the next steps?)*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Whom do you need to tell about it? (Accountability)*

# WEEK FIVE - OCTOBER 30

## MAKING COMMITMENTS



Be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as you come to study. Pray: ***“What do You want to teach me/us in these moments?”***

Opening question:

***“How have you followed the Spirit’s lead this past week?”***

**READ:** Matthew 5:33-37

**Overview:** These words of Jesus from His Sermon on the Mount are about so much more than making rash oaths we may or may not keep. They strike at the heart of our ability to enter and keep covenant with God and each other.

The context of Jesus’ words is important. They come just after He’s speaking about the power of our words—that when we say we hate our brother, it’s the same as committing murder in our hearts. Or when we look at a person lustfully with our eyes, it’s the same as committing adultery with them in our hearts. Or if we divorce our spouse for anything other than marital infidelity, we’re outside the bounds of what God intended for the marriage covenant. Jesus then fixes His attention on how quickly and often we carelessly make oaths—often using exaggerated declarations to try to show how sincere we are—when all that’s necessary is integrity of heart and life.

We live in a culture where the truth is often the first casualty of interactions between individuals. We have an incredibly elaborate system of lawyers and contracts and notaries and binding signatures to ensure we do what we say we’ll do—at least when it’s perceived to be important enough. And none of it makes us any more truthful. In fact, most of us don’t even believe truth is an objective reality!

A recent study by Barna Research found only 22% of adults in America believe there’s even such a thing as absolute, moral truth. But the real kicker was what the study found related to those who profess to be “born-again” Christians. They defined “born-again” Christians as “people who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that’s still important in their life today—and who also indicated they believe when they die, they’ll go to heaven because they’d confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as their “Savior.” Among that specific group, only 32% of adults and only 9% of teenagers said they believe moral truth is unchanging or absolute.

We wonder why people have such a difficult time telling the truth to each other. Well, apparently, most of them can’t even identify what the truth is in the first place!

## Points to consider:

### 1) DISCIPLES UNDERSTAND THE NEED TO MAKE VOWS AND PROMISES. (Matthew 5:33)

Disciples understand the weight and the necessity to fulfill the vows, oaths, and promises once made (it's better to not make a promise at all than to make one and not keep it—according to the Old Testament). The importance of making and keeping oaths is foundational for healthy families, business partnerships, and friendships. The integrity of someone's word was foundational in covenant making (which was the standard in the Old Testament). God's people, however, proved themselves to be covenant makers and covenant breakers in contrast to God—who's a covenant maker and covenant keeper. Jesus is basically reminding us we need to be the kind of people who, once we give our word, can be depended upon to keep it.

- Do you think we understand what it means to give our word and then keep it?
- Do you think we understand the meaning of a covenant relationship?
- What does covenant relationship mean to you?

### 2) DISCIPLES SHOULD NEVER MAKE UNKEEPABLE OR RASH VOWS. (Matthew 5:34-35)

Some of the Jews in Jesus' day had made an art form out of making outlandish and impossible-to-keep promises. Jesus is trying to get His followers to stop trying to impress each other with hyperbole and restore the integrity of keeping one's word.

James seems to echo the words of our Lord in his epistle, and he puts special emphasis on this command—introducing it with the words, "above all." *"But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and your no, no; so that you may not fall under judgment"* (James 5:12).

- What does it mean to you to simply let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no?
- How guilty are we of making rash or impossible-to-keep vows?

### 3) DISCIPLES DON'T MAKE PROMISES BASED ON WHAT THEY CAN'T CONTROL. (Matthew 5:36)

Disciples understand we shouldn't make a promise based on things you can't even control or have to fake your way to look good. When we "swear on our head," we're in essence swearing to God—because we ultimately don't even have control over the number of hairs on our head. In a very real sense, we try to make things more complicated by adding a layer of oath and responsibility when a simple "yes" or "no" will suffice and actually make us much more dependable.

The Jews of Jesus' day had put an interesting twist on this concept. They had trouble telling the truth consistently—just like you and I do—so in order to guard themselves against being found guilty of swearing falsely by the name of God, it seems they'd firmly established the habit of swearing by everything except God. They wanted to add force to their promises in order to make their words more credible, but they didn't want to incur the judgment of God by swearing something in His name when they didn't fully intend to make it good or when it wasn't entirely true. So, they created what was in effect a lesser class of oaths—oaths that were bound to various parts of God's creation rather than to God Himself. James Montgomery Boice refers to this practice as "evasive swearing."

- How often are we guilty of “evasive swearing?”

#### **4) DISCIPLES ARE TRUSTWORTHY AND THEIR WORD IS THEIR BOND. (Matthew 5:37)**

Disciples understand the importance of being trustworthy enough that all it takes is a yes or no. The heart of the matter in our passage has nothing to do with the formality of an oath or vow. The heart of the matter is the heart. In concluding His statement about oaths in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; and anything beyond these is of evil {or, of the evil one}” (Matthew 5:37). If we reserve truthfulness only for declarations that take the form of oaths or vows, and we neglect truthfulness the rest of the time, that’s Phariseeism—and it’s evil—and it makes oaths an instrument of evil.

Everything Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount comes back to the reality God sees straight into our hearts. He sees the malice and murder in our hearts when we cling to anger toward a brother or sister. He sees the adultery in our hearts when we gaze longingly at another woman. He’s the only lie detector with 100% accuracy! The righteousness that comes from God cares infinitely more about what God sees than about what man sees! Our “Yes” must be yes and our “No” must be no. No oath can make that so. Being believed is nothing. Being a truthful person in the eyes of our heavenly Father is everything.

When we consider the context of what Jesus and James are saying, we begin to understand the importance oaths have on the health of the church. For when Christians behave in obedience to Scripture, the authenticity with which we witness for the cross of Christ has substance. The salvation message carries incredible weight when we don’t simply “act” like Christians—but truly “live” like Christians, exposing how our hearts have been changed and transformed by the Gospel.

The Bible changes our entire behavioral trajectory because God speaks to us directly through the absolute truth of His Word. *“These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the LORD”* (Zechariah 8:16-17). Therefore, we’re without excuse. The world will always give us alternative routes to living with integrity, honesty, authenticity and genuineness—but we must decide whether the words we speak will be honest and true or deceptive and hypocritical. The choice is ours.

#### **RESPOND**

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it? (How are going to respond? / What are the next steps?)*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Whom do you need to tell about it? (Accountability)*